

**COMMUNISM AND THE APPROPRIATION OF
MODERNITY, KERALA, INDIA:**

A Critique of the Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Theory

by

Nissim Mannathukkaren

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Abstract

The state of Kerala in India is one of the most celebrated cases of social development in the world with its achievement of remarkable levels of human development despite low levels of per capita GDP. It was also the first region in the world to democratically elect a Communist government. While there are many studies on Communism in Kerala, the Communist negotiation of modernity has not been explored. This dissertation seeks to fill this void. The fundamental aim is to study the Communist negotiation of modernity and through it to question the theoretical premises of postcolonial theory and the Subaltern Studies, influential discourses in social sciences now. What emerges from the Communist experience in Kerala is that the structure of modernity is substantially determined by the agency of the actors involved, and not pre-determined and one-sided, as implied by postcolonial theory. It will be argued that post-colonial theory, with its postulation of a stark division between tradition and modernity, and the valorization of the former in an essentialist and culturalist fashion, fails to understand social transformation in the Third World.

Postcolonial theory's oft-cited criticism of Marxism as 'hyper-rationalism', which supposedly renders it unfit for 'traditional' religious societies, does not provide a convincing explanation as to why the language of Marxism and modernity has been appropriated by the marginalized classes in societies like that of Kerala. This dissertation will argue that the phenomenal success of Communism in a 'traditional' society like that of Kerala (hitherto one of the most deferential regions in India) is only possible because the new forms of substantive equality which were aimed at, and realized to a great extent by the Communist movement, were no alien imposition, extraneous to traditional forms of consciousness (as argued by post-colonial writers). Instead, they correspond to the latter's pre-existing

(unrealized) aspirations to equality. Also, the defining characteristic of the Communist movement was that even as it was one of the major harbingers of modernity, it simultaneously turned away from the Enlightenment legacy of denying tradition. Instead, the movement sought to create a 'fusion of horizons' in which the critical potential of modernity met with that of tradition.

The dissertation substantiates its theoretical claims by undertaking a detailed study of the processes through which Communism established hegemony in society, its attempts to construct a new cultural commonsense, the landmark land reforms and labor legislation brought about by its struggles and finally, its most recent attempt to initiate an extensive project of participatory democracy.

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This thesis owes the greatest debt to Prof. Jayant Lele who has not only been a supervisor but a “Guru” in the true Indian tradition. His wisdom and unfailing support throughout these past six years have proven invaluable in bringing this work to fruition. The thesis also bears his intellectual stamp as much of what I have written follows in the wake of his original theoretical framework and his ruminations on ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. I also take this opportunity to thank Professors Eleanor McDonald and Grant Amyot for their critical input and suggestions at the thesis proposal stage.

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What then did you expect when you unbound the gag that muted those black mouths? That they would chant your praises? Did you think that when those heads that our fathers had forcibly bowed down to the ground were raised again, you would find adoration in their eyes?

-- *Jean Paul Sartre*

Chapter 1

Introduction and Literature Review

The state of Kerala in India, with a present population of more than thirty million, was the first region in the world (if we exclude the tiny Italian principality of San Marino), to democratically elect a Communist government (in 1957). This combined with the fact that the state has made phenomenal achievements in human development, something to which the Communist movement has contributed in no uncertain measure, has evoked a lot of attention among scholars both in India and outside.¹ As one of them put it, “Under the impetus of a broad-based working class movement organized by the Communist Party, successive governments in Kerala have pursued what is arguably the most successful strategy of redistributive development outside the socialist world.”² This has led the World Bank to hail Kerala as the “third path” of development. The most significant aspect of this development is the fact that it has been achieved without coercion, and through popular struggles and democratically elected governments. This particular development trajectory was achieved by the elimination of landlordism, the vesting of land rights in tillers, the spending of huge amount of resources on the public provision of education, health,

¹ The life expectancy of Malayalees—the speakers of Malayalam, the main language in Kerala—in the beginning of this century was 73.3 years, which matched the newly industrialized countries of Asia like South Korea, China, Malaysia and Indonesia, which unlike Kerala has high levels of economic growth. Kerala’s female-to-male ratio is 1.058, similar to that of Europe and North America. The infant mortality rate is 13 per thousand live births, again comparable to the developed Western countries (Achin Chakraborty, “Kerala’s Changing Development Narratives,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (February 5, 2005): 542). The literacy rate is almost universal. All these add up to a high Human Development Index (HDI). In 1994 the HDI for Kerala was 0.775 compared to the 0.925 in the United States of America, which enjoyed a per capita income hundred times more than that of Kerala. The egalitarian nature of its development was evident from the fact that in 1991-92 Kerala enjoyed 33 PQLI (Physical Quality of Life Index) points more than the state of Punjab, which had twice its per capita income (Govindan Parayil, “The ‘Kerala Model’ of Development: Development and Sustainability in the Third World,” *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 5 (December 1996): 941).

²Patrick Heller, *The Labor of Development: Workers and the Transformation of Capitalism in Kerala: India* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 7.

infrastructure, agricultural credits and food.³ In effect the “Kerala model [if we can call it that] may be taken as an early prototype of sustainable development because of improvements in the quality of life, environmental stability, social and economic equality, and the decline in political strife.”⁴

Communism was a late entrant into Kerala, compared to the other regions of India, with the formal constitution of the Communist Party only in 1939. What boggles the mind of any student of history is the short span of time – just about two decades – in which these fundamental changes in society took place. In the words of Andalat, one of the faceless thousands, who dedicated their lives to Communism, these were changes that were “more powerful and magical than what Aladdin’s magic lamp could have conjured up”.⁵ From our perspective, one of the keys to unraveling the miraculous transformation that made the “most ostentatiously deferential region in India in the early twentieth century...the most pervasively clamorous by the middle of the twentieth”⁶ lies in Andalat’s recognition that these changes did not come about, but were brought about.⁷ Not by the bourgeoisie, but by the subaltern classes consisting of the peasantry and workers thus putting question marks on the famous dictum of Barrington Moore Jr.: “No bourgeois, no democracy.”⁸

³ Parayil, “Kerala Model,” 941.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Andalat, interview by author, July 8, 2003, Thiruvananthapuram, tape recording. See also his *Rekhyallatha Charitram (History without Documents)* (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1987), 17.

⁶ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1992), 96.

⁷ Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 17.

⁸ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 418. Moore does recognize that “the wellsprings of human freedom lie not only where Marx saw them, in the aspirations of classes about to take power, but perhaps even more in the dying wail of a class over whom the wave of progress is about to roll” (ibid., 505). But this remains submerged in a reading that privileges the role of the bourgeoisie.

Kerala, as elsewhere in India, was a society characterized by extreme caste (and class) inequalities.⁹ The interactions among the various ascriptive status groups were strictly regulated and governed by hierarchy and notions of purity and pollution. These extended to Christians and Muslims too.¹⁰ Everyday activity had to signify one's place in the social hierarchy and one's deference to 'higher' castes. Violations and transgressions were strictly punished. At the top of the hierarchy were the Kerala Brahmins called Namboodiris and at the bottom were the actual tillers of the land, the 'untouchable' castes like the Pulayas and Parayas (now known as a political category called the *dalits*).¹¹ But there has been a general consensus on the fact that caste oppression in Kerala was more severe than other regions. Not only untouchability but also unseeability was prevalent prompting Swami Vivekananda¹² to comment that Kerala was a "veritable lunatic asylum".¹³ In this context, the social transformation brought about by Communism was almost of a revolutionary nature, especially considering that it was achieved under the colonial state at first, and later under the bourgeois democratic framework of the Indian state and a hostile federal government. This along with the construction of a relatively egalitarian development 'model' makes Kerala seemingly very different from the general experience of "postcolonial misery" of much of the Third World¹⁴-- the extreme disenchantment following the non-fulfillment of the hopes

⁹ The Hindu social system consists of four varnas (and many castes within each): Brahmin (priests, arbiters), Kshatriya (kings, warriors), Vaishya (traders, commercial class) and Shudra (cultivators, producers). The fifth group, the 'untouchables', is considered to be outside the caste system (untouchability is legally abolished). Since it performs menial and degrading jobs, it is considered unclean and polluting.

¹⁰ Kerala is unique among the Indian states for the fact that Christians and Muslims constitute more than forty percent of the total population.

¹¹ Thus the tenure system was characterized by a strong class-caste correlation. The upper caste Namboodiris and Nayers controlled most of the land as landlords and superior tenants. High-ranking Christians (known as Syrian Christians) and Muslims too had superior rights on land. Lower castes within the caste system like Ezhavas and Tiyas had inferior rights and the untouchable castes had no rights at all.

¹² A prominent Hindu spiritual leader of the nineteenth century.

¹³ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 59.

¹⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 11. By using the term Third World, I am not ignoring the many problems that are associated with it.

and dreams that characterized the moment of liberation from the colonial yoke. If Kerala has avoided this denouement, it immediately throws up questions about this peculiar trajectory of a Third World society. Why, and how this particular social transformation took place will be the natural questions that arise. And a variety of studies have dealt with these and the role of Communism in the transformation. But one major lacuna of the existing studies is the absence of the larger question related to the nature of modernity that has been inaugurated by Communism in Kerala in the course of the last century.

This study, therefore, focuses not on the making of the Kerala ‘model’¹⁵ or on Communism per se, but on the Communist negotiation of modernity. The broad questions that will inform the study are: How did Communism, as a product of modernity as well as a producer of modernity, look upon the modernity project in a predominantly agrarian and peasant society? What are the theoretical implications of the Communist negotiation of modernity, and the heralding of Marxism and democracy in such a society? The fundamental endeavor of the thesis is to understand the Communist negotiation of modernity in Kerala and through it to question the understanding of modernity and social transformation provided by the Subaltern Studies collective in India, the main proponent of postcolonial theory, and one of the most influential discourses in social sciences now. This theoretical discourse is also one which has increasingly raised the question of the nature of modernity in the Third World and especially, postcolonial societies. Postcolonial theory is, itself, a product of the present conjuncture in history when all kinds of ‘post’ isms are ruling the roost with the philosophical underpinning of disenchantment with (Eurocentric) modernity. This study

¹⁵ For detailed studies of the Kerala development experience see Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Richard W. Franke, *Life is a Little Better: Redistribution as a Development Strategy in Nadur Village, Kerala* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993); K. P. Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles: Mobilization and Organization of Rural Workers in South-West India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

will seek to demonstrate that 'postcolonial misery' is not an inexorable feature of modernity, as implied by postcolonial theory. Instead, as the Communist movement in Kerala has shown, the structure of modernity is substantially determined by the agency of the actors involved.

Postcolonial theory's dismissal of Marxism as 'hyper-rationalism', which supposedly renders it unfit for 'traditional' societies, does not provide a convincing explanation as to why the language of Marxism and modernity has been appropriated by the marginalized classes in such societies. Communism's entrenchment in society was only possible because the new forms of substantive equality which were aimed at, and realized to a great extent by the Communist movement, were no alien imposition, extraneous to traditional forms of consciousness as argued by postcolonial writers. Instead, they correspond to the latter's pre-existing (unrealized) aspirations to equality. Postcolonial theory's positing of modernity as merely a Western phenomenon and its subscription to dualisms like modernity/tradition and culture/economy makes it difficult for it to map social reality in the Third World. It denies the fact that Third World societies are also producers of, and contributors to the theory and practice of modernity in the world. The positing of the autonomy of culture and the denial of translocal and global structures and the structure of capitalism negates postcolonial theory's attempt to provide a critique of the present conjuncture. It will be argued that Communism overcame such dichotomies to a substantial extent and this was one of the main reasons for its success. Contrary to postcolonialist criticisms, the 'derivative' nature of Marxist categories has not one-sidedly over-determined Communist politics: there was no formulaic transposition of models developed elsewhere onto a 'traditional' setting. The defining feature of Communism was that it tried to dialectically mediate between a universal conception of justice and a particular cultural context. Even as it was one of the major

harbingers of modernity, it simultaneously turned away from the Enlightenment legacy of denying tradition. Instead, the movement sought to create a 'fusion of horizons' in which the critical potential of modernity met with that of tradition.

Premised as this study is on the need to overcome the culture-economy dichotomy, it will locate itself in the broad Marxist theoretical framework while avoiding those versions of Marxism which are characterized by economic reductionism and linear evolutionism. The study will therefore recognize that the questions of culture are of great significance, but unlike postcolonial theory, will seek to understand them non-reductively.

This study is based in a context in which works on modernity, especially in non-Western contexts are on the rise. Therefore it would be worthwhile to look at some of the general questions that have emerged recently. No single concept, in the last three decades or so, has been dissected as much as modernity. The "incredulity towards metanarratives"¹⁶ that is so much the vogue of our present times has put a question mark on anything that is associated with modernity. As Nietzsche's disciples set about dismantling the Enlightenment project in the West, the subject of the Third World societies is caught in a bind: when on the threshold of modernity, she is asked to forget its promise of progress and salvation as a chimera. If in the originary conception, Enlightenment and modernity meant the inauguration of the rule of reason and the liberation from the tyranny of the irrational and the unreasonable, now it is posited that [m]odernity's incoherences—its places of unreason—are not cases of mere dysfunction which might readily be solved by a better management of technical progress and economic growth."¹⁷

What does it mean to be modern, in a Third World, more importantly, a post-colonial society? Does modernity in such societies always have to be a "*known history*,

¹⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

¹⁷ Jean Chesneaux, *Brave Modern World: The Prospects for Survival* (New York: Thames and Hudson: 1992), 140.

something which has *already happened elsewhere*, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content”¹⁸ Or do these societies always have to inhabit, what Homi Bhabha¹⁹ would call, the ‘liminal space’- a state of inbetween-ness, condemned to “ a permanent transition, an endless pause”.²⁰ What is it in their modernities that makes their present a site from which they must escape?²¹ Are these societies characterized by “social blanks”—the lack of institutional capabilities required for modern mega-societies, arising from the dissonance between Western institutions which have been imposed on them and their very own: “family, caste, village, pilgrimage center, little kingdom, and so forth”²² If we do not agree with this we could take comfort in the ‘fact’ that we are all inescapably modern now: “Most societies today possess the means for the local production of modernity thus making even the paradigmatic modernity of the United States and Western Europe (itself not an unproblematic assumption) no more pristine.”²³ This has led to the veering away from canonical forms of European modernity and the positing of alternative or plural modernities.²⁴

Nevertheless, all are not convinced. Many existing conceptualizations, especially, modernization and nativist theories, view modernity and tradition as stark binaries – modernity is (mainly) associated with the West, while the rest is equated with tradition. Although, they are located at opposite poles, both these theories imply that only the

¹⁸ Meaghan Morriss quoted in Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?” in *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 283.

¹⁹ *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

²⁰ T. N. Madan quoted in Satish Deshpande, “Mapping a Distinctive Modernity: ‘Modernization’ as a Theme in Indian Sociology,” *Occasional Papers in Sociology*, no. 1 (Delhi: Institute of Economic Growth, November 1999): 13.

²¹ Partha Chatterjee, “Our Modernity” (Rotterdam/Dakar: SEPHIS and CODESRIA, 1997), 1-20.

²² Satish Saberwal, *India: The Roots of Crisis* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 2.

²³ Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenbridge, “Public Modernity in India,” in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenbridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 19.

²⁴ See the collection edited by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

‘juggernaut of modernity’²⁵ rolls on, while, tradition had remained static and tranquil until the ‘imposition’ of modernity. Now, it is either swept away by the inexorable currents of the modern or it emerges mutilated from the encounter, only weakly capable of reproducing itself, leading to the state of inbetweenness that we saw above. What are the solutions suggested for overcoming this condition of aporia? Should the post-colonials, as Dipesh Chakrabarty asks them to, undertake the task of “provincializing Europe”— a process of documenting how Enlightenment’s ‘reason’ “which was not always self-evident to everyone, has been made to look ‘obvious’ far beyond the ground where it originated”.²⁶ Or on the contrary, should they, “instead of focusing on Europe as an object, reality, or hyper-reality, start asking questions about ...[their] present”?²⁷

This dilemma becomes even more acute when the post-colonial subject who is in question is not only ‘modern’, but also a ‘Marxist modern’. While those who have still not abandoned hopes of salvation in a capitalist modernity, can at least counter the post-modern skepticism with the ‘empirical’ fact of the triumph of liberal capitalism, what can the ‘Marxist modern’ hold on to? As the utopias of Communism turned into dystopias, the post-colonial Marxist has to, it seems, undertake a journey devoid of any, what Ernst Bloch would have called, ‘utopian surplus’. But is it really the ‘end of history’, in the nihilistic (or in the Fukuyaman) sense? Is the achievement of “liberal democracy in the political sphere” and “easy access to VCRs and stereos in the economic”,²⁸ the pinnacle of human striving? Or is it that the journey is hardly over, to see with Habermas that modernity is still an incomplete

²⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

²⁶ Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality,” 287.

²⁷ Vivek Dhareshwar, “‘Our Time’: History, Sovereignty and Politics,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (February 11, 1995): 322.

²⁸ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3-18.

project?²⁹ In the next section we specifically look at the way these and other questions related to social transformation have been tackled by the Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory, and the lacunae in their conception.

Literature Review -- The Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Theory

The Subaltern Studies project began in India towards the late seventies by a group of historians who were disillusioned with existing trends of Indian historiography. Within a decade or so, the project enjoyed so much international prestige that it inspired founding of a Latin America Subaltern Studies group in 1993. By this time the project's contributors were also simultaneously the major proponents of postcolonial theory which had broadened its horizon from the study of the subaltern to an understanding of the 'postcolonial condition' and cultural criticism of modernity in the Third World. Both share the same major thematic and philosophical concerns although postcolonial theory went beyond the Subaltern Studies to become a major influence in literary theory.³⁰

Ranjit Guha, the founding father of the Subaltern Studies project argued, a new form of history-writing was an absolute imperative as the historiography of Indian nationalism till then was dominated by "elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism." If colonialist historiography reduced the history of Indian nationalism to the efforts of the "British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions and culture", in the nationalist version, it was "written up as a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite." On the other hand, what Subaltern Studies was seeking to achieve was to write a history that brought to the fore "the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is *independently of*

²⁹ Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post modern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), 3-15.

³⁰ Postcolonial critics now span Western and non-Western contexts. This study will mainly deal with the writings of scholars associated with the Subaltern Studies collective in India.

the elite to the making and development of [Indian] nationalism.”³¹ Marxist historiography too came under scathing critique from the subalternists for its alleged class-reductionism which fails to understand the unique modes of subaltern resistance under colonialism.³² While Marxism rejects bourgeois modernization, it still continues to work with the teleological assumptions of the former, seeing postcolonial history through the modes of production narrative and as a transition (or a failed transition) to capitalism.³³

As is obvious from the terminology used, Subaltern Studies, in the beginning, especially, drew inspiration from Gramsci who grappled with the question of subaltern identity through a Marxist framework. It has been argued that that the more immediate influence was the social history ‘from below’ propounded by historians like E. P. Thompson.³⁴ But Subaltern historians themselves have not concurred. It was obvious from the beginning that the project of reclaiming the subaltern voice was not something that would be a mere inversion within the modernist discourse. Also, we have to take into account the cultural and linguistic turn that the project took from the late eighties, placing it firmly in the ‘post’ discourse camp. Dipesh Chakrabarty, prominent subalternist, argues that this comparison to “history—from—below” approach of Eric Hobsbawm and Thompson is not entirely right as Subaltern historiography differs from the former in three important respects: it “necessarily entailed a relative separation of the history of power from any

³¹ Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Subaltern Studies I* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1-3.

³² See Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Radical Histories and the Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of Subaltern Studies,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 8, 1995): 751-759.

³³ Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, 2 (1990): 395.

³⁴ See David Ludden, “A Brief History of Subalternity,” in *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contesting Meaning, and the Globalization of South Asia* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 4.

universalist histories of capital, critique of the nation form, and an interrogation of the relation between power and knowledge.”³⁵

One of the main points raised by the subalternists was the tendency among Marxist historians to term peasant revolts organized by the discourses of religion or caste as “backward ”or “pre-political”. They, on the other hand, insisted that peasant’s consciousness was not a vestige of the past but a fundamental part of modernity and this consciousness was also able to read and relate to modernity correctly.³⁶ The Marxists, according to them, believed in the Eurocentric and stagist notion of history in which the peasant has no future other than to “mutate into industrial worker in order to emerge, eventually, as the citizen-subject of modern democracies.”³⁷ The main essence of Subaltern Studies could be summed up as “a democratic project meant to produce a genealogy of the peasant as citizen in contemporary political modernity.” The fundamental difference between political modernity in India and the West was that in the former it was not “founded on assumed death of the peasant.” The peasant does not have to transform into an industrial worker to become a citizen-subject. Moreover, the Western notion of the political as a “story of human sovereignty in a disenchanted world” does not apply to the Indian context where a strict separation between politics and religion is not sustainable.³⁸ The endeavor to read Indian modernity in its own terms would mean the critique of the tendency in existing historiographies to describe it using negative prefixes borrowed from “European metahistories”: “*Not bourgeois, not capitalist, not liberal, and so on*”.³⁹

³⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xxii.

According to subalternists, Indian history always has been read in terms of a 'lack', or an 'absence', from the perspective of (Western) modernity. Instead, they want to recover the deep ambivalences that mark modernity in India: "Colonial Indian history is replete with instances where Indians arrogated subjecthood to themselves precisely by mobilizing, within the context of 'modern' institutions and sometimes on behalf of the modernizing project of nationalism, devices of collective memory that were both antihistorical and antimodern."⁴⁰ The implication is that Indian modernity fundamentally differs from Western modernity. Partha Chatterjee argues in a similar vein when he speaks about "our modernity". The distinguishing feature of Indian modernity is the persistence of a certain skepticism of modernity's values and consequences even in its acceptance, which according to Chatterjee, stems from the intertwining of modernity with colonialism. As a result, while modernity in the West has been characterized by a conception of the "present as the site of one's escape from the past, for us it is precisely the present from which we feel we must escape."⁴¹ The complicity of "modern knowledges with modern regimes of power" has condemned the colonized to be perpetual consumers of a universal modernity. This subjecthood has resulted in the colonized's urge to produce their own modernities.⁴² Chatterjee detects the adaptation of modernity not only in the "supposedly cultural domains of religion, literature or the arts. The attempt to find a different modernity has been carried out even in the presumably universal field of science."⁴³

While Chatterjee mostly seems to be endorsing the ambivalent modernities of the non-West as he recognizes that "one cannot be for or against modernity; one can only devise

⁴⁰ Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality," 284.

⁴¹ Chatterjee, "Our Modernity," 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 18.

strategies for coping with it”⁴⁴, his is not a position that is itself rid of ambiguities. The anti-modernist strain in Chatterjee’s writings is also quite marked to be ignored. Thus in an earlier essay, he argues that “for countries like India the concept of bourgeois equality and freedom, owing to their externality to the immanent forms of social consciousness, cannot even claim the same degree of effectiveness as expression of unity of society, despite their formal enshrinement in the political constitution.”⁴⁵ Elsewhere, Chatterjee makes a strong case against universalist notion of rights and modernity.⁴⁶

The subalternists have rightly argued that Marxist and liberal scholarship have had a tendency to argue that certain undemocratic relationships—like personalized systems of authority—are not quite modern and that they would melt away under capitalism.⁴⁷ In their view, the global history of capital does not reproduce the same history of power everywhere: “In the calculus of modernity, power is not a dependent variable and capital an independent one.”⁴⁸ Chakrabarty accepts that Marxism is relevant but inadequate to theorize power especially in colonial societies. The fundamental characteristic of power in societies like that of India is the direct domination and subordination of the subaltern by the elite. According to Ranajit Guha, this feature “was traditional only insofar as its roots could be traced back to pre-colonial times, but it was by no means archaic in the sense of being outmoded.”⁴⁹ Thus it is a feature of capitalism itself. Colonialism in India survived only on the condition that the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Himani Bannerji, “Projects of Hegemony: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies’ Resolution of the Women’s Question,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (March 11, 2000): 909.

⁴⁶ Partha Chatterjee, “Beyond the Nation? Or Within,” *Social Text*, vol.16 (Fall 1998): 57-69.

⁴⁷ Importantly, they do not note that not all strands of Marxism subscribe to this. Also, it is not that the Subalternists were the first to voice this critique. Jayant Lele, for instance, had noted that the tradition-modernity dichotomy operates in Marx when he fails to recognize that the traditional symbols of legitimation continued to be effective under capitalism. But unlike the subalternists, Lele, argues that, nevertheless, the essential Marxian insight that the rulers’ quest for legitimacy is a feature of all class-societies, capitalist or non-capitalist remains valid (Jayant Lele, *Elite Pluralism and Class Rule: Political Development in Maharashtra* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 14-15).

⁴⁸ Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 13.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

colonizing bourgeoisie failed in its universalizing mission. Colonial capitalism definitely impacted society but could not incorporate “vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people”. It was capitalism, but in Guha’s famous words, it was dominance without hegemony.

If capitalism is not hegemonic how is it that it has been seen as the main feature of colonized societies? Gyan Prakash, another prominent subalternist, sees Marxism “as part of the history that institutionalized capitalist dominance...” by universalizing the mode-of-production narrative.⁵⁰ What Prakash wants to question is the ‘foundational’ status attributed, by Marxists to capitalism in understanding the colonization of India and also their tendency to read ‘particularistic’ histories of “region, culture, race, nation” from the ‘universalistic’ language of capitalism only. Instead, like Chakrabarty, he wants to assert “difference as the condition of history’s possibility...and that the histories of the metropolitan proletariat and the colonized are discrepant, even if both are exploited by capitalism.”⁵¹ Increasingly under the influence of poststructuralism “differences” became the main motif of Subaltern Studies. This was meant to counter the “problem of universality” in history. “[H]aving an egalitarian society and political democracy may be laudable thoughts in themselves but these thoughts are not as important or as sensitive to the philosophical questions of differences.”⁵² Marxist histories cannot understand the concept of difference as they naively assume that under the impact of capitalist industrialization, particularities like caste and religion will be replaced by universalistic ones like that of class. The divisions on the basis of religion, caste and language that mark the

⁵⁰ Gyan Prakash, “Can the ‘Subaltern’ Ride? A Reply to O’ Hanlon and Washbrook,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, 1(January 1992): 168.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵² Dipesh Chakrabarty quoted in Vinay Bahl, “Situating and Rethinking Subaltern Studies for Writing Working-Class History,” in *History after the Three Worlds: Post- Eurocentric Historiographies*, ed. Arif Dirlik, Vinay Bahl and Peter Gran (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 112.

Indian working class movement make Chakrabarty argue that the singular failure of Indian Marxists has been the lack of “an anthropological and theoretical understanding of culture(s)”⁵³ which stems from their “disenchanted” and “hyper-rationalist” view of the world which shows “antipathy to anything that smacks of the ‘religious’.”⁵⁴ Obviously, with the emphasis on differences, totalizing claims of other hegemonic discourses like nationalism too began to be questioned. The focus began to shift to the ‘fragments’ that resist such totalities.⁵⁵ In response to the critique by Marxists that such a focus hurts the unity of the oppressed, they respond that the public sphere is already “fragmented under the pressure of democracy and cannot be united artificially by a Marxism that insists on reducing the many diverse experiences of oppression and marginalization to the single axis of class or even the multiple axis of class, gender and the ethnicity.”⁵⁶

Subaltern Studies’ critique of a universal modernity has important implications for the theory and practice of Third World politics and this will be one of the main poles around which this study revolves. The crucial argument that the subaltern project makes is the ‘external’ and ‘alien’ character of modernity in India: “This externality is not something that can be casually mentioned and forgotten. It is inscribed on every move, every object, every proposal, every legislative act, each line of causality. Moreover, the “[a]cceptance of

⁵³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Class Consciousness and the Indian Working Class: Dilemmas of Marxist Historiography,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* XXIII, no. 1-2 (1988): 29.

⁵⁴ Chakrabarty, “Radical Histories,” 752.

⁵⁵ See for example, Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*; Shahid Amin, *Event, Memory, Metaphor: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), and “In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today,” in *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, ed. Ranajit Guha, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1-33.

⁵⁶ Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 18.

modernity came to be connected, ineradicably, with subjection.⁵⁷ What colonial modernity inaugurated (despite the absence of political institutions of liberalism) was the

complete vocabulary of liberal rights in the economic and social fields... the idea of state as an impersonal regime of relations, the idea of an individual subject... the equality of rights and rightlessness... and finally a state which (illegitimately under colonialism) pretended to represent the collective interest of the society, and from whose legitimate interference nothing in society was morally immune.⁵⁸

This externality was compounded by the fact that the national movement led by the elitist middle class rather than invent an ideal adequate to the “structure and discursive possibilities of their own society and history” followed “tasks, models, ideals and historical paths that were universal, but enacted earlier only in Europe, through discourses that were equally universal.”⁵⁹ Partha Chatterjee argued in a similar vein when he posited that nationalism, even when it opposed colonialism shared its thematic of reason, progress and modernity, accepted its Orientalist conception of India, and thus was a derivative discourse.⁶⁰

There is no denying the fact that Subaltern Studies has justifiably criticized many of the linear, evolutionist and progressist notions of the theoretical paradigms like that of modernization and dependency. The older modernization theories and political development approaches were characterized strongly by the tradition-modernity dichotomy. ‘Traditional’ societies did not have an history of their own and they have no future other than that of imitating the West. These are manifested in concern with the institutional lag in Third World societies and a fear of the masses overrunning whatever institutions are there,⁶¹ the emphasis

⁵⁷ Sudipta Kaviraj, “On State, Society and Discourse in India,” in *Rethinking Third World Politics*, ed. James Manor (London: Longman, 1991), 78. Kaviraj is not part of the Subaltern Studies collective, but has contributed articles to the series brought out by the collective, and has shown theoretical affinity with it.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

⁶¹ Samuel P. Huntington, “Political Development and Political Decay,” *World Politics* 17, no. 3 (1968): 386-430.

on the role of Westernized elites in political modernization,⁶² the notions of a “non–Western political process,”⁶³ and participant and parochial political cultures and so on.⁶⁴ What we know as notions like that of “development” which had its origins in the West acquired a completely natural connotation.⁶⁵ Under colonialism Enlightenment reason became a ruse to suppress the Oriental ‘other’ by constructing it as inferior. It drew its justification by presenting an image of the colonized as ‘children’.⁶⁶

Modernization theories ignore that development discourse was “rooted in the rise of the West, in the history of capitalism, in modernity and globalization of Western state institutions, disciplines, cultures and mechanisms of exploitation.”⁶⁷ Even theories like dependency which opposed modernization from a Third World perspective, were ultimately operating “within the same discursive space of development”⁶⁸ and thus, were not able to overcome their ethnocentrism. They unwittingly replicated the dichotomous categories of modernization theory like tradition/modernity, advanced/backward etc. through their categories like developed/underdeveloped and center/periphery. Further, It read off the salient features of social formations in the Third World from the laws of capitalist mode of

⁶²David A Wilson, “Nation-building and Revolutionary War,” in *Nation Building*, ed. Karl. Deutsch and W. J. Foltz (New York: Atherton Press, 1966).

⁶³ Lucian W. Pye, “The Non-western Political Process,” *Journal of Politics* 20 (1957): 468-86.

⁶⁴ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture—Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965). This valorization of Western institutions in pluralist and liberal democratic theory nevertheless ignores what critical theorists have pointed out: “that formal democratic institutions and procedures permit administrative decisions to be made largely independently of reflection on the practical life-world of the citizens. The legitimation processes elicit only generalized motives and diffuse mass loyalty but forbid participation” (Lele, *Elite Pluralism*, 9).

⁶⁵ See Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (London: Zed Books).

⁶⁶ See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁶⁷ Jonathan Crush, “Introduction: Imagining Development,” in *Power of Development* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 11.

⁶⁸ Arturo Escobar quoted in *ibid.*, 20.

production.⁶⁹ Also, the dependency theories in positing an homogenous and abstract ‘Third World’ did not pay enough attention to the questions of cultural specificity.⁷⁰

Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory offer an important corrective to the widespread tendency among such accounts of non-Western societies to treat them as mirror images (in the making) of Western societies; hence the appellations like “developing”, ‘modernizing’ etc. which have been used to describe them. The modernization paradigm, for instance

evacuates the contemporaneity of such societies, robbing the present of its immediacy and constricting its relations with the past and the future into narratives of loss or inadequacy. It is truly remarkable how this motif of a society, a culture, a history, a politics, even a personality permanently in a state of inbetweenness—a double-edged failure—recurs across disciplinary contexts.⁷¹

Subaltern Studies makes some original contributions in critiquing hegemonic discourses like that of nationalism and also in questioning the ‘objectivity’ of archival material by bringing to the fore the linkages between power and knowledge. The need to understand the specificity of modernity in non-Western societies and the criticality of the ‘peasant question’ are also important issues raised by the Subaltern Studies. Nevertheless, the present study will argue that the project is imbued with many problems which have deleterious consequences for the exploited classes and groups in the Third World. I am not proceeding here on the assumption that the project is characterized by a complete unity. As Ludden points out, “Its

⁶⁹ For a critique of the functionalist and teleological tendencies of such theories, see David Booth “Rethinking Social Development: An Overview,” in *Rethinking Social Development: Theory, Practice and Research* (London: Longman, 1994), 5-6.

⁷⁰ On this see Rist, *History*, 121. It is not that such concerns were totally absent from the dependency critique. Lele notes how the contributions of Andre Gunder Frank towards “a culture-critique of the roots of modernization theory... have been overshadowed by the debates generated through his economic generalizations” (Jayant Lele, “Orientalism and the Social Sciences,” in *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol Breckenbridge and Peter van der Veer (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 61).

⁷¹ Deshpande, “Distinctive Modernity,” 13.

internal coherence has been less intellectual than personal and more formal than substantive.”⁷²

The emphasis on the agency of the subaltern in an overwhelmingly elitist- oriented scholarship was a welcome theoretical move. The fact that the subalterns and the subordinate classes have resisted oppression throughout history has enough empirical evidence.⁷³ It spans across modern and pre-modern times, not just an outcome of modernity: “tradition has always been] capable of generating, from within, a critique of an oppressive social practice, ... its legitimating ideology”.⁷⁴ In that sense Ranajit Guha is right in arguing that there has been an “invariant notion of resistance to elite domination”.⁷⁵ Guha’s study of peasant insurgency in India 1783 to 1900 confirms this. The so-called pre-political peasants extended the scope of their attack from the European oppressors to the native collaborators of the Raj. Also, their consciousness was developed enough for them to identify “some of the basic elements of economic exploitation and the political superstructure which legitimated them.”⁷⁶ From this necessary recuperation of the agency of masses, Subaltern Studies takes it to the other extreme which posits agency as voluntarism. The valorization of the subaltern as the maker of her own history was already criticized by theorists like Gayatri Spivak who were sympathetic to the subalternist project.⁷⁷ The “colonized subaltern *subject*”, as Spivak reminds us, “is irretrievably heterogeneous”. The subaltern is not imbued with “determinate vigor and full autonomy” and ultimately it can only be “identity-in-

⁷² Ludden, “Brief History,” 3.

⁷³ See the work by *Annales* school of historians.

⁷⁴ Jayant Lele, *Hindutva: The Emergence of the Right* (Madras: Earthworm Books, 1995), 85.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Javeed Alam, “Peasantry, Politics and Historiography: Critique of the New Trend in Relation to Marxism,” *Social Scientist* 11, no. 117 (Feb. 1983): 45.

⁷⁶ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 28. For a study of the century-long rebellions by the Muslim peasantry in Kerala see K. N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar 1836-1921* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁷⁷ Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge 1995).

differential”.⁷⁸ The subalternist notion of autonomy leads it to being an ahistorical conception. As Javeed Alam has argued rightly, “Autonomy can never be an inherited condition of the exploited and oppressed masses but a dialectical possibility born of struggle and revolutionary advance,” instead, here it is located in a “mental space”.⁷⁹ The subaltern itself becomes a reified category, with hardly any connections to reality.⁸⁰ How different it is from the Gramscian conception of the common sense—the uncritical and unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world—which is hardly unified, but a “fragmentary” and “incoherent” conception which contains elements of philosophy, a critical consciousness, is obvious here.⁸¹ It is the contradictory unity of critical and uncritical consciousness which makes commonsense unique.

Similarly, the focus on the subaltern sphere as an independent one, and the split between the politics of subaltern and elite domains has led to a politics that is only focused on the “lower storey” which could not threaten the larger political structure. Subalternity was detached from organized transformative politics. Subaltern social mobility and class differentiation within subalterns were not acknowledged.⁸² The connections of the subalterns with other social groups and also the need for leadership and intellectual tools that bridge elite-subaltern divisions were ignored.⁸³ Contrary to the split posited between subaltern and elite domains social transformation brought about by the Communists in Kerala can only be

⁷⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁹ Alam, “Peasantry,” 49.

⁸⁰ Ludden, “Brief History,” 21. Later Subaltern Studies even abandoned the focus on the subaltern itself. Instead, the focus begins to be on subjects like Bengali middle class, colonial prisons, the nation, the community, Indian religion and language etc. (Bahl, “Subaltern Studies,” 91). As Ramachandra Guha notes in a review of volume 8 of Subaltern Studies: “Over the years, most members of its editorial collective have moved from documenting subaltern dissent to dissecting elite discourse, from writing with (Socialist) passion to following the (postmodernist) fashion” (Ramachandra Guha, “Subaltern and Bhadrakok Studies”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (August 19, 1995): 2057.

⁸¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971), 419.

⁸² Ludden, “Brief History,” 13.

⁸³ K. Balagopal, “Drought and TADA in Adilabad,” in *Reading Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ludden, 343-357.

understood by the overcoming of this split, by the construction of the ‘national-popular’ will which broke down barriers between the intellectuals and the people. In fact, as we will see throughout the study, this constituted an important feature of the Communist movement.

The later linguistic and cultural turn in Subaltern Studies which made its historians the main voice of postcolonial theory, led to the characterization of social reality in terms of ‘culture,’ ‘language,’ ‘texts’ and ‘discourse’. While this was again not an unwelcome trend when empiricism and economic reductionism ruled the roost, the problem was the excessive emphasis on these elements alone. What Peter Dews pointed about poststructuralism is valid about postcolonialism too: There is a total “disanalogy between texts and institutions’...[and] the consequent inability to give an appropriate account of the latter.”⁸⁴ Literary works begin to stand in for all reality and questions of evidence began to be supplemented by that of narrativization and representation. Material problems are converted into metaphorical ones.⁸⁵ If Gramsci sought to supplement materialist with cultural analysis in his concept of hegemony, here culture substitutes material analysis.⁸⁶ Economic exploitation itself takes a back seat. The culturalist bent of Subaltern Studies was more accentuated in its reception outside, especially in the United States where there is a tendency to see cultures in essentialist terms, to analyze colonialism and nationalism as cultural phenomena, and to shun Marxism.⁸⁷ Sumit Sarkar argues with regard to the theoretical shifts of Subaltern Studies:

What had started as an understandable dissatisfaction with the economic reductionism of much ‘official’ Marxism is now contributing to another kind of narrowing of horizons, one that conflates colonial exploitation with western cultural

⁸⁴ Peter Dews, *The Logic of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), 35.

⁸⁵ Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 5, 79.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁷ Ludden, “Brief History,” 13.

domination. Colonial discourse analysis abstracts itself, except in the most general terms, from histories of production and social relationships. A ‘culturalism’ now further attenuated into readings of isolable texts has become, after the presumed demise of Marxism, extremely nervous of all ‘material’ histories: the spectre of economic reductionism looms everywhere.⁸⁸

While differences are emphasized, it is not analyzed as to how these differences are created and promoted in the real world.⁸⁹ The emphasis on “autonomous communities” and the “politics of location” becomes ahistorical by ignoring the conjunctures that produced them.⁹⁰

From a commitment to recovering and documenting subaltern voices, slowly the project began to focus on the (cultural) critique of Western Enlightenment and Eurocentrism. Hence the task of “provincializing Europe” and uncovering the externality of modernity. But as Vinay Bahl puts it, “one wonders if non-European countries, by simply being less Eurocentric, could enjoy a happier state of affairs despite economic globalization and increased global communication”.⁹¹ The focus on culture without material relationships leads to the consequent focus on Eurocentrism sans capitalism. I will argue that this obsession with Eurocentrism and colonialism leads to an evasion of the present, despite providing a critique of modernization theories. As Dhareshwar points out, “politically relevant, and intellectually challenging questions about even Eurocentricity are to be encountered in our relationship to the post-colonial present. Without the thematisation of that relationship, the attempt to provincialise Europe may, paradoxically, simply trap us in that province.”⁹² The ambivalences and aporias produced by modernity in the Third World are resolved in the subalternist writings by a rejection of modernity. The attempt to reclaim subjecthood by charting out ‘our’ own modernities regresses into relativism. This leads to

⁸⁸ Bannetji, “Projects of Hegemony,” 903.

⁸⁹ Bahl, “Subaltern Studies,” 99.

⁹⁰ Arif Dirlik, “Place-Based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place,” in *Places and Politics in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Roxann Prazniak and Arif Dirlik (Oxford and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 15-51.

⁹¹ Bahl, “Subaltern Studies,” 94.

⁹² Dhareshwar, “Our Time,” 322.

the elision of the present and a constant harking back to the past, the 'pre-modern'. This way of looking at modernity reinforces the modernization paradigm. For in both, the 'inbetweenness' is not overcome: in the first, the past becomes the ideal, and in the second, the future. The subalternists do not seem to be interested in the consequences of peasant spontaneity and militancy for liberation but only in spontaneity and subjectivity for their own sake.⁹³ Rather than overcoming subalternity as in Gramsci, the emphasis is on celebrating subalternity which leads to the obliviousness to questions of power.⁹⁴

Despite the condemnation of the practice of reading Indian society through "European-derived social sciences and political philosophies", the subalternist debt to Michel Foucault is obvious and is not unacknowledged. It seeks to "pluralize the history of power in global modernity and separates it from any universal history of capital."⁹⁵ Following Foucault, the history of modernity cannot be understood through capital alone, but through the emergence of a new disciplinary regime which occasioned and accompanied capitalism. In new institutions like work houses the instilling of "ethical consciousness of labor" was more fundamental than their economic role and testify to "the bourgeoisie's great dream and great preoccupation of the Classical age: the laws of the state and the heart are at last identical."⁹⁶ This denial of the central role to capitalism in the constitution of modernity is problematic from the point of view of the subalterns for whom the theory is speaking.⁹⁷

⁹³ Alam, "Peasantry," 46.

⁹⁴ Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 20.

⁹⁵ Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 12.

⁹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 68. For Foucault, the "supervision of, and intervention in, the social domain by agencies of welfare and control is more fundamental characteristic of modern societies than an economy released from directly political relations of domination". This follows Weber for whom "the social forms engendered by purposive or instrumental rationality, with their indifference to personal ties, and their crushing of idiosyncrasy and spontaneity, which represent a profounder threat to human freedom than the class oppression specific to capitalist society" (Dews, *Logic of Disintegration*, 147, 151).

⁹⁷ Among the subalternists Dipesh Chakrabarty is the only theorist who has sought to rethink many of the postcolonial positions in light of Marxist criticisms (see Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Invitation to a Dialogue," in *Subaltern Studies IV*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 364-376; "Marx after Marxism: A Subaltern Historian's Perspective," *Economic and Political Weekly* (May 29, 1993): 1094-1096. He

Even though Subaltern Studies arose as a counter to the elitist colonial, nationalist and Marxist historiographies, it ultimately ends up as a Third Worldist– nationalist discourse uncritically upholding tradition, religion, community, etc. ignoring in the process questions like that of internal hierarchies and oppression.⁹⁸ This is because of the series of dichotomies that characterize its enterprise (especially in the later phase): tradition/modernity, colonizer/colonized, West/East and so on. If in the beginning subalternists critiqued the complicity of the nationalist elite in silencing the voice of the subaltern and the “*failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation*”,⁹⁹ and also saw nationalism in the political domain as deeply complicit in the project of modernity and its forms of disciplinary power,¹⁰⁰ now they partially redeem the nationalist elite. Nationalism in the material domain is still imitative of Western models, but in the cultural and spiritual domain it is seen as launching the “most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being. In this true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power.”¹⁰¹ The culturalist assumption is seen here in the positing of the cultural domain as “true and essential domain”. As a result, in the subaltern critique

[a]ll local social relations of difference and their cultures are erased, retaining the one between essentialized and unified versions of colonial and national discourse... This ideological position converts the question of social reform for women, for example into a colonial imposition, thus disallowing critiques of patriarchy and women’s oppression conducted by the national community.

accepts that “Marx’s critique of capital and commodity will be indispensable for any critical understanding... a critique of modernity in India [cannot] ignore the history of commodification in that society” (Chakrabarty, “Marx after Marxism,” 1094).

⁹⁸For a Marxist feminist critique of the Subaltern school, see Bannerji, “Projects of Hegemony.”

⁹⁹ Guha, “On Some Aspects,” 5.

¹⁰⁰ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*.

¹⁰¹ Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 6.

This is how the critique travels, intentionally or unintentionally, to illiberal forms of [cultural] nationalism.¹⁰²

Subalternist adoption of the notion of ‘governmentality’ to argue for the blindness of modern liberal state to communitarian identities and its inherent coerciveness¹⁰³ all lead to what Akeel Bilgrami has called the “normative communitarian” position.¹⁰⁴ It will be seen in the course of this study that the one-sided understanding of modern state as merely characterized by governmentality is an erroneous one. The critique of modernity as Western, the stand against universal rights, the occlusion of material aspects in favor of cultural ones lead to the reinforcement of the Weberian tradition-modernity dichotomy (that it initially sought to overcome) with India placed at the tradition end of the spectrum.¹⁰⁵

The subalternist and postcolonial arguments could be seen as an extension of the post-modernist and post-structuralist turn since the seventies, which has seemingly acquired a hegemonic status in the last few years. The general tenor of post-modern explorations has been to abandon the belief in universal solutions to the problems of mankind. But from this position, a regress into a debilitating relativism is not very far. Critical streams like Marxism also do not escape the post-modernist attack for the former operates within the “discursive space” of modernity. As Foucault argues, “the fault lies in... the very determination to make a science out of Marxism... If we have any objection against Marxism, it lies in the fact that it could effectively be a science.” Against the “affects of the centralizing powers” which the

¹⁰² Bannerji, “Projects of Hegemony,” 910, 904.

¹⁰³ Partha Chatterjee, “Secularism and Toleration,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (July 9, 1994): 1768-1777. Chatterjee argues that Western notions of secularism are inapplicable to a multi-religious society like that of India.

¹⁰⁴ Akeel Bilgrami, “Secular Liberalism and Moral Psychology of Identity,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 4, 1997): 2533.

¹⁰⁵ Bannerji, “Projects of Hegemony,” 908.

discourse of science invariably generates, Foucault proposes his “genealogies.”¹⁰⁶ While we can agree with Foucauldian critique of the scientific aspirations of (certain versions of Marxism), it is difficult to proceed further for Foucault does not make the distinction between science and ideology, as he see cannot conceive of knowledge in separation from the operation of power. This occludes the question of objectivity and validity.¹⁰⁷ Subaltern Studies follows a similar methodology.

The denial of causal effectivity to capitalism by Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory is an important drawback in analyzing the present conjuncture of late capitalism.¹⁰⁸ Modernity is mainly seen as a cultural phenomenon, not as ‘capitalist modernity’. Like post-developmental arguments that speak of the “strawman of capitalocentrism”,¹⁰⁹ postcolonial theory sees capitalism as “nothing more than a potentially disposable fiction, held in place by our acceptance of its cognitive categories and values” which can be ‘refused’ in favor of “marginal histories, of multiple and heterogeneous identities”.¹¹⁰ This ignores that without paying attention to totality and structure, it would be impossible to make a coherent response to exploitation under a globalized world. Postcolonial theory’s focus on Eurocentrism as a cultural incursion does not take into account that

[w]ithout capitalism as the foundation for European power and the motive force of its globalization, Eurocentrism would have been just another ethnocentrism...[It] fails to explain why this particular ethnocentrism was able to define modern global

¹⁰⁶ Michel Foucault, “Genealogy and Social Criticism,” in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 43.

¹⁰⁷ Dews, *Logic of Disintegration*, 192.

¹⁰⁸ Arif Dirlik has persuasively argued that postcolonial theory’s emergence itself is linked to the latest phase of capitalism—the emergence of Third World capitalism, and the arrival of the Third World intellectuals in First World academe. But then he goes onto dismiss postcolonial theory: “rather than a description of anything, [it] is a discourse that seeks to constitute the world in the self-image of intellectuals who view themselves as postcolonial intellectuals” (*Postcolonial Aura*, 53, 62). This ignores some of the important issues raised by it.

¹⁰⁹ See Arturo Escobar, “Place, Economy and Culture in a Postdevelopment Era,” in *Places and Politics*, ed. Prazniak and Dirlik, 193-217.

¹¹⁰ Rosalind O’ Hanlon and David Washbrook, “After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, 1 (Jan. 1992): 147.

history, and itself as the universal aspiration and the end of that history, in contrast to the regionalism or localism of other ethnocentrism.¹¹¹

The following questions can be asked with relation to the Subaltern Studies project: has the project helped to create an emancipatory politics for the subalterns and brought us closer to the goal of social justice for all? What type of collective action is possible under the project when it promotes fragmentary politics and ‘differences’?¹¹² The evidence from this research will show that these are better answered by going beyond the Subaltern Studies project.

For a Different Understanding of Modernity

The biggest failure of Subaltern Studies/postcolonial theory is the lack of explanation for the attraction of modernity for the masses and their appropriation of the languages of modernity. After all, it is through the very institutions of “alien provenance”¹¹³ that the masses are announcing their presence in India in the contemporary scenario.¹¹⁴ Even though Indian democracy is still a formal one, the increasing assertion of the disadvantaged classes is an irrevocable reality. The entrenching of democracy in India can be explained only by taking into account the universal elements of modernity.¹¹⁵ The attraction to forms of substantive equality can be safely termed as a universal spanning across cultures.¹¹⁶ The binary categories of modernity/tradition and the privileging of one over the other fails to

¹¹¹ Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 68.

¹¹² Bahl, “Subaltern Studies,” 101.

¹¹³ Sudipta Kaviraj, Introduction to *Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28.

¹¹⁴ Javed Alam, “Is Caste Appeal Casteism? Oppressed Castes in Politics,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (March 27, 1999): 757-761.

¹¹⁵ The original Enlightenment project conceived reason as a faculty that human beings across cultures possess (see Henry Vyverberg, *Human Nature, Cultural Diversity and the French Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Vyverberg also argues that the early Enlightenment thinkers, contrary to the received wisdom, were accommodative of cultural differences. Its descent into Eurocentrism is a later development.

¹¹⁶ As Moore notes: “Movements to do away with the priest, to attain direct access to the deity and the source of magic, have simmered underground in both [pre-modern] Europe and Asia for long periods, to burst forth from time to time in heretical and rebellious movements” (Moore, *Social Origins*, 456).

understand the dialectical relationship between the two, the new and the received. The range of misconceptions that have arisen in the context of the modernity debate are a result of, as Lele points out, treating “modernity as a unique product of the West” which is very true of the Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory. Instead, “it is both necessary and possible to dissociate the idea of modernity from the institutional complex exemplifying Western beliefs and practices and its self-understanding as the unique and only event of modernity, so far.” The West’s transition from feudalism to capitalism is actually the “culmination of centuries of micro-moments of modernity into a societal crisis and its transcendence as a macro-moment of modernity.”¹¹⁷ This formulation also helps us to correct the fallacious assumption that tradition is unchanging while change is only brought about by (Western) modernity. If this assumption were true, we would not be able to make sense of dramatic changes (what Marx calls ‘epochal changes’) like the transition from slavery to feudalism before the onset of modernity. Of course, this does not mean that there are no differences between modernity and tradition. The argument here is that a focus only on the dichotomy and rupture between the two misses the important continuities between the two.

The fundamental theoretical premises of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory now enjoy wider acceptance. Western communitarian theorists like Charles Taylor have justifiably argued that the dominant theories of modernity have been acultural and believe in the linear transition of all societies to single end-point, a modernity that is immune to the immense cultural markers of difference which exist among them. Here the explanation of modernity is usually given in terms of “our coming to see certain kernel truths about the human condition” in which reason and rationality play the key roles. Taylor’s critique of

¹¹⁷ Jayant Lele, “By Faith Alone: History as a Weapon in the Politics of *hindutva*,” in *Fussing Modernity: Appropriation of History and Political Mobilization in South Asia*, ed. Hiroyuki Kotani, Takeshi Fujii and Fumiko Oshikawa (Osaka: The Japan Center for Asia Studies, 2000), 48-50.

theories of modernity, which conceive it as a single “enlightenment package” capable of being applied anywhere, has led him to theorize about “alternative modernities” premised on a cultural theory of modernity. Here the emphasis is on viewing the origins of modernity in the West not as the “coming to see certain kernel truths”, but in the rise of a particular “moral outlook”, a cultural constellation that substituted the existing ones.¹¹⁸ Taylor alerts us to the need for understanding the cultural dimensions of the origins of modernity in the West and in its transposition elsewhere. But, like the Subaltern Studies, he ultimately takes a position that sees it as an exclusively Western phenomenon without paying enough attention to the universalizable content in it.

Also it ignores the fact that Western modernity itself was shaped in a dialectical relationship with non-Western societies and that all societies now are participants (with varying strength and agency, of course) in modernity, in its critique and institutionalization. The essentialist and monolithic view of Western modernity propounded by postcolonial theory ignores its internal differentiation and the different strands within it. The reason why many facets of Western modernity are easily accepted in non-Western societies is because of its correspondence to “deep mythical structures ” within the latter.¹¹⁹ This is the continuity between tradition and modernity. Beyond the tradition-modernity dichotomy, there arises another sphere which arises out of the interaction between Western modernity and local cultural systems, “for which an analogue can be found neither in western modernity or in

¹¹⁸ Charles Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity,” in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 192, 179. But Taylor does not reduce the validity of post-seventeenth century natural science to its cultural origins and thus accepts the “coming to see certain truths” version at least in this regard.

¹¹⁹ Rajeev Bhargava, “Alternative Modernities,” Unpublished Manuscript (2001), 6. Even when postcolonial theory acknowledges that “the ideologies of modernization and instrumental science are so deeply sedimented in the national body politic that they neither manifest themselves nor function exclusively as forms of imperial power”, it attributes them merely to their “authorization and deployment by the nation state”(Gyan Prakash quoted in Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 60).

indigenous tradition.”¹²⁰ Even though Bhargava calls this alternative modernity, it is different from postcolonial theory’s “our modernity” and even Taylor’s alternative modernity, for it is posited as a version of modernity and believes that there are some features common to all modernities.

If the one-sided interpretation of modernity is to be avoided, then it is necessary to recover the understanding of its dialectical nature. The systematic reduction of the critical potential of modernity into just instrumental rationality and the complete separation of facts from values, the descent of the promise of Enlightenment into the Weberian ‘iron cage’ and the Foucauldian ‘carceral’ society, is a perversion of the original intent of the crowning of reason. This is the context in which Habermas’ postulated modernity as an incomplete project.¹²¹ The Janus-faced character of modernity is obliterated in the post-modern and post-colonial accounts for a linear reading of modernity as indissolubly associated with domination, alienation, deprivation etc. Instead as Giddens argues, modernity can be understood in “four dialectically related frameworks of experience: displacement and reembedding, intimacy and impersonality, expertise and reappropriation, privatism and engagement.”¹²² Looking simultaneously at these two faces of modernity makes it possible to separate the distortion and corruption of Enlightenment values in colonialism and capitalism and overcome the tendency to equate the “entrenched” version of modernity¹²³ with what modernity can and ought to be.

Postcolonial theory’s aim of the writing of “post-foundational” histories against foundational ones which are based on the “assumption that history is ultimately founded in and representable through some identity—individual, class or structure—which resists

¹²⁰ Bhargava, “Alternative Modernities,” 7.

¹²¹ See Habermas, “Modernity”.

¹²² Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity*, 139-140.

¹²³ Javeed Alam, *India: Living With Modernity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

further decomposition into heterogeneity,”¹²⁴ is a welcome one; at the same time, it is too one-sided to acknowledge the presence of some universal foundations.¹²⁵ Post-structuralism’s rejection of an integrated critical standpoint to base one’s critique upon because it supposedly implies a repressive totalization,¹²⁶ is replicated in postcolonial theory. This leads to the denial of ethics.¹²⁷ The stand in favor of heterogeneity and fragmentation ignores the dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular. Like Habermas, we should be able to see that “morality [*moralität*] as a universal structure transcending particular cultures both transcends and is indigenous to forms of existence characterizing ethical life (*sittlichkeit*)”.¹²⁸ As he puts it, “if we remain faithful to the Aristotelian view that moral reasoning is bounded by the law of the city, and [if we] remain linked to a lived-in ethos, we must be prepared to dispense with the emancipatory potential of moral universalism and abandon the chance for penetrating moral criticism of exploitative and repressive social structures”.¹²⁹ Postcolonial theory’s ethics, unfortunately, conforms to this

¹²⁴ Prakash, “Post-Orientalist,” 397.

¹²⁵ It is anathema to talk of foundations in the age of post-structuralism, but it is hard to conceive of any social theory or politics, which does not make use of foundations. Thus, even Derrida, when he posits that a “certain idea of justice” is undeconstructible, I suspect, is taking recourse to a foundation (Jacques Derrida, *The Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, New York: Routledge, 1994), 90). Foundations, as used here, are not transcendental, immutable essences, but which are a sort of *a posteriori* deductions of universals from concrete forms of life through history. Thus, instead of adopting an anti-foundationalist stance one should see foundations as contestable, or to use Judith Butler’s phrase, “contingent foundations” (see Steven Seidman, Introduction to *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12).

¹²⁶ Dews, *Logic of Disintegration*, 242.

¹²⁷ Contra poststructuralism, Habermas, for instance, locates the ethical principle in the immanent rationality of linguistic inter-subjectivity. Habermas’ radical proposal is that the originary mode of language is communicative, not the strategic or instrumental. In Habermas, “the argument is not that communicative forms ought to be primary, the argument is that they are primary. Reason does not need to be regenerated, it is by nature regenerative in the sense that reason as communicative reason is embedded in language” (David Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 28). This move on Habermas’ part of grounding the ethical principle in the structure of language itself is necessary to circumvent the contextualist and relativist reduction of ethics to forms of life embedded in particular cultures.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹²⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 70. Habermas’ universalism has been criticized for doing “violence to the heterogeneity of language-games” (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 66). But, as Peter Dews points out, this has arisen from a “chronic confusion between language-games and validity-claims.” Habermas seeks to establish universality only with regard to validity-claims so as to create conditions for plurality (*Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas* (London: Verso, 1992), 21). Habermas’ formulation has the potential of resolving the particularism

description. As Rosalind O' Hanlon and David Washbrook comment about postcolonialism's solutions: "methodological individualism, the depoliticising insulation of social from material domains, a view of social relations that is in practice extremely voluntaristic, the refusal of any kind of programmatic politics—do not seem to us radical, subversive or emancipatory. They are, on the contrary, conservative and implicitly authoritarian."¹³⁰

This study's understanding of modernity is rooted in the kind of universalism outlined above.¹³¹ This universality is not an ahistorical essentialist one but one which is reconstituted into a new "dialectical relation to particularity, positionality and group difference."¹³² Postcolonial theory does not base itself on any conception of human nature and universal human needs. We should be able to simultaneously talk about a human nature and the socio-historico constitution of human beings. Marx, contrary to popular opinion that he did not have a concept of human nature, provided such a resolution.¹³³ Once certain

vs. universalism debate for it tries to incorporate the communitarian criticism against Kantian formalism. Here it should be noted that there is also a "Eurocentric abridgement" (which needs to be acknowledged and critiqued) in Habermas of his original universalistic claims by treating the prescientific stage of social learning as non-reflexive (Lele, "By Faith," 49-52). This will again lead to the tradition-modernity dichotomy that the present study has been criticizing.

¹³⁰ O' Hanlon and Washbrook, "After Orientalism," 145.

¹³¹ Another serious lacuna in Habermas is the complete abandonment of the paradigm of production for the paradigm of communication. A related consequence of this is the neglect, as Agnes Heller presciently notes, of "the anthropological meaning of work" something that was theorized extensively by Marx. Habermas associates labor or work only with instrumental rationality. Instead, as Heller rightly points out, it is not "solely concerned with the appropriation of outer nature" alone, but also helps to "accomplish the socialization of our *inner nature* as well... Accomplished human freedom means socialization of our inner nature without repression, both in communication and creation" (Agnes Heller, "Habermas and Marxism," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. John B. Thompson (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 34-5). Anthony Giddens also notes the equation in Habermas of labor with 'forces of production' only (see Anthony Giddens, "Labour and Interaction," in *Habermas*, ed. Thompson, 156).

¹³² David Harvey, "Class Relations, Social Injustice and the Politics of Difference," in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael. Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1993), 57.

¹³³ One such example is the sixth theses on Feuerbach (Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton & Co., 1978), 145). If human essence is just an "ensemble of social relations", the conclusions from that will be relativistic. Therefore as Norman Geras (*Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, London: Verso, 1983), 34) shows, Marx can be interpreted to have meant that there is a "man's 'nature'...in some aspects intrinsic to each individual and thus universal." At the same time it is also something more than what is intrinsic in the individual. Thus Marx's critique of Feuerbach is directed at

universals of modernity are established, the scope for “our modernity” and “alternative modernities” to diverge greatly is minimal, and can only happen by regressing into relativism.¹³⁴ Their arguments cannot harp on ‘difference’ alone as a criterion unless they also simultaneously understand its dialectical relation to universality. *Sittlichkeit* versus *moralitat* is a false dichotomy; what is needed is a dialectical relationship between the two.¹³⁵

With the real subsumption of almost all societies by capital, and the resultant predatory globalization (combined with pre-capitalist forms of exploitation and oppression), the need for a universalist ethic and a ‘basic system of human rights’ looms large. Postcolonial modernities with their emphasis on articulating ‘difference’ are not able to provide “a totalizing comprehension of the new unlimited capitalism – a theory adequate to the global scale of its connexions and disjunction”¹³⁶ and as a result, are unable to talk about exploitation of labor as a common reality under different “cultural capitalisms”.¹³⁷

The following chapters will see a detailed empirical substantiation of these criticisms.

The critique of postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies cannot remain solely at the level of

the latter’s reducing of human essence to only what is inherent without taking into account social relations. It does not posit social relations against what is intrinsic.

¹³⁴ Postcolonial theory’s critique of Western modernity does not have anything substantial to say on the alternative political (and other) institutions that should form the basis of postcolonial modernity. Similarly Taylor had argued that alternative modernities should come up “not with identical institutions to that of the West but with functionally equivalent ones” (Taylor, “Two Theories,” 184). But it is not asked as to whether there are really any functional alternatives to, for example, democratic mode of governance (see Thomas McCarthy, “On Reconciling Cosmopolitan Unity and National Diversity,” in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 222). The chapter on the negotiation of the political by the Communists will see a detailed critique of the postcolonial position.

¹³⁵ Again Dipesh Chakrabarty is the only subalternist to grapple with this problem (even though he does not provide an answer). He asks: “Can we...build democratic, communitarian institutions on the basis of the nonindividualistic, but hierarchical and illiberal, precapitalist bonds that have survived and sometimes resisted – or even flourished under- the onslaught of capital?” (*Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), xiv).

¹³⁶ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Post Modernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 72). The postcolonial position on capitalism is vague; if it had posited capitalism as not important, it also sees the “homogenization of the contemporary world by capitalism[!]” (Prakash, “Post-Orientalist,” 398.) But it does not prescribe any program to counter this phenomenon.

¹³⁷ So whatever may be the differences in entrepreneurship cultures that exist among, for example “Samurai” capitalism of Japan, “Mafia” capitalism of Russia, “Chaebol” capitalism of South Korea, the levels of exploitation of the workers are almost the same (if not more) than Western capitalism.

theory or the conceptual. The empirical study of the Communist negotiation of modernity in Kerala will provide the necessary tool to understand the deficiencies of these postmodern-inspired theoretical frameworks. Each chapter, dealing with different aspects of the Communist movement, will see a detailed questioning of the central concepts of these frameworks discussed so far such as the autonomy of peasant politics, the split between subaltern and elite levels of politics, the positing of Marxism as a part of Eurocentric universalism, culturalism, modernity as a Western phenomenon, the denial of causal effectivity to capitalism, governmentality, passive revolution, etc.

As noted before, the emphasis will be to understand all the aspects of social reality in a non-reductive fashion while at the same time, recognizing their interlinked nature. The crucial question is how to conceive the relationship between the 'base' and the 'superstructure'. While it is difficult to conceive the two levels as independent, for economic forces incorporate "mental instruments', philosophical knowledge",¹³⁸ it would be wrong to believe that there can be no causal relationship between them and that the "structures created and perpetuated by a multitude of conscious, individual acts cannot develop some sort of internal logic, or institutional imperative, over and above these acts."¹³⁹ In order to overcome the debilitating alternation between economic determinism and Althusserian 'overdetermination' (in which everything determines everything else), it is imperative to conceive the base as only setting "the range of possible outcomes", where which alternative realizes itself is a matter of "free political and ideological activity".¹⁴⁰ This dynamic of free political and ideological activity will be seen clearly in the Communist negotiation of

¹³⁸ Antonio Gramsci quoted in Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 118.

¹³⁹ Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought*, 119.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. See also Norman Geras, "Post-Marxism?" *New Left Review* 163 (May-June 1987): 40-82 and "Ex-Marxism Without Substance: Being a Real Reply to Laclau and Mouffe," *New Left Review* 169 (May-June 1988): 34-61.

modernity where the agency of the actors involved made effective use of the structural and material context in realizing the objective of substantive equality. It will be studied with the knowledge that “[c]onceptions of individual or collective transformative agency and struggle are vacuous without an accompanying understanding of their dialectical relation with determining material, epistemic, institutional, and ideological structures which they both reproduce and transform.”¹⁴¹ Therefore the debt to Gramscian Marxism, which, in my view, is imbued with such an understanding, will be obvious throughout this work.

Communism and Modernity

The inadequacies that characterize the subalternist and postcolonial methodology come into a sharp relief when we seek to study the Communist project in Kerala. Surprisingly subalternist and postcolonial theory have not produced any known work on the politics and society of Kerala.¹⁴² Therefore this study does not seek to engage with assumptions of any of the existing work on Kerala except when they are relevant to the problematic sought to be explained here. Dilip Menon’s work on the social history of Communism (in the early part) is an exception, and is the only one which is directly relevant to the present study.¹⁴³ It does not completely adopt the methodology of the Subaltern Studies, but there are important similarities. A vast majority of book-length studies on Communism has been limited to a quantitative account of Communist ministries and their achievements, the electoral strategies of the Left or political and economic aspects.¹⁴⁴ Cultural and ideological factors, or, as noted

¹⁴¹ Kumkum Sangari “Consent, Agency, and Rhetorics of Incitement,” in *Social Change and Political Discourse in India: Structures of Power, Movements of Resistance*, ed. T. V. Sathyamurthy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996): 464.

¹⁴² Postcolonial theory has mainly been applied to Malayalam literary studies.

¹⁴³ Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁴⁴ For some of the important works of this genre see Victor M. Fic, *Kerala: Yenan of India* (Bombay, Nachiketa Publications, 1970) Ronald Herring, *Land to the Tiller: The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in South Asia* (New

before, the larger question of Communism as a part of the modernity project, have hardly been addressed.¹⁴⁵ Another major drawback of the existing studies is the fact that they approach Communism from the top-down, from the point of view of the leadership or changing political line of the Communist parties alone. The importance of addressing the question from the bottom-up, in terms of the meaning of Communism for the peasants and workers and other 'ordinary' people in society has not been recognized. The present study is a step in filling this void as well.

Dilip Menon understands the crucial point that Communism in Kerala was not "just a political movement organizing the proletariat and peasantry into militant entities pressing for exigent economic concessions", it also invoked "euphoric visions of a new order and a rampant rejection of past hierarchies."¹⁴⁶ The "intimations of equality" and desire for community in a social order characterized by extreme social and economic inequalities were the driving force behind the emergence of Communism. But then he goes on to argue that these very inequalities hindered the eventual realization: "The intimations of equality offered by caste movements, nationalism and communism were thwarted by the fractures within

Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); G. K. Lieten, *The First Communist Ministry in Kerala: 1957-1959* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1982); E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *The Communist Party in Kerala: Six Decades of Struggle and Advance*, 3 vols. (New Delhi: National Book Centre, 1984-1988); T. J. Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaptation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹⁴⁵ Ronald Herring however has looked at cultural and ideological aspects in article-length studies, so has Robin Jeffrey (his book, *Women and Well-being* deals in part with such aspects). Patrick Heller's *Labor of Development* is an excellent work, but again from a political economy perspective. Manali Desai has dealt with the question of political agency in the formation of the Communist Party in article-length studies, which unlike most of the other works, are informed with a rich theoretical content (see "The Relative Autonomy of Party Practices: A Counterfactual Analysis of Left Party Ascendancy in Kerala, India, 1934-40, *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 3 (November 2002): 616-57, and "Party Formation, Political Power, and the Capacity for Reform: Comparing Left Parties in Kerala and West Bengal, India," *Social Forces* 80, no. 1 (September 2001): 37-60); Anna Lindberg, *Modernization and Effeminization: Kerala Cashew Workers since 1930* (Copenhagen and Honolulu: NIAS and University of Hawaii Press, 2005), J. Devika, "Modernity with Democracy?: Gender and Governance in the People's Planning Campaign, Kerala," Working Paper No. 68 (Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, February 2005), 1-60, and Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict* (London: Sterling, 2000) have dealt with the question of modernity but in relation to gender and caste.

¹⁴⁶ Menon, *Communism in South India*, x.

society—of caste, kinship, religion and locality.”¹⁴⁷ Community is the main tool that Menon uses to understand societal changes. But he criticizes Subaltern Studies’ understanding of an “*a priori* sense of community among subordinate groups” which is characterized by an “element of staticity and essentialism”. Menon wants to historicize the notion of community and dispel the idea that collectivities are “‘created’ in any real sense or for all time.” Therefore for him “idea of community represents an aspiration and not an achieved entity.”¹⁴⁸ Thus “there can only be conjunctural creations of community.”

I agree with Menon’s emphasis on the historical constitution of communities and in that sense it is different from the subalternists’ usage. Community is not a static entity, it is constantly in the process of formation. As Jean Luc Nancy argued, community “far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us* – question, waiting, event, imperative—in *the wake of society*”.¹⁴⁹ But this thesis will question Menon’s argument that wider imaginings of community like nationalism and Communism “gave way to local resolutions.” It will be argued that the community engendered by Communism has brought about an imagination the fundamental quality of which was the transcending of local identities. This did not mean that the latter were ignored but Communism mediated between a universal conception of justice and a particular cultural context. Therefore, as noted before, contrary to the view held by the subalternists, the ‘derivative’ nature of Marxist categories have not one-sidedly over-determined Communist politics. As Menon, again, rightly notes, the “reshaping of communism into a doctrine of caste equality”¹⁵⁰ was one of the factors for its success. This may be considered as a substantiation of subalternist and postcolonial

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁴⁹ *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 1991), 11-12. But Menon is not equally sensitive to the other dimension of community, that is, it does acquire some permanence and fixity through the narratives we use to make sense of ourselves.

¹⁵⁰ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 2.

theory's argument that modernity is vernacularized in its travel from the European center. But this view does not take into account the universal element in what is being vernacularized. Arguments similar to Menon's had posited that Communism's appeal is only explicable in terms of "regional sentiments rather than the evocation of its universal message".¹⁵¹ It will be argued here that one cannot be viewed in isolation from the other. While initially the message of Communism was translated into the local idiom of caste equality, later, it went beyond that to bring about a more substantive equality and "basic system of human rights". This is possible to understand only by moving beyond the tradition-modernity dichotomy.

Subaltern Studies in its endeavor to construct a new form of history-writing has problematically conflated Marxism with elitism. The thesis will show that in practice it has not been so. Kaviraj has argued that Marxism in India was characterized by modernism. It believed that European modernity could be reenacted in India and that socialism was universalizable. According to him, Leftists' thinking showed "theoretical imitativeness" and "their major undertaking was not the invention of a social theory" but merely an "application" of borrowed doctrines.¹⁵² This study will question these formulations. Communism in Kerala was built on the avoidance of high modernism which can be characterized as to bring a particular history to nullity and construct society up from scratch. Its position could be categorized as one which respects the past without being imprisoned by it. While it believed that socialism was universalizable, it did not have the naïve belief in the

¹⁵¹Subrata Mitra, "Flawed Paradigms: Some 'Western' Representations of Indian Politics," in *State and Nation in the Context of Social Change*, ed. T. V. Sathyamurthy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 237.

¹⁵²Sudipta Kaviraj, "On the Structure of Nationalist Discourse," in *State and Nation*, ed. Sathyamurthy, 326. Even if Kaviraj's assertion is true of Indian Marxism, its essentialism and homogenization ignores the important differences within the Communist movement in different parts of India and the different trajectories it has taken (see for a comparative study Paul Brass and Marcus Franda, eds., *Radical Politics in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA. and London: MIT Press, 1973). It is beyond the scope of this study to undertake such a comparative excursus. The assertions here are mainly limited to the Communist movement in Kerala.

modernist position that the European past lets us know in advance the script of modernity.¹⁵³ Communism, as we will see, avoided the two main weaknesses that characterized the Nehruvian state in the national sphere: the “excessively economic conception of the idea of development” and, “the total ignorance of civil society.”¹⁵⁴

Of course, it should not be forgotten that Indian Communism, like many others in the world, came into existence and grew in an atmosphere of world Communism completely dominated by Stalinism.¹⁵⁵ However the Stalinist allegiance of the movement in India and the usually alleged feature of Indian Communism as totally servile to Soviet diktats,¹⁵⁶ has led theorists to miss the important ways in which it managed in its practice to adapt and appropriate a theory formulated elsewhere to local conditions, and also contribute to its elaboration.¹⁵⁷ Therefore the lack of adequate theoretical schooling in Marxism¹⁵⁸ and the dependence on Stalinist machinery on whatever was learned did not prevent a vibrant

¹⁵³ See Kaviraj, “Nationalist Discourse,” 333.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 327.

¹⁵⁵ As K. Damodaran, one of the founders of the Communist Party in Kerala put it: “We were told that Stalin was the ‘great teacher’, the ‘guiding star’, who was building socialism in the USSR and the leader of world socialism (“Memoir of an Indian Communist,” *New Left Review* 93 (1975): 35-58).

¹⁵⁶ See some of the works like G. D. Overstreet and M. Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), John H. Kautsky, *Moscow and the Communist Party of India* (New York: John Wiley, 1956) and Victor M. Fic, *Peaceful Transition to Communism in India* (Bombay: Nachiketa, 1967).

¹⁵⁷ As early as 1951 the Communist Party of India (CPI) inaugurated a new program which talked of an Indian revolutionary path which rejected both the Chinese and Russian paths and which was based on “our own specific conditions”. Commenting on the Chinese path, it said, we cannot make their “necessity into a binding principle for us” (Communist Party of India, *Statement of Policy* (New Delhi, 1951), 2, 6). Javeed Alam has persuasively argued that the fraternal relations of collaboration and advice that existed did not mean that Indian Communism was controlled by Moscow. He also does not deny that this advice often hindered independent thinking (Javeed Alam, “Communist Politics in Search of Hegemony,” in *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 190-1). In any case, after Stalin’s death and CPSU’s 20th Congress the Communist Party in India had decided to toe an independent line (see Bhabani Sengupta, *Communism in Indian Politics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 46. It can be argued that the greatest contribution of Indian Communism has been the use of parliamentary methods in the struggle for socialism. As Nossiter writes, it is in this aspect that it has “made a creative contribution to the pool of applied communism” in the world (Nossiter, *Communism*, 106).

¹⁵⁸ As Damodaran notes, “Lenin’s theses on the colonial question were not known to Indian Communists till the end of the fifties” (Damodaran, “Memoir,” 38).

practice.¹⁵⁹ As Ramachandra Guha notes astutely: “The paradox of Indian Marxism is that its practice has always been more appealing than its theory.”¹⁶⁰ Without recognizing this vibrant practice, it is impossible to understand the democratic transformation brought about by Communism in Kerala and also the collapse of hierarchies in one of the most iniquitous regions in India. It will be seen that many of the philosophical critiques of modernity and developmentalism adduced by post-colonial critics now have been part of the Communist practice almost from the beginning.

Ronald Herring has argued that since most of the Communist leaders derived their understanding of society from practice and not from texts, “they were not harmstrung by rigid adherence to any European theory of revolution.”¹⁶¹ While this lack of theoretical knowledge led to more flexibility in practice, Herring does not pay attention to the fact how exposure to the larger corpus of Marxist writings would have helped practice. For instance, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, the preeminent Communist leader from Kerala, had not read thoroughly *The Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci until the mid-1990s, after almost fifty years as a Communist; they immediately had a great impact on him.¹⁶² Nevertheless, the structural and conflictual view of power and society that Herring argues was held by the Communists, was definitely derived from (basic) Marxist texts.

¹⁵⁹ One of the remarkable features of Indian Communism (not just in Kerala) despite its Stalinist leanings and despite its emergence in a ‘traditional’ agrarian society was its avoidance of personalized leadership and the non-reliance on charismatic figures. Collective leadership has been the norm.

¹⁶⁰ *An Anthropologist Among the Marxists And Other Essays* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 211.

Of course, unlike the theorist, the political activist has to contend with the popular. Therefore there will be more flexibility in the latter’s position (Professor Stephen Cullenberg, personal communication, November 6, 2003). In the Communist movement, the respect towards the popular was not instrumental, as it can be in mass politics.

¹⁶¹ Ronald J. Herring, “Stealing Congress’s Thunder: The Rise to Power of a Communist Movement in South India,” in *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations*, ed. Kay Lawson and Peter H. Merkl (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 397.

¹⁶² P. Govinda Pillai, prominent Marxist ideologue, interview by author, April 18, 1999, Perumbavoor, tape recording. Govinda Pillai co-authored a book with Namboodiripad called *Gramscian Vichara Viplavam* (Gramscian Revolution in Thought) (Thiruvananthapuram: Chinth Publishers, 1996). It is interesting to note that Namboodiripad, without reading Gramsci, was groping towards many of the ideas and concepts outlined by him, especially on culture.

While all the subalternist arguments are generally directed at Marxist theory, they also are implicitly referring to its practice which allegedly has replicated theory. For example, while Chakrabarty accepts that Marx is indispensable (despite his argument that “the problem of universalism /Eurocentrism... was inherent in Marxist...thought”) to understating modernity, according to him, this “relationship to Marx cannot any longer be the straightforward one that the Indian communist parties once encouraged, where the scripting of our histories on the lines of some already-told European drama posed no intellectual problems for self-understanding.”¹⁶³ The emphasis again is on the imitativeness of Indian Marxism, which merely follows models constructed elsewhere. If Chakarabarty accepts the use of Marxian tools to a certain extent, other subalternists have generally seen it as a part of a modernity that is alien to India. For Chatterjee caste is an internal structure while class is external, introduced in India by colonial rule.¹⁶⁴ Here Subaltern Studies complements many post-developmental discourses which see Marxism as a ‘borrowed’ philosophy, which is ineffective in “understanding the complex realities of the other, fundamentally, different cultures and contexts”.¹⁶⁵ This does not take into account the reality of capitalism in these cultures and the yearning for substantive equality as a ‘universal’, spanning across cultures which leads to the attraction to Marxism.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Chakrabarty, “Marx after Marxism,” 1094.

¹⁶⁴ Anjan Chakrabarty and Stephen Cullenberg, *Transition and Development in India* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 17.

¹⁶⁵ Ponna Wignaraja, “Rethinking Democracy and Development,” in *New Social Movements in the South : Empowering the People* (New Delhi: Vistaar), 4-35.

¹⁶⁶ Subaltern Studies does spend a lot of time on the subaltern quest for equality. On the subaltern resistance to caste hierarchy, Chatterjee argues: “the very universality of dharma [moral order] as the ideality of caste is not generally acknowledged by every part of the system of castes”. Also, the subalterns have the “desire for a structure of community in which the opposite tendencies of mutual separateness and mutual dependence are united by a force that has a greater universal moral actuality than the given forms of a dominant dharma” (Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 180, 197-8). But this universal is still an incomplete one, for Chatterjee does not abandon the East-West dichotomy. He is seeking to construct a non-Western idea of equality in which the authority of the caste system was not questioned but only the validity of the hierarchical structure in the caste system (see Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 173-199, 220-239).

In Kerala, Marxism inaugurated the “imaginary” of substantive equality, something which did not happen in the national space, where even the transition to bourgeois democracy and a formal equality was brought about by a ‘passive revolution’ with significant compromises with feudalism. This results in a bourgeois democracy which is greatly emasculated by pre-capitalist forms of exploitation. It will be seen that the most important feature of the Communist movement was the overcoming of passive revolution. The new imaginary of substantive equality involved the “definition of new possible spaces hitherto outside the repertory of our forbears and beyond the limits of their social imaginary”.¹⁶⁷ And this quest for substantial equality was shaped by the dialectic of the universal and the particular, of being inspired by anti-imperialist and socialist struggles elsewhere, at the same time inflecting it by local considerations. In this light, it may seem as the postcolonial ‘our modernity’, but what this thesis wants to demonstrate is that the primary endeavor of the Marxist project was not establishing ‘difference’ alone but real and substantial equality. The new concept of rights—political, economic and social— was fashioned by extending the existing vocabulary and by activation of the “latent resources” of the culture. The language of Marxism in Kerala has been appropriated and become so much a part of common-sense that it is difficult to argue that it is of an ‘alien provenance.’

Chapter Outline

The Communist negotiation of modernity in Kerala will be studied through four different aspects of it that is, the political, the economic, the cultural and the processes by which

¹⁶⁷ Taylor, “Two Theories,” 189. But Taylor uses social imaginary from a different perspective. For him, modernity is a radically new dispensation, which did not have moorings in the past. But modernity, while radically new in many ways, is, at the same time the accumulation of many micro-moments of critique, “the localized accretions to a tradition of critique” (Lele, “Orientalism,” 70). So substantive equality, that emerged as a new social imaginary in Kerala, was still built on earlier ‘traditional’ forms of critique and the immediately preceding caste reform organizations.

Communism initially established hegemony in society. In each of these aspects the focus of attention will be what the present study considers as their most important moments and which best encapsulate the Communist negotiation of modernity in that particular aspect. Therefore this thesis does not seek to provide an exhaustive account of the political, economic and cultural aspects since the 1930s to the present, a task which is beyond the scope of this study. It is extremely difficult to delineate in a neat fashion the different aspects of social reality precisely because of their interlinked nature. Here such a division is merely undertaken for analytic purposes. Similarly, the study, unlike Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory, will situate the Communist movement in the larger structures of the national and international, economic and political contexts without which it cannot be understood. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to deal with these structures in detail, except when they are relevant to the central problematic of the thesis. Thus, phenomena like the rise and the fall of Stalinism, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which have immense relevance for the study of the Communist movement in itself, are not dealt with here. On the other hand, significant events like the depression, the Second World War, the Indian independence movement, and the latest phase of capitalist globalization are considered, but from the point of view of their impact on the Communist negotiation of modernity.

This thesis has been divided into eight chapters. The first chapter has introduced the problematic, analyzed the Subaltern Studies' and postcolonial theory's understanding of modernity and social transformation and proposed an alternative understanding.

The second and third chapters cover the period from the 1930s to 1957 and will examine the processes through which the Communists constructed a 'national-popular' will in society thus establishing a different relationship with modernity. Against scholarship that

posits Communism as merely addressing local concerns— which had nothing to do with anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism—it will be argued that the Communist success can only be understood by its ability to simultaneously negotiate exclusions based on class, caste, language, region and the nation and bring about their unity. These chapters will critique the subalternist and postcolonial valorization of the spontaneity and autonomy of peasant politics.

Chapters four and five will look at the Communist negotiation of modernity in the cultural sphere again covering the period from the 1930s to 1957. The Communist cultural assertion will be seen as another facet of the construction of the ‘national popular’. More importantly it was a significant attempt at fusing the compartmentalized spheres of art and life. The remarkable feature was that that the Communist project avoided the presumptions of high modernity, of seeing culture as a mere appendage which would automatically adjust itself after the transformations in the material sphere are complete. What these chapters show is that changes in the material sphere cannot be understood unless the cultural/ideational sphere, which influences them and is influenced by them, is also understood. These chapters will question postcolonial theory’s conception of culture as merely a way of *seeing* the world, rather than also as a way of *making* the world.

Chapter six will focus on the Communist negotiation of modernity in the economic sphere (1957-1974) by specifically looking at the process of the struggle for, and the implementation of land reforms and the legislation for agricultural workers’ rights. The fundamental argument is that the Communist project bridged the material/cultural split that characterized the bourgeois nationalist imagination (and postcolonial theory in the present) by recognizing that the subaltern classes could not be citizens of the modern political order without a structural and material transformation of the social system in their favor.

Chapter seven will look at the Communist negotiation of modernity in the political sphere by focusing on the decentralization project, the Peoples' Plan Campaign (1996-2001) initiated by the Left government. It will be argued that the People's Plan constitutes another moment in Communism's appropriation of the critical potential of modernity—the inauguration of new forms of political sociability which are not just anchored in older forms of community, and the radical restructuring of the role of the state itself. This will question postcolonial theory's understanding of the relationship between state, civil society and modernity in Third World societies.

The final and concluding chapter will tie up the key arguments and will elaborate further on some of them.

A Note on the Method

A vast majority of the studies on Communism in Kerala have been quantitative and positivist. This study is primarily a qualitative study which does not have the purpose of establishing law like determinations. At the same time, unlike Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory, it does not dismiss the usefulness of positivist methods, nor does it see the distinction between structure and meaning, and quality and quantity as extreme polarities. The best way to proceed in social science research is to combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies.¹⁶⁸ The culturalist turn of the subalternist school led to its reliance on qualitative methods, which too have further been reduced to the formal study of texts alone. This has resulted, as we have noted before, in its inability to account properly for the institutions and structures in which these texts are located. This study will seek to overcome this deficiency.

¹⁶⁸ See Sidney Tarrow, "Bridging the Quantitative- Qualitative Divide in Political Science," *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 89, no. 2 (June 1985), 471-474.

The research has relied on both qualitative and quantitative data, and also different kinds of methods— interviews, observation and documentary research. A variety of written material has been relied upon—government records and publications (including those of the colonial government which have been an excellent source in understanding the rise of Communism), Communist party documents and publications, autobiographies and biographies of Communist leaders/activists, literary texts, statistics related to the economy, newspapers and periodicals. To ensure representativeness, the literary texts, poetry, plays and folk songs selected for analysis in this research have been the most popular and important ones in their era in the respective elite and subaltern cultural levels. Similarly, the political texts too have been selected with the criteria of relative importance and influence. The symbolic texts and documents have been interpreted with the intention of understanding the authors' categories rather than the imposed categories that are mostly part of quantitative studies. But, unlike the subalternist methodology, the actor's and author's points of view have not been treated as an explanation. Also, the texts are sought to be understood within the social-historical context in which they are produced and appropriated. This research does not assume that the symbolic forms can be analyzed solely on the basis of the social-historical conditions and by excluding an analysis of their internal structure and content. An exclusive reliance on the former leads to what is called the "fallacy of reductionism" while the dependence on the latter alone can lead to the "fallacy of internalism".¹⁶⁹ The study has sought to avoid both these fallacies. Here, social-historical conditions are treated only as an "ultimate framework for helping to decide what conventionally recognizable meanings, in a

¹⁶⁹ See, for details, John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990), 272-327.

society of that kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate.”¹⁷⁰

The emphasis of the study was on deriving an ‘authentic’ understanding of the worldview of the actors and the meaning of Communism and modernity for them. Thus, the interviews were of a qualitative nature. Sixty-one in-depth, open-ended and semi-structured interviews of non-proportional, nonrandom sample of Communist activists and others were conducted in two phases, May-August 2003, and July-August 2004.¹⁷¹ Importance was placed on understanding the consciousness of the lowest level of Communist activists. Thus, twenty-five interviews were, of activists predominantly belonging to the peasantry and working classes. Nine (five national and state level, and four district and municipality level) Communist leaders were interviewed, and so were eight intellectuals (both Marxist and non-Marxist). The final constituent of the sample was the non-Communist middle and upper classes, which consisted of nineteen interviews. There has been apprehension among researchers that nonrandom samples of interviews can lead to a biased understanding of the phenomenon under study. This problem has been overcome by the triangulation methodology followed here, of comparing different kinds of data and different kinds of methods to construct a possible, unified meaning.

The interviews were undertaken mainly in Muvattupuzha municipality in Central Kerala. Muvattupuzha can be considered a microcosm of Kerala society with Muslims and Christians constituting half of the total population. It is also significant for the fact that it was the first municipality in Kerala to elect the Communists to power (in 1958). Despite this, it is not a Communist stronghold. It is located in the erstwhile Travancore region, outside

¹⁷⁰ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 64.

¹⁷¹ A few interviews conducted before (in 1999) the study began were also used.

the Communist heartland of Malabar. Muvattupuzha has, generally, with the odd exception, elected non-Communist representatives to the State Assembly and the Indian Parliament.

I also participated in two public meetings held by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) (July 2003, Thiruvananthapuram) and by the Left Democratic Front (Muvattupuzha, August 2004), and a seminar organized by the CPM (May 2003, Thiruvananthapuram).

Chapter 2

The Construction of the 'National-Popular': I

If our students are allowed to pursue their studies in the right atmosphere with all that a well equipped school stands for, the danger of communism is as remote as is the danger of any other 'ism' unless of course these 'isms' are able to establish themselves on the basis of their inherent truth of substance... [next paragraph] good education will undoubtedly combat communism because it is incompatible with any kind of 'ism'. An 'ism' is a symptom of individual and social imbalance...¹

The sheer hubris of the administrators of the newly formed nation-state in their ability to 'mould' citizens through one of modernity's greatest tools, education has proved, in retrospect, to be nothing but Panglossian optimism and a refusal to understand the 'great transformation' that was happening in their midst. A transformation that culminated in the democratic election of a Communist government in 1957. This transformation was brought about by the peasants and the working class. This and the next chapter will show that what is more important here is that the transformations were not the result of a spontaneous movement of the peasantry, as valorized in the 'history from below' of the Subaltern Studies, but occurred on a terrain where spontaneity met conscious leadership of the Communist Party and its precursor, the Congress Socialist Party. Also the chapters will question Dilip Menon's argument that wider imaginings like Communism and nationalism collapsed into local resolutions. If modernity/tradition dichotomy had to be overcome, then the modern project of Marxism had to penetrate the worldview and commonsense of the peasants. Many of the modernity projects in the Third World have failed because of the fact that a huge gap

¹ Office of the Director of Public Instruction to Secretary, Education Department, September 26, 1950, *Madras Govt. Secret Files, Under-Secretary's Safe* (henceforth USS) no. 51/51, 19 June 1951 (Tamil Nadu Archives) (hereafter TNA).

separated the modernizing elite from the common people.² In the absence of a “sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation... the reactions between [them] are reduced to, relationships of a purely bureaucratic and formal order”.³ This is when instrumental rationality becomes pervasive. The unique characteristic of the negotiation of modernity by the Communists in Kerala was that theory was not formulated in opposition to the spontaneous feelings of the masses.⁴ The reciprocal relationship between the two was the main reason for the success of the Communists. Communists in effect managed to construct a ‘national-popular will’⁵ by overcoming the separation between the intellectuals and people—a prominent feature in other societies too but accentuated here because of caste hierarchies. This was achieved through “long ideological and political preparation, organically devised in advance to reawaken popular passions and enable them to be concentrated and brought simultaneously to detonation point”⁶ and not through mere economistic struggles or adventurism of armed voluntarism. At the same time, the Communist project’s promise of overcoming the material/cultural split is what drew the masses away from the Gandhian bourgeois nationalist project. This demonstrates the inadequacy of a merely culturalist understanding of society which is prominent in Subaltern Studies.

The processes that entrenched Communism in society run counter to the theoretical propositions of the Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory. Their main lacuna is that they do not account for the complex ways in which large-scale mobilizations are constructed and

² See Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (London: Michael Joseph, 1995), 199-224.

³ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 418.

⁴ ‘Spontaneous’ is defined by Gramsci as “not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by ‘common sense’, i.e. by the traditional popular conception of the world—what is unimaginatively called ‘instinct’, although it too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition” (ibid., 198-9).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 110.

the ways in which newer consciousness arises by intermingling with existing ones.⁷ While it is true that orthodox Marxists have looked at peasant radicalism with contempt and suspicion, the construction of Communist hegemony and the founding of modern democracy in Kerala were not premised on the ‘death of the peasant’, but achieved through the peasantry and the agricultural labor. What the Subaltern Studies claims as the novel project of inaugurating a democratic project with the peasant as the citizen is thus preempted by the Communist movement by a few decades. But unlike in the subalternist project, the peasant is not essentialized and valorized in an ahistorical fashion. Also, unlike the elitist modernization projects, democracy is not postponed until a modern industrial working class is constructed.

The Economy

Without understanding the material context it would be impossible to make sense of the social transformation. This context acts as its enabling as well as limiting condition. The economy of Malabar⁸ in the 1930s, as elsewhere in the world, was trying to recover from the devastation caused by the depression. The prices of important crops like pepper and coconut fell drastically.⁹ This brought an end to the boom in the world prices of cash crops that was witnessed in the 1920s. In the three decades since 1900 there was a tremendous expansion of cultivation with almost two *lakh* acres of land being brought under pepper and coconut.¹⁰

Dilip Menon basing himself on this and other facts had contentiously argued that instead of

⁷ See Alam, “Peasantry,” 49.

⁸ The state of Kerala was formed in 1956 joining together three regions Malabar, Travancore and Cochin. Malabar was directly administered by the British whereas the latter two were princely states.

⁹ In Chirakkal *Taluk* (administrative division below the district), in 1928, the prices of pepper were *Rupees* (Rs.) 534-6-0 per *bharam* (1 *bharam*: 82.8 lbs) and coconuts sold for Rs. 49-2-10 per 1000 which fell to Rs. 146-0-0 and Rs. 27-0-0 for pepper and coconuts respectively (*Revenue Department G. O. 493, March 4, 1931* (Kerala State Archives, hereafter KSA)).

¹⁰ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 121. One *lakh* is equal to a hundred thousand.

viewing the Malabar peasantry in this period as having “lived and worked in conditions of extreme penury entailed by the twin exactions of lord and state”,¹¹ it is more accurate to see the small cultivators as responding to the demands of “commercialized agriculture, fuelled by international demand” and participating in it “willingly, to their profit.” He points out that the common analysis of academic studies (mainly Marxist) which emphasizes features like rack renting, insecurity of tenure, evictions, exorbitant revenues leading to the pauperization of peasantry and a stagnant wetland economy stems from a misunderstanding caused by the focus only on the wetland regions of south Malabar.¹² Instead, if we focus on the other regions of Malabar and “look at the dynamic relationship between wetland, dryland and forest”, what emerges is not “a tale of consistent poverty within a subsistence economy, but a picture of fragile affluence created by a cash crop economy.”¹³ He also argues that the proportion of land revenue as a part of total revenue decreased dramatically by half in the period from 1880-1920.¹⁴ Even as this is the case, Menon is careful to add that this “degree of integration into the market did not necessarily mean the undermining of patronal, reciprocal relations between large *tharavadus* [landed matrilineal households] and dependent labourers and cultivators.”¹⁵

Even if Menon’s argument is accepted, it does not explain how the percentage of agricultural laborers rose in the period between 1900 and 1930 if there was a “fragile

¹¹ Panikkar, *Lord and State*, 48.

¹² Menon, *Communism in South India*, 22.

¹³ Dilip M. Menon, “Peasants and Politics in Malabar”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 11, 1997): 2619; Menon, *Communism in South India*, 22. This argument of Menon is problematic when we read it with the assessment of colonial officials. C. A. Innes in his 1915 report on Malabar tenancy legislation concluded, the “lot of cultivating tenants in Malabar was deplorable”. The only reason that the British could not contemplate doing anything for them was because, as F. B. Evans notes in his criticism of Innes, it would be a “grave political blunder to weaken the janmi [landlord] class which was admittedly a political force on the side of the government.” Similarly, the government was also sure “It would be unwise to raise [the] question [of conferring occupancy rights on tenants] now because... it is really a part of socialism” (author of the note unknown) (*Law (General) Department G. O. 2731, November 13, 1923* (TNA)).

¹⁴ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

affluence” in which small cultivators benefited.¹⁶ The more plausible explanation seems to be that while the boom in cash crops did actually bring about an economy significantly geared to exports to a world market, the real benefits do not seem to have flowed down to the actual cultivators.¹⁷ Also, Menon’s account ignores the revenues yielded from sources other than land revenue. The monopolies that the colonial government had on items like salt, tobacco and timber really affected the peasantry and agricultural laborers. The taxes from salt and tobacco amounted to almost half of land tax in the beginning of the 1850s.¹⁸ Besides these the colonial state taxed the most important necessities of daily life including “houses, shops, cattle, looms, ferries, fishing-nets, tapping knives, toddy and arrack [local forms of alcohol]. In fact, nothing fell outside the exacting grasp of the state.”¹⁹ All these additional taxes amounted to 25 percent of the land revenue.

If there are serious divergences in the characterization of the period before 1930, there seems to be some convergence after that. Even Menon agrees that with the effects of the Depression, the small cultivators were again forced to depend on the large landowning feudal lords for subsistence. Since North Malabar was a food grain deficient area (a problem worsened by the conversion of wetlands for cash crops cultivation),²⁰ the large landowners

¹⁶ In 1901 the percentage of agricultural laborers in the total agrarian population of Malabar was 60 (M. Kabir, “Peasants and Politics in Malabar” *Economic and Political Weekly*, (May 3, 199): 942-950) and in 1931 it had increased to 68. Kerala had the second-highest rate of proletarianization in India (after Bengal) between 1910 and 1950 (Desai, “Party Formation,” 43). After 1931 there was a dramatic increase in the number of agricultural laborers following the economic downturn caused by the depression (see K. N. Raj and Michael Tharakan, “Agrarian Reform in Kerala and its Impact on the Rural Economy: A Preliminary Assessment,” in *Agrarian Reform in Contemporary Developing Countries*, ed. A. K. Ghose (London: Croom Helm Heler and St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 35.)

¹⁷ This is reinforced by the fact that in 1927-28, in 139 *desams* (administrative division below the *taluk*) of the district 59 percent of the cultivators were in debt. Similarly, despite the surge in the number of banking institutions, the lower cultivating tenants did not get credit from them because of their inability to provide collateral like secure title deeds (A. R. MacEwen, *Resettlement Scheme Report for the Eight Plain Taluks of the Malabar District and Malabar Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1930* cited in Kabir, “Peasants”, 945).

¹⁸ Panikkar, *Lord and State*, 14-16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ The colonial impact on the economy and the subsequent integration with the world market had led to the overemphasis on the cultivation of commercial cash crops. By 1937-38 Malabar had nearly fifty per cent of

who controlled the production of paddy exercised real dominance in the countryside which was accentuated by the fact that the forests and wastelands were the private property of the landlords.²¹ Even though there were some landlords with smallholdings, large swathes of land were under the control of a few landlords, especially in South Malabar.²²

The agitation for tenancy reforms had begun with the formation of the Malabar *Kudiyam Sangham* (Malabar Tenants Union) in 1922, an organization of the rich and middle peasantry. Even though land in Malabar was owned by the great landowners, they never cultivated the land directly. From the 1900s town-based professional class took on tenancies to cultivate cash crops for profit. This class too was not a directly cultivating one, but leased out the land on sub-tenancies.²³ The struggle was carried out by lawyers, intellectuals, and journalists of prominent *kanakkar* (superior tenants) families and the methods were totally constitutional. Despite the fact that the government stood stolidly by the landlords over a century of peasant uprisings, with the entry of the educated and articulate members of the rich peasantry (mainly belonging to the upper caste Nayars), it was forced to concede to their

total land under cultivation for cash crops. The exploitation of the colony by the metropolis through the extraction of raw materials from it and the export of finished goods to it was starkly evident in Travancore. In 1937-38 59.2 per cent of the imports consisted of essential consumption goods (mainly food grains) whereas 65.1 per cent of exports consisted of raw materials and semi-manufactured goods (E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1968), 83-85). The export orientation of the economy can be gauged from the fact that in Travancore, the index of export trade rose from 100 in 1854-55 to 5019 in 1936-37 (M. A. Oommen, *Essays on Kerala Economy* (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH, 1993), 74).

²¹ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 9.

²² *Report of the Special Officer for the Investigation of Land Tenures on the Recommendation of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, May 1947* (Government of Madras, 1950), 123. Some big landholders like Vengayil Nayanar and Kalliattu Nambiar held as much as 200,000 and 36,000 acres of land respectively (Menon, *Communism in South India*, 38).

²³ Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 164. The pattern of landholding shows the differences between the regions. In the 1940s Travancore had 20 percent of the population in the small landowning category. Cochin had seven percent and Malabar, only five (Ibid.). In 1931 owner cultivators numbered only 6 percent in Malabar where as it was 61 percent in Travancore; tenants constituted only 6 percent in Travancore while they were 23 percent in Malabar. The corresponding figures for agricultural laborers were 31 and 68 percent in Travancore and Malabar respectively (Desai, "Party Formation," 43). Compared to Malabar Travancore had a very quiescent peasant history due to some distinguishing characteristics. The royalty, which owned almost all the land in the state, conferred ownership rights on the tenants of the state in 1865 in the hope of boosting commercial agriculture. Slavery was also formally abolished in 1855 even though agricultural laborers continued to be in a semi-slave status. Ronald Herring has argued that the less oppressive landlordism in Travancore did not mean that it had a healthy agrarian structure (see his *Land to the Tiller*).

demands in less than a decade.²⁴ The Malabar Tenancy Act was passed in 1930 which granted fixity of tenure, fixation of fair rent, ban on arbitrary evictions etc. But the Act did nothing for the *verumpattakar*, or the tenants-at-will. The attitude of the *kanakkar* towards the *verumpattakar* changed and what the Act did was while “curbing the rights of traditional *janmis* [it] created a new class of *janmis*.”²⁵ The *kanakkar* continued to exploit the *verumpattakar* in the same fashion as the *janmis*.

In 1931 the British government went ahead to increase the land revenue by 18.75 percent. This affected the peasantry which was already reeling under the price crash. The lords, to overcome the increased exactions by the state, began to impose feudal levies on their tenants other than increasing the rent.²⁶ The condition of the cultivators began to worsen with many being forced to sell their land.²⁷ The serious condition of the peasantry forced the government to suspend the collection of the enhanced land revenue.²⁸ The special officer appointed by the Madras government to look into the indebtedness of agriculturists observed: “The agriculturist has hardly anything left after paying his dues (debt, rent, tax) etc. and his condition becomes embarrassing. What is applicable to the smaller ryots [farmer] is applicable on a larger scale to the bigger ones... In short, agricultural indebtedness has become... the bane of village life.”²⁹

The 1939 Malabar Tenancy Committee, which was constituted to go into the unresolved question of the inferior tenants, noted that almost fifty percent of the agricultural

²⁴ P. Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change: Malabar 1836-1982* (New Delhi: Sage, 1989), 78-9, 87-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁶ Menon has argued that exaction of ‘feudal levies’ from tenants began only with the economic downturn of the Depression. Before that they were only confined to the service castes and agricultural laborers. This ignores the prevalence of feudal levies before the 1930s, which has been recorded by early Congress leaders like K. Madhavan in his autobiography (see Kabir, “Peasants,” 950).

²⁷ K. K. N. Kurup, *Kayyur Riot: A Terrorist Episode in the Nationalist Movement in Kerala* (Calicut: Sandhya Publications, 1978), 8.

²⁸ *Revenue Department, G. O. 272, February 9, 1934* (KSA).

²⁹ *Revenue DR 617/35, April 4, 1935* (Kozhikode Regional Archives, hereafter KRA).

produce went out of the peasants' hands to the landlords and the government.³⁰ But the main demands of the inferior tenants like reduction in rent rates and abolition of one year's rent as deposit were rejected. The condition of the agricultural laborers was even worse with the wages they earned needed to be trebled to make them a living wage.³¹ The ineffectiveness of the clauses of the Tenancy Act of 1930 was proved when there were more than 20,000 evictions ordered in the period 1940-46 in Malabar District.³² World War II and its aftermath were characterized by severe shortages of food grains.³³ The prices of basic commodities had increased manifold. Landlords, capitalists and black marketers ruled the roost. Demobilized soldiers swelled the ranks of the unemployed.³⁴ The people who made money out of black marketing invested it in buying land.³⁵ As the government itself put it: "To sum up, the present situation in Malabar, the condition of the people is deplorable and they are sunk in indebtedness, poverty and misery."³⁶

Even after independence, the condition of the peasantry was not ameliorated. The measures taken like the *punam* [shifting cultivation]-*charter* of 1948 which prohibited the denial of cultivation of wastelands by landlords and also decreed low rates of rent for them remained only on paper. The demand for the cultivation of wasteland was the fulcrum around which the struggles of the Communist Party and the peasant unions were to be constituted. The amendments to the Tenancy Act of 1930 brought about in 1951

³⁰ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 95. He adds that this could be an underestimate as it was based on the rent rates mentioned in the Tenancy Act which were lower than the real rates prevailing then. The constitution of the committee itself shows the nature of power structure in the society. It had four representatives from the landlord class, 12 from the superior tenants and only three representing the inferior tenants who constituted the majority (Anilkumar A. V., *Thiraskritha Charithrathinu Oru Aamukham (Foreword to A Discarded History)* (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2000), 47).

³¹ Evidence of M. Gopala Kurup, *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1940*, vol. I (Madras, 1940), 223.

³² *Revenue (Ms.) Department G. O. 1935, August 12, 1947* (KSA).

³³ *Public (General A) Misc., G. O. 630 (Confidntl.), March 12, 1948* (TNA).

³⁴ K. K. N. Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles in Kerala* (Trivandrum: CBH publications, 1989), 11.

³⁵ *Deshabhimani*, August 5, 1945.

³⁶ *Report of the Special Officer for the Investigation of Land Tenures*, 26.

perpetuated its lacunae. It did not contain any provisions for the substantial amelioration of the condition of the inferior tenants.

In Travancore despite the phenomenal growth of banking,³⁷ a majority of the agricultural loans were sought for the cultivation of cash crops, which benefited mainly the Christian community.³⁸ The position of the tenants- at- will and small owner-cultivators were scarcely better than before. By 1930 on an average, the rural family was indebted to the extent of Rs. 380.³⁹ Travancore, which had twenty-five percent of the total cultivated area under coconut cultivation, suffered badly (mainly the predominant small holders) because of the fall in the price of coconut (which throughout the nineteen thirties was lower than the average price of the later nineteenth century). In 1934 the state witnessed an alarming number of sales of land because of the failure to pay land revenue.⁴⁰ Along with these developments was the persistence of the other characteristics of a colonial economy like the predominance of foreign capital and de-industrialization.⁴¹ In the 1930s 5/6th of the total plantation economy and sixty percent of the coir industry was under British control.⁴² This forced the indigenous bourgeoisie to invest in land.⁴³ “This, in turn, led to a gigantic transformation in the character of landed property itself, i.e., it became a commodity that can

³⁷ In 1935-6, out of the 390 registered joint-stock companies in Travancore, 271 were in the field of money-lending and other financial transactions whereas only 53 were engaged in industrial production proper (Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 89-90). In 1932-33 Travancore had 20 per cent of the total banks in India. In Cochin too there was a tremendous growth of banking with the number rising from 5 in 1917-18 to 167 in 1932-33, an increase by almost 34 times (Oommen, *Kerala Economy*, 59).

³⁸ This was because the Christian law of inheritance provided more secure proprietary rights on land making it a more acceptable security for the banks (Oommen, *Kerala Economy*, 63).

³⁹ Nossiter, *Communism*, 53.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 77.

⁴¹ While population doubled between 1881 and 1931, the “absence of a corresponding growth in the number of people employed by the industrial sector is ample proof of the semi-colonial nature of the economy developed by the British” (R. K. Suresh Kumar, “Socio-Economic Basis of Political Evolution in the Erstwhile Travancore State, 1859-1938,” (Ph. D Thesis: Kerala University, 1989)).

⁴² Capitalism in agriculture was mainly confined to the plantation sector and also to rice growing areas in Kuttanand.

⁴³ This assertion is validated by the fact that a very high proportion of the bank advances were towards agriculture, a unique phenomenon when compared to other parts of India (Oommen, *Kerala Economy*, 71).

be bought and sold like any other commodity.”⁴⁴ The effect of this growing transfer and concentration of land came to be noticed in the 1941 census which recorded that 23 percent of Travancore’s population was agricultural laborers, almost double the proportion recorded in 1921.⁴⁵ The process of pauperization was not confined to the peasantry, as Namboodiripad points out, but affected a section of the landlords too. In his estimate, 60 to 80 percent of the rural population in Travancore and Cochin were proletarian or semi-proletarian.⁴⁶ The condition of the urban working classes too were quite bad as it was acknowledged in the Travancore Legislative Assembly.⁴⁷

The outbreak of the Second World War provided another opportunity for the export economy of Kerala. The price of coconut had increased more than five-fold by the end of the war and by 1950 it had shot up to seven fold. But what was phenomenal was the growth in rubber exports (mainly a result of the Japanese conquest of Malaya, which cut off one of the main sources of natural rubber): by 1945, Travancore’s rubber exports had shown an increase of a phenomenal 750 times since the base it touched during the depression. The boom was such that it benefited some smallholders too.⁴⁸ The growth of banking which suffered from the mid-thirties recovered, if not in terms of new units, but in terms of branches of the existing ones. In the period between 1941-47, 235 branches were opened in Travancore.⁴⁹ But this prosperity again was accompanied by a simultaneous concentration in landholding and wealth. Jeffrey estimates that only four to five percent of the population in Kerala may have “successfully navigated the depression and prospered during the war and its

⁴⁴ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 91.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 78.

⁴⁶ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 98, 104.

⁴⁷ See T. K. Velu Pillai’s statement (*Proceedings of the Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly*, vol. VII, part I (1938), 27).

⁴⁸ Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 80-1.

⁴⁹ Oommen, *Kerala Economy*, 67.

aftermath.”⁵⁰ This was evident during the war when severe food shortages were the reality of the masses.⁵¹

Major industries of Kerala like coir manufacture⁵² (by 1953, 200,000 workers were directly engaged in coir work. The industry flourished in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century because of the demand for cheap floor covering from the West) were to suffer badly from the 1940s because of the development of alternative products like synthetic floor covering and rising standards of living in the West.⁵³ In the Ambalapuzha-Cherthala *taluk* regions (in Travancore) where the coir industry was mainly located, there were reports of severe poverty and unemployment.⁵⁴ The Report of Second Enquiry on Agricultural Labour in India concluded that the deterioration of the condition of laborers was worse than elsewhere in India.⁵⁵ These structural conditions provide the context in which political agency takes place. They do not mechanically produce an outcome; on the contrary, the nature and quality of political practice determines the final outcome from among the range of possible ones.

The Stirrings of Socialism

The early thirties was a period of great hope for the Indian national movement. After a decade and more of Gandhi’s entry into the independence struggle, there were signs of the masses finally playing a hegemonic role in it. But what was to follow was a

⁵⁰ Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 81, 83.

⁵¹ Revenue (Ms.) Department, G. O. 1911, June 17, 1943 (KSA).

⁵² By 1953, 200,000 workers were directly engaged in coir work. The industry flourished in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century because of the demand for cheap floor covering from the West (Nossiter, *Communism*, 58).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁴ In some places, it was found that per capita income per day was as low as two *annas* and seven *paisas* [denominations of a Rupee] (Puthupally Raghavan, *Sakthavu R. Sugathan* (Comrade R. Sugathan) (Kottayam: Current Books, 1999), 237-8).

⁵⁵ Nossiter, *Communism*, 52.

continuation of the elite-control of the earlier period because of the class content of Gandhian nationalism. The Gandhian united front strategy of landlords and princes with peasants and others prevented any radical change in the social set-up.⁵⁶ This was to later culminate in the achievement of independence, albeit through a process of 'passive revolution' in which the Indian bourgeoisie had to make significant compromises with the feudal land-owning classes.⁵⁷ Passive revolution, as Gramsci has defined it is when the "thesis alone in fact develops to the full its potential for struggle, up to the point where it absorbs even the so-called representatives of the antithesis" rather than transcend it in a dialectical opposition.⁵⁸ In the Kerala context too, 'passive revolution' had all the chances of realizing itself but ultimately could not, as the worker-peasant classes ascended to gain hegemony of the anti-imperialist struggle and complete the task of democratic revolution. Thus Kerala alone could come closer to achieving 'national liberation' in the Fanonian sense, although within a sub-national context.⁵⁹

But in the Kerala of early thirties, nationalism, leave alone national liberation, seemed a distant phenomenon. Against the received wisdom that argued that there was an effervescence of nationalism in these years, Dilip Menon has shown that nationalism was ineffective because it could not deal in any significant way with caste inequality.⁶⁰ An abstract

⁵⁶ Pandey, "Peasant Revolt," 187-8.

⁵⁷ According to Sudipta Kaviraj, "the Indian capitalist class [does not] exercise its control over society through a moral-cultural hegemony of the Gramscian type... [p]olitically too, as in the field of economic relations, the Indian bourgeoisie cannot be accorded an unproblematic primacy, because of the undeniable prevalence of precapitalist political forms in our governance" ("A Critique of the Passive Revolution," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, nos. 45-47 (1988): 2431).

⁵⁸ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 110.

⁵⁹ See Frantz Fanon, "National Culture," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 156. For a discussion on the failure to achieve 'national liberation' in the Indian national context, see Guha, "Some Aspects". Subaltern Studies has rightly recognized passive revolution as the main feature of the Indian transition, but then it goes onto generalize it as a common condition of all Third World societies without examining exceptions like that of Kerala. See Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion.

⁶⁰ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 90. For a valoristic account of the civil disobedience movement of 1930, see Fic, *Yenan of India*, 13.

and homogenous nationalism that failed to incorporate the fragments like caste, locality, class and religion and their concerns. The elite upper-caste leadership of the Indian National Congress prevented wide-scale participation of the masses. Even when the lower-castes like Tiyyas and Chaliyas (weaving community) participated in nationalist activities like liquor picketing and propagation of *khadi*,⁶¹ they did so out of considerations which were hardly national.⁶² The disconnect of these Gandhian programs with the quotidian lives of the laboring masses could not be more stark. As A. K. Gopalan, arguably the most popular among the Communist leaders, notes in his memoirs about the response of the poor:

We suffer only because of these landlords' boys who make speeches and picket and not because of the government. After a day's hard work, a little toddy is a relief. They don't allow us even that. The white man's fabrics are very cheap. They don't allow us to buy these... We don't get the time to spin on the *charkha* [hand-cranked spinning wheel].

In Gopalan's view, even though large sections of the middle class came forward, it was not possible to mobilize the poverty-stricken masses.⁶³ The alienation of the peasants from the Congress program is confirmed by another incident recounted by Communist leader E. K. Nayanar in his memoirs. An elderly peasant who was asked by the Congress activists not to drink responded:

You sons of rich landlords need no liquor. Those like me who work hard from morning to evening do need it. Only then can we prepare ourselves for work the next day. What we earn by such hard work, you drain from us as rent and other payments... Even after this perpetual hard work we are poor. Our only enjoyment is toddy. Won't you let us enjoy this humble refreshment? We don't want your

⁶¹ Coarse home-spun cotton cloth.

⁶² Thus the Tiyyas, who traditionally practiced toddy tapping were attracted to temperance for reasons of "economy and status", while the Chaliyas whose economic well-being was threatened by factories and cheap foreign imports saw in the propagation of *khadi* a scope for revival of their condition. Even for the upper caste Nayars, nationalist activity provide an opportunity to fashion a new sense of community identity in the face of their declining dominance (Menon, *Communism in South India*, 98-100, 106). A merely culturalist reading as in the Subaltern Studies writings cannot account for the diverse motives demonstrated by different caste groupings here.

⁶³ A. K. Gopalan, *In the Cause of the People: Reminiscences* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1973), 25.

Congress. Will you let us draw drinking water from your well? No... You will not let us live on this earth.⁶⁴

Congress tried to push the issue of caste under the carpet for the sake of 'national unity'. It looked at the *Harijan* (untouchable castes) movement against caste oppression as a 'communal' one (in a contradictory relationship with the nationalist cause). Even when caste was dealt with, the attitude was paternalist. Instead of seeking to bring about structural changes within the caste system, the goal was reform within it by emphasizing programs like temple entry, cleanliness and purity. Gandhi's unbending refusal to invest the anti-untouchability and temple entry programs with any political significance led to limiting participation in them to upper-caste Hindus only.⁶⁵ But this did not mean that temple entry could not have generated a wider appeal. In fact, the Guruvayur *satyagraha* of 1932 showed all the signs of overcoming caste barriers.⁶⁶ The Congress leader K. Kelappan's fast unto death pledge attracted attention from outside India too. The orthodox sections of caste Hindus who had earlier shown virulent opposition to Congress interfering in religious matters now seemed like capitulating to the liberal wave sweeping across the region. A caste Hindu meeting was held at Guruvayur in which all the caste Hindu leaders of Kerala pledged their support for the temple entry program.⁶⁷ The government was worried about the revolutionary potential of Kelappan's death. But the fast was forced to be abandoned under the insistence of Gandhi who did not want to exacerbate matters just after the signing of the Poona Pact with the leader of the untouchables, B.R. Ambedkar. There was immense disappointment at this move by Gandhi. Thus the Guruvayur *satyagraha* was "successfully

⁶⁴ E. K. Nayanar, *My Struggles: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1982), 7.

⁶⁵ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 107, 115.

⁶⁶ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 44. See also E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *How I Became A Communist*, trans. P.K. Nair (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1976), 136. *Satyagraha* is a Gandhian non-violent method of struggle.

⁶⁷ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 44.

‘nationalised’ and made to conform to the necessities of national politics.’⁶⁸ It was the inability to bring about genuine changes in the caste system that provoked responses such as these from the lower-caste poor on the hollowness of the claims of nationalism: “The whites should be driven out you say. How good they are! Do they have untouchability? They can be touched, one can go near them – it is not possible to approach your [upper-caste Congressmen] house. Yet you ask us to help you to free this country. What will that avail us? We will not listen to you.”⁶⁹ This showed the limits of anti-colonialism. Ultimately, nationalism in Malabar in this period “moved along the local faultlines of power, resolving itself, in a large part, into the activities of younger members of dominant *tharavadus* [matrilineal feudal households].” Rather than create wider unities, “nationalism by decree” deepened the existing caste divisions.⁷⁰ If the lower castes felt that nationalist activity was a continuation of the exercise of authority by the landed upper caste elites, Muslims too were wary of Congress becoming strong for fear of Hindu domination.⁷¹ The situation was almost similar to Gramsci’s description of Italy during the 1930s:

In Italy the term ‘national’ has ideologically very restricted meaning, and does not in any case coincide with ‘popular’ because in Italy the intellectuals are distant from the people, i.e., from the ‘nation’. They are tied instead to caste tradition that has never been broken by a strong popular or national political movement from below.⁷²

If Menon has very persuasively deconstructed the myth of nationalism, he has not been equally sensitive about the Janus-faced nature of nationalism.⁷³ Nationalism is not only

⁶⁸ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 115. For a comparative peep into other instances of such ‘nationalization’, see Gyanendra Pandey, “Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1919-1922,” in *Subaltern Studies 1*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143-197.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 22.

⁷⁰ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 117.

⁷¹ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 26.

⁷² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985).

⁷³ See Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence*, vol. 2: *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1995).

a “justification for a regime of hierarchy and domination”, but also appeals “to the sense of community in which exploitation, generation of surplus and its appropriation is not divided in terms of those who produce and those who appropriate but is a projected communal activity.”⁷⁴ If nationalism till 1934 had not fulfilled what Menon has called the ‘intimation of equality’, it also laid the foundation for the realization of the same later. Menon follows Subaltern Studies in focusing on the ‘fragments’ alone without looking at the simultaneous process of the emergence of nationalism

The ineffectiveness of the nationalist imaginary was not only due to the reasons we outlined above; it was also due to the organizational weaknesses of the Congress party till then. Most of the leaders were professional lawyers and spent all the weekdays in court. Thus Congress used to essentially function only on Sundays thus earning the nickname ‘Sunday Congress’ for itself. This caused a discord between the dedicated full-time ordinary workers and the part-time leaders. More important were the serious differences of opinion emerging because of the “incongruity between the Gandhian ideas that were the guiding influence of the leadership, and the revolutionary ideas that spread fast among the rank and file.”⁷⁵ This contradiction set the stage for the next stage of struggle, for a more inclusive nationalism. If nationalism “moved along the local faultlines of power”, it also simultaneously provoked the disenchantment of the fragments. But the fragment does not exist in a perpetual state of negation vis- à- vis the totality, as some have argued,⁷⁶ it also seeks to enter into a dialectical relationship with the latter. Caste, class, religion, gender and other ‘particularities’ are at a perpetual struggle to reconstitute the definition of nation.

⁷⁴ Jayant Lele, “The Two Faces of Nationalism: On the Revolutionary Potential of Tradition,” in *National and Ethnic Movements*, ed. Jacques Dofny and Akinsola Akiwowo (London: Sage, 1980), 213-214.

⁷⁵ Namboodiripad, *How I Became a Communist*, 121.

⁷⁶ See Pandey, “Defense of the Fragment.”

The very same Gandhian programs like civil disobedience, *khadi* propagation, temperance, *harijan* uplift etc. which did not attract the laboring classes, created a stir among the middle and upper echelons. An instrumental and cynical attitude towards nationalism was not the only response in a fast-disappearing segmented society. The other face of nationalism, as community, as the ‘intimation of equality’ also attracted people. Almost the entire first generation of the Communist leadership in Kerala came into politics inspired by the Gandhian nationalist struggle. E. M. S. Namboodiripad notes that he cannot describe in words the “emotional upsurge” he felt when Gandhi broke the Salt Law. The Guruvayur *satyagraha* too “thrilled thousands of young men” like him and “gave inspiration to a vast majority of the people to fight for their legitimate rights with self-respect, rights that were denied to them for ages.” It should be noted that despite Namboodiripad’s later characterization of Gandhi as the “all pervading creator, sustainer and destroyer of Civil Disobedience Movement”, he “actively participated” in the latter’s movement for Harijan uplift.⁷⁷ Similarly, many other future Communist leaders like P. Krishna Pillai, A. K. Gopalan, Puthupally Raghavan and so on were captivated by the benevolent face of nationalism (the thrill of the struggle of “unarmed Indian people” against the “mightiest of all the Empires in the world”⁷⁸) and initiated into political activity through the Gandhian programs.⁷⁹ It was the non-fulfillment of the promise of nationalism (of every caste and class grouping having an equal place in the nationalist imaginary) that drove these people beyond the confines of Gandhian politics.

The move to the Left in the form of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in 1934 at the national level was the culmination of the disenchantment with the Gandhian program. In

⁷⁷ Namboodiripad, *How I Became a Communist*, 112, 123, 151.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷⁹ See Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 120.

Kerala, the formation of the CSP was of added significance for it was to transform into the Communist Party later. The leading members who were instrumental in the formation of the CSP in Kerala had only a rudimentary knowledge of Marxism, as we noted before. Marxism as a theoretical and practical aid came only later. As the Communist leader K. P. R. Gopalan put it, “we had socialist aims without knowing anything about Socialism”.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, they were unanimous in rejecting the “Gandhian notion that societal transformation can take place without economic structural change, class conflict and violence.”⁸¹ It was the search for equality that led them to Marxism rather than the other way round. Krishna Pillai had already recognized in the early thirties that peasantry was to be the fulcrum of any anti-imperialist struggle and that without the participation of the masses it would be meaningless.⁸² He made the distinction between the ‘Congress of the rich’ and ‘Congress of the poor’,⁸³ and he obviously did not leave any ambiguities as to what the Congress should be. Soon, the left wing in the form of CSP captured a majority within the Congress organization. The right wing continued with its emphasis on social reform programs; also, the distinction that Krishna Pillai had made was becoming a truism with the wealthy classes supporting the right-wingers while the left-wingers were strapped for cash.⁸⁴

One significant development with the formation of the CSP was the widening of nationalist activity into the princely states of Travancore and Cochin reversing the Gandhian policy of *laissez faire* or non-interference in the internal politics of princely states and the identification of the British alone as the adversary.⁸⁵ This was one of the first steps toward moving away from bourgeois nationalism, and inflecting the nationalist imaginary with class.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Menon, *Communism in South India*, 147.

⁸¹ Herring, “Communist Movement,” 397.

⁸² T. V. Krishnan, *T. V. Thomas: Jeevithakatha (Life History)* (Kozhikode: Pranavam Books, 1998), 33.

⁸³ Nossiter, *Communism*, 70.

⁸⁴ Calendar Case No. 29 of 1938, May 16, 1938, Stationary Second-Class Magistrate of Cannanore, *Madras Home Dept., G. O. No. 1265 (Confidntl.), March 24, 1942* (TNA); see also Namboodiripad, *How I Became*, 172.

⁸⁵ Namboodiripad, *How I Became a Communist*, 176.

A move away from the “idea of ‘trusteeship’- the landlords and princes acting as trustees in the economic sphere, Gandhi and company in the political.”⁸⁶ But from this critique of Gandhi as a part of hegemonic nationalism, Subaltern Studies moves onto a position that, as we have seen, partially redeems the nationalist elite. This is occasioned by the culturalist turn and the critique of modernity. Here the figure of Gandhi and his ‘antimodernist, antindividualist’ rhetoric of ‘love, kinship, austerity, sacrifice’ becomes the symbol of the struggle for the sovereignty of the ‘inner’ cultural domain.⁸⁷ This valorization of Gandhi does not allow us to understand the transformations in Kerala which moved away from the Gandhian passive revolution. The setting up of CSP units in the princely states also had another significance: the laying of the foundation of the unification of Kerala, for the emergence of a linguistic entity became easier with the contacts established between the different regions.

The explicit recognition of the need for organization on the basis of class led the CSP to establish contact with labor unions and also convert these from their moderate aims to more radical ones. The party began to hold study-classes among the laborers on issues like scientific socialism, trade unionism etc.⁸⁸ Manali Desai argues that the CSP could become the dominant force in Congress because it faced “less resistance from the dominant peasants and landlords *within* the Congress Party than they did elsewhere [in India].”⁸⁹ This is not an entirely accurate argument. While the right wing was “an ideological rather than class-based

⁸⁶ Pandey, “Peasant Revolt,” 187.

⁸⁷ Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*. As Himani Bannerji points about the shift, though the Subaltern Studies “began in a critical and historiographical and political impetus, it travelled a circuitous epistemological path to social conservatism and cultural nationalism... its initial stance of reduction and rejection of all nationalisms eventually gave place to an ambiguity and produced a qualified support for a certain kind of nationalism that shuns modernity. Thus, Subaltern Studies, intentionally or unintentionally offers a historiographical and epistemological basis for illiberal forms of nationalism where Fanon’s class analysis and characterisation of petty bourgeois political consciousness as ‘false decolonisation’ is bypassed in elite favour of cultural nationalism and ethnicised religio-communitarian state” (Bannerji, “Projects of Hegemony,” 904).

⁸⁸ Raghavan, *Saksham*, 61- 65.

⁸⁹ Desai, “Party Formation,” 49.

opposition,”⁹⁰ it did not mean that class-based support was not available to it. The landlord and the (emerging) bourgeoisie support for the right-wingers was a characteristic feature of the politics of the time. Namboodiripad documents how the right wing had turned the wealthy Gujarati community in Calicut against the Left-controlled KPCC (Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee) in order to financially weaken it. Similarly, the right wing enjoyed the support of the powerful newspaper *Mathrubhumi* (Motherland),⁹¹ while the newspaper begun by the socialists *Prabhatam* (Dawn) not only suffered severe financial difficulties but also incurred the hostility of the government which banned it soon after it started functioning in 1935. It took another three years for it to start publication again.⁹² The right wing was also resolutely opposed to any radical agrarian program which favored the tenants.⁹³ Moreover, Desai’s statement that “there were no concerted efforts by politically organized landlords... to block the activities of the Congress”⁹⁴ is also not substantiated for the biggest opposition to the socialists (and the Communists later) came from the landed classes acting in collusion with the state. There were many instances of the police stations being located as a part of the houses of the dominant lords. The police was given accommodation and all other means of support by the landlords for suppressing peasant activities.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Namboodiripad, *How I Became a Communist*, 172-3.

⁹² Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 114

⁹³ Kurup, *Kayyur Riot*, 31.

⁹⁴ Desai, “Party Formation,” 56, f.n.22.

⁹⁵ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 151; Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 31.

Beyond Moral Economy

The disenchantment with Gandhian reformism took the socialists to mass mobilization, especially in the countryside. The most important of the activities of the socialists in Malabar was the organization of *karshaka sanghams* (peasant unions). The *sanghams* were to change the face of the countryside in a manner unimaginable a few years ago. What began as activities like peasants marching to the landlords' house and submitting petitions were to later culminate in the total defiance of the institutions of feudalism. One of the crucial factors that contributed to the strength of the peasant unions was that the majority of the socialist leaders themselves hailed from elite feudal families, especially Nayar *tharavadus*.⁹⁶ This gave the unions a legitimacy which they otherwise would not have secured so easily in a hierarchical society. Belonging to the same social stratum as the landlords, the socialist leaders could intervene on behalf of the peasants on equal terms with the landlords. Paradoxically, those who set out to eliminate caste succeeded in organizing the subaltern classes because they "commanded respect as members of the rural elite."⁹⁷

The unions at first operated within the moral economy framework. They were not so much for the abolition of landlordism as they were for preventing its excesses.⁹⁸ As Pandey points out with regard to the peasant revolt in the United Provinces (UP),

The idea of a just, or moral struggle appears fundamental to the peasants' acceptance of the necessity of revolt. Exploitation as such was not unjust. It was inevitable that some ruled and some conducted prayers and some owned the land and some laboured, and all lived off the fruits of that labour. But it was important that everyone in the society made a living out of the resources that were available.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Andalat, *Rekhyayillatha*, 71. Mostly these were the younger members of these *tharavadus* which were now on the verge of collapse because of the tremendous changes that notions of marriage, family and property underwent from the beginning of 1900. The Matriliny Bill which became the law in 1933 sounded the death knell of traditional family system among the Nayars by allowing for the partitioning of *tharavadu* property and giving individuals the right to claim their share of its property (Menon, *Communism in South India*, 129-30).

⁹⁷ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 131; Govinda Pillai, interview.

⁹⁸ Peasant's Memorial, Kasargod *Taluk*, December 8, 1938, Court Records, S. C. 44/1941 reproduced in Kurup, *Kayyur Riot*, 88-93.

⁹⁹ Pandey, "Peasant Revolt," 171.

Like in UP, in Malabar, it was when the lords started imposing excess levies in a period of hardship that the peasants started to resist. The main grouse was against *akrama pīrivukal* (irregular exactions) like *nuri* (“a handful of grain set aside for the landlord every time a certain number of measures was reached”), *vāsi* (“one and three-quarters measures for every measure”) and *chillara purappadu* (“miscellaneous levies at the time of festivals”). Other demands were to fix rent at one-fourth of the net produce, security of tenure, cancellation of rent arrears, fixing of wages for agricultural labourers and to reinstate customary privileges like collecting firewood and manure from forests owned by the landlords, cultivation of wastelands, end to trade in serf labour and abolition of bonded labour etc. The scope of these demands was such that they encompassed the bonded labourer, the free agricultural labourer, the cultivator and even the small landowner.¹⁰⁰ Demands like redistribution of land was not yet part of the peasant vocabulary. But, significantly, even when operating within the moral economy framework, the peasants now decided what was fair and unfair.¹⁰¹ The importance of the material dimension is clearly visible in the demands put forth. Even when Subaltern Studies posits the subaltern as autonomous subject, it merely sees it as a cultural being.

The basic form of protest and making demands was undertaking *jathas* (processions) to the landlords’ houses. By reading the memoirs of Communist leaders, one gets a sense of how quickly the *jatha* idea captured the imagination of the masses.¹⁰² The *jathas* ordinarily used to number anywhere between 4000 and 7000 (sometimes up to 15000). Menon argues

¹⁰⁰ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 135; P. Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change: Malabar 1836-1982* (New Delhi: Sage, 1989), 94; for details of the various feudal levies, see Andalat, *Rekhyillatha*, 20-40.

¹⁰¹ Resolution passed by the Chirakkal Taluk Karshaka Sangham, *Mathrubhumi*, August 19, 1938; *Prabhatham*, January 2, 1939.

¹⁰² See especially, Gopalan, *Cause of the People*.

that *jathas* by ensuring anonymity as well as a sense of community enabled them to adopt confrontational stances towards lords. He also rightly points out that they were similar to the subversive religious pilgrimages in their potential for disorder.¹⁰³ We will argue that this shows the continuity between tradition and modernity, that the critical potential that exists in the traditional order transforms itself into a new form in modernity. The peasant unions which initially worked within the confines of the agenda set by the CSP leadership later went beyond it to make more radical demands electrified by the “experience of collective strength built up by the *jathas*.”¹⁰⁴ This goes against the widely held argument that peasantry is an inchoate, backward looking class waiting to be liberated by the ‘modern’ party and the industrial working class. ‘Organization’ and ‘unity’ become the key words among the peasantry: “It is because we are convinced that it is due to lack of unity in our midst and because we do not collectively bring our disabilities to the notice of the authorities that they remain unredressed that we have recently taken to organized efforts.”¹⁰⁵

Although in the first couple of years the peasantry had operated mainly within a moral economy framework and the CSP leadership was still hobbled by the fact that it had to operate within the Gandhian Congress thus forcing it to moderate many of its demands,¹⁰⁶ simultaneously there was another language emerging – the language of defiance which would become hegemonic later. As early as 1935 Namboodiripad was talking of the need for *karshaka raksha sena* (farmers’ self-defence army) to protect themselves from the excesses of the state and the lords. He also stressed the need for farmers to have economic and political

¹⁰³ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 138.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁰⁵ Peasant’s Memorial, Kasargod Taluk, December 8, 1938, Court Records, S.C.44/1941 reproduced in Kurup, *Kayyur Riot*, 88-93.

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum of All Malabar *Karshaka Sangham* to Revenue Minister, Madras Government, reproduced in *Prabhatam*, January 2, 1939.

power.¹⁰⁷ K. Damodaran, future Communist leader and great popularizer of Marxism through his plays, was telling peasants that class war, between the peasant and the lord and the capitalist and the labourer was becoming a reality. He exhorted them to a new political and economic program with the unity of peasants and labourers cutting across caste lines.¹⁰⁸ Krishna Pillai, meanwhile was asserting that “*jenmisampradayam* [landlordism] is responsible for the oppression of cultivators. In no civilised country does it exist any longer.”¹⁰⁹ The CSP slogans like ‘death to landlordism’ and ‘death to capitalism’ also began to be mouthed by the peasants and labourers (and even their children!), without always understanding their meanings. But what was more important was that it shook the edifice of the feudal society in which servility of the subalterns was the norm so far.¹¹⁰

What peasant activity in this period achieved was more in the social sphere than in the economic sphere. Extra-economic oppression by the landlords is something that united the masses across caste and class differences. The lower castes faced severe social restrictions like being not able to wear shirts (upper garments for women) or sport moustaches. The women of the poor tenant and agricultural labour households were often sexually exploited by the landlord.¹¹¹ It was considered offensive to the landlord for even *kanakkar* to tile their houses.¹¹² The peasants could not use the same language as the lords, they were forced to use

¹⁰⁷ *Mathrubhumi*, October 13, 1935.

¹⁰⁸ *Mathrubhumi*, May 26, 1937.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Menon, *Communism in South India*, 138.

¹¹⁰ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 74-75. Gopalan recounts the incident when one landlord tells him that while he had no objection to peasants holding meetings and raising slogans, he was pained by the fact that they would shout these slogans in front of him and whenever they would pass by his house. It was unbearable for the lord to lose the recognition associated with the title (Andalat, interview).

¹¹¹ *Prabhatham*, January 2, 1939; Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 6.

¹¹² Written evidence, K. T. Kammaran Nambiyar, *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1927*, vol. II (Madras, 1928), 299.

a different language altogether which was highly humiliating.¹¹³ As Charles Taylor has argued:

Nonrecognition or misrecognition... can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, reduced mode of being. Beyond simple lack of respect, it can inflict a grievous wound, saddling people with crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy but a vital human need.¹¹⁴

The socialists were keenly aware of the social dimensions of oppression not just the economic aspects of it. Against Menon's argument that socialists believed that economic equality would naturally eliminate caste-based oppression,¹¹⁵ they were aware of the need to fight it independently. Rather than a class or economic-reductionist approach, the socialists recognized the existence of what Nancy Fraser has called "bivalent modes of collectivity" which are collectivities that "suffer both socio-economic maldistribution and cultural misrecognition in forms where neither of these injustices is an indirect effect of the other, but where both are primary and co-original."¹¹⁶ As Ronald Herring has correctly pointed out: "landlordism was perceived [by the Left] in structural, systemic terms: a social system sustained by colonial rule and ultimately guaranteed by force."¹¹⁷

With the formation of the unions, feudal oppression became difficult. Peasants refused to pay rent unless receipts were given for the same. Extra-rental levies almost stopped. By 1938, it became difficult for the landlords to evict tenants. Even when the courts ruled in favour of the landlords, it was often not possible to implement the order. After a point, the landlords even stopped going to the courts and instead settled the disputes

¹¹³ Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 29; Kurup, *Kayy Rhot*, 11. Different castes within the hierarchy had a different way of addressing the lord (see Thoppil Bhasi, *Olivile Ormakal* (Memories in Hiding) 5th ed. (Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhath Book House, 1999), 66.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* (July-August, 1995): 68.

¹¹⁵ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 117.

¹¹⁶ Fraser, "From Redistribution," 71, 78.

¹¹⁷ "'Fanaticism,' Jacquesie, Movement, Party: Ratchet Politics and Peasant Mobilization in South India, 1836-1956," paper presented at the symposium titled "Power, Agrarian Structure and Peasant Mobilization in Modern India," Charlottesville (May 25, 1997), 26.

with the peasant unions. There were even instances of *janmis* publicly apologizing for their misdemeanours.¹¹⁸ The practice of the landlords taking the donations offered to the shrines by devotees was stopped.¹¹⁹ The struggle for recognition was as much a part of the peasant struggle as material amelioration.¹²⁰ One of the resolutions passed at the third Valluvanad *Taluk Karshaka Sangham* conference included the call to start resistance against language (sanctified by tradition), which denied ‘self-respect’.¹²¹ The social position and prestige of the lords, which was what they valued the most suffered irrevocably¹²². Peasants began to address the landlords by name and refused to step aside in deference when they passed by. The lower castes and untouchables began to flout the rules of attire and behaviour.¹²³ More importantly, they began to resort to traditional methods of punishment like social boycott, which were imposed on them. Only now, the landlords were subject to it. Even other peasants who refused to join the unions were subject to social strictures.¹²⁴ Ritual punishments like denial of the services of washerwomen operating within notions of purity-pollution evoked fear of ostracism. On the one hand, these actions evoked a sense of community, on the other, they signified the questioning of the community centred on the

¹¹⁸ Andalat, *Rekhyayillatha*, 76-79.

¹¹⁹ V. V. Kunhambu, *Kayyur Samara Charithram* (History of Kayyur Resistance), 2nd ed. (Trivandrum: Chintha Publishers, 1984), 115-116.

¹²⁰ See Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion.

¹²¹ *Mathrubhumi*, April 16, 1938.

¹²² In one *kanakkaran's* account, he did not face any trouble from the *janmis* so long as he avoided “impudent and insulting behaviour...avoided acting against the interest of the janmi in other respects, showing due regard for his position and prestige” (written evidence of T. A. Kalyana Krishna Ayyar, High Court Vakil, Calicut, *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1927*, vol. II, 416).

¹²³ Vishnu Bharatheeyan, socialist leader noted in 1940, “By the preachings of the socialists there has been an awakening amongst the tenants as regards their rights... Till yesterday if a tenant saw a janmi’s karyasthan [manager], he bowed to him. Today it is not exactly like that. He stands a little erect because of our propaganda. Now rent is given only after obtaining the receipt” (*Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1940*, vol. I (Madras, 1940), 261. Later on the struggle for establishing democratic impersonal systems of legality and administration would gain prominence, putting question marks on postcolonial theory’s one-sided understanding of modern governmentality.

¹²⁴ There were many such cases reported during 1939 (see *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, April 16, 1939). “By the end of 1938, social boycott, criminal intimidation and trespass, personal violence, a no-rent campaign and cases of arson were perpetrated by members of these unions against local persons who showed any tendency to criticise or oppose them or refused to join the unions” (Intelligence Bureau Report (secret), *Home Department Political (I) 1941, September 9, 1941*, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI)).

feudal *tharavadu*.¹²⁵ Here the critical potential of tradition meets the critical potential of modernity.¹²⁶ The ushering in of the new age is not by a complete denial of the past.

The socialists had tried to integrate the activities of the various unions that had come up first at the village level and then at the *taluk* level. The idea of an All Malabar *Karshaka Sangham* (AMKS) came up in 1936 itself and a propaganda committee was formed with the intention of forming one. Finally, the first conference of the AMKS was held towards the end of 1938 presided over by A. K. Gopalan.¹²⁷ It became a three-tier body with the *taluk* and village level units below it. There was a phenomenal growth in unions and their membership with the agitation for the amendment of the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930 gathering storm. In 1939 under AMKS, there were 180 unions (in only N. Malabar) with a membership of around 20,000.¹²⁸ With the agitation for the amendment, there were even reports that tenants were refusing rent-payments causing immense worries to the government both on the land revenue collection front and also about the undermining of its authority.¹²⁹ They had clearly recognized what their contemporary Gramsci was arguing elsewhere: “any formation of a national-popular collective will is impossible, unless the great mass of peasant farmers bursts simultaneously into political life.”¹³⁰

CSP was active not only among the peasantry but also among the urban working classes in the towns of Calicut, Cannanore etc. in Malabar. Many future Communist leaders

¹²⁵ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 139.

¹²⁶ Menon does not note the fact that peasant unions later, under the influence of the socialist leadership, went beyond practices like social boycott. The peasants felt that if the landlords could use it for centuries, they could very well do so. The party convinced them that social boycott is a vestige of the feudal past that the peasants are trying to destroy. Therefore they should adopt new means of agitation (*Prabhatam*, January 2, 1939). Also, social boycott was dividing the peasant community causing problems in building unity. Krishna Pillai intervened in one instance to tell the peasants that no peasant should forcibly be made a member of the peasant union (Andalat, *Rekhyillatha*, 80).

¹²⁷ Intelligence Bureau Report (secret), *Home Department Political (I) 1941*, Septemebr 7, 1941 (NAI).

¹²⁸ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 143.

¹²⁹ Madras Government Fortnightly Report (hereafter FR), first half of November 1938 cited in Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 96-7.

¹³⁰ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 132.

like A. K. Gopalan got the training in the “practical application of Marxism” from spending time among the union workers.¹³¹ The socialists led the tile and textile workers into strikes in 1935. In 1937 there was the landmark *beedi* [indigenous form of cigarette] labourers’ strike. The linking of the economic with the political was already being put forth by the socialist leadership. New ideas and imaginaries existing beyond the local were being introduced by the external intervention. The socialists were aware that the critical consciousness of the peasantry alone was not enough that it has to be coupled with modern proletarian ideologies.¹³² K. Damodaran, addressing a union meet, spoke of class war being an inalienable part of the political struggle and how every small strike for economic concessions was also a strike against imperialism.¹³³ But the main problem facing the socialists was that there was hardly any working class to speak of in Malabar. Nevertheless, the socialist activity was creating worries for the government which observed in 1937 that the socialists were “very active in organizing unions among all sorts of workers.”¹³⁴ The building blocks of the national-popular will were being placed.

In Travancore, nationalist struggle had still not taken roots. Politics moved along the faultlines of caste and religion in a state ruled by upper castes. Christians, Muslims and Ezhavas (middle classes in these communities) joined together to fight the Nayar domination of the government. The aim of CSP was to work with the movement for responsible government in the princely state for which the Travancore State Congress (TSC) had been formed (Nayars too joined this). In 1938 a massive struggle was launched against the government headed by the autocratic *Dewan* [Prime Minister] Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar. The socialists from Malabar were providing organizational support to the struggle. The most

¹³¹ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 61.

¹³² See Alam, ‘Peasantry,’ 50.

¹³³ Quoted in A. V Anilkumar, *C* (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers 2002), 35.

¹³⁴ FR1, September 1937, Home Political, 18/9/37 cited in Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 252.

significant aspect of it was the role that the working class of Alleppey town and surrounding areas played. Around 50,000 coir workers struck work not only for their economic demands but also in solidarity with the TSC demand for responsible government. The latter was achieved by the intervention of the socialist leadership, especially that of Krishna Pillai.¹³⁵ What was remarkable was that the strike lasted for 25 days demonstrating the workers' ability to respond to demands beyond the local and the economic.¹³⁶ More remarkable was the fact that even when some of the leaders of the coir workers' union were wooed by offers of concessions by the government, the majority of workers refused to bend.¹³⁷ Here again is a classic demonstration of spontaneity of the "subaltern classes" meeting "conscious leadership".¹³⁸ From a " 'generic' hatred that is 'semi-feudal' rather than modern in character."¹³⁹ and a negative consciousness of opposition without an understanding of any alternative, here the working classes move to a clearer perception of the enemy and its relationship with the state. The *totality* itself now comes into the cognitive map of the subalterns. The early work of Subaltern Studies had recognized the fragmentary nature and the limitations of the consciousness of the peasantry and thus had closely followed Gramsci. Guha had noted that the peasant rebellions were mainly motivated not by larger concerns of nationalism, but by the ideas of "territoriality that is, co-residential solidarity and primordial loyalty". But he rightly asserts that these rebellions "made the broader and more generalized struggles of the Indian people possible in the twentieth century".¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ The other political demands were for adult suffrage, revoking the ban on TSC and the Youth League, release of political prisoners etc. Puthupalli Raghavan notes that when the Coir workers' union met to vote on the strike, the resolution on the political demand for responsible government drew the greatest support from the workers (see Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 86-88; also Nossiter, *Communism*, 81).

¹³⁶ Robin Jeffrey, " 'Destroy Capitalism! Growing Solidarity of Alleppey's Coir Workers, 1930-40," *Economic and Political Weekly* (July 21, 1984): 1162.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 1163; Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 104.

¹³⁸ But Gramsci presciently notes, " 'pure' spontaneity does not exist in history" (*Prison Notebooks*, 196).

¹³⁹ Ibid., 273.

¹⁴⁰ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 331-2.

The 1938 strike was the first political strike by the workers of Kerala bringing about momentous changes in their views on politics, organization etc.¹⁴¹ But the withdrawal of the struggle under the influence of the national leadership of the Congress, again, led to division on left-right lines in TSC. A left group called Radical Conference was formed under the initiative of the socialist leaders, trade-union workers and the Youth League.¹⁴² While the middle-class leadership of TSC had contempt for the workers, many younger activists, who saw the revolutionary potential of the working class moved towards Communism.¹⁴³ Most of the future Communist leaders of Travancore like K. C. George, M. N. Govindan Nair, T. V. Thomas, P. T. Punnoose and Srikanthan Nair came out of State Congress and later, Radical Conference background. The participation of the socialists in the struggle for responsible government in the princely states was based on the clear understanding that they would strengthen the struggle for national independence. Krishna Pillai asserted that none understood this better than the Socialist Party members.¹⁴⁴

The increasing tendency of the peasant unions to enter into violent confrontations with the authorities and the landlords and the latter's backlash forced the socialists to think of a force organized on military lines. Thus volunteer squads came into existence in almost all the villages of N. Malabar in 1939. They began to attack the police, attack the courts where unions members were tried, prevent evictions etc.¹⁴⁵ The socialist transformation into

¹⁴¹ The red flag became the symbol of struggle and resistance. It was unveiled for the first time by the coir workers in 1937 (Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 92). The Dewan banned the red flag and the slogan *Inquilab Zindabad* (Victory to the Revolution) after the outbreak of the war (*Prabhatham*, June 12, 1939).

¹⁴² Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 116; Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 161-164.

¹⁴³ Daily Report, November 6, 1938, *Travancore Government English Records*, Confidential Section 981/1945 (KSA); *New Age*, April 7, 1957, 11 cited in Jeffrey, *Politics*, 253.

¹⁴⁴ *Prabhatham*, annual issue, May 1939, cited in Krishnan, *T. V. Thomas*, 37-38.

¹⁴⁵ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 152. The "volunteers are expected to be ready to lose their lives for the cause of their sangham. *Karshaka Sangham* members have been fed on revolutionary ideas" (Confidential Report from Superintendent of Police (SP), Special Branch, Central Intelligence Department (CID) to Under-Secretary, Public Department, Madras, April 13, 1941, *Public (General)*, G. O. No. 811-12 (Confidntl.), April 24, 1941, (KSA).

Communism was also becoming complete. A Communist nucleus was already formed in 1937 with some of the top socialist leaders being part of it, even though it continued within CSP. While the disenchantment with the Gandhian program gave rise to CSP, it was severely restrained by the fact that it continued to function within the Congress framework. Despite organizing peasants and workers, the socialists were ultimately, as Namboodiripad self-critically points out, so “circumscribed by the anxiety to preserve the internal unity of the Congress as an organisation that they failed to carry on determined ideological struggle against Gandhism.” While the working class and peasantry were successfully brought into the anti-imperialist struggle, their organizations were still “looked upon not as mass political organisations operating independently of, and if necessary in opposition to, the bourgeois leadership of the national movement, but as vehicles through which the workers and peasants are mobilized behind that leadership.”¹⁴⁶ Here the socialists are seeking to go beyond the Gandhian united front strategy in which the internal conflicts and struggles for class, caste and justice were postponed till such time the freedom of the nation was attained, which Sathyamurthy has termed as “a particularly odious feature of the more developed nationalism.”¹⁴⁷ Subaltern Studies’ cultural turn and the uncritical redemption of Gandhi lead to its participation in this form of nationalism.

The contradictions of leading the increasingly radical peasant unions and simultaneously trying to present a moderate face for the sake of national unity were beginning to show. The transformation of the socialists into Communists was logical with the kind of views the leadership held. Namboodiripad has stated that it was “pure chance” that they became part of CSP first. If they had been exposed to the Communists first, they

¹⁴⁶ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 167.

¹⁴⁷ T. V. Sathyamurthy, “Indian Peasant Historiography: A Critical Perspective on Ranajit Guha’s Work,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 18, no. 1 (1990): 107.

would have converted much before.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, the socialists were in constant touch with the Communist Party of India (CPI) at least since 1935 and the leadership had some kind of exposure to Communist literature.¹⁴⁹ The outbreak of the Second World War exacerbated the tensions between the left and the right wings with the former thoroughly being opposed to India being dragged into an imperialist war. Finally, the CPI formally came into being in Kerala on January 26, 1940. Almost the entire CSP joined the CPI. Even after this, for some time the Communists were in a peculiar dilemma for the CPI was under a ban by the British government. Therefore, they retained their primary membership of the Congress.

An Inclusive Nationalism

In an analysis of the activities of the CSP, Dilip Menon has argued that

Congress Socialism' represented a local reaction *against* nationalism, in view of the subordination of local politics to the exigencies of the national party... From 1935, the socialists in Malabar worked within the confines of the locality, and their highly successful rural mobilisation made little attempt to ally itself with wider concerns of province and nation, or indeed of the Congress...¹⁵⁰

This we will argue is a flawed analysis. On the contrary, as I pointed out before, Congress Socialism represented a turn towards 'national liberation'. Socialism was a reaction against the exclusion of the local and here the local is not pitted *against* nationalism but is seeking a place in the nationalist imaginary. What it sought was a democratic negotiation of nationalism, in which, admittedly, it did not succeed completely. Menon completely ignores the wider linkages established in this period by socialist activity. The most prominent example of this is the struggle by the Malabar socialists for the establishment of responsible government in princely states. Gopalan describes the *jatha* undertaken by the socialists in

¹⁴⁸ Namboodiripad, *How I Became a Communist*, 187.

¹⁴⁹ Nossiter, *Communism*, 75.

¹⁵⁰ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 120; original emphasis.

support of the Travancore struggle. He calls the huge crowds consisting of Congressmen and others, workers and students as “a model of the united front against imperialism.” There were big receptions throughout the way especially from peasant unions in Malabar. The Muslim support too was striking. What impressed him most was that people were hardly deterred by the massive deployment of police and the military and the threat of loss of lives. The courage shown by the people, in Gopalan’s account, was so striking that he himself yearned for the opportunity to die as a victim in the police firing.¹⁵¹ The articulation of the local with that of a wider region is also visible in the agitation by the peasants of Kasargod *taluk* for the separation of the *taluk* from the South Kanara district and its amalgamation with Malabar (72 percent of the population in Kasargod was Malayalam-speaking while South Kanara had a predominance of Kannada speakers).¹⁵² While this demonstrated the emergence of the ties across the differently administered Malayalam-speaking areas, the emergence of a new nationalist consciousness was also visible. Gopalan who had earlier described the scorn with which the nationalist activists were received in the rural areas had a different story to tell now. The same peasants, who had attacked him in 1931, were receiving him in 1938 with the slogans “Let imperialism be damned”, “Let landlordism be damned” and “Victory to Congress”.¹⁵³ A non-economic-reductionist approach was again demonstrated in the Leftist mobilization of a linguistic identity. But the latter is also a bivalent collectivity located in both political-economic and cultural-valuational structures. Menon and Subaltern Studies ignore the structural features that provide the conditions for

¹⁵¹ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 101-103.

¹⁵² Peasant’s Memorial, Kasargod Taluk, December 8, 1938, Court Records, S.C.44/1941 reproduced in Kurup, *Kayyur Riot*, 88-93.

¹⁵³ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 87. It is surprising that while Menon takes note of the former, fails to acknowledge the latter.

the emergence of nationalism. A. R. Desai, describing the emergence of new classes under the British rule, argues,

one striking characteristic of the new social classes was their national character. This was due to the fact that they were integral parts of a single national economy of India and further, they lived under a single state regime. This engendered community of economic, political and other interests of the members of each of the new classes on an all-India national basis... they felt an urge to organize themselves on all-India scale and start movement to advance their common interests on a national basis.¹⁵⁴

Linguistic and national entities were not the only wider imaginings made possible but also more importantly that of class, albeit in a rudimentary fashion. According to Menon, against the statement of intent of the CSP and unlike elsewhere, where rural radicalism and nationalism were linked, “peasant unions ploughed local furrows and addressed immediate concerns of subordination and excess of authority. Wider political unities... gave away to the inwardness of the resolution of inequality within the village.”¹⁵⁵ But this view does not recognize the extent to which linkages beyond the local had been established. We already noted how peasants had realized their strength lay in ‘organization’ and ‘unity’, something which was not confined to the local. What Menon has termed as the “significant erosion of erstwhile rural authority and deference” was possible because of these extra-local linkages. One significant feature of the activities of the peasant unions was the fact that they used to intervene in and support conflicts outside their jurisdiction.¹⁵⁶ The formation of the *taluk* and district-level unions further emboldened the unions at the village level.¹⁵⁷ The reason why the

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in David Ludden, “Subalterns and Others In the Agrarian History of South Asia,” in *Agrarian Studies: Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge*, ed. James C. Scott and Nina Bhatt (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2001), 210.

¹⁵⁵ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 120.

¹⁵⁶ Andalat, *Rekhyayillatha*, 76-7. Menon notes this fact but does not state the implications of it.

¹⁵⁷ The attempts to integrate the urban working classes were begun in 1935 itself when unions from all over Kerala met under the initiative of CSP and exchanged ideas and experiences. This was the first time when labor activists from Travancore established contacts with the Malabar socialists. It was at CSP meets that many future Communist leaders of different regions got to know each other (see Krishnan, *Sakhavu*, 62, 64). The Third All Kerala Labour Meet in February 1939 resolved to support the responsible government agitation by native states

government was so intimidated by the peasant union activity was because of its realization of their connections to a wider network.¹⁵⁸ The participation in *jathas* too created a consciousness which was different from anything that was experienced before. Menon has only stated that they created a sense of community. He does not differentiate between the community of the old and the new. There is a qualitative difference between community which is still underwritten by hierarchy, and community in which the participants are deemed equal. As Communist leader K. A. Keraleeyan notes, *jathas* had people from different castes and classes, from the Namboodiri to the Harijan, from the middle peasant to the agricultural labourer.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, the *jathas* took the peasants to places where they had not been before. They congregated from different villages to go to the *taluk* or district headquarters, places which existed only in their cognitive map before.¹⁶⁰ The perception of what constitutes the local is altered with such experiences.

The movement to the construction of a peasant-worker alliance was also taking place. Towards the end of the thirties peasant unions began to give moral and physical support to striking factory workers in towns.¹⁶¹ The socialist newspaper *Prabhatham* carried in

(*Prabhatham*, February 27, 1939). At this meet, it was decided to form a Kerala State Trade Union Council for the sake of which a organization committee consisting of Communist leaders like A. K. Gopalan and P. Krishna Pillai was constituted (Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 134).

¹⁵⁸ Describing the *Karshaka Sangham* activities in S. Kanara district in 1939, the District Magistrate (DM) says, "They were organised by persons from Malabar who visited these areas periodically and who were helped by local persons... The members and organisers of these Karshaka Sanghs were being guided by the rules framed by similar organisations in Malabar." Therefore these Karshaka Sanghs can be "said to form a part of the Karshaka organization of Malabar" (Letter to Chief Secretary, Madras Government (Confidntl.), April 11, 1941, *Public General, G. O. No. 811-12 (Confidntl.)*, April 24, 1941, (KSA)).

¹⁵⁹ Andalat, *Rekhyillatha*, 69. The "wave of protest" against feudal oppression cannot be understood unless we recognize its pan-class and pan-regional character (Andalat, interview).

¹⁶⁰ Gopalan notes that fact that the in the *jatha* undertaken to Calicut in December 1938, many peasant activists were traveling there for the first time (*Cause of the People*, 96). Even the peasant union representing a small village like Kayyur sent 8 delegates to the *jatha* undertaken to Mangalore, the headquarters of South Kanara district demanding the inclusion of Kasargod in Malabar district (Kurup, *Kayyur Riot*, 40).

¹⁶¹ In February 1939 the Chirakkal *Taluk Karshaka Sangham* passed a resolution stating their support to the striking Commonwealth factory workers in Cannanore and declared that the worker-peasant class interests are one. The Kakkattu *Karshaka Sangham* donated six bags of rice to the Commonwealth workers (see *Prabhatham*, March 27, 1939). The Third Chirakkal *Taluk Karshaka Sangham* Conference Report states that "jennies and the vested interests were terrified at the united work done to create class consciousness and unity among the

each issue a column called 'labor world' in which news about the peasant and worker struggles not only from Malabar and Kerala but also from all over India were carried. It had become a common practice for the national-level socialist and Communist leaders to preside over and address peasant and workers at union meetings.¹⁶² Moreover the paper consistently gave equal, if not more importance to national issues. There was also significant coverage and discussion of international developments including articles by foreign authors (mainly Russian and Chinese) translated into Malayalam. All of this contributed to going beyond the immediate face-to-face community to an 'imagined community' of workers and peasants spread across linguistic and cultural barriers and the beginning of the comprehension of the larger structures of exploitation. The workers who traveled to Travancore for the responsible government agitation came back with new ideas of solidarity.¹⁶³ Even the imagination of a linguistic identity hardly resembled Anderson's nationalist community. For even though European nations were imagined as communities ("a deep horizontal comradeship") they were characterized by actual inequalities and exploitation.¹⁶⁴ Here the socialist linguistic imagination was different for it was simultaneously seeking to eliminate actual inequality and exploitation.

Menon has provided the much-needed corrective to the all-dominant trend of analysing the politics of the period as a simplistic linear narrative of rising class-consciousness. He argues that the "formation of the unions had as much to do with ties of

peasants with the ultimate object of establishing a 'Kisan-Mazdoor' Raj" (*Home Department Political (I) 1941, September 7, 1941*, (NAI)). Earlier, in 1937 peasants similarly supported the striking *beedi* workers in Cannanore (Anilkumar, C, 37). See also Gopalan, *In the Cause*, 93.

¹⁶² The coir workers of Alleppey were influenced by different streams of ideas from outside their immediate world in the form of TSC, Youth League and CSP-Communism. Finally, Communism influenced them the most (Jeffrey, "Destroy Capitalism," 1162).

¹⁶³ Anilkumar, C, 41

¹⁶⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 7.

region, kinship and caste as the presence of any particular class interest.”¹⁶⁵ But in doing so he, like Subaltern Studies, goes to the other extreme of ignoring the unique qualities of the emerging class imagery. He also argues that most of the unions “owed nothing more than a formal allegiance to the KCSP leadership who now needed an issue which would garner support of wider groups as well as allow them to exert a degree of control over diverse initiatives.”¹⁶⁶ This obfuscates the substantial integration achieved by the socialists of both the peasant and working class unions. Unions affiliated to the AMKS functioned under the agenda set by the latter.¹⁶⁷ Many socialist leaders were simultaneously the office bearers of unions as well. As Namboodiripad notes, “it was the combination in one and the same person of the office-bearer of the village Congress Committee, the leader of the teacher’s union and the organiser of the kisan sangham that made the anti-imperialist movement strike deep roots in the countryside.”¹⁶⁸

To conclude, Menon has argued for a ‘localist’ reading of union activity; therefore, according to him, terming it as ‘militant anti-imperialist and anti-feudal agitations’ as confusing “socialist rhetoric with actual rural political activity”. This not only denies the beginnings of a new imagery brought about by socialist activity but also overlooks its unintended consequences.¹⁶⁹ In denying the anti-colonialist content of the peasant struggles,

¹⁶⁵ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 137.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, resolution passed by the Chirakkal Taluk Karshak Sangham on February 25, 1939 (*Prabhatham*, March 27, 1939) and Peasant’s Memorial, Kasargod Taluk, December 8, 1938 (Court Records, S. C. 44/1941 reproduced in Kurup, *Kayyur*, 88-93). A. Kunhikannan, secretary of the Kodakkad Peasant’s Union, presenting his evidence before the Tenancy Committee states: “We accept the rate of fair rent proposed by the All-Malabar [Karshaka] Sangham” (*Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1940*, vol. I, 321). The membership of the unions also entailed the payment of fees of 2 annas per head. Of this 1 anna was retained by the local union, 6 pies each were paid to the taluk union and AMKS respectively (Subramanian Thirumumpu, *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1940*, vol. I, 320).

¹⁶⁸ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 156.

¹⁶⁹ Elsewhere, Menon himself has argued that any good history “has to concentrate [not only] on the form of political activity [but also] on the unintended consequences” (Dilip M. Menon, “Peasants and Politics in Malabar”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, (October 11, 1997): 2620).

Menon, unintentionally replicates the hegemonic nationalist ideology which “disallows any opposition to colonialism other than itself, any dissent organized on other lines the title to oppositional glory.”¹⁷⁰ It views the peasants as the prisoners of “territoriality that is, co-residential solidarity and primordial loyalty.”¹⁷¹ While there is the need for resisting nationalist and Marxist historiography which sees every peasant resistance as either as ‘nationalist’ struggle or ‘class’ struggle, there is also the need for recognizing peasant struggles which have been able to go beyond a fragmented consciousness. It is my argument that the substantially different trajectory that social transformation in Kerala has taken is primarily because of its early success in building extra-local linkages.¹⁷²

The period under consideration in which socialism and nationalism emerged in the imaginary of a primarily peasant society demonstrates the inadequacies of Subaltern Studies/postcolonial theory. The yearning for substantive equality is what drew peasants to socialism. The extreme misrecognition and exploitation that the laboring classes and other lower castes suffered under feudalism had no solution under Gandhian nationalism which operated on the material/symbolic split. If the peasant unions initially operated under a moral economy of feudalism, very soon they were seeking to go beyond it. The beginning of a class imagery is an example of this. A merely culturalist reading as in the Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory does not acknowledge this development. They ignore, as Gandhian nationalism does, the need for material/structural transformation for symbolic recognition

¹⁷⁰ Sudipta Kaviraj, “The Imaginary Institution of India,” in *Subaltern Studies VII*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10.

¹⁷¹ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 331.

¹⁷² “The national upsurge of the nineteen-thirties and the role played in it by the working class and socialist movements were thus on a really all-Kerala scale. For, though the form in which and the intensity with which they manifested themselves are different as between Malabar, Cochin and Travancore, they did not remain localised; the political national movement with a really all-Kerala leadership was slowly emerging. And it was the organized working class guided by socialist ideology that was standing at the head of this movement” (Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 164-165).

to have any effectivity. A genuine national-popular will in modernity can only be constructed if this dimension is recognized, and the socialists took the first steps in this direction.

Chapter 3

The Construction of the 'National-Popular': II

If the last chapter saw the foundations of the national-popular being laid by the socialists, this one will see the building upon these foundations by the Communists. The new tendencies seen were elaborated and began to acquire a systematic character, especially the consolidation of class consciousness and a linguistic identity. This goes against Menon's dismissal of class and the Subaltern Studies' positing of religious consciousness as the main framework of the peasants. The transformation of the consciousness in less than a decade was so dramatic that the peasantry and working classes under the leadership of the Communist party were more than willing to indulge in a violent confrontation with the landlords and the state. Tradition-modernity dichotomies lose their relevance when the so-called backward peasantry and labor play an active part in the inauguration of civil society and a proletarian public sphere.

Towards Communism

The newly formed Communist Party immediately tried to generate a mass movement against the war even though it was under a ban. The government, fearing the threat of the Communists, wasted no time in arresting the top leadership of the Kerala Communist Party (KCP) (still working within the fold of the Congress). The party, in turn, decided to hold an Anti-Repression Day on September 15, 1940 to which the right wing Congressmen were thoroughly opposed. The protest evoked strong response from civil society showing the kind of support that the unions and the socialists had been able to build. There were violent demonstrations and also clashes by the volunteer squads with the police in N. Malabar

including one in which resulted in the death of a police officer. Prominent Communist leader K. P. R. Gopalan was accused of the murder and later sentenced to death.¹ Again Menon sees the conflict as basically guided by “local rivalries and tensions” rather than by the protest against the war.² Namboodiripad calls it the first militant resistance which was “consciously organised by a political party as against the hitherto spontaneous resistance of the people.”³ After this there was a backlash by the state against the Communists as a result of which they had to finally come out of the Congress umbrella as an independent political party. The party had to face immense difficulties because of the ban. Its resources were thin, organisation weak and the top leadership in jail. But it “was, in fact, during the period of illegality that the Communist Party, as a political party (and not merely as a group of good and hardworking Congressmen), became the leader of the anti-imperialist movement.”⁴

With the formation of the Communist Party, there was increasing militancy in the countryside.⁵ The most significant of the incidents was the Kayyur episode, which was to enter into the ‘mythology’ of Communism. Again anti-war protest was the context in

¹ Sessions Court, North Malabar Division, Saturday 16 August 1941: Sessions Case Nos. 6 and 11 of 1941, *G. O. 1265, Home (Confntl.)*, March 24, 1942 (TNA).

² Menon, *Communism in South India*, 155. If one examines the depositions of the accused in the case, they are abound with references to local issues and conflicts as Menon argues. A majority of the accused cite their enmity with Samuel Aaron, powerful Malabar businessman and factory owner, as a reason for their implication in the case. Others include various kinds of rivalries with prosecution witnesses. But this seems to be a ruse to avoid punishment by denying any links with the peasant unions or the Communist Party. As the prosecution itself notes: “Almost all the accused have adopted the stereotyped plea of enmity with Samuel Aaron and the influence of Aaron over the police.” Moreover, Menon’s claim that the authorities were “more apprehensive about local conflicts than the nationalist implications of Protest Day” is also difficult to substantiate. Secretary of State Leopold Amery later replying to a question in the House of Commons on the commutation of the death sentence of K. P. R. Gopalan says that he doubts “whether situation in India would be improved by the release of prisoners who have attempted by violent methods to oppose the war effort or... the overthrow of the existing basis of society” (*G. O. 1265, Home (Confntl.)*, March 24, 1942, (TNA)).

³ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 170.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵ The speeches of the peasant union leaders were acquiring a tone of defiance. V. V. Kunhambu addressing a *Karshaka Sangham* meeting at Pilicode stated, “capitalists should be done away with” (*Public (General) G. O. No. 811-12 (Confntl.)*, April 24, 1941 (KSA)). There were incidents of peasant unions forcibly harvesting the crops without the landlord’s permission. There were new slogans like “one who sowed the seeds will reap the harvest” (Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 108-110).

which the peasant unions took the police head-on in a place called Kayyur on March 28, 1941. Three processions of around 200 *Karshaka Sangham* members shouting Communist slogans forced a police constable to carry the red flag. After a while, he resisted and tried to escape by jumping into the river but was stoned to death by the crowd.⁶ Later, four of the arrested were sentenced to death. The event “marked a watershed in agrarian political activity. Primarily, it showed how the local dread of the police had been replaced by an open defiance and confrontation.”⁷ But Menon, after rightly characterising it as such, again adds that “party programmes and the strictures of peasant unions lost their way amidst the settling of scores with a police force which had so far held labourers in their thrall.”⁸ Here, the peasants are incapable of thinking beyond the local. In actuality, nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments too had a role to play in their consciousness.⁹ When P.C. Joshi, General Secretary of the Communist Party went to the prison to meet the four Communists sentenced to death, Madathil Appu, one of them said, “We joined the party to fight and die for the freedom of the country.” Chirukandan, another, said, “We are four *kisan* [peasant] sons. But India’s millions are *kisans*. We can be hanged but they can’t be destroyed.”¹⁰ The essence of ‘national liberation’ is captured in the statement of these peasant activists with

⁶ D. M., South Kanara to Chief Secretary, Madras, March 31, 1941, *Public (General) G. O. 811-12 (Confdntl.)*, April 24, 1941 (KSA).

⁷ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 168. As a Communist circular noted, “Another benefit of the September 15th incident is the change in mentality that has arisen in the police force, from pride to fear, from official overbearance to submissive helplessness” (Circular no. 22, *Home Department Political (I) 1941, September 7, 1941*, (NAI)).

⁸ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 168.

⁹ On the day before the riot, the police who were camping in the area interrogated T. V. Kunhambu, the captain of the volunteer squad. He angrily retorted that imperialism would be decimated soon (Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 96). We should also not discount the physical training and the study classes held by the Communist Party before the incident. Andhra Communist P. Sundarayya had also secretly visited Kayyur to explain party programs and exhort the peasants, which according to Communist leader A. V. Kunhambu, had created lot of enthusiasm among them (Kunhambu, *Kayyur*, 16).

¹⁰ “Kayyur Heroes” *New Age*, vol. XXIII, no. 48, 1975 reproduced in Kurup, *Kayyur Riot*, 107-113. Earlier. They had written to Joshi, “We are only proud to die for our country’s independence... We are inspired by the martyrdom of nationalists like Bhagat Singh and we remember the immense hardships that Lenin had to face before the victorious revolution over the Czarist regime... National unity has to be achieved at any cost...” (quoted in Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 105-6).

little education.¹¹ This nationalism, unlike ethnic nationalisms, is not something that excludes others or is characterized by chauvinism. But it views nationalism as a part of universal emancipation.

With the Kayyur episode, there was a massive repression undertaken by the government against the party and the peasant unions. On April 25, 1941, the government declared as unlawful the All Malabar *Karshaka Sangham* and all village *sanghams* affiliated to the main body as unlawful associations.¹² With Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union, the character of the war changed for the Communist Party, with the 'imperialist war' becoming the 'people's war'. After the ban on the peasant unions, the strength of the peasantry and agricultural labourers diminished. But they found innovative ways of overcoming the ban. The *karshaka sanghams* changed their names to *kisan sanghams*.¹³ The volunteer squads, for example, turned themselves into 'anti-Jap' committees, for conducting propaganda against the Japanese.¹⁴ The anti-imperialist struggle suffered a setback with the Communist Party now supporting the British.¹⁵ For the first time, working class and other mass organisations split. By the end of 1944, Congress began to set up organizations of students, peasants and workers to rival the Communists. "Anti-Communism became the hallmark not only of the

¹¹ The historian K. K. N. Kurup has recognized the nationalist character of Kayyur. He points out the tendency among Communists to portray it only as a class struggle. He also rightly notes the shades of influence of the ideology of terrorism on some of the peasant activists and Communist leaders (see Kurup, *Kayyur Riot*, 79-80).
¹² *Public (General) G.O. 811-12 (Confidntl.)*, April 24, 1941 (KSA).

¹³ Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 133

¹⁴ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 169-170. But Menon's characterization of this "as the seemingly absurd exercise of anti-Japanese propaganda" implies the disconnect of such lofty programs with the concerns of the poor in the rural areas (he sees the committees' popularity solely in terms of their ability to meet local political concerns, "it was not so much the ostensible ideology which was important but its translation into political practice"). This is not entirely true. An analysis of the songs and slogans coined by the Communist Party show that they had tried to make a link between the local and the extra-local, of why Japan constituted a threat to the country (see Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 155).

¹⁵ Although the party made it clear that it will oppose where it was needed and supporting the war did not mean a surrender to the imperialist government ("Marching towards Independence," Communist Party pamphlet cited in Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 146). This was not entirely rhetoric as was demonstrated later. While some of the top leaders like K. Damodaran continued to be in jail, many others had still warrants pending against them. Also, there were arrests for making provocative speeches (Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 7-8).

right-wing but sections of the left also. A new generation of anti-imperialists grew who genuinely believed that the Communist Party was a paid agent of British imperialism.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, the greatest advantage for the party was that the ban on it was lifted and it could function legally. This period from 1942-1945 saw the phenomenal growth of the party despite the ‘anti-nationalist’ position that it took. This was possible because of the extraordinary level of penetration into civil society that it was able to achieve during the period: “though its slogans on the national-political plane ran counter to the sentiments of a majority of anti-imperialists, its practical day-to-day activity was eminently fitted to the needs of the people.”¹⁷ The other important move by the party was the formulation of the united Kerala slogan, the logical culmination of the process of integration started by the socialists. As noted earlier the linguistic identity was not formulated by papering over class differences but was thought through them.

But with the People’s War line and the severe economic crisis due to the war, the party had to reformulate its program in the countryside. Confrontation with the landed elite had to be given up for reconciliation. Severe food shortages and famine-like conditions necessitated a placatory policy towards the landlords without which it would have been impossible to expand local cultivation under its ‘grow more food’ programme. The temporary truce between the Communists and the landlords and moneylenders etc. on the one hand, gave fillip to food production and thus ameliorated the condition of the poor, on the other, it resuscitated the declining power of the landed classes. Feudal levies, for example, were back in some places.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Communists were able to become a mass party through its food program. The peasant unions began agitations for price control

¹⁶ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 172.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁸ Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 14; Menon, *Communism in South India*, 170-2.

and rationing. They took census of the needs of villagers.¹⁹ *Jathas* were taken out to the Collector for the 'opening' of government stores to feed the poor. Volunteer patrols conducted inspections of ration shops for irregularities. Food committees set up by the party (which included representatives from all organisations including the Muslim League and the Hindu *Mahasabha* [Grand Council]) became the mediators between the government and the merchants.²⁰ In Travancore, the struggle against black marketing, hoarding and price rises was taken up by the Communists and the Coir Factory Workers' Union under their aegis. In 1943 there was a significant spurt in the formation of unions and also the revival of non-functional unions especially through the leadership of trade unionists and Communists, T. V. Thomas and R. Sugathan.²¹

Subaltern Studies, premised as it is on the critical consciousness alone of the subalterns, does not take into account factors like manipulation of, and confusion among them, and consequently the need for education and propaganda.²² Organization became the watchword among the workers and peasants. Again, the spontaneity and 'moral outrage' against feudalism was "educated, directed, purged of extraneous contaminations, the aim was to bring it into line with modern theory [Marxism]."²³ The party slogan was "Men into Kisan Sangham, women into the Mahila [women's] Sangham, and children into Bala [children's] Sangham."²⁴ According to the party there were more than 180 Bala Sanghams with almost

¹⁹ Andalat, *Rekhyathilla*, 134.0

²⁰ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 173; *Deshabhimani*, June 10, 1945.

²¹ Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 159-162. The spread of inter-union and peasant-worker ties is demonstrated by the fact that the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union played the crucial role in the revival of Punalur Paper Mill Workers' Union. In 1942 it played a crucial role in the setting up of the *Karshaka Thozhilali Sangham* (farm laborers' union) in Kuttanad, one of the main regions of capitalistic agriculture (Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 168). In Malabar the integration of unions continued. The Motor Transport Employees' unions felt that the local unions were not enough and a coordinating organization at the district level was needed, which came into existence in 1944. This was something that the socialists had pushed for since 1938 (Anilkumar, *C*, 47-8).

²² Alam, 'Peasantry,' 46.

²³ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 198.

²⁴ *People's War*, January 24, 1943 quoted in Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 138.

6300 children in Malabar. “These children, ever alert and vigilant, pass resolutions on every event of importance. . . . If a kerosene trader treats a customer rudely, the little children assemble, pass a resolution condemning the action and warn the merchant to correct his ways.”²⁵ What is striking is the phenomenal change in attitudes which occurred in less than a decade.²⁶

The imbrication in civil society was further achieved by the Communist influence on culture (see chapters four and five). They had a clear understanding of the need to engage with the quotidian lives of the people. This was achieved with the dual policy of creating new critical modes of interaction and also making critical what already existed. Reading rooms became the center of village life and laborers and peasants were exposed to a different world altogether. Similarly, folk arts became the transmitters of new ideas. Another important intervention was the revival of shrine culture albeit without the excesses of feudalism.²⁷ But the shrine festivals were also used to propagate the ideology of Communism. The slogan “make every temple festival into an all night street corner meeting” was launched.²⁸

Confronting the State

The period of truce between the Communists and the landlords was not to last long. With the end of the war there was a new dispensation. There was return to the militancy of the earlier period. Government had declared an exemption from revenue assessment on *punam*

²⁵ Ibid. Although this may claim may involve slight exaggeration, it is not without basis. Earlier, the government itself had noted about the Bala Sanghams: “the children [were] being made useful instruments to belittle authority” (Confidential Report from Superintendent of Police (SP), Special Branch, Central Intelligence Department (CID) to Under-Secretary, Public Department, Madras, April 13, 1941, *Public (General)*, G.O. 811-12 (Confidntl.), April 24, 1941 (KSA)). The total number of party members in 1943 stood at 2500, volunteers – 10,000 and full-time party activists – 300 (Andalat, *Rekhyayillatha*, 91).

²⁶ In Travancore, there was the daring incident of paper mill workers with red flags infiltrating the Legislative Assembly and shouting slogans against the princely rule (Raghavan, *Sakbavu*, 162).

²⁷ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 177.

²⁸ *People's War*, December 27, 1942 cited in *ibid*.

(shifting cultivation) practiced on unsurveyed jungle lands during the period of the war.²⁹ Such leeways came to an end. Landlords too began to exercise their authority with impunity again. They became the main food hoarders and the controllers of black marketing in food grains. There were a high number of evictions as the landlords began to regain ownership of leased lands.³⁰ But the Communists too were willing to go further than before. The new policy explicitly brought back the issue of the end of feudal landlordism and the conferring of ownership on the cultivator.³¹ The militancy of the Communist Party was aided by the fact of the return of demobilized soldiers (Malabar had the highest recruits from Madras Presidency) after the war, who became “willing converts to the fight for wasteland.”³² They also trained the volunteer squads for their future confrontations with the police.

The struggle for the cultivation of wastelands assumed urgency. The *karshaka sanghams* demanded that wastelands be assigned to cultivators the failure of which will lead to the encroachment and the cultivation of such lands.³³ One of the significant conflicts took place in a place called Karivellur towards the end of December 1946. The *Raja* [king] of Chirakkal, one of the prominent absentee landlords of the area, wanted to transport 10,000 seers of paddy procured from his tenants and stored in the granary. The peasant unions had demanded that the paddy be distributed to the villagers at a fair price since there was terrible food scarcity in the village. The *Raja* refused (his intention being to sell the same in the black market) and secured police protection to transport the paddy. This was resisted by a crowd led by Communists who attacked the police shouting “Inquilab Zindabad [victory to the

²⁹ Revenue (Ms.) Department G. O. 1911, June 17, 1943 (KSA). The monopoly over waste and forestlands by the *janmis* was an especially pernicious feature of the agrarian system of Malabar.

³⁰ As noted before, there were more than 20,000 evictions ordered in the period 1940-46 in Malabar District, (Revenue (Ms.) Department G. O. 1935, August 12, 1947 (KSA)).

³¹ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 180.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 17.

revolution],” “Kill the police” etc.³⁴ First, there was *lathi* [baton] charge by the police and later there was firing, including the use of machine guns. Two peasants died. There was massive repression after the incident with the police adopting the usual tactic of arresting Communists and peasant activists from the surrounding villages who were not involved. What was remarkable was that the united front that the villagers had put up against the *Raja* showing the penetration of Communist ideology. The laborers in the village refused to help him in transporting the paddy and he was forced to take help from outside.³⁵

There were many other incidents resembling Karivellur, mainly of a minor nature. Also, there were instances of violence against police, forcible occupation of wastelands and fight for customary privileges like the right to collect firewood, thatching grass and against the forcible appropriation of paddy being taken as rent for the landlord. Many cases were filed in these offences.³⁶ But there was another major confrontation near Irikkur. First, a crowd numbering more than a thousand demonstrated against arrest of peasants who were getting military training as part of the volunteer squads. The authorities were to later call it an ‘agrarian revolution’. There was an immediate ban on all meetings in the area. But the peasant activists decided to violate it and hold a secret meeting. The police got to know of it and surrounded them. Again, there was an encounter in which slogans like “Down with imperialism” were raised. Five peasants were killed in the police firing. The cycle of arrests and repression followed.³⁷ The militancy of the party and the peasants only strengthened the support of the repressive apparatus in favor of the landlords.

³⁴ *Public (General A) Department, G. O. 2773 (Confidntl.), November 9, 1948 (TNA).*

³⁵ Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 21.

³⁶ See *Public (General A) Misc. G. O. 1712 (Confidntl.) July 14, 1948 (TNA)* and also Andalat, *Rekhyallatha* 136-156. There were also many instances in which the peasants paid the landlord what they thought was a fair price for the paddy.

³⁷ Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 31-3.

Meanwhile, Travancore witnessed one of the most important working-class struggles in Punnapra and Vayalar in October 1946. The struggle for responsible government had acquired further urgency with the *Dewan* making his moves for an independent Travancore and proposing an American-style constitution in which his position would be akin to that of the President. With the end of the war, the economic crisis deepened with the situation of the lower classes deteriorating. Black-marketing and hoarding exacerbated food scarcity. “Not a morsel of rice you get/ Even if you pay in gold/ And wait before the shop all day/ Till all your hairs turn gray” was a popular song in the *jathas*.³⁸ Like in Malabar, there was an increasing number of incidents in which the unions clashed with the police. The *Dewan* had begun to repress the working-class and peasant resistance and there were a number of police atrocities. The ATTUC -- All Travancore Trade Union Congress (which included unions of non-Communist socialist persuasion too) under which there were 55 unions called for a symbolic strike on September 15, 1946 and a general strike on October 22, 1946. On the one hand, the *Dewan* tried to mollify the trade union leadership and isolate it from the Communist Party by granting all the economic demands. On the other, repression hardened with the military being called in. CPI, Coir Workers’ Union etc. were banned. The Communist Party was preparing for any eventuality by opening camps in which political and physical training were given to workers. On October 18, there were almost 2500 workers in camps.³⁹ After the strike had begun, there were processions with red flags and wooden spears to the house of Applon Arouge (a prominent factory owner of the area) where the police had set up their camp. In the bloody (mismatched) clash that followed, 4 policemen and thirty-five workers died. Some of the rifles fell into the hands of the workers who retreated to the island of Vayalar. Martial law was declared. On October 27, armed troops

³⁸ K. C. George, *Immortal Punnapra – Vayalar* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1975), 25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

crossed over to the island and in the ensuing clash, 300 peasants and workers were shot dead.⁴⁰

The most significant aspect of the resistance was the commendable bravery showed by the subaltern classes. Not only they put up with the tremendous atrocities committed by the police before and after the strike, they were also willing to take on the latter head-on.⁴¹ The other notable feature highlighting the political consciousness of the workers is that the *Dewan* could not prevent the workers from going on a general strike despite the granting of each and every economic demand of theirs.⁴² These were clear signs of an emerging hegemonic moment when the working classes go beyond the *political economic* moment (in which economic class interests are expressed) to a transcending of “corporate limits of the purely economic class”.⁴³

In Malabar militancy continued⁴⁴ with the Communist Party making deep inroads into the rural areas. The food situation did not show any sign of improvement with the government removing statutory rationing. The Communists used this to counter the government. The party newspaper *Deshabhimani* unleashed a vigorous campaign against black-marketing and corruption. And the struggle for cultivation of wastelands further

⁴⁰ Nossiter, *Communism*, 91.

⁴¹ There have been lot of insinuations, unsubstantiated, against the Communist Party leadership that they deliberately and wantonly sacrificed the lives of cadres (see, for example, A. Sreedhara Menon, *Punnapra Vayalarum, Kerala Charitharavum* (Punnapra-Vayalar and Kerala History) (Kottayam: DC Books, 1999).

⁴² T. M. Thomas Isaac, “Class Struggle and Structural Change: Coir Mat and Matting Industry in Kerala, 1950-80,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, (July 1982), PE-15.

⁴³ Chantal Mouffe, “Ideology and Hegemony in Gramsci,” in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 180.

⁴⁴ “A.K. Gopalan and K. P. R. Gopalan have been very active bolstering up morale in North Malabar. It is reported that the former, particularly, is becoming violent in his speeches, especially when referring to the police... He is also alleged to have incited people to revolt, in a recent speech of his” (Report of the DSP, Malabar for the week ending December 12, 1947, *Public (General A) Misc.; G.O. 630 (Confidntl.), March 12, 1948* (TNA)). The tone of defiance of the Communist leadership was further evident in Namboodiripad’s letter to the Collector of Malabar in which he charges him for “gross negligence of [his] duty in the matter of non-release of political prisoners and the non-withdrawal of political cases... It is this attitude of yours that is today the biggest hindrance to the restoration of normal condition in Malabar” (September 2, 1947, *Public (General A) Misc., G. O. 1712 (Confidntl.) July 14, 1948* (TNA)).

strengthened.⁴⁵ Rather than allow the peasantry some respite by giving access to wasteland cultivation, the Congress ministry of Madras passed a law making void, with retrospective effect, all alienation of private lands since 1945. Moreover, it continued the severe repression through the MSP (Malabar Special Police).⁴⁶ *Jathas* were banned by the authorities. By strengthening the power of the landed classes, Congress proved how far-removed it was from the pressing problems of the masses.

The militancy of the CPI in the countryside now acquired a different tone in the new conjuncture in which the central committee of the party decided to follow the 'revolutionary line' which called for the violent overthrow of landlordism and the national government in April 1948. The famine-like conditions prevailing in Malabar gave a fillip to the implementation of the new line. The character of slogans too changed. New ones appeared like "Telengana way, our way" and "land to the tiller and power to the people".⁴⁷ Attacks on police guarding paddy, obstructing movement of food grains or removing food grains from the storehouses of landlords, snatching of firearms, threatening landlords with violence for paddy were some of the activities reported during this period.⁴⁸ In April- May of 1948 alone, nearly forty peasants were killed, either in police firing or in lock-ups due to torture. Scores of Communists were accused in these incidents and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment (R.I.). Communist leaders K. P. R. Gopalan and Kanthalot Kunhambu also were sentenced to three years R.I. in one of the cases. Even minor offences attracted R.I. of eighteen months. There was a virtual 'reign of terror' by the police. There were instances of police

⁴⁵ Report of DSP, for the week ending January 5, 1948 and District Magistrate, Malabar to Home Secretary, January 27, 1948, *Public (General- A) Misc., G. O. 630 (Confidntl.), March 12, 1948* (TNA).

⁴⁶ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 183-4.

⁴⁷ Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 103. A major Communist insurrection took place in the Telengana region in Eastern India.

⁴⁸ *Madras Government FR for first and second halves of April 1948* (TNA).

burning the houses of peasants and shooting without the order of higher authorities.⁴⁹ The government as a part of its repression tried to raid the study classes held by the CPI which were used by it as a ploy to conduct propaganda and plan strategies.⁵⁰ In Travancore, within 11 days of the Congress ministry taking charge, on April 3, 1948, there were arrests of Communist Party leaders and leaders of peasant and workers' unions and student organizations.⁵¹

More teeth were added to the repressive apparatus of the state which feared the replication of Telengana in Malabar. In September 1948 the Public Safety Ordinance was passed on the lines of Defence of India Act of 1939 mainly to curb Communist activities.⁵² Force was also supplemented with attempts to generate consent among the populace against Communism with propaganda work.⁵³ But the reason for the failure of the government to stop the spread of Communism is not hard to fathom. The former treated the latter as either a law and order problem or a social/psychological malaise which could be treated with appropriate preventive measures.⁵⁴ None of the structural/ideological causes were addressed by the government. Only repression hardened with the Communist Party declared unlawful by the Madras Government in September 1949 through the Criminal Law Amendment Act. Later the government justified it by stating that the activities of the party had assumed

⁴⁹ Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 57-71.

⁵⁰ *Madras Government, FR, first and second halves of October 1948* (TNA).

⁵¹ Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 227.

⁵² *Madras Government Secret USS, 67, October 10, 1948*(TNA).

⁵³ Ministry of Home Affairs at the center decided to translate the pamphlet "Communist Violence in India" and distribute it free through District Collectors and Congress Committees in the Communist strongholds of Madras state (*Madras Government Secret USS, 88, November 11, 1949*) (TNA).

⁵⁴ The naivety could not be more evident than the authorities' view that the youth could be prevented from being attracted to Communism if they could divert them "by engaging them in extra-curricular activities". National Cadet Corps "is by far the best anti-communist weapon that we have in our hands as it inculcates a sense of discipline". Other measures include encouraging pupils to do more social work like assisting at festivals, cleanliness campaigns in slum areas etc. "Such organized activities will develop a spirit of cooperation, tolerance and understanding which would eventually prove a more effective deterrent to the spirit of communism and its intolerance" (Director of Public Instruction to Secretary, Education Department, September 26, 1950 and April 11, 1951, *Madras Govt. Secret USS 51/51, June 19, 1951* (TNA).

“such alarming proportions and the situation had grown so menacing” that it was forced to ban it.⁵⁵ Preventive detention was also widely employed against Communist leaders. But the influence of Communism in civil society could not be easily countered.⁵⁶ On January 1, 1950 there was a conflict between peasants and policemen in a place called Shooranad. One inspector and some policemen died. This prompted the ban of CPI in Travancore too.⁵⁷

The coming into being of the new republic gave the Communists another opportunity to emphasize the necessity of national liberation against what in their view was the myth of independence fostered by the Congress. They observed January 26, 1950 as ‘Anti-Constitution day’.⁵⁸ On February 11, 1950, just 15 days after the republic came into existence, there was the Salem jail massacre in which 22 Communist prisoners from Malabar were shot dead after an altercation with prison wardens over the deplorable conditions in jail. Communist leaders C. Kannan and Kanthalot Kunhambu escaped with injuries.⁵⁹ Further reinforcements of the police force were undertaken with two subdivisions, eight additional circles and 55 police stations newly opened.⁶⁰ But with the new constitution in place, the Communists, ironically, appealed to fundamental rights guaranteed under it and sought protection against preventive detention and other ‘anti-constitutional’ acts of the

⁵⁵ *Madras Government Secret USS 49/50, June 6, 1950* (TNA).

⁵⁶ The Travancore government itself assessed that in 1949 seventy-five per cent of the labor unions were under Communist control. It also noted that “public were generally not inclined to support strong action against the communists” (*Madras Government Secret USS 21/49* (TNA)). The Government of India was similarly apprehensive about the election of an underground Communist to the Cochin Legislative Assembly (*Madras Government Secret USS 74/49, October 6, 1949* (TNA)).

⁵⁷ Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 241.

⁵⁸ In a Communist Party circular “the new constitution is condemned as one wherein the workers and kisans do not have any place or voice in the administration of the country, that the majority are left completely to the mercy of the capitalist rulers...” (Police Intelligence Report, *Madras Government Secret USS 10/50, January 20, 1950* (TNA)).

⁵⁹ Anilkumar, *C*, 60-62. The carnage attracted criticism even from the Congress fold. J. B. Kripalani formed the *Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party*, which attracted many from the Congress party in Kerala too. The Communists had started following the policy of resistance in jails too. Even in prisons they established Soviet Republics and they had also started agitating for privileges associated with political prisoners. This had created tense situations in jails (Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 89).

⁶⁰ Four Dy. S. Ps, 13 Inspectors, 61 Sub-inspectors, 94 Head Constables and 920 Police Constables were also newly recruited to deal with the Communist problem (Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 90).

government.⁶¹ The peculiar position of the new nation-state which had chosen liberal democracy was demonstrated when the High Court of Madras declared the Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908 (which was used extensively against the Communists) ultravires of the Constitution.⁶²

The revolutionary line of violent overthrow of the Indian state did not last long with the latter proving its might in unambiguous terms. With the first parliamentary elections around the corner, the party realized,

To continue our present negative attitude to the issue of election would mean to isolate ourselves even from our supporters, to doom ourselves to a state of political impotence, to hand over the masses to socialist, congress factions and other reformists. It would mean losing a great opportunity to popularize our programme, to reforge our links with the people, to build the unity of the left parties and to develop a mass movement against the present government.⁶³

Therefore the new program was put in place which did not abandon revolution but put it off to a more opportune time in the future.

Even though the party lost a number of cadres as martyrs and was defeated by the repressive apparatus of the state, it is during the period between 1948-51 that it really matured and transformed itself into a revolutionary party.⁶⁴ This was the most crucial period in which the possibility of national liberation finally appeared on the horizon. On the one hand, despite the ill-advised line of 'violent overthrow of the state', it provided an opportunity to the Communists to demonstrate their sincerity to the cause. On the other, it exposed in a stark manner the bourgeois-feudal character of the Congress regime, a process that was to take much longer in other parts of the country. During the period from 1948,

⁶¹ *Madras Government Secret USS, 49/50, June 3, 1950* (TNA).

⁶² The High Court in its judgment ruled, "if the freedom and independence that have recently been won are to have any meaning at all, it is up to you [the executive] to see that the public are able to enjoy and exercise their freedom as fully as possible" (*Madras Government Secret USS 9/51, February 2, 1951* (TNA)).

⁶³ Cited in Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 105.

⁶⁴ Krishnan, *T. V. Thomas*, 140-1.

3000 Communist Party members and sympathizers were imprisoned in Kerala, besides the number of deaths due to police action. Nevertheless, the party and the movement were only strengthened by the repression, not weakened.⁶⁵ Brutality of the Congress regime was what drew a lot of people to the Communist fold and its argument that independence was illusionary as the character of the state remained the same.⁶⁶ The role that the immense suffering which the Communists underwent played in the spread of Communism has been underplayed or ignored in the literature. Communist Party members from the top leadership to the ordinary workers have been subject to numerous jail terms and severe torture in jail.⁶⁷ If violence associated with the primitive capitalist accumulation was one of the important factors in the onset of modernity in the West here violence by the state and the sacrifices borne by the Communist activists are crucial factors in the founding of democracy.

The disenchantment with the Gandhian program which led to the formation of CSP in mid-thirties now comes a full circle. There was widespread shock and anger at the fact that the enemies of the people and British collaborators like the feudal lords had turned now into 'Congressmen' and adorned high positions in the party.⁶⁸ The class character of the

⁶⁵ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 194.

⁶⁶ Thoppil Bhasi (playwright and Communist activist, Bhasi was one of the most famous figures of the Malayalam literary world. His 1951 play *Ningalenne Communist Akki* (You Made Me a Communist) virtually revolutionized the public sphere) recounts the incident in 1948 in which an untouchable agricultural laborer defied the landlord by resisting eviction from his homestead. The lord filed false charges against him after which the police raided the village and rounded up as many untouchables they could find. All of them were tied up together and publicly flogged on their way to the police station (Bhasi, *Olivile*, 27-8). The government itself was aware of the draconian nature of its measures: the Criminal Law Amendment Act is "very drastic and opposed to the fundamental rights declared and safeguarded by the Constitution" (Advocate General to Chief Secretary, April 21, 1950, *Madras Government Secret USS 49/50, June 3, 1950*).

⁶⁷ Barbaric acts were committed by the police. Some of the usual practices were, to put one down on the back and pull his legs and arms sideways and tie them up fully stretched; peeling the skin below the knee by rolling a coconut stump on it with force; thrusting needles inside the nails of hands and feet, thrusting hot cadjan stalks into the genitals and so on. Prisoners would be forced to drink urine if they ask for water. Making cuts on the body with a blade and then applying chilly paste on them was another common practice (see George, *Immortal*, 103-104; Bhasi, *Olivile*, 59).

⁶⁸ Novelist Cherukad wrote a satire on this phenomenon, *Shanidisha*, which highlights the irony of the post-independence situation in which all those who opposed independence turned overnight into wearers of *khadi* and worshippers of Gandhi while those who dedicated their lives to it remained underground in hiding (see

Congress provincial governments was already evident in the period before independence. A stubborn refusal to incorporate agrarian reform was its main feature. This hardened after 1947. Moreover, the Congress in Kerala was torn apart by conflicts among the elite representing various caste configurations. Between 1948 and 1952, there were five different governments in Travancore and four in Cochin. The wrangling for office and unbridled corruption soon deflated the aura of the legacy of anti-colonial struggle. As Namboodiripad notes even sections of the working class and the peasantry too thought that Congress should be allowed a chance to rule.⁶⁹ “[I]t had not been the staggering economic and social problems, nor a conflict over large policy issues, which caused the downfall of the Congress within a decade. The door to the Communist rule was opened... by the gradual but steady decline of the ethical, moral and political standards of the Congress”.⁷⁰

After 1952, there was a sea change in people’s support for the Communists, especially in Travancore. Thoppil Bhasi recounts the transformation in the attitude of the police towards the Communist prisoners because of the emerging groundswell of mass support. After his arrest, there were big demonstrations by agricultural laborers in many villages of Central Travancore.⁷¹ The radical difference was reflected in the results of the 1952 elections. In Travancore- Cochin, the Communists secured 29 seats (26.6 per cent of votes) and emerged the second largest party. It had won no seat in 1948. In Malabar, it got 16 per cent of votes and 6 seats (its ally KMPP got 7 seats and 13 per cent votes).⁷² In 1954, in its stronghold of Malabar, the Communist Party won 38.3 percent of votes and 50 percent

Kanthalayam Keshavan Nair, *Kalapa Sabithyam: Cherukadinte Novalukal, Oru Patanam* (Literature of Rebellion: A Study of Cherukad’s Novels) (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Granthasala Sahakarana Sanghom, 1978), 39-58).

⁶⁹ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 192.

⁷⁰ Fic, *Yenan of India*, 32.

⁷¹ Bhasi, *Olivile*, 260

⁷² Nossiter, *Communism*, 116-7.

of the seats in the District Board elections.⁷³ The party continued the struggles it launched in the past decade. The demands were for the halving of *pattam* (cash payment for garden land), fixity of tenure for hut-dwellers, cancellation of rent arrears, cultivation of wasteland without rent etc.⁷⁴ The struggles had reached a new stage when the All India *Kisan Sabha* conference held at Cannanore in 1953 called for, among other things, the abolition of landlordism without compensation and free distribution of lands acquired from the landlords among the poor peasants and agricultural laborers. The importance of material factors that we have observed before continues here. The unificatory process initiated by the socialists and Communists culminated in the formation of the Kerala *Karshaka Sangham* in 1956 by dissolving the regional units of Malabar, Travancore and Cochin.⁷⁵

The party's victory in the District Board elections was the first time in India when the Communists got to administer at the district level. This could be seen as the precursor to the Communist win in the first elections to a united Kerala in 1957. What was significant was that the Board gave an excellent example of governance in the three years of its tenure. Those divisions which elected opposition members were given special attention. The party did not interfere in the affairs of the board. The Board laid a lot of importance on austerity.⁷⁶ In an attempt to show that the Communists were better administrators than Congressmen, the party even invited leftist parties and progressive individuals to share power in the board. The performance of the Board was acknowledged when some of its Communist Party

⁷³ Fic, *Yenan of India*, 489-90.

⁷⁴ Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 108.

⁷⁵ V. Muraleedharan Nair, *Dynamics of Agrarian Struggle* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1996), 90.

⁷⁶ Pavanan, *Keralam Chuvannopol* (When Kerala Turned Red) (Kottayam: National Book Stall, 1995), 19-20. To cut costs, the president and the members of the board used to walk to the schools they had to inspect. Also, rather than stay in guesthouses, they would spend the night in the schools.

members later received awards from the Nehru government at the center for model administration.⁷⁷

Instituting Civil Society

The Communist success in Kerala can only be understood by the comprehensive engagement it had with civil society. In fact it was one of the important factors in the inauguration of civil society. Rather than restricting itself to only economic demands, the Communists sought revolutionary changes in the structure of society. In the Communist analysis, landlordism, for example, “ was a multifaceted institution inextricably intertwined with caste indignities... economic exploitation, political inequality, and imperialism: a social system which land tenure reform alone could not resolve.”⁷⁸

The response logically to such an analysis that was multi-faceted which concentrated on the several layers of social formation.⁷⁹ A militant approach was constantly supplemented by an approach that was based on developing a communicative rationality. Libraries and reading rooms became the lifeline of the Communist movement.⁸⁰ Similarly, this was the norm during the period before the party came into existence. The peasant unions had as one of their main agendas the setting up of night schools and libraries and reading rooms for the peasants. One of the novelties of the reading rooms was the communal drinking of tea where one person read the newspapers and the others listened. Tea and coffee, being newly

⁷⁷ Fic, *Yenan of India*, 44, 51.

⁷⁸ Herring, “Communist Movement,” 395.

⁷⁹ Describing K. P. R. Gopalan’s activities, Krishna Pillai says that he was involved simultaneously in the organization of laborers, students, youth, children and the setting up of reading rooms (K. Krishna Pillai, *Sakhakele Munnottu* (March on, Comrades), *The Collected Works of Krishna Pillai*, ed. Andalat Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha, 1998), 40).

⁸⁰ The government warily noted in 1949 that Communist -sponsored village libraries exist in all Communist centers (*Madras Government Secret USS 21/49* (TNA)).

introduced beverages, were not bound by any caste taboos and thus contributed to the new imagining beyond caste.⁸¹

The other crucial intervention of the peasant unions was in the resolution of local disputes in the villages. Instead of the expensive and time-consuming procedure through the courts, the peasants settled their disputes with the help of the unions. Even family disputes were resolved by the unions.⁸² The government noted that unions were trying to set up a parallel government.⁸³ This was a not a phenomenon that was confined to Malabar or to peasant unions. In Travancore too this was the scenario with the Coir Factory Workers' union playing the same role. This was a fundamental shift from the hierarchical system (albeit under the guise of moral economy) that prevailed under feudalism. Earlier, for example, in the Christian-dominated areas of Alleppey and Shertallai *taluks*, it was the church and the lords who were the mediators and arbitrators in the community disputes.⁸⁴ Not only civil cases but criminal cases too came under the purview of the unions. In the period from 1943 to 1946 it was estimated that 90 per cent of the cases were resolved by the unions.⁸⁵ Traditional consensual modes of dispute resolution were transplanted onto the modern setting but without their hierarchical underpinnings. Again the negotiation with modernity is conducted not through a complete denial of the past. If Subaltern Studies denies the importance of civil society in Third World societies, here peasant unions are one of the main constituents of social transformation and they conform to the standards of modern

⁸¹ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 146-7.

⁸² Andalath, *Rekhyillatha*, 63-6, 73. E. K. Nayanar, Communist leader, who later went on to become the longest serving chief minister of Kerala recounts how the first peasant union in Kayyur came into being. After a dispute between peasants from Kayyur and the neighboring village was peacefully resolved by a union from another village, peasants in Kayyur demanded that a union be formed in their village too (E. K. Nayanar, *Olivukala Smrithikal* (Reminiscences of Underground Life), 2nd ed. (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1999), 21).

⁸³ *Public (General) G O. 811-12 (Confidntl.)*, April 24, 1941 (KSA).

⁸⁴ Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 177, 189. The emergence of the workers' union was a blow to their power. So much so that they floated their own union.

⁸⁵ George, *Immortal*, 40.

associational life. They are characterized by equality, freedom of entry and exit, deliberative procedures of decision-making, recognized rights and duties of members and so on that Chatterjee posits as features of Western-derived civil society organizations.⁸⁶ At the same time they also seek to incorporate some of the features of traditional communities. The emphasis on only the rupture caused by modernity makes us miss the continuities between tradition and modernity.

In the initial period what was remarkable was that the party solely survived on the funds collected from the people and collections made from the members of the party.⁸⁷ During the war, when an epidemic of cholera broke out in Malabar (which killed nearly 15,000 people), Communist activists were in the forefront of the disease- alleviation programs and also other activities like burying of the dead in the most difficult of circumstances putting their own lives at grave risk.⁸⁸ It was again during the war that the Communist intervention in society led to the system of rationing. We already saw that the period of 'people's war' had been mainly spent by the Communists in agitating for price controls and rationing. The food committees set up by the party became the main mechanism for alleviating starvation .The persistent pressure mounted by the agitations forced the Travancore government to introduce statewide rationing in 1943. Malabar too

⁸⁶ Chatterjee, "Beyond the Nation," 60.

⁸⁷ Madras Government Secret USS 21/49 (TNA). There were instances when people used to donate rice and coconut trees to the party (Andalat, Rekhayillatha, 94). The party brought into existence the rice dole system in which the peasants contributed rice. "The expenses of the whole organization should be met from this one item only and the peasants made to realize the importance of the system". It was emphasized that local peasant organization should have an auxiliary voluntary organization. The goal was to enroll at least one member from a peasant family as a volunteer. He would be put in charge of 20 families and would visit them every twice a week to enquire about their welfare and also discuss matters relating to organization. "It is essential that in every village there should be a lady volunteer for a peasants group." Voluntary workers were also instructed to do more humanitarian work like nursing the sick etc. (Communist Party circulars no. 14 and 18, *Home Department Political (I) 1941, September 7, 1941*, (NAI). Most interestingly, in the first elections of Travancore in 1948 the party did not have funds to contest, therefore it asked the voters to not only vote for the party but also contribute 1 *anna* along with it (Raghavan, *Sakthavu*, 129)!

⁸⁸ Krishnan, *T. V. Thomas*, 101; Andalat, *Rekhayillatha*, 133.

introduced rationing in the entire district by February 1945.⁸⁹ If Bengal, which produced nearly all the rice it required, lost millions of people due to famine during the war, Kerala, which only produced fifty percent of its requirement, avoided such a calamity. “The idea that the state ought to perform functions for the people and that such functions could be forced from the state gained currency.”⁹⁰ The near-universal spread of the public distribution system in Kerala in the present is definitely attributable to the early gains made.

In the Communist penetration into the countryside, one of the crucial factors was the role that teachers played in it. Teachers had emerged as the ‘organic intellectuals’ of the Communist movement. Local leadership to the peasantry was often provided by the teachers. This is a different trajectory from the one that Gramsci had posited. According to him the peasantry lacks the capacity to “elaborate its own ‘organic’ intellectuals, nor does it ‘assimilate’ any stratum of ‘traditional’ intellectuals”.⁹¹ Teachers unions proliferated from the thirties. Malabar’s teachers were considered a great threat to the government. In 1948, a government enquiry found that teachers were involved in teaching students Communist anti-government slogans.⁹² Against Menon’s argument that socialist activity resolved itself into fight for local issues, it is constituents like the teachers’ movement that gave socialism and Communism later a national-popular character.⁹³ The Malabar Aided Elementary Teachers’ Union formed in 1936 fought against the dictatorial ways of the management and also for issues like security of service and living wages. The teachers’ link to the peasantry was also due to the fact that they hailed from the same class and hence were in the know of their

⁸⁹ Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 85.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹¹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 6.

⁹² Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 69; Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 69.

⁹³ The example of P.R. Nambiar, Communist leader who came to the movement through the teachers’ movement (Pavanan, *Keralam*, 14) demonstrates how the particular, local concerns go onto acquire a structural and systemic character. People like Nambiar (who spoke English, Tamil and Hindi other than Malayalam) epitomized the Andersonian bi-lingual intellectual who was the catalyst of a new consciousness.

condition. Namboodiripad argues that since they were subject to wage-labor exploitation, they could empathize with the industrial working class too.⁹⁴ Later the union became a part of the anti-imperialist struggle.⁹⁵ The Communist influence on the teaching community negated one of the most important ideological state apparatuses.

The Communists had created the most extensive and disciplined network of local-level cadres.⁹⁶ This was despite the fact that transport and communication facilities were hardly developed. Some of the villages were only accessible by boat or by foot. Monsoons would render them completely isolated. The tremendous support that the Communists enjoyed from civil society is the sole reason for their ability to sustain themselves during periods when they were in hiding. The movement thus could not be repressed despite government repression. From 1948, many of the top Communist leaders were able to avoid arrest by living in underground shelters. When in hiding, the *bala sanghams* were put to use in finding about police movements and also in bringing food.⁹⁷

Earlier, in the early thirties, parallel to the rising consciousness of the workers and peasants and in an effort to channelize the same, journals and magazines began to spring up like *Kesari* (Lion) *Thozhilali* (Worker), *Sabodaran* (Brother) and *Prabhatham* (Dawn). Also the genre of political pamphlets emerged. There were a lot of these published regarding the need for peasant organizations, the problems that peasants face, the economy and so on. The founding of *Prabhatham* strengthened this tendency. The debates that took place in these pamphlets played a significant role in the amelioration of the agrarian situation and also the

⁹⁴ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 155-6.

⁹⁵ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 92.

⁹⁶ Herring, "Communist Movement," 404.

⁹⁷ Nayanar, *Olivukala*, 33. Reading the memoirs of activists like Nayanar and Thoppil Bhasi gives us a sense of the extraordinary difficulties that subaltern classes endured in giving shelter to the Communists.

construction of tenant reform laws.⁹⁸ These had worker and peasant-related news and radicalism. *Prabhatham* of the socialists, as we have seen, was the most radical one with extensive coverage of worker and peasant issues: the “formation of unions, resolutions adopted at meetings, reports of conditions in factories, the existence of bonded labour in the foothills and the progress of strikes”.⁹⁹ But all of these were not just accounts of real life struggles alone but also had fictionalized elements too. There were short stories and poems and they also borrowed extensively from folk culture which made it rather appealing to its targeted audience.¹⁰⁰ The role that *Prabhatham* played can be compared to that of *Ordine Nuovo* initiated by Gramsci in Italy:

[T]he articles in *Ordine Nuovo* were not of cold intellectual constructions but flowed out of our own discussions with the best workers and set forth the feelings, wishes, real passions of the Turin working class of which we had partaken and which we had stimulated. . . the articles in *Ordine Nuovo* were also ‘putting in action’ of real events, seen as forces in a process of inner liberation and as the working class’ own expression of itself.¹⁰¹

Socialists, in trying to build a secular culture, sought to make use of a factor unique to Malabar—high literacy. “Literacy was to be the premise of the new socialist culture based on reading rooms.”¹⁰² Missionary activity and the birth of social reform movements, in virtually all communities, had given a great fillip to the promotion of education from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This modern development would not have such an impact if it had not corresponded with the traditional lower-caste discourse in which knowledge, symbolically at least, helped to reverse customary hierarchical roles and overcome caste

⁹⁸ K. K. N. Kurup, “Karshaka Samarangalum Malayalam Sahityavum” (Peasant Struggles and Malayalam Literature), in *Nammude Sabityam, Nammude Samoobam*, ed. M. N. Vijayan (Our Literature, Our Society), vol. II (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2000), 143.

⁹⁹ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 146.

¹⁰⁰ M. S. Devadas, *Theranjedutha Prabandhangal* (Selected Essays) (Thrissoor: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1991), 84.

¹⁰¹ Gramsci quoted in Denzil Saldanha, “Antonio Gramsci and the Analysis of Class Consciousness: Some Methodological Considerations”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (January 30, 1988): PE-13.

¹⁰² Menon, *Communism in South India*, 143.

oppression.¹⁰³ Malabar had the highest school- going population in the presidency in 1931. By 1932 there were fifty registered reading rooms with 6635 members.¹⁰⁴ The importance of reading rooms to socialist organization was enormous. Socialist party members had begun to function as newspaper agents in twenty-three major towns. Peasant unions began to spring up from peasants reading together newspapers like *Prabhatbam* . In turn, peasant unions began to set up night schools and libraries. The party program included the setting up of reading rooms, night schools, study classes and libraries which functioned in the evening so that laborers could use them after work. Promotion of literacy became one of the main agendas.¹⁰⁵ A new world was opened to the workers and peasants, a world of revolutions and the end of injustices. Peasant unions and study classes were rife with discussions of international, national and regional issues.¹⁰⁶ Again, unlike in the narratives of Menon and Subaltern Studies, a new imagination which is extending beyond the local and the ‘fragment’ is being constructed. More importantly, it is starting to understand the connections between the various levels.

The way the Communist Party was able to start publishing its weekly newspaper *Deshabbimani* from 1942 showed its deep connections with society. To collect donations for the newspaper, the party held many *melas* (cultural gatherings) in the rural areas of Malabar. Peasants and agricultural laborers contributed in whatever possible way to the newspaper: rice, eggs, coconuts, gold and even calves! All these were auctioned in the *melas*. It was unprecedented for a newspaper to be established almost entirely on the basis of public support, that too from the lower echelons of society. This is another example of the way in which the traditional order is an active contributor to the foundation of one of the main

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 144-5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.150-1. Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 63-4.

¹⁰⁶ Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 64-5.

pillars of modern public sphere—the newspaper. We see a different trajectory from that of print-capitalism identified by Anderson – the emergence of a new linguistic and socialist imaginary albeit significantly constituted by the people themselves as participants, not merely as recipients, and also outside the ken of market forces. Also a different publisher-reader relationship emerges with the Communist publication of anti-capitalist and anti-feudalist messages. In 1947 the paper was subjected to lot of difficulties by the government when almost all its editors and many correspondents were arrested and cases filed against the paper. A bail amount of Rs. 4000 was demanded by the courts. Again, the newspaper could start functioning only because of the support from the public which collected a sum of Rs. 28,000 in a period of three weeks.¹⁰⁷

The cumulative effect of the Communist intervention in society was the emergence of a proletarian public sphere.¹⁰⁸ Habermas' construction of the public sphere was linked to the emergence of bourgeois society under liberal capitalism and was separate from the state, market and the family. The subjectivity that was characteristic of the bourgeois public sphere

was articulated through the symbolic matrix of culture, especially writing, reading, and literary criticism—activities that challenged the interpretive monopoly of church and state authorities. The institutions of this reading public (salons, coffeehouses, book clubs, and the press) prepared the ground for a political public sphere, a forum of discursive interaction that was ostensibly open and accessible to all, where private citizens could discuss matters of public interest freely, rationally, and as equals. The bracketing of social and economic status, however, not only masked the persistence of power and interest; it also entailed the idealization of the nuclear family, as the source of a private autonomy.¹⁰⁹

In contrast to this what emerged in Kerala can be termed as a proletarian public sphere in the sense that Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge have defined it. It does not mean that a

¹⁰⁷ Pavanan, *Keralam*, 24.

¹⁰⁸ T. K. Ramachandran, intellectual, interview by author, May 21, 1999, Kozhikode, tape recording.

¹⁰⁹ Miriam Hansen, foreword to *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, by Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge (University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota, 1993), xxvii.

bourgeois public sphere modeled on the West did not exist. What is problematic, in their account, with the bourgeois public sphere is the fact that it claims to represent an abstract principle of generality and against all particularity which meant the bracketing of social and economic status. Thus its claim to represent the general will, in actuality performs as a mechanism of exclusion. It not only excluded social groups like women, workers etc. but also social issues like “material conditions of production and reproduction, including sexuality and childrearing...”¹¹⁰ It has to be stressed here that Negt and Kluge’s construction is derived from Western capitalist and fully mass-mediated societies and therefore adequate qualifications have to be made before using it in the context of a colonial Third World society.

The appropriation of the institutions of civil society by the subaltern classes under the Communist aegis has put a question mark on Partha Chatterjee’s postcolonialist characterization of these institutions as embodying the desires of the nationalist elites to “replicate in its own society the forms as well as the substance of Western modernity.” According to him this also ensured that “civil society will long remain an exclusive domain of the elite... and that the function of civil-social institutions in relation to the public at large will be one of pedagogy rather than of free association.”¹¹¹ He does not take note of the appropriation of (and even founding of) institutions of civil society by the masses but only sees these institutions as “serious protagonists of a project of cultural modernization still to be completed.”¹¹² The masses on the other hand act in the sphere of ‘political society’— a domain “lying between civil society and the state” and communities are their main agents of

¹¹⁰ Ibid., xxvii-viii.

¹¹¹ Chatterjee, “Beyond the Nation,” 28.

¹¹² Ibid., 29.

political practice.¹¹³ This draws a wedge between tradition and modernity instead of understanding the diverse ways in which the two are mutually constituted especially in predominantly agrarian societies.

The ‘National-Popular’

I have argued that the Communist movement in Kerala led it on the path of national liberation. The construction of the ‘national-popular’ was achieved through a keen sense of the relation between tradition and modernity and through processes that are at variance with the arguments of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory. Chatterjee argues that there are two different spheres—that of peasant-communal politics and, organized politics.¹¹⁴ Unlike the subalternist emphasis on the split in the domains of politics between elites and subalterns, the national-popular would not have been possible without the overcoming of this split. Subaltern Studies is right that many resistances that arise out of popular spontaneity do not rely on elite initiatives, but this does not mean that they lead to desirable consequences (popular mobilization in communal riots is an example). It does not also demonstrate that autonomous peasant politics had developed a stable long-term concrete option for the oppressed classes.¹¹⁵ Even when Chatterjee admits that peasant-communal ideology may not be totally capable of identifying and resisting exploitation and that it requires awareness brought in from outside—the sphere of organized politics, he does not see these two spheres having any commonalities. Organized politics is characterized by “centrality of the individual, the collective as the aggregation of individuals, sectional

¹¹³ Ibid., 27; Partha Chatterjee, “Community in the East,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (February 7, 1998): 281. A detailed discussion on postcolonial theory’s exposition of political society is found in Chapter 7.

¹¹⁴ Partha Chatterjee, “Agrarian Relations and Communalism: 1926-35,” in *Subaltern Studies I*, ed. Guha, 37.

¹¹⁵ Alam, “Peasantry,” 45-6.

interests, alliances between sectional interests” and so on, values which are totally alien to peasant-communal ideology.¹¹⁶ This dichotomy follows the tradition-modernity one.

There have been a lot of misunderstandings regarding Gramsci’s concept of the national-popular. It was earlier thought to be merely a cultural concept which stood for progressive realist forms in art including literature and cinema. Later in the 1960s the Italian new left made a stringent criticism of the concept for its alleged idealism and for supplanting the original Marxist emphasis on revolution and the international with national and popular. This for it represented a slide from revolution to *reformism*. The national-popular has also been used as a purely political concept.¹¹⁷ David Forgacs, instead, has argued that this division between the cultural and the political one is a false one and Gramsci, in fact, used it in an integral sense.

If Gramsci posited that only one of the classes, bourgeoisie or the proletariat could be the hegemonic class, in Kerala, the (class differentiated) peasantry and agrarian labor played the role of the dominant classes. While the Communist Party had few resources to launch a frontal attack (war of maneuver) against the might of the Indian state, it did indulge in few skirmishes. Therefore the construction of hegemony (war of position) was the natural option. “It involved the formation of a collective will through the building of a mass party, where a number of social classes and class-fractions are successfully hegemonized by the party and the proletariat”[in the Kerala case, the peasantry].¹¹⁸ But the war of position has not turned out to be a transitional stage on the way to the dictatorship of proletariat and socialist democracy. This was because of the regional nature of the Communist movement in

¹¹⁶ Chatterjee, “Agrarian Relations,” 37.

¹¹⁷ David Forgacs, “National-Popular: Genealogy of a Concept,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), 179-80.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

India and its inability to mount a serious challenge at the national level. This was tragically confirmed with the failure of the sectarian line of 1948.

Communism's relationship with nationalism has been mostly misunderstood by studies. It was different from postcolonial theory's nationalism which "is solely constituted by 'the experience of colonialism and imperialism' [and is therefore] suspended outside the modern systems of production (capitalism and socialism)."¹¹⁹ Also, rather than being a "reaction against nationalism",¹²⁰ Communism in Kerala tried to dialectically mediate between the national and the regional. This nationalism of the Communists was something that allowed the incorporation of an internationalist line, as was witnessed during the Second World War. But it was evident that the colonial government understood the nationalist character of Communism more than anyone else: CPI is "primarily a nationalist party working for Indian independence not withstanding its lip service to internationalism; and a large proportion of its members are attracted to its fold because it stands for the overthrow of the British rule."¹²¹ And as K. Damodaran put it: "It was our mass work coupled with the fact that we were identified with the nationalist aspirations of the people which undoubtedly played a significant role in ensuring that Kerala became the important stronghold of post-independence communism."¹²² The nationalism of the Communists was different from that of the capitalists who used it as a legitimizing ideology. The fundamental difference between Kerala and Bengal has been that Communism in the former was part and parcel of the anti-colonial and other popular movements, where as it was largely independent of them in the latter. This has led to different "party formations"— differences in organizational strength, membership, and political capacities to win elections. Communism in Kerala has been a far

¹¹⁹ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 107-8.

¹²⁰ See Menon above.

¹²¹ *Home Political*, 7/5/44.1Pol (1), August 4, 1944 cited in Kurup, *Agrarian*, 8.

¹²² K. Damodaran, "Memoir of an Indian Communist," *New Left Review* 93 (1975): 36.

more popular movement with extensive ties in civil society. This enabled the Communists later to implement more substantive and radical reforms in Kerala than in Bengal.¹²³

The 'anti-nationalist' line of the Communists did cause damage to the movement. Despite the fact that the Communists' anti-colonialism was far more comprehensive than that of the Congress, the People's War line was ultimately born from the mistake of the "underestimation of the national factor in working out of the tactics of the revolution, in the failure to realise that Communists in a colonial country can fulfill their class tasks only if they take proper account of the national aspirations of the people."¹²⁴ The Communists lost many nationalist-minded socialists and towering trade-union leaders to parties like the Kerala Socialist Party and Revolutionary Party formed later. Despite this, the party, as we saw, made rapid strides during the 1942-5 period because of the substantial role in popular movements based on the concrete daily needs of the people. The party weekly newspaper *Deshababimani* started in 1942 was soon to become the best circulated weekly. Donations and collections from people totaled Rs. 300,000.¹²⁵ This does not mean that nationalism was of no consequence to the people. Communists had already proved their nationalist and anti-imperialist credentials in the difficult period (when they were underground) between 1939 and 1942. Moreover, as we noted before, even in the period of truce with the British, the Communists' support was a critical one. The real intentions of the Communists were obvious to all. As the government noted, the "Malabar comrades were 10 percent anti-Nazi and 90 percent anti-British Government... Collectors generally find them intolerable friends of the Government."¹²⁶

¹²³ Desai, "Party Formation," 40.

¹²⁴ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 174.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹²⁶ Madras Government Report, Political and Judicial, Jan-Dec. 1942; FR, second half, September 1942 cited in Nossiter, *Communism*, 86.

The inclusive character of nationalism that the Communists were aiming at could be achieved only by a substantial commitment to regional and linguistic sentiments. In the early fifties, the movement started by them in the late thirties intensified. A. K. Gopalan emphasized in 1951 that “India’s most important problem, the Communists’ No. 1 goal” was the establishment of linguistic provinces.¹²⁷ Some have argued that the Communist success in Kerala was due to its “manipulation of regional patriotism”.¹²⁸ This argument is flawed for it focuses on one element without taking into account the interaction and integration among the different levels brought about by the Communist movement.¹²⁹

The Class Imagery

The most significant transformation that took place in these two decades of socialist and Communist activity is the emergence of class-consciousness. Many academic studies have viewed this transformation as a linear process with class completely subsuming caste and other ethnic identities. What this ignores is, more than the persistence of ‘traditional’ allegiances, the formation of new communities under modernity. Politics in Kerala in this period and later too have been marked by strong caste and communal orientations. But caste and community have had a significant impact only among the middle and upper classes.¹³⁰ While this is true, what cannot be questioned is the new imagery of class arising out of the Communist movement. Menon, while rightly questioning the linear narrative, goes on to

¹²⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 119.

¹²⁸ Selig Harrison, *India: The Most Dangerous Decades* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 181.

¹²⁹ As Paul Brass argues, Communist parties do not have a monopoly over regional symbols; they have had to contend with regional parties who use such symbols. Communist parties are not “simply parties of regional sentiment, but parties that have both a regional and class appeal and that relate effectively not only to symbols of regional nationalism but to the specific social structure of their region” (“Political Parties of the Radical Left in South Asian Politics,” in *Radical Politics*, ed. Brass and Franda, 94, 112).

¹³⁰ Criticizing the communal and caste analysis, Nossiter writes, it “seriously underestimates the importance of the [Communist] movement’s ideological and practical commitment to political mobilization along class lines” (Nossiter, *Communism*, 115).

negate the salience of the emerging class consciousness by terming it as “confounded by the realities of multiple divisions within rural society which would not allow more than a conjunctural unity.”¹³¹ On the contrary, the substantial assertion of the working classes and the peasantry has been due to the fact that class has been more than a ‘conjunctural unity’. Within a decade of socialist and Communist activity, the new language was already visible. As a Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union pamphlet in 1944 stated: “The Government and capitalists will always be allied against the workers in as much as they have vested interests, and until the workers are in a position to change their order of things to their favour, they will have to encounter many difficulties in their struggle for establishing just rights.” It also goes on to assert: “ a group of capitalists who have themselves made a long history of breach of promise ... has badly interfered with the industrial progress of this state.”¹³²

Even though union activity had begun as early as 1922 in the coir industry in Alleppey with the setting up of the Travancore Labour Association, deconstructing it would help us understand the nature of its activity. The Association was actually formed by a ‘jobber’ or labor-contractor (known as *moopan* in Malayalam), who went on to acquire so much wealth as to start his own factory.¹³³ In the early years of the association’s functioning, the people who presided over its meetings and led them were not workers or labor activists but capitalists, community elites and office-bearers of caste organizations. They mainly played the role of mediators between the government, the capitalists and the workers. Social

¹³¹ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 118. Similarly Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his study of the working class in pre-colonial Bengal, had argued that the workers’ “sense of identity as ‘workers’ or ‘poor people’ was always enmeshed in other narrower and conflicting identities such as those deriving from religion, language and ethnicity.” The class identity of the workers was “remarkably fragile” (*Working-Class History*, 194-5, 198).

¹³² Government of Travancore, Confidential Section (Secret), 4213/44, December 12, 1944 (K.S.A).

¹³³ Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 46.

reforms like an alcohol ban and education were their main concerns.¹³⁴ Even though it had set up a newspaper and managed to provide some very limited benefits to the workers, it played no part in the few strikes that took place in the last years of the twenties. This was to change with the onset of the thirties as it came under small Communist fringe groups.¹³⁵ In a strike held in 1934, the workers shouted, “Destroy the Nayar”, “Destroy Nayar dominance” and “Destroy Capitalism”.¹³⁶ It is interesting to note here that class consciousness jostles for place with consciousness against caste hegemony. The word *muthalali* which meant “a proprietor, especially of land” had come to mean a ‘capitalist’ and the word *muthalalitvam* (capitalism) gained wide currency.¹³⁷ As we had noted above, the 1938 coir workers’ strike which meshed with the movement for responsible government displayed characteristics of Gramscian hegemony where workers sought to go beyond economic corporatism.

The most critical evidence of the emerging class-consciousness was the shifting of allegiance of the lower caste Ezhava underclass from SNDP¹³⁸ and cultural reform to a political and economic program under the Communist Party. This signifies that the subaltern classes’ horizons cannot just be limited to a Scottian ‘moral economy’ ‘and subsistence ethic’.

¹³⁹ But as Scott himself recognized the recourse to “weapons of the weak” is only due to the fact that a credible political project with land reform on the agenda is absent.¹⁴⁰ Even though

¹³⁴ K. K. Kunhan, General Secretary of the association for many years, quoted in Andalath, *Keralathile Thozhivilivargathinte Piravi*, 3rd ed. (The Birth of the Working Class in Kerala) (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha, 2000), 62.

¹³⁵ For a characteristic attitude of the leadership of the association, this speech by the president in 1932 is illuminating: “You [workers] should have respect and affection towards your capitalist bosses. You should always bear in mind that their progress is also your progress... capitalists and workers should live amicably... (quoted in Andalath, *Keralathile*, 63-4).

¹³⁶ *Proceedings of the Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly*, vol. VII, part I, 1938, 35.

¹³⁷ Jeffrey, “Destroy Capitalism,” 1162.

¹³⁸ *Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam* (Society for the Propagation of a Moral Order), social reform organization for the Ezhavas founded by Sri Narayana Guru in the early 1900s. Tiyyas were known as Ezhavas in the Travancore region.

¹³⁹ See James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellion in South East Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

SNDP activists held leadership position in unions like the Travancore Labor Association, they were merely interested in cultural reform.¹⁴¹ This was despite the fact that almost 90 per cent of the coir workers were Ezhavas. By the 1940s the SNDP lost its progressive orientation and had become a thoroughly conservative organization under the control of the bourgeoisie and the middle-classes. In the decisive 1946 Punnapra rebellion, the SNDP was covertly backing the princely government.¹⁴² A majority of the Ezhavas, belonging to the laboring classes were not to be fooled by the SNDP propaganda and went on to become the bedrock of the support for the Communist movement. The career of R. Sugathan (1901-1970), prominent Communist leader and trade unionist is symptomatic of the journey many Ezhavas undertook in their lives. Born into a poor Ezhava family, Sugathan joined as a factory worker after studying till the seventh grade (which was enough to get a white collar government job then). Those were the heydays of the Kerala renaissance with social and caste reform organizations churning the social fabric. Sugathan plunged into them right way and was an active member of the *Sahodara Sangham* (The Brotherhood Movement) and the SNDP, working hard to eliminate caste as an institution. Later, he became involved with the Travancore Labour Association, and finally joined the Communist Party in 1942.

¹⁴¹ The SNDP membership in 1928 was 50,000. But its gospel of self-help borrowed from the context of an industrializing Victorian England was out of place with the lives of the ordinary Ezhavas, even though they were stirred by the functioning of such an organization in a caste-ridden society. Without an economic program, SNDP could not make any material improvement to the Ezhavas (Nossiter, *Communism*, 30-1). But from 1917, Sri Narayana Guru laid great stress on education unlike the period before in which building of temples and purifying Hindu rites were the main activities (Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 107).

¹⁴² The SNDP report of the enquiry committee set up by it on the Punnapra incident stated that workers should realize that no one could protect their interests better than the *Dewan*, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, and insulting such a person would be detrimental to their interests. It also asked the workers to surrender unconditionally by giving up their arms and also promise that they will break all association with Communists and also desist from violent activities (*Vivekodayam* 44, no. 1 (December 1946) cited in Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 206).

The struggles organized by the Communist Party mobilized the dwarf peasantry and agricultural laborers who constituted the backbone of the movement.¹⁴³ In the early phase of socialist and peasant union activity, the class distinction between the peasantry was not emphasized. Therefore, even rich and middle peasantry were part of it.¹⁴⁴ The abolition and redistribution of the “rent fund” collected by the landlords became the mechanism to unify the landless laborers and inferior tenants with the superior tenants even when their objective class interests were different.¹⁴⁵ But by the mid 1940s the rich and middle peasantry had consolidated their position somewhat. During the food crisis, they kept out of the movement and they exploited the conditions by selling their produce in the black market.¹⁴⁶ Therefore the party redefined its policy to one focusing on agricultural laborers and poor peasants: “That the peasant movement is a united movement of everyone other than the *janmi* in the countryside is a false notion. Peasants do not form a single class; among them there are the better off, the middling and the poor. Below them are the laborers even without land.”¹⁴⁷ In 1952, the CPI began to organize the landless agricultural labor (who belonged mostly to the untouchable castes) separately.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 117. The occupational profile of the accused persons in the Kayyur, Karivellur and Kavumbayi resistances shows the predominance of dwarf peasantry and laborers (see Kunhambu, *Kayyur*, 148-149; *Public (General A) Department G. O. 2773 (Confidntl.), November 9, 1948* (TNA) and Kurup, *Kayyur Riot*, 33).

¹⁴⁴ Examination of the evidence of the members and office-bearers of the peasant unions before the Malabar Tenancy Commission gives an understanding of their class composition. The general pattern that emerges (even though there are differences between unions) is that the peasant unions drew membership from the petty *janmis*, *kanamdars*, *verumpattam* tenants and even agricultural laborers (see evidences of E. P. Gopalan, M. Gopala Kurup and K. Kunhiraman, *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1940*, vol. I (Madras, 1940), 96, 223, 250).

¹⁴⁵ Herring, “Ratchet Politics,” 34.

¹⁴⁶ Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 117. This does not have to be generalized into the classic Marxist position of the conservative character of the middle peasantry. As Teodor Shanin put it “the whole question of revolutionary potential of certain social class must be treated as historical, i.e., temporary, relative and changing”. The Telengana and Tebhaga movements saw considerable participation by the middle and rich peasantry (see Joseph Tharamangalam, “Indian Peasant Uprisings: Myth and Reality,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13, no. 3 (April 1986): 116-134).

¹⁴⁷ Communist Party pamphlet cited in Menon, *Communism in South India*, 186.

¹⁴⁸ Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 110.

Subaltern Studies' emphasis has been on a unified peasantry without its internal differences. For example, Guha's category of "peasant" ignores real life variations thus making its basis ahistorical and astructural.¹⁴⁹ Menon, in a fallacious argument, questions the existence of divisions based on class in Malabar. In his view, "constructions of the allegiances of 'middle' and 'poor' peasants are not possible, since categories tend to be blurred" and "a single person could be landlord, tenant and cultivator in different contexts". To be sure, there were many in the agrarian structure who belonged to more than one class category.¹⁵⁰ This did not mean that they had no one primary class position.

The emergence of class-consciousness could thus be said to be the most important feature of the period under consideration. There was a definite shift from a negative and limited consciousness to an understanding of totality and the articulation of an alternative. Chatterjee argues that in pre-independent Bengal the ideology that shaped peasant

¹⁴⁹ Bahl, "Subaltern Studies," 93.

¹⁵⁰ The Malabar Tenancy Committee Report gives evidence of such multiple class positions. The general tendency was to hold land on different type of leases, like *verumkozhu*, *kushikanam*, *kanam*, *verumpattam* etc and also on *janmam* right. But, for example, E. P. Gopalan, president of Valluvanad Taluk Karshaka Sangham, held about eight and half acres (five and half *paras* (one *para* = 10 seers)) seed area of single crop land, dry land of 15 *paras* seed area) on *kanam* and *verumpattam* tenures. But *verumpattam* lands were only about an acre in total. Similarly, M. Gopala Kurup, secretary, Kurumbranad Taluk Peasants' Union held eight acres of which six were under *janmam* and two under *kushikanam*. There were also cases of poor *janmis*, but big *janmis* held most of the lands. One common feature that runs across poor peasantry to middle peasantry is the state of indebtedness. C. V. Kunhappa Nambiar records that this is generally the condition in his village and surrounding areas. K. Kunhiraman, whose family holds 45 acres of land, states, "Holding land is not profitable, but people stick to it in the hope that some day they will get relief." The general refrain is that cultivation expenses are more than the yield. The grievances of the peasants were lack of fixity of tenure, excessive rents, indefiniteness about rent and feudal levies and unjust evictions. Unlike the subalternist emphasis on culture, the crucial nature of material factors is evident here. The *verumpattakars* were the mostly badly affected. According to Narayanan Nayar, in British Malabar, "99 per cent of the verumpattamdars have not been able to maintain themselves" and "my conviction is that cent percent are indebted" (see evidences of Subramaniam Thirumumpu, E. P. Gopalan, P. Narayanan Nayar, V. M. Vishnu Bharateeyan, M. Gopala Kurup, C. V. Kunhappa Nambiar, K. Kunhiraman and A. Kunjikannan, *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1940*, vol. I (Madras, 1940), 323, 95, 186-7, 259, 221, 246, 250). There were also instances when rich *janmis* held lands under *kanam* tenure from people who occupy low position both socially and materially (see written statement of K. T. Kammaran Nambiyar, *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1927*, vol. II (Madras, 1928), 299). Similarly, A. R. MacEwen, author of the report on the second resettlement of Malabar, noted that the distinction between cultivating and non-cultivating and landowners and tenants was not of much value (*Revenue R. Dis. 12-A/1930, March 3, 1930* (KRA)). But this did not mean that this was the predominant feature. Lower castes holding land under *janmam* right (which was customary for upper castes) was a rarity. For example, it was difficult for an Ezhava or an untouchable to be holding *janmam* lands (Rajan Gurukkal, historian, interview by author, June 9, 2003, Kottayam, tape recording).

consciousness was “fundamentally *religious*”. Religion “provides an ontology, an epistemology as well as a practical code of ethics, including political ethics.” When the peasantry “acts politically, the symbolic meaning of particular acts—their signification—must be found in religious terms.”¹⁵¹ The contrast of Communist peasant resistance with this and also the Muslim peasant rebellions in Malabar in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is important. In the latter Islam offered “a new collective, almost familial, solidarity and mutual supportiveness...Islam offered a language of redemption, a crude egalitarianism, an antipathy to landlords and foreigners, a kind of institutionalized inversion, of the everyday world of the peasants.”¹⁵² The Communist movement had transformed this negative consciousness into a positive one by carrying forward the critical function of the rebellions, but by substituting the perception of landlords in individual terms with a systemic analysis. It continued and built on the tactics of Muslim rebellions like “targeting of the most reprehensible landlords to memorialization of martyrs.”¹⁵³ More importantly, Communists substantially overcame the collective action problems among the Hindu community which was plagued by caste hierarchies and lacked the solidarity of the Muslims.¹⁵⁴ Gramsci had argued: “little understanding of the state means little class consciousness”.¹⁵⁵ This too was overcome by sustained mass campaigns undertaken by the Communists.

Thus, as we have seen in this and the last chapter, one of the most important transformations in the colonial world was brought about by a mass movement which successfully constructed a ‘national-popular’ will. The success of it has much to do with the way in which the Communists negotiated modernity. It did not try to negate the entire ‘life

¹⁵¹ Chatterje, “Agrarian Relations,” 31. This is a one-sided view of religion, it does not take into account religion as ideology, and also that it can become a tool for manipulation in communalist mobilization (Alam, “Peasantry,” 50).

¹⁵² David Arnold quoted in Herring, “Ratchet Politics,” 11.

¹⁵³ Herring, “Ratchet Politics,” 33.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 275.

world' of tradition but rather sought to build upon its rational kernel. The socialist and Communist attention to cultural indignities as much as to material exploitation demonstrates this. The hegemonic moment was constituted in the fact that various class groups, despite their material different interests were united in the struggle against landlordism. By and large the Communists were able to avoid economic reductionism. It was not merely the structural conditions that propelled the Communists to power in 1957. It was the result of a sustained ideological struggle which forged a unity between economic, political and cultural issues "placing all the questions around which the struggle rages on a 'universal', not a corporate level, thereby creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate ones."¹⁵⁶ This was the key in creating unity among the class-stratified peasantry. What has to be recognized is the fact that the Communist movement was not a mere reflection of the class and caste forces in society, but was an active force in making class and caste salient and decisive cleavages.¹⁵⁷ Subaltern Studies, by positing social reality as two compartmentalized wholes, of peasant-communal and organized politics, obfuscates the necessity and the actuality of interaction and commonalities between the two domains.

Large-scale social transformation, like that in Kerala cannot come about with out the aspiration for liberation among the peasantry and the urge for radical change among the elites. Subaltern Studies, like James Scott, valorizes autonomous peasant politics at the expense of organized and institutionalized politics. From the fact of sporadic upsurges of peasants, to infer that "the domain of politics underlying such revolts is autonomous is a highly questionable proposition." Alam is right in arguing that in the context of landlord-bourgeois alliance that characterize societies like that of India, the class that is autonomous is

¹⁵⁶ Gramsci quoted in Mouffe, "Ideology and Hegemony," 180.

¹⁵⁷ See Desai, "Relative Autonomy."

not peasants but the landlords.¹⁵⁸ Contrary to the above, the changes in Kerala resemble what Joel Midgal has outlined in his study of twentieth-century peasant revolutions which were not “based on a sudden burst of violence” but the participation of peasantry in “long-drawn out revolutions in a variety of institutionalized ways—as political cadres, as disciplined soldiers, as loyal suppliers of food, money, and shelter, and as active and passive members of a host of revolutionary organizations and groups.”¹⁵⁹

Modernity is not considered as an imposition or as an assault on tradition; rather, it is engaged with and appropriated here, not rejected in toto. The peasant is not an anachronism, nor his consciousness backward, but the vehicle through which modernity and democracy are constructed. Communism in Kerala avoided the stagist notion that “that a vigorous and independent class of town dwellers [is] an indispensable element in the growth of parliamentary democracy.”¹⁶⁰ Namboodiripad was the first to recognize the revolutionary content of the Mappilla rebellion.¹⁶¹ At the same time the Communist movement avoided the exoticization of the peasant and locating the mainspring of spontaneity and subjectivity in pre-capitalist consciousness only, as in Subaltern Studies.¹⁶² It recognized the contradictory consciousness of peasantry, its susceptibility to ideological mystification and inculcation as well. If Moore argues that Indian independence arrived, “partly under the impetus of peasant yearning for a return to an idealized village past,”¹⁶³ the cumulative effect of the Communist struggles on Kerala modernity was such that the peasant was no longer looking to the past, but had his/her eyes planted in the future.

¹⁵⁸ Alam, “Peasantry,” 45, 48.

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Theda Skocpol, “What Makes Peasants Revolutionary?” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 14, no. 3 (April 1982): 362.

¹⁶⁰ Moore, *Social Origins*, 418. The implications of this statement are, as Varshney points out, “Yes peasants, No democracy” (Ashutosh Varshney, “Why Democracy Survives,” *Journal of Democracy*, 9, 3 (1998): 41).

¹⁶¹ See K. N. Panikkar, “Charitharakaranaya E. M. S” (E. M. S., The Historian), in *Vaakekum Samoohavum*, ed. K. Gopinath (Thrissoor: Current Books, 1998), 384-389.

¹⁶² Alam, “Peasantry,” 47.

¹⁶³ Moore, *Social Origins*, 430.

Chapter 4

Questioning Autonomy: Relinking Art and Life: I

The establishment of Communist hegemony in Kerala society came about due to a multi-faceted approach to social transformation. Therefore, culture and the aesthetic formed a natural object of focus of the Communists. In this and the next chapter we will look at the Communist negotiation of modernity in its cultural aspect in the period till it won power.

It will be argued that the movement's engagement in the cultural domain should be seen as another facet of the construction of the national-popular will. Here again, unlike the Subaltern Studies' narrative, the subaltern and elite spheres interact constructively and as a result are able to overcome to a substantial extent the exclusion and marginalization suffered by the former for centuries. If postcolonial theory posits anti-colonial nationalism as having desired to fashion an aesthetic that was both national and modern and yet different from the Western,¹ the Communist project went beyond this to incorporate the crucial dimension of the need to communicate with the masses, and for them to express themselves. Post-colonial theory, even when it seeks to speak for the subaltern, ignores this dimension; instead it valorizes the nationalist assertion of autonomy and difference in the cultural or 'inner domain'² despite the fact that it was completely detached from the concerns of the subalterns. The nature of the inner domain constituted is hardly gone into here. In its account, the nationalist elite, the bilingual intelligentsia

came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity, from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out; language therefore became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world.³

¹ See Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 8.

² See *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

But what is ignored is the fact that the language fashioned by the intelligentsia was still a hierarchical one which hardly resonated with the aspirations of the 'people'. Moreover, without a program for transformation of the material condition of the masses, the cultural autonomy sought remains without a foundation. Thus decolonization remains only at a cultural level demonstrating again the material-symbolic split. It will be seen that the Communist project in Kerala differed from the nationalist one in many important respects.

The Communist project inaugurated a radically a new aesthetic which not only demolished its feudalistic bases but also thoroughly questioned the bourgeois aesthetic which had become dominant since colonial modernity. Western modernity had seen the disintegration of the unified world-views of religion and metaphysics and their substitution by the specialized and autonomous spheres of science, morality and art with their own independent rationalities. The most serious outcome of this was the emergence of the culture of expertise with its total separation from the life of the masses and the hermeneutics of everyday communication.⁴ In keeping with this trend, despite significant mutations, and despite the fact that capitalism had not fully entrenched itself, cultural modernity too under colonialism in Kerala had developed a strong aestheticist conception of art for art's sake. It is my argument that the Communist project tried to break open the specialized autarchic domains and reconcile art and life. What the Communists sought to achieve, with checkered results of course, was the relinking of beauty with truth and justice. It aimed "at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism."⁵ Basically, this could be seen as deriving from a Marxian concept of totality: "[I]n a social order in which experience

⁴ See Habermas, "Modernity," 9.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

itself is irrevocably fragmented, what is at stake is the very possibility of making connections-between traditionally segmented domains of public and private, politics and everyday life, reality and fantasy, production and desire, between diverse and competing partial publics.”⁶ While the segmentation between the public and the private could hardly said to have existed in the same degree as in the West, the emerging capitalist society in Kerala showed tendencies similar to it.

As in other aspects, Communist engagement in culture avoids the presumptions of high modernism, of seeing culture as a mere appendage which would automatically adjust itself after the transformations in the material sphere are complete.⁷ Changes in the material sphere cannot be understood unless the cultural/ideational sphere is also understood which influences it and is influenced by it. Even as this is the case, it avoids the culturalism of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory; instead, it sees the cultural domain in its interrelated complexity, despite contrary tendencies which gained ground for some time. The Communist movement, despite its lack of adequate theoretical acumen, could be seen as intuitively grasping the fundamentals of what Dirlik has termed as ‘culturalist Marxism’ which “resists economic reductionism by recognizing culture as a semi-autonomous realm: not merely a superstructural element or the organic expression of totality, but an active

⁶ Hansen, “Foreword,” xxxiv.

⁷ Some Marxist accounts have also derived this conclusion. Alam has argued that the Indian Communist movement looked at the “build-up of the revolutionary potential in Indian society only by, or at least primarily through, working on the state, its institutions, processes and dynamics.” This, in his view, “led to a withdrawal of attention from society as such – its institutions, values and particular modes of articulation—as direct targets of revolutionary focus.” The sum result of such a strategy of revolutionary politics is a “non-hegemonic conquest.” Alam also argues that such a state-centered strategy led to the ignorance of questions of culture, the need to bring about changes in popular consciousness of the masses etc. Even when it mobilized the masses successfully, it could not “enter into their world as it was, or on their terms, and to engage them in a constant dialogue that could have been instrumental in bringing about attitudinal changes and altering value orientations” (Alam, “Communist Politics,” 180-1). Instead, I will argue that the phenomenal success of Communism in Kerala, especially in the period till it won power, has been due to the fact that it avoided a state-centered strategy of social transformation, and its most significant achievement has been the substantial alteration of the consciousness of the masses. Even though Alam has focused on the failures of the Communist movement at the national level, his argument should have incorporated the important successes like that of Kerala at the regional level without which it would not be comprehensible (Ibid., 197-8).

element in history that exists in a dialectical relationship to other constituent elements of society that is at once a relationship of unity and contradiction.”⁸ The Communist project, in contrast to the Subaltern Studies one, is not premised on essentialist primordialism. It views “cultural identity as a project that was very much part of the struggle for liberation that it informed.”⁹ The Communists radically altered the social consciousness of the masses through their sustained campaigns in the cultural sphere. This does not mean that they did not suffer any failures. In fact, there were many blemishes. But as we saw in the last chapters, a proletarian public sphere came into existence, unlike the bourgeois public sphere of the Western democracies.

The Renaissance

The impact of colonial modernity in Kerala began to accelerate towards the end of the nineteenth century. There were variety of developments like the spread of print media, the beginning of political activism, the origins of nationalism, the formation of rudimentary legislative bodies, the foundation of colleges for English education and, industrialization. The first wave of cultural renaissance occasioned by the contact with the modernizing power of colonialism saw the birth of social reform movements operating within the structure of caste which aimed at the removal of crippling customs and superstitions. The spread of print-capitalism had a significant impact in the cultural arena. New forms of literary communication originated. Material conditions in India and Kerala were akin to those in Europe of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries giving rise to new forms of writing like

⁸ Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 45-6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15

the novel.¹⁰ It is interesting to note the influence of modular literary forms imported from Europe seen most palpably in the first significant Malayalam novel *Indulekha* (1889) written by O. Chandu Menon which had its subtitle called *English Novel Mathiriyilulla Oru Katha* (A Story in the Manner of the English Novel)! The new forms of consciousness took a drastic break from the existing feudal modes of cultural expression. For centuries, the mythical mode and almost exclusively poetry had dominated the literary sphere. Much of the literary production was devoted to the veneration of the Hindu pantheon. The material reality of real people hardly featured in the writings of the orthodox literati tied to the ruling classes. Only by the nineteenth century the satirical mode began to re-enter the literary domain along with new forms like prose.¹¹

The Great Trio of poets, the *mahakavitrayam* consisting of Kumaran Asan (1871-1924), Ullur Parameswara Iyer (1877-1949) and Vallathol Narayana Menon (1878-1958) were in the forefront of creating a new secular sensibility that went beyond the dependence on the Brahminical-based culture of the great Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. “Their work provided Malayalam with a truly native tradition in literature, nationalist in spirit, Romantic in style, and modernist in outlook. They freed the language from having to depend upon the Sanskrit heritage.”¹² Asan’s contribution especially, was all the more significant, considering that he belonged to the oppressed Ezhava caste. He was actively involved in the SNDP movement and though he was considered a ‘poet of romantic love’ his poems on the caste

¹⁰ See Ayyappa Panicker, “Malayalam Literature,” <<http://www.cs.princeton.edu/~mp/malayalam/copy/prdkerala.org/mallitature.htm>> (April 21, 2005).

¹¹ Thomas Palakeel, “One Hundred Years of Malayalam Literature: A Brief Survey,” <<http://www.shelterbelt.com/KJ/malayalashahityam.html>> (April 25, 2005).

Here it should be noted that Palakeel subscribes to a tradition-modernity dichotomy framework. He calls the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as “parochial and derivative” and argues that only modernity made it universalist and encompassing. This may be due to the fact that he is considering only high culture and not popular/folk culture also.

¹² Ibid.

problem provided one of the earliest critiques of hegemonic nationalism from a fragmentary perspective:¹³

Why shouldst thou wail,
Then, O Bharat [India]?
Thy slavery is thy destiny,
O Mother!
Thy sons, blinded by caste,
clash among themselves
And get killed;
What for is freedom, then?¹⁴

In *Duravastha* (Tragic Plight), Asan goes even further in shaking the foundations of the Brahminical orthodoxy. What has been called as a classic example of revolutionary romanticism,¹⁵ it is set against the backdrop of the Moplah rebellion and portrays the trials and tribulations of a Brahmin woman who marries an untouchable, virtually unthinkable in those days of strict caste segregation. It resonates with the universalist philosophy of Sri Narayana Guru: 'one caste, one religion, one god'. In critiquing caste injustices and seeking to usher in a casteless society, Asan borrowed not only from modern sources but also from tradition in the form of Buddhist philosophy.¹⁶ This is seen in his works like *Chandalabhisukhi* (Beggar Woman) and *Karuna* (Compassion). Asan was the most important figure of the counter-culture that emerged during the cultural renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He symbolized perfectly the renaissance's radical break with the Sanskrit-dominated mythical culture of feudalism, especially in the content of literature—a task which was only partially achieved with the Bhakti movement in the

¹³It should be noted here that this is not a well-thought out and consciously articulated political position. Asan was generally known to be diffident towards political issues. On the fragmentary perspective, see Pandey, "Defense," and also Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*.

¹⁴ "Reflections of A Thiyya Boy," in Panicker, "Malayalam Literature".

¹⁵ P. K. Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana Sahitya Prasthanam: Nizhalum Velichavum* (Progressive Literature Movement: Shadow and Light) (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1987), 53. It would be more appropriate to call it progressive romanticism than revolutionary romanticism (see N. E. Balaram, *Marxian Soundarya Shastram* (Marxian Aesthetics) (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1996), 26).

¹⁶ M. R. Chandrashekar, *Keralathile Purogamana Sahitya Prasthanathinte Charitram* (The History of Progressive Literature Movement in Kerala) (Kozhikode: Olive Publications, 1999), 189.

medieval period.¹⁷ This itself was made possible by the changes in material conditions brought about by the encounter with colonialism, the most important being the rise of an English-educated middle class among the oppressed castes. Nevertheless, even Asan was constrained by the ruling ideology of Brahminism and could not fully put into practice his beliefs.¹⁸

Marxists have been accused of downplaying the importance of Asan by calling him a social reformer without any interest in political revolution. This allegedly is a result of the Communist tendency to valorize the political struggles from the 1930s at the expense of the cultural renaissance from the 1880s.¹⁹ This critique is similar to the one that Partha Chatterjee has made with regard to the fallacy of seeing nationalism as a political movement alone. Instead, he argues that nationalism begins much earlier than thought, in the cultural domain, where it declares its sovereignty first.²⁰ With regard to the criticism about Communists in Kerala, there is an element of truth in it for Communist stagism (which was not the dominant tendency) at times had drawn too tight a distinction between revolution and reform, and culture and politics. But the one-sided critique also misses the important question that Communists raised about the efficacy of the pursuit of social reform alone without an understanding of the need for a complete transformation of the power and property structure of society. Also, it would be wrong to argue that Communists failed to understand Asan's contribution. As early as 1947 Namboodiripad had noted that it would be anachronistic to have expected Asan, living in a princely state and far away from the winds of a nascent nationalism, to expound nationalism in his poems. For him Asan's

¹⁷ P. K. Pokker, *Varnabhedangal, Padabhedangal* (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1999), 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ See Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 112-117.

²⁰ Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*. This argument ignores the complex ways in which the different domains interact and constitute each other.

progressiveness lies in the fact that he constantly challenged the orthodoxy.²¹ But he was equally prescient to note that Asan still was only a representative of the bourgeois class, even though the Ezhavas were only a recent entrant into it. Even when the latter resolutely fought against the feudal order, he was not willing to take the next step towards a revolution by the masses. Also, he showed a lot of diffidence towards struggles in the political sphere. Even when he sets *Duravastha* against the backdrop of Moplah rebellion, he does not go into the political aspects of it whereas the Communists had placed prime importance on political struggles, seeing them as the base on which struggles in other spheres of society could take place.²² Individual subjectivity, individual love and romance were the focus of many of his poems, mirroring a society that was moving from a traditional joint family system to a nuclear family. Also, Asan, as a member the Sri Narayana movement, was mired in excessive spiritualism even when he fought against the existing Brahminical orthodoxy.

Namboodiripad observes that the most important feature that differentiated the rising bourgeois class in Europe and that in India was the latter's compromises with reactionary religious ideologies and spiritualism. In the final analysis, for the Communists, Asan, did not go far enough for the latter was shackled by his own bourgeois liberalism and the belief in the efficacy of piecemeal changes. The former, on the other hand, stressed the need for a total revolution which encompassed social, economic and political spheres.²³ As a result the Communists credit Asan with inaugurating only one revolution—the romantic one.²⁴

The humanism of the bourgeois liberal was also clearly visible in another of the Greta Trio, Vallathol Narayana Menon. Though an upper caste Hindu, Menon is credited

²¹ E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *Therenedutha Prabandhangal* (Selected Essays) (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1990), 31.

²² *Ibid.*, 83.

²³ *Ibid.*, 166-7.

²⁴ See P. Govinda Pillai, *Sahityam: Adhogyam, Purogyam* (Literature: Decline and Progress) (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1992), 50.

with inaugurating Christian symbolism through his popular epic on Mary Magdalene.²⁵ Despite the fact that Menon was an ardent nationalist and took up political issues more explicitly than Asan, the Communists had the same criticism against him too. If Asan represented bourgeois liberal democracy in the cultural sphere, Menon did so in the political sphere. But he was lauded for trying to fashion a sensibility that married ancient Hindu culture with a modern worldview.²⁶ Here too one sees the Communist negotiation of modernity in a way that does not see it as a *tabula rasa* but as one which builds on accretions of critique. This is a more nuanced understanding of the relation between tradition and modernity than even critical theorists like Habermas who argued that modernity “*has to create its normativity out of itself*”.²⁷

The period till the thirties was thus essentially marked by a new sensibility which differed in great detail from the pre-colonial period, especially in the imagination of universalism which sought to go beyond the stifling limitations of caste hierarchies.²⁸ But still it was romanticism and bourgeois liberalism that provided the paradigm of critique. Nevertheless, the shift to a more popular and proletarian aesthetic was already visible in a rudimentary fashion. Even Asan, who began with Sanskritized diction and Sanskrit meters had begun to move towards simple Dravidian meters.²⁹

Socialist Realism and the Progressive Literature Movement

But it is with the 1930s and the emergence of socialist and Communist-led struggles that the shift was fully realized. The organizing framework of literature and high/elite culture had

²⁵ Palekil, “Malayalam Literature.”

²⁶ Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 72-74.

²⁷ Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 7.

²⁸ We should not draw too stark a distinction between the colonial and pre-colonial periods. The imagination of universalism is not confined to modernity alone. Of course, at the same time, what is different in the new imagination of universalism has also to be recognized.

²⁹ Panicker, “Malayalam Literature.”

changed from romanticism to realism, especially, socialist realism. Romanticism, originally, drew its inspiration from the French Revolution. Even though it had many variants, individual freedom, which is the essence of a bourgeois democratic revolution, was the common element in all of them. Realism was a product of the same social conditions that produced the industrial revolution, massive urbanization, proletarianization, poverty etc. Realism transformed into socialist realism with the emergence of Communism.³⁰

The culmination of the shift to realism was the 1937 play *Pattabakki* (Arrears of Rent) written by Marxist theoretician and activist K. Damodaran which became immensely popular. It was the first play to directly address the issue of class struggle and also tackle an explicitly political issue. Its popularity was huge and was performed in all the peasant meetings and party conferences all over Malabar. P. Kesavdev's *Kannadi* (Mirror) is a socialist realist novel depicting the struggles of the Alleppey coir workers and especially the 1938 general strike. It also shows the how the workers develop from a class in itself to a class for itself. A successful work, it elaborates the characteristics of a new man, a socialist man and also valorizes political activity of the laboring masses.³¹

P. Govinda Pillai argues that the decade from 1929-1939 constitutes the most important one in the formation of modern Kerala.³² In 1937 the *Jeevat Sabitya Sanghom* (Association of Kerala's Living Literature) was founded under the initiative of the socialist leaders like Namboodiripad and Damodaran. A majority of the people associated with the *Sanghom* were those who were in the forefront of left-wing politics and peasant and working

³⁰ Govinda Pillai, *Sabityam*, 17.

³¹ Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 57.

³² P. Govinda Pillai, "EMS as a Literary Critic and Cultural Activist," *The Marxist* 14, nos. 1-2 (Jan-June 1998), <http://cpim.org/marxist/199801_marxist_ems_culture_pg.htm>(April 25, 2005).

class movements.³³ The inspiration was the Indian Progressive Writer's Association's founding conference in Lucknow in 1936. Namboodiripad wrote a piece called "Jeevat Sahityavum Soundarya Bhodhavum" (Living Literature and Sense of Beauty) in 1937 which served as a manifesto for the movement and was also the first serious attempt to apply Marxist criteria to assess Malayalam literature.³⁴

The main thread of the argument that runs through is the assertion that art is not for art's sake but for the sake of progress of society. Committed literature should always encourage progressive forces in society. According to Namboodiripad, two major forces are contending with each other in the world. On the one side there is fascism, imperialism, feudalism and capitalism, on the other, there is freedom, nationalism, democracy and socialism. Even science, which is supposedly based on non-violable laws, is not value-free. It can be used for either progressive or reactionary purposes. Here one can see the preliminary steps towards anticipating the Habermasian problematic of the need to bridge the artificially separated domains of science, morality and art in modernity. Science is not excluded from this, thus questioning the Enlightenment crowning of the Kantian fact-value dichotomy. But unlike in postcolonial theory, only instrumental rationality is questioned without abandoning the quest for substantive rationality. Chatterjee, as we have seen, reduces the validity of natural sciences to its cultural origins.

Namboodiripad stresses it should not be understood from his argument that aesthetic beauty should be sacrificed for the purpose of 'progress,' only that beauty should not become an excuse in the sustenance of conservatism. He also adds that lively literature is

³³ Critics have alleged that the Sanghom was mainly founded by political activists who had nothing to do art and literature (see Chandrashekar, *Keralithile*, 68). One can justifiably ask about the credentials and the intent of the people behind a literary movement. But what is more prominent in this critique is the urge to keep the different domains of modernity autonomous and separate. The violation of the specialization of each sphere is what causes concern for the critics. The question of linking art to truth and justice is not posed here.

³⁴Govinda Pillai, "EMS".

not one that merely demands food for the poor or a revolution and an end to exploitation.³⁵ Damodaran in a paper read at the conference made a scathing critique of almost all elite literature produced so far in Malayalam for its lack of resonance with real life and the present. He saw all the classical works and the recent romantic ones as a part of 'literature of escape'. Instead what was needed was a literature of 'expression' which portrayed man and his reality in all its complexity, the economic, social and political aspects of his existence.³⁶ The question of dealing with the present and looking to the future was extremely important for the proponents of the new literature. For according to them, the trend so far has been to go back into the past and rely solely on Hindu epics while ignoring the contemporary present.³⁷ The present cannot be fashioned only by imitating antiquity as the revivalists wanted. The revivalists could be equated with the petite bourgeoisie class which "[c]rushed by capitalism... long to react against it from outside, to destroy it by willful violence. Having no future in the dominant system, they return to an embellished past where they see themselves as masters of their own destinies."³⁸

Soon after the formation of the *Sanghom*, there was great enthusiasm among many known litterateurs to join the movement including non-socialists like G. Shankarakurup, M. P. Paul and Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-1987) and others like Thakazhi Shivshankara Pillai (1914-1999), Ponkunnam Varkey (1908-2003), and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1912-1994), the future literary doyens and initiators of socialist realism. But the critics were equally aghast at the way the socialists posed the problem. Kuttikrishna Marar, a virulent critic of the movement was to later mock that the new literature was one which falsely

³⁵ Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 17-21.

³⁶ Sardarkutty, *Purogamana*, 49-50.

³⁷ Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 75.

³⁸ Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*, trans. Diarmid Cammell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 162.

believed that portraying the poor sympathetically and insulting the rich was a sign of good literature.³⁹ Another allegation was that the movement wanted to shun tradition and the glorious works of the past like the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, epics etc. and even the recent classics. Some of the critics were particularly aghast at the statement of P. Kesavdev (1904-1983), one of the leading socialists and writers that epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* should be burned.⁴⁰

But this was not to be a spoke in the wheel of the movement which began to gain strength. Also, the parallel struggles of socialism and Communism provided the necessary practical correlate to the discursive shifts. With the founding of the *Jeevat Sahitya Sanghom* and the emphasis on realism, a new genre of short story virtually exploded in the literary scene with some of the best talents emerging in it.⁴¹ Kesavdev (1904-1983), one of the earliest socialists and trade unionists in Travancore, earned lot of acclaim in the literary field. Despite his explicit political identification with the oppressed classes and his impatience about the aesthetic side, he produced some moving stories.⁴² The massive shift in public discourse is so obvious with the titles of stories like Dev's *Meenakaran Koran* (Koran, the Fisherman). Varkey's stories famously exposed the foibles and hypocrisies of the Church leading to an important critique towards the secularization of society. Its impact was very much felt even among the conservative laity.⁴³ Varkey was arrested and jailed in 1944 for instigating class war through his works, the first writer to be booked on such charges.⁴⁴ His short stories are considered milestones in Malayalam literature. The ordinary and poor peasants formed

³⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁰ Andalat, *Purogamana Sahityavum Communistkarum* (Communists and Progressive Literature), (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1993), 89.

⁴¹ Panicker, "Malayalam Literature."

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ 'Annie Jacob', housewife, interview by author, July 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

⁴⁴ M. S. Dileep, *Varkkiyude Velipadukal* (The Revelations of Varkey) (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Cooperative Society, 2000).

the world of his discourse. He saw the King and Church as the two great oppressors of the time. Almost his entire work was written from a socialist point of view. He was a great believer in the fact that a writer should have firm political commitments. He was particularly scathing of writers who were squeamish of declaring their political allegiances. Varkey remained a Communist sympathizer throughout. People like Varkey delivered the biggest blow to the aestheticist conception of art for art's sake.

Similarly, Basheer too criticized the weaknesses of Islamic society in Kerala.⁴⁵

Ponjikara Raphy, a younger contemporary of Varkey, took up the latter's tirades against the Church and more significantly, the psychology of the proletariat came out brilliantly in his work.⁴⁶ In Thakazhi's work too, the have-nots and peasants proliferate.⁴⁷ Like Basheer "Thakazhi also captured the living language of the underclass and traced the waxing and waning of their hopes in modern India."⁴⁸ One of his popular works came out in 1948 called *Thottiyude Makan* (Scavenger's Son) detailing the life of three generations of *thottis*, cleaners of night soil. Other significant novels of his are *Enippadikal* (Rungs of the Ladder) and *Randidangazhi* (Two Measures of Rice, 1949). In Kesavdev, we find an unbending socialist stridency which was hardly concerned about the aesthetic side, maybe one of the reasons why he did not scale the literary heights that others did.⁴⁹ The two significant novels of his were *Odayil Ninnu* (From the Gutter, 1942) and *Ulakka* (The Pestle, 1951) which are classic examples of socialist realism. 'From the Gutter' had a "galvanizing effect on the reading public of Kerala."⁵⁰ A radical story about the protagonist Pappu, a rickshaw driver who

⁴⁵ Panicker, "Malayalam Literature."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Here I am following the popular convention of referring to Thakazhi Shivashankara Pillai by his first name, a practice which extends to a few other personalities too.

⁴⁸ Palekil, "Malayalam Literature."

⁴⁹ Palekil argues that orthodox positions like that of Dev's was responsible for Progressive Literature losing its sheen later (ibid.)

⁵⁰ K. M. George quoted in Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 88.

spurns all authority from his childhood, the feudal lord to his employer at the weaving company. The defiance of the latter cost him his job and also landed him in jail after which, he turns a full-time rickshaw driver. In sphere of personal relations too, he is a revolutionary who has the courage to live with a poor woman and her daughter, absolutely scandalous for a society still predominantly feudal and patriarchal.⁵¹ The ideals of conduct portrayed in the novel became a catalytic force in a society already being subjected to radical questioning in the political and social sphere. These ideals “were very different from the deference, respect for hereditary rank and readiness to absorb oneself into the cycles of an extended family, which formed the basis of social relations in old Kerala.”⁵²

The Lively Literature movement was gaining great importance and prestige as the Progressive Literature movement was doing at the national level. Poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s speech inaugurated the Second All India Progressive Literature Conference at Calcutta. The Lively Literature changed its name to *Purogamana Sahitya Prasthanam* (Progressive Literature Movement, PLM) in the 1944 conference at Shoranur which was held under the aegis of the Malabar division of the Communist party. As Thakazhi opined later: “It has to be accepted that the Communist Party had a good understanding of how to use literature and writers.”⁵³ The wide acceptance that the movement garnered in the preceding seven years is reflected in the fact that the conference was attended by some of the major litterateurs in Kerala, unlike the 1937 *Jeevat Sahitya* meeting which had mainly political activists. A non-socialist, M. P. Paul, presided over the conference. One of the important issues that dominated the meeting was the need to raise the voice against Japanese fascism. There were also laudatory comments about the Soviet

⁵¹ P. Kesavadev, *Odayil Ninnu*, 4th ed. (Kozhikode: Poorna Publications, 2000).

⁵² Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 89.

⁵³ Quoted in Sardarkutty, *Purogamana*, 52 (my translation).

Union. In writer Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai's words: "If Christ were to reincarnate today, he would have chosen to live in Moscow. The reason is that there is not one Sunday, but all the days in a week are Sundays. That is how moral the life in Russia is."⁵⁴

The second conference of the PLM was inaugurated by the Bengali litterateur Harindranath Chattopadhyay. The reactionary role that the Catholic Church in Kerala has played is evident from the fact that the Bishop of the Calicut Diocese opposed the meet because of PLM's supposed inspiration from Communism. To this Chattopadhyay responded "A God that is scared of communism does not deserve to live".⁵⁵ To the allegations that the PLM was merely a tool for the propagation for Communism, Changampuzha, the most famous of the poets among the second-generation romantics and a non-Communist responded:

Communist Party is an organization based on an economic program that will bring the good of humankind. It has an ideology that is optimistic about the success of a social structure that is founded on world peace and brotherhood. And it works towards this goal with strong integrity, unshakeable courage and commendable mentality of sacrifice. In this light, what is wrong if the PLM decides to promote communism?⁵⁶

Such affirmation of PLM from even non-socialists demonstrates the hegemony that Communism was able to establish by the mid-forties. Hegemony is, as Gramsci conceived it, "in which one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too."⁵⁷ The foundations of the national-popular in the cultural domain could be seen erected here. And it should be noted this affirmation of Communism came during the debacle of the party when it adopted the

⁵⁴ *Deshabhimani*, June 17, 1945.

⁵⁵ *Deshabhimani*, June 10, 1945.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 88.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology," 180.

People's War line in support of the British against the 'Quit India' program of the Congress. Even writers like M. P. Paul and Mundassery, who had criticized the Lively Literature earlier, joined the movement. This does not mean that there were no longer any differences of opinion among the writers. They just shelved them temporarily for what they believed to be a greater cause. Namboodiripad was to later compare this joint effort to the united front forged in the political sphere.⁵⁸

But the most virulent critics like Kuttikrishna Marar were relentless in their opposition. Even writing in 1962, he argued:

The goal of PLM should be the progress of literature and litterateurs. The worship of Soviet Union, the condemnation of Japan, a united India, the sacredness of the treaties that the native states signed with the British and so on should not be its focus of attention. If a literary organization indulges in the pursuit of such goals, poets who would go on to become teachers of the world would be reduced to being mere cheerleaders of political parties and the organization itself would decline in time.⁵⁹

But Marar was a believer in the eternal values of literature and was totally ignorant of the need to bring in society as a central element in literature, as acknowledged by even present-day supporters of his like Chandrashekar.⁶⁰ In Marar, the Sanskrit orthodoxy combined with the ideology of colonial modernity which argued for the autonomy of the aesthetic.

The influence of the Communist-led mass struggles and the cultural artifacts produced by the peasant activists is remarkably seen in even non-Communist poets like Edassery who in his post-independence poem "Puthan Kalavum Arivalum" (A New Pot and Sickle, 1951) makes the peasants sing the famous lines: "power, we should harvest first."⁶¹ A new sensibility is inaugurated when the peasants move away from the 'moral economy' framework to the assertion of political power. Another non-Communist writer Lalithambika

⁵⁸ Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 88.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Chandrashekar, *Keralathile*, 107.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 115-118.

⁶¹ Kurup, "Karshaka," 13 (my translation).

Antharjanam's story, 'Achante Makan' (Father's Son) is a strong critique of the liberal belief that independence would solve all the problems of the country. The story ends with the clarion call to build a new world and the words: 'victory to the revolution'. This is where the imperative of the capture of state power by the working classes was realized even by non-Communist writers. It is the Gramscian moment that recognizes that the "subaltern classes, by definition are not united and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State'."⁶² This does not have to be construed as a teleological theorization which privileges knowledge forms tied to the state as postcolonial theory has implied,⁶³ but as one that contends with their reality, the fact that the "historical unity of the ruling classes is realized in the State, and their history is essentially the history of States and groups of States."⁶⁴ Edassery's other poems and plays too (for example, 'Koottukrishi', Collective Farming, 1951) dealt with the peasant question and the struggles waged around it, something which is conspicuously absent in the present-day post-modern poems. For example the poem 'Eviction' recounts the emotional attachment of the peasant to his land under the shadow of its imminent loss:

Beloved is that homestead, heaven
 Too can be forsaken for its sake,
 Born and raised there, I long to
 Die there.
 There lie my forefathers with
 Eyes closed in an eternal sleep.⁶⁵

But unlike in subalternist accounts here there is no yearning for a bygone past; rather, the liberation of the peasant in the future. Vyloppilli's work in 1952 was also titled *Kutiyozhikkal* (Eviction). As noted before, there was a virtual explosion of the short story genre during the

⁶² Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 52.

⁶³ See Chakrabarty: "Radical Histories," 757.

⁶⁴ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 52.

⁶⁵ Kurup, "Karshaka," 138 (my translation).

period and after independence, the novel too flourished. Even writers who did not have allegiance to the movement were influenced by it. A conservative poet like Ulloor wrote:

It is over.
The black night
Of trampling upon
Labor, by rich
Low castes, by upper castes
Women, by men and
Orientals, by westerners.⁶⁶

P. Bhaskaran's collection of poems 'Odakuzhalum Lathiyum' (Flute and the Baton) came out in 1948 and was banned by the government. Another collection came out titled 'Kurekkoodi' (Some More). All these dealt with peasant issues and on how the peasants and laborers were organizing themselves and becoming strong. The poem 'Randu Kannukal' (Two Eyes) is an example which describes the rape of peasant woman by the police:

To get work, to get wages
Chirutha and her husband
Join the union
There comes, one day,
Ghosts clad in khaki to
Destroy the union.

After the rape, Chirutha's eyes, which earlier glowed like lotus, now are described as:

Daggers that pine for revenge.

Now,

All the Chiruthas come charging
All the Chiruthas come plunging.⁶⁷

His other famous work was 'Vayalar Garjikkunnu' (Vayalar Roars, 1946) written in the aftermath of the Vayalar rebellion:

⁶⁶ M. R. Chandrashekar, *Communist Kavithrayam* (The Communist Trio of Poets) (Thrissur: Current Books 1998), 25 (my translation).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 (my translation).

While the elite cowered in fear,
These heeded the land's call.
Without a tremble
These courageous battled those
Vile men who dishonor the land.
Without fear of death
These courageous confronted the
Government that eats its people.⁶⁸

Critics have argued that by romanticizing the valor of the participants of the rebellion Bhaskaran has closed his eyes towards the great tragedy perpetrated on them by the party.⁶⁹ This views the workers and peasants as mere pawns in the hands of the elites. Bhaskaran, O.N.V. Kurup and Vayalar Ramavarma were the trio of poets who were closely associated with the Communist Party. The meetings of the party always had songs composed by Bhaskaran. ONV used fisher folks' language in his poem 'Puthiya Koothukal':

Hot blood flows of those
Oppressed who sought to defy
The fattened guns in battle...
Cheruma fishermen will not,
Anymore, fear the guns.⁷⁰

Most of his early poetry was written as propagandist 'marching songs'. Many of them were populated by the motifs of hammer and sickle. Even though Chandrashekarar criticized the Communist valorization of violence in this early poetry, he does not differentiate between the types of violence and also the fact that many of the poems also empowered the subaltern classes at one level by instilling in them the courage to resist state violence. The naming of the girl born in the untouchable Pulaya household as sickle in the poem "My dear sickle" is

⁶⁸ Ibid., 35 (my translation).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 66 (my translation). *Cherumas* are one of the untouchable castes.

especially demonstrative of this.⁷¹ The motif of the sickle was a powerful imaginary in the Communist movement in other parts of the country too like Bengal.⁷²

The 1950s are considered the golden period in terms of art and literature. After the split of PLM in 1948 (see below), the relations between the Communist and the non-Communist began to improve from 1952. There was significant amount of good work being produced in novels, poetry and drama. The most important aspect was the aspiration towards a “good tomorrow” that animated most of these works.⁷³ As early as 1935 G. Shankarakurup, a non-Communist, wrote the famous poem ‘Tomorrow’ which was replete with hopes of a good future. The ambivalence towards modernity that dominates post-colonial theory is resolved here for modernity is not a site from which one has to escape. There is also the absence of the apocalyptic vision and tragic tone which pervades many of the Marxist poets of Bengal.⁷⁴

The decade was also known as the ‘Red Decade’. The plays of Thoppil Bhasi, Cherukad, Edassery, K. T. Muhammad, P. J. Antony and Varkey came out in this decade, and were performed by Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC), Prathibha, Malabar Kendra Kalasamithi (see next chapter). ONV, Thirunelloor Karunakaran and Punalur Balan established themselves as poets in this era.⁷⁵ PLM as an institution did not survive the split of 1948. But there was no abatement to the production of progressive literature. National figures like Mulk Raj Anand, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Kishan Chandar, K.A. Abbas, Balraj Sahni visited the state many times to promote progressive literature.⁷⁶ The imagination

⁷¹ Ibid., 67.

⁷² See Rajarshi Dasgupta, “Rhyming Revolution: Marxism and Culture in Colonial Bengal,” *Studies in History* 21, 1 (2005): 89. One of the important ways the Communist movement appropriated a traditional romantic symbol was the reconfiguration of the (quarter) moon into a sickle.

⁷³ Devadas, *Theranjedutha*, 90.

⁷⁴ Rajarshi, “Rhyming Revolution.”

⁷⁵ Govinda Pillai, *Sabityam*, 34.

⁷⁶ Govindapillai, “EMS”.

of a national space was also visible here, which at the same time sought to go beyond it in many ways. This conforms to the theoretical point that Partha Chatterjee makes that a “nationalist impulse... must always be a part of a larger politics that transcends nationalism; otherwise the achievement of its formal goal, national independence, leaves it without content.”⁷⁷ Despite this recognition, postcolonial theory, ironically, does not have any sympathy for politics with a universalist content. The pioneers of PLM like Thakazhi, Basheer, Varkey and Cherukad now evolved into masters of their craft. Thakazhi wrote the novels ‘Thendi Vargam’ (The Beggar Class, 1950) and ‘Chemmeen’ (Shrimps, 1956) and the short story ‘Inquilab’ (Revolution, 1952). Basheer’s works ‘Ntuppuppakkoranendarnnu’ (Me Gran’dad’ ad an Elephant, 1951) ‘Pathummayude Adu’ (Pathumma’s Goat, 1957) contributed substantially, by using the Muslim subaltern lingo, to the democratization of language. In cinema too, which was a fledgling department, the impact of progressive art was clearly visible and the people behind it were also associated with PLM.

The shift to socialist/ progressive realism in high culture was a constitutive element in the construction of the national-popular. There was a structural and paradigmatic shift from romanticism which had raised the first banner of revolt against the Brahmin orthodoxy and the hegemony of the sacerdotal language. But romanticism had still not gone the whole way in inaugurating the national-popular, limited as it was by its incomplete attention to material factors and the excessive focus on the individual. By and large the ‘political’ too was not explicitly dealt with under its rubric. Of course, romanticism and realism are not two compartmentalized categories. In Kerala realism itself was imbued with some characteristics of romanticism. But it would be difficult to call socialist realism merely romantic realism as the intellectual P. P. Raveendran does especially considering the fact that he has underlined

⁷⁷ Quoted in Fredric Jameson, “Globalization and Political Strategy”, *New Left Review*, no. 4 (July-August 2000): 64.

the deep complicity of romanticism with capitalism.⁷⁸ A similar argument has been made by the historian K. N. Ganesh.⁷⁹ Maxim Gorky called socialist realism revolutionary romanticism. Socialist realism, according to Gorky, needed romanticism as an unavoidable part. For him, both thinking and imagination go together.⁸⁰ But this is not the same meaning that Raveendran has attributed to romantic realism.

Realism in Kerala substantially managed to develop an anti-capitalist critique. The real took precedence over the fantastic. Against romanticism's emphasis of the individual and the self, realism brought the social to the fore. Against the valorization of the infinite and the transcendental nature of the universe, realism stressed a material understanding of reality. Also, the simplicity of the language used by the writers—as we have seen above—helped in bridging the gap between the people and the intellectuals.⁸¹ Talking about the emergence of a popular aesthetic Thakazhi notes in his memoirs: “The knowledge about literature was not confined to the literate... One could see poetry being read even in the huts of Kuttanadan hillside and ricefields... Literary meets were organized even in the most remote and unreachable areas. People used to flock in great numbers to hear the musical session in party meets.”⁸² The split between the elite and subaltern domains is overcome here.

⁷⁸ Interview by author, May 18, 1999, Kottayam, tape recording.

⁷⁹ See below.

⁸⁰ E. Sardarkutty, *Purogamana Sahitya Niroopanam*, 2nd ed. (Criticism of Progressive Literature) (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1993), 25, 31. Socialist Realism has also been called as socialist idealism, socialist romanticism, progressive realism and so on.

⁸¹ This is in marked contrast to the high European aesthetic and urban, elitist tone adopted by many Marxist litterateurs in Bengal limiting it to people with certain amount of cultural capital (Rajarshi, “Rhyiming Revolution,” 94).

⁸² Quoted in M. P. Balaran, “Swathathinteyum Samskarathinteyum Roopikaranam Swathantryapoorva Keralathil: 1930-1947” (The Formation of the Self and Culture In Pre-Independence Kerala) in *Nammude Sahityam, Nammude Samooham*, vol. II, ed. M. N. Vijayan (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2000), 162 (my translation).

The Split in PLM

The united movement of Communist and non-Communist writers in PLM was to last only for four years. With the independence of the country, important differences cropped up between them. Communists like M.S. Devadas argued that this was due to the changed political conditions and the new class relations at the national and international levels and blames the non-Communists totally for the debacle.⁸³ Namboodiripad, in a balanced analysis, puts down the split to the tendency among the non-Communist writers to be attracted to the new establishment which was seeking them, and to the fact that the Communist Party adopted a sectarian approach from 1948 (till 1951) which called for an armed revolution.⁸⁴ The divisions and the mechanical simplification that the Communists resorted to also ignited the old 'art for art's sake' argument among the non-Communist writers. Many of the 'progressive writers' became the followers of Joseph Mundassery, one of the main proponents of the 'art for art's sake' idea. Later when Mundassery became a part of the Communist-led movement, it seemed as though the dispute had been resolved in Mundassery's favor.⁸⁵ But if the Marxists had indulged in mechanical simplification and reductionism, the other party was no less guilty of reductionism on the idealistic side. Mundassery believed that aesthetic and art had an essence that transcended history which in turn implied that there is an unchangeable human essence. While this is true, it is not gone into as to how this human essence interacts with material conditions in various historical periods. Rajeevan argues that this ideology of liberal humanism had gained hegemony which

⁸³ Devadas, *Therenjedutha*, 22. Later on, Devadas was to take a more balanced position when he notes that the division between the two groups was fruitful because it exposed the fallacies of both positions and enabled them to understand each other better. This in turn helped to avoid the sectarian position that the Communists adopted for a short period in the future. The cooperation between Communists and non-Communists were to develop again later which Devadas attributed to the lessons learned from the split (89).

⁸⁴ Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 117; see also Pillai, "EMS".

⁸⁵ B. Rajeevan, interview by author, May 19, 1999, Palakkad, tape recording; also see his *Jananibidamaya Danthagapuram* (Populous Ivory Tower) (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1991), xv.

had made it impossible for Marxist criticism to overcome its limitations for quite sometime. Marxist criticism itself had suffered because of the inability of Marxists- who were mainly political activists—to develop a theoretical base.⁸⁶ One of the important Communist leaders and theoreticians, N.E. Balaram, also argued that the lack of understanding in Marxian aesthetic theory contributed to the debacle. But the other side was equally inept at understanding the social reality of the time and the role of imperialism and feudalism in constituting it. The need to develop a radical aesthetic which would revolutionize culture was also not understood by it. The Communists, in his view, had at least a conception of how a new society and culture would look.⁸⁷

The sum effect of the split was the alienation of some of the best writers from the Communist-led front. This included Thakazhi, Kesavadev, Basheer and so on. The dogmatism of the Communist Party in this period had its consequences at the national level too. Some of the leading lights of the national PLM like Mulkraj Anand and K. A. Abbas were also alienated from the movement.⁸⁸ The program of the Communists in 1948 demanded: the establishment of a republican Kerala by abolishing monarchies, princely and feudal estates be divested without compensation, the redistribution of the property held by British capitalists and also those of the native capitalists who exploit the workers and employees excessively, the promotion of a scientific attitude among the masses mired in superstitions, resistance to Anglo-American imperialism which was the biggest impediment to world peace. It was asked by the party whether the progressive writers agreed to this program.⁸⁹ It is surprising that a manifesto like this could draw the opposition of the writers. But when posed in this manner of a strict adherence to a party program, it did. It also

⁸⁶ Ibid., xv-vi.

⁸⁷ Balaram, *Marxian*, 30-33.

⁸⁸ Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 128.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 127. Traces of modernist language are visible here.

exposed the liberal humanist ideologies of many writers who did not agree with many of the items on the program.

The Communist argument for literature being committed to a politics and ideology had shifted to writers being actually members of a political party. The opposing side felt that this would be a great impediment to the creativity of the writer. But the impact of more than ten years of progressive literature is seen in critics like Mundaserry who were great proponents of the importance of 'form' had come around to the view that there is nothing like "art for art's sake".⁹⁰ Nevertheless, in the 1948 conference, when the differences between the two groups were getting wider, the Communists introduced a manifesto which reflected their position that "politics is the heart of progressive literature" and "imperialism is the root of all injustices in society". Communists at the conference tried to get support for a position which advocated that writers should be members of the Communist Party. There was widespread opposition to this and the Communists responded by branding their critics as reactionaries and treating them as outsiders. Also, the writers in the Communist camp were also promoted as the best in the field. Here the threat of Stalinist disciplinarianism of the party silenced even those Communists who had an objection to the program of subjecting writers to the party line and the resultant dilution of quality.⁹¹ The movement formally split in 1949. Communist writers held a separate conference which concluded that writers should not confine themselves to creating literary works, but should actively participate in revolutionary struggles. Also, literature should be totally based on socialist realism.⁹²

⁹⁰ Mundaserry in an article written in 1947 argues that feelings and emotions which constitute the material for art and literature are formed in human beings in contact with the outside world (Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 96).

⁹¹ Chandrashekar, *Keralathile*, 252, 46.

⁹² Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 102.

P. Bhaskaran, well-known poet and later, popular songwriter for cinema did not renew his membership in the party after the split.⁹³ His poetry even began to critique the degeneration of the revolutionary party without losing his concern for the oppressed:

We, the ones who watered the
Ideologies of Terrible Hate
We, the ones who pretended not to be
Human beings in a war protecting
Human beings.⁹⁴

In another poem called the 'Aavi Vandi' (Steam Rail) he compares the Communist Party to the

Rail tracks that lead us backward
In the guise of inviting us ahead.⁹⁵

The writers who still continued to follow the party line like K. P. G. Namboothiri and D. M. Potttekad were hardly well known for their literary abilities. The only exception was Cherukad. According to M. P. Paul, the reason why writers were still wary of the Communist program was that they were also asked to state their position on each and every day- to-day political issues like the elections in Travancore, the boycott of elections in Cochin, liberation struggles in Burma and Malaya and so on, and more importantly, whether they would accept the leadership of Soviet Union and if not, they were considered to be the slaves of American imperialism. He also questioned the absolute supremacy of politics that Communists wanted the writers to acknowledge. Paul did not deny the importance of politics but only that of the omniscience of politics⁹⁶

⁹³ Chandrashekar, *Keralathile*, 304.

⁹⁴ From the poem "Prethangalude Pattu" (Song of the Ghosts), Chandrashekar, *Communist*, 40 (my translation).

⁹⁵ Ibid. (my translation).

⁹⁶ Chandrashekar, *Keralathile*, 273, 301. This is seen in the kind of questionable means used by the Communists used in getting the PLM program they wanted. To get a majority they surreptitiously got in people who had nothing to do with literature for the meet (Sardarkutty, *Purogamana*, 59).

Communists have been accused of reducing art and literature to an instrument for their propaganda, as merely tools of 'agitprop'.⁹⁷ It is true that there were two camps within Communists, especially in the sectarian period as acknowledged by Communist writer Devadas himself. One section had a very short-term and reductionist view on culture. The cultural agenda was a mere accoutrement to the economic and political struggles and had no independent existence in itself. The other group, while recognizing the instrumental nature of short-term cultural struggles, also had a comprehensive and long-term outlook on culture.⁹⁸ Even Cherukad, one of the few writers who never left the Communist fold was candid enough to admit that the party went too far in making its own writers get recognition. The deleterious side in linking the different spheres together was also that non-specialists became involved in all of them in a doctrinaire fashion. Thus Cherukad recounts how he became active in the literary sphere along with the peasant and teaching ones. In fact, "what was considered the mark of a good Communist was that he should be able to work and succeed in any front".⁹⁹

The split in the PLM and the stance adopted by the Communists is an example of the moments when the attempt to fuse together the cognitive, moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive dimensions is replaced by the incursion of one domain into the other. Here the political dimension becomes all-pervasive. Politics itself is replaced by "moral rigorism" or the "dogmatism of a doctrine."¹⁰⁰ But this departure was not permanent and the Communist negotiation of modernity returned to the purpose of the interactive unity of the three dimensions. The tendency to privilege instrumental rationality over communicative

⁹⁷ Chandrashekar, *Keralathile*, 157.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 280-1.

⁹⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁰⁰ Habermas, "Modernity," 12.

rationality was ended. Culture was again viewed in a dialectical relationship with other spheres, rather than as one which could be instrumentally acted upon.

The Communists undertook a serious self-examination of the position that they adopted during 1948-51 and the consequences it had for the progressive literary movement. Namboodiripad was especially very candid about the failures of the Communist position. He even expressed regret over the kind of language used against opponents like Kesari Balakrishna Pillai, while at the same time reiterating his ideological differences with him, like the latter's inability to participate in any of the political struggles waged by the socialists/Communists in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰¹ He also pointed out that mistakes happened on both sides but the Communists erred in negating the role of form in literature:

Communist writers did commit the mistake of trying to find a direct and mechanical relation between the economic and political struggle of the working people and the creative production of the literary workers. On the other hand non-Communist workers made it appear as if the aesthetic quality of a work of art is something independent of, and standing above the economic and political struggles of the working people. Both denied, in fact, the need for a painstaking study of the process which class struggle in all its manifestations and the creative work of the individual author act and interact on another...¹⁰²

The important consequence of the debate, in Namboodiripad's view, was a dialectical clashing of views leading to a better understanding of reality. The main drawback of the Communist movement in the 1930s and 1940s was the lack of grounding in Marxist theory especially in Marxist aesthetic theory. He admits that the activists had only vague notions like the need for socialism and the goodness of Soviet Union. Also being full-time political activists they did not have the time to devote towards the pursuit of theoretical

¹⁰¹ Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 230.

¹⁰² E. M. S. Namboodiripad, "Humanism and Class Struggle in Literature," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1982), 396.

understanding.¹⁰³ Even Marx and Engels, as is well known, did not develop a comprehensive aesthetic theory.

The most important departure in the later years was in the understanding of the relations between art, culture and class. Even when the producers of art are imbricated in the class relations of society, they also, by the virtue of the fact they contend with life and human beings in their entirety, rise above class considerations very often. Namboodiripad, citing the example of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, argues that while it reflects the contradictions of a class society and is also produced by the ruling class, it also speaks of a sensibility which escapes the hegemonic ideologies, securing its popularity across ages. This is something that the Communists were not aware during the early period even though they had opposed Kesavadev's insistence that the "Ramayana should be burned".¹⁰⁴ Here Namboodiripad is independently articulating a position that has been theorized elsewhere in the academic realm. Terry Eagleton argues that the two most common positions adopted by Marxist scholarship has been either that "works of literature are just expressions of the ideologies of their time" and hence are "prisoners of 'false consciousness'" or how "much literature actually challenges the ideological assumptions of its time."¹⁰⁵ Instead of these simplistic approaches he seeks a middle ground which would "explain the literary work in terms of the ideological structure of which it is part" and it would also "search out the principle which both ties the work to ideology and distances it from it."¹⁰⁶

The question of revolutionary content versus beautiful form posed by the PLM was considered later to be a false dichotomy: the "fact is that both revolutionary content and

¹⁰³ Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 297-9.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁰⁵ Terry Eagleton, "Literature and History," in *Contexts for Criticism*, 3rd ed., ed. Donald Keesey (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1998), 466.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 467.

aesthetically beautiful form are the products of the people; it is their struggle first against nature, then against exploitative society, that has created all the aesthetically beautiful works of revolutionary content.”¹⁰⁷ Even when the debate between form and content had almost sounded the death knell of PLM, Devadas in 1951 had argued that form was as important as content and such a unity was an integral part of Marxism. Also, criticizing the earlier position of the Communists, Namboodiripad argues that it

would be ridiculous to try to find a direct and mechanical connection between the natural and social environment in which particular author is living and working, and his literary work. The formation of ideas is much more complex than that. Equally ridiculous would it be to think that the individual author is nothing but a copyist who reflects his natural and social environment as a mirror reflects what is placed before it.¹⁰⁸

He argued that the formulations of Lenin on party literature, party spirit and discipline should not be applied mechanically. Unlike the things demanded of Communist writers in 1948, the demands were now few: a basic commitment to Marxism-Leninism and the mass movements of the people and to take into account the opinion of the ordinary masses also in their assessment of their works. The party would not interfere any more than this in the creativity of a writer. As far as non-Communist writers and the wider progressive literature were concerned, the party would indulge in only creative criticism while simultaneously making use of their contributions to the democratic process.¹⁰⁹ The party was also to adopt a more constructive and flexible approach towards the independence of writers. M. S. Devadas argued now that the appropriate policy towards non-Communist writers is one of cooperation and agitation, friendship and criticism. The main problem according to him was the mechanical tendency to brand one camp of writers as progressives and the other as

¹⁰⁷ E. M. S. Namboodiripad, “Marxism and Aesthetics,” in *Selected Writings*, 420.

¹⁰⁸ Namboodiripad, “Humanism,” 391.

¹⁰⁹ It is interesting to note that Namboodiripad now makes a distinction between working class literature and the wider progressive literature (Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 97).

reactionaries.¹¹⁰ He also recognized the fact that Communist works of art which are low in aesthetic quality can only attract a minority of the people. If they were of a better quality, they can attract a broader section of the masses to the ideology of Communism.¹¹¹

The Communist movement again showed the capacity to chart a path away from high modernity. The importance it placed on culture as a vital constituent element of society helped it to avoid conceiving modernity narrowly as “institutional change brought about by the extension of rational action.”¹¹² It also differed fundamentally from the national movement which has been characterized as ignoring cultural reproduction of society.¹¹³ The period under review shows that the Communists inaugurated a new aesthetic imagination which was able to hegemonize even the non-Communist elite literary sphere. If the cultural renaissance of the late nineteenth century moved from the feudal-based cultural heritage, it was still limited by its romanticism and the consequent lack of attention to material and political factors. The Progressive Literary Movement overcame the big divide that separated the intellectuals and the people for centuries. The national-popular could not have been constructed in the cultural domain without shunning the modernist slogan, art for art’s sake. The national-popular was premised on the relinking the compartmentalized domains of art, truth and morality.

¹¹⁰ Chandrashekar, *Keralathile*, 59.

¹¹¹ Sardarkutty, *Purogamana*, 64.

¹¹² Lele, *Elite Pluralism*, 10.

¹¹³ Kaviraj, “On State,” 91.

Chapter 5

Questioning Autonomy: Relinking Art and Life: II

The last chapter saw the beginnings of the national-popular in the elite/high culture with the Progressive Literary Movement which broke fundamentally with the existing culture to mainly portray the trials and tribulations of the lower orders of society. But this had to be complemented with transformations in popular culture too for the construction of the national-popular to be complete. This was achieved by the new genre of songs born out of the Communist movement and popular theater both of which borrowed extensively from folk culture. Again it will be seen that the Communists successfully negotiated dualisms like tradition/modernity and the universal/particular. Unlike postcolonial theory's emphasis on cultural difference the Communist project's attempt was to link cultural difference with the universal project of emancipation. Tradition was not considered as a burden from the past but something that was an active element in the constitution of the present. The fundamental feature of the Communist project's negotiation of the cultural was that it did not look to the West, as in the modernization projects, or to the past, as in traditionalism.

A Popular Aesthetic

Simultaneously with the shifts in the sphere of elite/high culture, the popular culture was showing significant shifts too with the emergence of a new aesthetic which broke off the shackles of earlier segmentation. As we have seen, the newspaper *Prabhatam* of the socialists not only contained coverage of worker and peasant issues but also fictionalized elements which borrowed extensively from folk culture.

In the early days of the formation of the peasant unions, it was really difficult to get peasants to get to join them as the latter were totally unused to this modern form of institution which went beyond caste affiliations. Moreover, being oppressed by feudalism for centuries, they were not very open to the idea of defying the landlords. Here the peasant unions used the medium of songs constructed in a folk style familiar to the peasants but containing new themes (which were nevertheless an elaboration and carrying forward of older ideas of equality). K. A. Keraleeyan, secretary of the first peasant union formed in Kerala, Kolacheri Peasant Union, describes how the organizers used to row in small boats in the night singing songs that would take the names of peasants living on the banks of the river and asking them to join the union.

Oh, Nullikodan Raman,
Won't you join the union?
Oh, Kariattu Kunjamma,
Won't you join the union?¹

Gradually, with the unions gaining strength, peasant activists used to sing songs for the women working on the paddy fields, which the latter used to take up. These songs recounted the injustices of colonialism, drew contrasts between the luxurious life style of the Viceroy with the miserable existence of the peasants, the burden of indebtedness, the illegal exactions of the lords, the greatness of the reading rooms and the need for children's unions:

For two hundred years, the
Whites have been ruling our land.
Twenty One Thousand² we pay as
Monthly rent to the Viceroy...
And he gets ten *lakhs*³ for his vacation...
Debts which break the spine,
Suffering that represses.
Not just the sum borrowed
Its many times paid...

¹ Quoted in Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 176-7 (my translation)

² Amount in Rupees.

³ One *lakh* is equal to a hundred thousand.

Whatever happens, debt is in
 Arrears, always; what justice is this? ...
*Pattam, Purappad, Varam*⁴
 Don't we have to pay them all in time?
 Don't we have to bow down and make
 Offerings to the lord on *Onam* and *Visnu*?...⁵
 What slavery and injustice, how
 Do we suffer this?...
 For long the lords have been extracting *vasi*,⁶
 The peasants have been destroyed.
 Now by uniting to form unions
 We shall show our *vasi*.⁷

Most of these songs written by Communist activists like Keraleeyan were mocked by the literary establishment as mere *padapattukal* (marching songs) without any literary content. All the peasant union meetings at the *taluk* and *firka* levels were grand festivals with plays and various folk arts being their inalienable part. Even women and children came and stayed up very late to watch these programs. The paintings of the martyrs of Kayyur were displayed in an exhibition conducted as a part of the Thalasseri Jagannatha Temple festival.⁸ Similarly, a Communist poem paid tribute to the martyrs:

You the valiant swordsmen
 Who fought for the rise of the poor,
 Verily you aren't dead,
 You are still alive in the proud hearts of many,
 Like Abhimanyu, Arjuna's valiant son,⁹
 Never shall we forget, comrades
 The royal path that you have trodden
 We swear, with our clenched fists,
 That death and dry hay are alike to us!
 Never shall we rest till we liberate the land
 And never shall we withdraw from fight
 Till Fascism is dead!
 Hail to thee Bolshevik heroes
 We salute thee "Lal Salaam, 'Lal Salaam."¹⁰

⁴ Rent and other levies by the landlord.

⁵ Hindu festivals.

⁶ A feudal levy.

⁷ *Vasi* also means obstinacy. Andalat, *Rekhyillatha*, 178-79 (my translation).

⁸ Kunhambu, *Kayyur*, 105.

⁹ Figures of Hindu mythology.

¹⁰ From the poem "Lal Salaam" (Red Salute), Kurup, *Kayyur Riot*, 117.

Here secular Communist martyrs seamlessly become a part of the religious pantheon. At the same time the religious figures themselves are being reinterpreted for the secular cause of liberation from material exploitation. There is no “passive acceptance of any past whatsoever...rather, it is the voluntary choice of realizing the unity of historical meaning by the reappropriation of a selective past.”¹¹

With the strengthening of struggles elsewhere, the songs composed began to increasingly show an extra-local sensibility paralleling the scope and scale of these struggles. Now, they began to encompass the concerns of the workers in the towns and even those of the exploited teachers in schools:

One by one
Companies close down.
Life comes to a standstill
Everywhere in the land.

Lords are hardly bothered
Lords of the government are
Hardly bothered.¹²

And they also began to connect the peasant struggles with larger issues of nationalism. Towards this purpose an array of personalities began to be invoked from the early nineteenth-century rebellions against the East India company led by Pazhassi Raja and Veluthambi Dhalava to the Moplah rebellion led by Variakunnathu Haji. And in the same breath, a land without feudalism, kingship and exploitation is envisaged:

The courageous land of Kerala,
Of the courageous Pazhassi Raja.
The tender land of Kerala
Where lived the brave Veluthambi.
Kerala which bears the battle valor
Of Variakunnathu Haji...
Kerala without feudalism,

¹¹ Laroui, *Arab Intellectual*, 100.

¹² Andalat, *Rekhyillatha*, 181(my translation).

Without royalty and oppression.
Kerala that will be independent
Will be a united Kerala¹³

Again we can see the critical appropriation of the past. It resembles Frantz Fanon's characterization of a revolutionary nationalism:

A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover a people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which the people has created itself and keeps itself in existence.¹⁴

Here unlike the subaltern history portrayed by Subaltern Studies where subaltern and elite nationalisms are always autonomous and dichotomous,¹⁵ there is a convergence in which elite nationalism is itself being appropriated and redefined by the subaltern. Unlike the Gandhian nationalism here Kerala is envisaged without feudalism and kingship. Thus the subaltern sings:

Slaves, we are not,
Rest we shall not,
Fight we shall unshaken...
Rest we shall not

Until we get the
Power and rights
Entitled to us.¹⁶

The songs composed by Communist activists like K. A. Keraleeyan, K. P. R. Gopalan, Premji, T. S. Tirumumbu and so on as part of peasant union activity were so popular despite

¹³ Ibid., 181-3 (my translation).

¹⁴ Quoted in Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 15.

¹⁵ See Ludden, "Subalterns and Others," 210-1. There is an awareness of this dichotomy in some of the writers. For example Chatterjee argues that it is not enough to demarcate the two domains of elite and subaltern politics it is also imperative to trace in "their mutually conditioned historicities the specific forms that appeared, on the one hand, in the domain defined by the hegemonic project of nationalist modernity, and on the other, in the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalizing project" (*Nation and its Fragments*, 13). But this recognition has not by and large translated into the Subaltern Studies research.

¹⁶ Andalat, *Rekhyallatha*, 183 (my translation).

being not of the highest aesthetic quality. Even now they are part of popular memory¹⁷ and also have become so much a part of the folk tradition of society to obscure their original authorship.¹⁸

In Travancore too, the importance of culture to the organization of the working class was being realized by the Alleppey Coir Factory Workers' Union which set up a workers' cultural center. The center rewrote the prevalent conventions of drama which had it as subjects kings and the lords or portrayed myths or epics by staging a play about the travails of a poverty-stricken worker family. The center even trained workers in various arts. During the Second World War some of the *Ottan thullal* [folk art] songs composed by the center about the starvation faced by the worker families became very popular. The same was the case with the plays too. The future founding of the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC) which was to revolutionize the stage was definitely on the path trodden by the center.¹⁹ The interlinking of the fragmented domains of society meant that the Communists would try to enlarge the 'political'. This was seen during the People's War line, the party concentrated on developing a cultural campaign condemning Japanese fascism. Poems like 'Vallatha Kaalam' (Terrible Times) were penned. This alone sold 4000 copies in a single day. Also, various folk arts like *Ottan Thullal*, *Kummi*, *Kolattam*, *Kolkekali*, *Kaikottikali* etc. and plays were staged incorporating the themes of anti-Japanese fascism.²⁰

¹⁷ Satheesan, autorickshaw driver, interview by author, June 6, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording. Satheesan, a Communist activist in his thirties, has only few years of school education, but is well aware of the songs composed by Vayalar Ramavarma in the forties.

¹⁸ Kurup, "Karshaka," 135.

¹⁹ Raghavan, *Sakhavu*, 141-2.

²⁰ Ibid., Chandrashekar, *Keralathile*, 108. Here it should be noted that the Communists had, on occasions, used intemperate language against supporters of Japanese fascism like the nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose (see Chandrashekar, *Keralathile*, 153-4).

In the late 40s the Travancore government was expressing concern over the setting up of dramatic clubs and village libraries by the Communists.²¹ In Malabar too similar concerns were being expressed. In 1948, the district magistrate wrote in reference to the *melas* that were held for collection of funds for the party newspaper:

Processions and postings have become now the sole form of activity of communists who deftly arrange during the various Deshabhimani Melas that are organized, interesting music and drama along with long propaganda speeches. Some of the dramatic representations are reported to consist of showing officials' corruption and Jenmi-official conspiracy.²²

This is what prompted the government to think of banning *melas* under the Dramatic Performances Act.²³ One unintended consequence of the *melas* was that the party was drawn closer to the people and the folk arts. In fact, the theater movement in Malabar was an outcome of the *melas*.²⁴ Plays and other folk arts were staged in these gatherings which lasted into the wee hours of the night.²⁵ In a period when modern forms of mass entertainment had not taken roots, the *melas* were a major draw. But at the same time they were not mere entertainment too.

On April 3, 1946, the peasant Communists staged a play in Urathur village satirizing the oppression of the Kalliatt landlord using the folk art form of *Kurattipattu*. The goons of the landlord disturbed the play by throwing country-bombs onto the stage.²⁶ Similarly, one of the accused in the Karivellur incident was an *Ottan Thullal* dancer who used to propagate Communist ideas in his dances.²⁷ The importance of culture to the mobilization of the

²¹ Minutes of the meeting of Ministry of States, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Defence, Governments of Madras, Travancore and Cochin, Delhi, April 2, 1949 (*Madras Government Secret Files (USS)*, no. 21/49, date? (TNA)).

²² District Magistrate, Malabar, to the Secretary, Home Department, January 27, 1948, *G. O. 630 (Confid.)*, *Public (General A) Department, March 12, 1948* (TNA).

²³ *G. O. 630 (Confid.)*, *Public (General A) Department, March 12, 1948* (TNA).

²⁴ Pavanan, *Keralam*, 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁶ Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles*, 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

Communist Party is shown by the fact that a typical advertisement of party meeting included an announcement of “exciting cultural programs” along with the speeches of party leaders E. M. S. Namboodiripad and A. K. Gopalan.²⁸ If high culture showed a paradigmatic shift to incorporate the ‘popular’, popular culture itself was overcoming a different kind of fragmentation, not derived from modernity, to make linkages with the ‘national’. Subaltern and elite politics converge here but substantially governed by the former. What was condemned by elite/high culture as propagandist art was the key factor in linking with the folk culture. Here the negotiation of modernity takes place not by denying the existing language but by relying on it. But significantly the language was expanded too.

Revolution in Theater

With the movement towards realism, there was a significant alteration in the mode of Malayalam drama from the early thirties. V. T. Bhattathiripad’s 1930 play *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathbekku* (From the Kitchen to the Stage) was aimed at the liberation of the Brahmin Namboodiri women whose social condition was worse than even the lower castes. We have already noted how Damodaran’s *Pattabakki* (‘Rent Arrears’) had inaugurated socialist realism. C. Kannan, Communist leader acted in *Pattabakki* since 1937 in various peasant meetings. Similarly, A.K. Gopalan also acted in the play on many stages. It was the most popular play written by Damodaran. After ‘Rent Arrears’, he wrote another propagandist play *Rakthapanam* (Draught of Blood) in 1939 which again was quite popular and was performed in all the peasant meetings and party conferences all over Malabar. A simplistic melodramatic tale of class war in which the capitalists are cruel and inhuman, while the poor workers are

²⁸ *Navayugam*, November 21, 1953. ‘John Joseph,’ brought up in a conservative Syrian Christian household recalls the fascination that the cultural programs of the Communist Party had for him as a teenager despite the fact that he had no leanings towards the party (insurance agent, interview by author, July 22, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

the paragon of virtues, it appealed to the rural masses immensely. So much so that the government was terribly afraid of its consequences: “it is objectionable as it tends to bring about class hatred between capitalist and labourers” noted the Superintendent of Police.²⁹ The laborers towards the end of the play are optimistic: “We might die; but our death will be the death of capitalism.” Further, “All factories are alike; all capitalists are alike; Everywhere labourers—the poor—must suffer oppression, exploitation and disgrace. To be free from them there is only one way—destroy capitalism.” Finally, “All capitalists will be cruel” who resort to “various tricks” to defeat the workers and even try to seduce some of the women among them.³⁰ Moralistic judgments abound through the play. Socialism/Communism as a superior moral system is constantly alluded to. Communism is not only an inevitable result of the logical contradictions of capitalism but also is brought about by the summoning of moral force. Damodaran is thus not a believer in the scientific side of Marxism alone as Dilip Menon implies: “with the aid of this science (Dialectical Materialism) we can forecast the future of man and society and thus control it.”³¹ This belief in the controllability of ‘life chances’ is tempered with the moralistic side. Therefore the cognitive-instrumental dimension does not overrun the moral-practical side. As in Marx Damodaran evokes morality and ethics along with the scientific analysis of society.³²

Damodaran initiated the practice of linking the Communist trade union movement with art and cultural practice, again linking the above dimensions.³³ The socialist newspaper exhorted that since capitalists try to inculcate religious superstitions among the workers, the

²⁹ SP, Special Branch, Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to Chief Secretary, dated December 6, 1939 (*Public (General) Dept. G. O. No. 2232 (Confidntl.)*, December 14, 1939 (KSA).

³⁰ Translated excerpts of *Raktapanam* cited in SP’s report, (*Public (General) Dept. G. O. No. 2232 (Confidntl.)*, December 14, 1939 (KSA).

³¹ K. Damodaran quoted in Menon, *Communism in South India*, 148.

³² For a critique of the widely prevalent position that Marx did not have a concept of justice and ethics see Norman Geras, “The Controversy About Marx and Justice,” *New Left Review*, no. 150 (March-April 1985): 47-85.

³³ Anilkumar, C, 41.

latter should use the religious holidays to build class-consciousness so as to reinterpret the religious experience itself. On important religious festivals like *Thiruvathira* workers' theatre perform on many themes with the minimum of props.³⁴ The progressive writers were at the forefront of the theater movement which began to flourish with the spread of the struggles led by Communism. People like Varkey were popular playwrights too. Thoppil Bhasi's play *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me a Communist, 1952) was a path-breaking play in terms of popularizing Communism. Performed by KPAC, it was taken to every town and village in Kerala. It was performed over 600 times.³⁵ Bhasi drew the material for the play from the attempted Communist uprising in Surnad in 1949 in which five policemen were killed. Again, it was a simple tale of how people caught up in the vortex of the great changes—the disintegration of the feudal society— finally come to realize that there is no better future than one that is guided by Communism.

As many other plays of the time, this one too was not aesthetically well developed which nevertheless did not affect its popularity precisely because of the fact that its content was able to successfully capture the aspirations of the people. Namboodiripad self-critically looks at the play: “The playwright has portrayed him (the Communist hero) as one who is not a living and developing Communist, with human feelings and foibles. This ‘Communist’ comes to the stage and talks in hackneyed phrases which are supposed to be “political.”³⁶ The other successful plays of KPAC were *Mooladbanam* (Capital), *Sarvekallu* (Survey Stone), *Nammalonnun* (We are One), *Mudiyanyaya Putbran* (The Prodigal Son), *Puthiya Aakasam*, (New Sky), *Puthiya Bhoomi* (New Earth) and so on. Kurup attributes to the socialist realist drama movement a significant role in bringing about the death of feudalism and the initiation of

³⁴ *Prabbatham*, January 23, 1939.

³⁵ C. Achutha Menon, “Introduction,” in *Capital*, ed. Thoppil Bhasi, trans. K.T. Ramavarma (Thrissur, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1979), 5.

³⁶ E. M. S. Namboodiripad, “On People’s Culture”, in Namboodiripad, *Selected Writings*, 406.

land reforms.³⁷ Darren Zook too argues, “it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that the popularity of the communists, which allowed them to capture state power in the elections of 1957, stemmed largely from the popularity of Bhasi's play and its songs.”³⁸

The impact of the theater movement was quite remarkable. Poets like O. N. V. Kurup became popular through plays staged by KPAC. The KPAC (founded in Central Travancore), in fact came into existence with the explicit purpose of spreading revolutionary ideas in the social and political spheres. The immense popularity of the songs in the plays is attributed to their grounding in folk culture and Dravidian meters demonstrating the significance of form. Till the 1920s and 1930s the drama scene in Kerala was dominated by translations from Sanskrit plays with *puranic* (mythical) themes. Even when Malayalam plays were written, they were written in the style of classical Sanskrit drama. The text used for the play was mixed with *slokas* (verses) in Sanskrit meter. If these plays were the staple diet of the educated middle classes, the masses flocked to the Tamil musical dramas which were immensely popular in Kerala. Even when Western style prose drama became strong in Malayalam in the thirties, the audience was mainly restricted to the educated classes.³⁹ It was the success of combining Malayalam with a folk sensibility that led the KPAC songs to chart new paths which were unprecedented at the time.⁴⁰ Moreover, the KPAC plays decided to use the most popular form —the music dramas rather than the prose dramas. Here it should be added that this development of a particular cultural essence also beckoned to the universalism of a revolutionary politics. The form used vernacular sources but the content went beyond them. But this was done by expanding the meaning of the vernacular itself.

³⁷ Kurup, “Nammute,” 141.

³⁸ Darren C. Zook, “The Farcical Mosaic: The Changing Masks of Political Theatre in Contemporary India,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 18, 2 (2001): 181.

³⁹ Achutha Menon, “Introduction,” 5-15.

⁴⁰ O. N. V. Kurup, foreword to *KPAC. Nataka Ganangal* (Songs of KPAC Plays) (Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhat Book House, 2000), vii-viii.

Again linguistic identity is harnessed for a politics that is in a dialectical relationship with the universal.

Even though the critics looked down upon the propagandist plays, their popularity was undeniable. Theater became in the fifties the primary instrument of social criticism and a weapon of social change. The fact that the capitalist backed-culture industry was yet to entrench itself and the popular/pulp dichotomy had not developed also helped its cause. What the theater movement did was to liberate the production of plays from a professional system. Instead, youths in towns and villages, unschooled in the theories of drama, formed theater groups of their own. These groups became the foundation of the theater revolution. Though not totally secure in the aesthetic sphere they performed the task of communicating with the masses.⁴¹ For long under feudalism the visual culture was confined to the temples and the mansions of the lords. Art was dominated by “elitist predilections... which had engrossed itself in witty epigrammatic verses devoted to graphic head-to-foot descriptions of famous courtesans (like Unnineeli and Unnichiruthevi) and the frankly erotic dance depictions on the *Kathakali* [elite dance form] stage.”⁴²

KPAC was formed in 1950 by a group of activists associated with the CPI. The play *Ninagalenne* was controversial as there were allegations that it contained subversive ideas and that it encouraged people to rebel against the government. The play was banned in 1953 under the Dramatic Performances Act. A mass movement was initiated against the ban by the CPI which led to the overturn of the ban. It created a record by being staged more than 10,000 times.⁴³ The party acted as a coordinator without directly controlling it. The most distinct aspect of its organization was the democratic way of functioning. “Once a month a

⁴¹ Namboodiripad, *Theranjedutha*, 34.

⁴² T. K. Ramachandran, “Imagined Identities, Fabricated Memories: The Fascist ‘Hindutva’ Ideology and the Cultural Life in Contemporary Kerala: A Question of Contexts”, Unpublished Manuscript (1999), 6.

⁴³ Nandgopal R. Menon, “Path-breaking Plays”, *Frontline*, vol. 18, no. 10 (May 12-25, 2001): 27-8.

general body meeting was convened. All artists attended it and made suggestions to improve the play that was being staged.”⁴⁴ Almost all artistes of KPAC, in the initial days, were members of the party and contributed Rs. 40 of their Rs.500 salary as levy to the party. Talented artists such as KPAC Sulochana, K.S. George, G. Devarajan, M. S. Baburaj, K. Raghavan Master, P. J. Antony, Kambissery Karunakaran, K. P. Ummer and KPAC Lalitha and poets such as O. N. V. Kurup and Vayalar Rama Varma, to name a few, were either associated with the KPAC or began their career in it.” The organization also created a ripple effect with other troupes coming into existence started by artistes associated with KPAC.⁴⁵ The Kerala Theaters which staged many successful plays were also linked to the Communist Party. The organization had the unique custom of the main actor and the menial worker drawing the same salary. And everybody’s expenses were borne by the company.⁴⁶ Popular writers like Varkey were associated with it and a number of his plays were to be staged by it in the 1950s. The songs written by Vayalar Rama Varma for his plays became huge successes.

The theater revolution provided another instance of the construction of the national-popular. The plays though they supposedly used the socialist realist mode had doses of melodrama in them as pointed out in the critique by Namboodiripad. But the crucial distinction was that they were substantially different from the aristocratic and feudal melodramas of previous era with their glorification of the feudal order and its claims to divine sanction. Aesthetic forms can be used for different political purposes. To attribute one political function exclusively to an aesthetic form is to take an essentialist and anti-materialist position.⁴⁷ Thus melodramas are appropriated for a different function here. If the

⁴⁴ O. Madhavan, actor and a former secretary of KPAC, quoted in *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Menon, “Path-breaking Plays.”

⁴⁶ Raj, *Varkiyude*.

⁴⁷ M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 58.

feudal melodramas were confined to the elite upper caste space the Communist plays were created by writers and activists committed to a radical transformation of society and performed for the masses. Therefore while the plays of the fifties in Kerala could be accused of theatricality and excessive sentiment, they cannot be blamed for being escapist and reactionary and instilling false consciousness in the working class. Even when they used moral categories they did not shy away from social reality and portrayed the working classes and the peasantry as the agents of social transformation. Thus they differed from the conventional melodrama which “aspires to the transcendental, ceaselessly submitting the realities of existence into mythical moral categories because these are the currency of human interaction in the pre-modern symbolic order maintained by the church and the monarchic state.”⁴⁸

Constructing Difference?

Unlike what postcolonial theory has argued about resistance to colonial modernity and the “desire to construct an aesthetic form that was modern and national, and yet recognizably different from the Western”,⁴⁹ I have argued that the aesthetic that the Communists wanted to construct was not simply based on the desire to be ‘different from the Western’.

Postcolonial theory’s attempt construct difference leads to a position that treats Indian culture as Western culture’s ‘other’. Such approaches focus excessively on cultural difference abstracted from the social formation.⁵⁰ Tradition here becomes an essentialized and unreconstructed entity. The Communists, even when they had recourse to difference and tradition, understood it as part of the political and economic framework and their main aim

⁴⁸Ibid., 71.

⁴⁹ Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 8.

⁵⁰ Prasad, *Hindi Film*, 13.

was to democratize and demystify it as well. Difference was also never defined in exclusion to the universal. In negotiating the cultural there is a constant moving between what is received and what is new without privileging one above the other, and thus making new sense of both. Modernity is not a complete negation of the past.

This was clearly evident in the controversy about the Communists criticizing some of the works of major writers like Varkey, Dev and Basheer for what the former thought as the portrayal of decadent sexuality. The main criticisms that the Communists leveled against these writers were that instead of promoting man-woman relationship based on equality, they reduced romantic love to animalistic sexuality.⁵¹ In a famous essay written in 1949 titled “Premavum Purogamana Sahityavum” (Romantic Love and Progressive Literature) Communist writer Devadas clearly articulates the Communist position on the matter. Here Devadas echoes and bases himself on Lenin’s critique of the reduction of the Marxist freedom of love to the sexual instinct eviscerated of any social dimension.⁵² Thus for Devadas revolution in sexuality and romantic love does not mean ultimately man turning into an animal as implied in some of the progressive writers’ adaptation of Freud.⁵³ Devadas points out the contradictions in some of the progressive writers’ positions which valorize adultery and prostitution as a questioning of conventional norms but do not subscribe to divorce as a solution to failed marriages. This, he writes, is inimical to women’s rights and also legitimizes the outward respectability sought by bourgeois marriages. He shows an understanding of the popular commonsense when he argues that majority of the people

⁵¹ Devadas quoted in Chandrashekar, *Keralathile*, 344 (my translation).

⁵² See V. I. Lenin, *The Emancipation of Women: The Writings of V. I. Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1966), 97-123.

⁵³ Devadas, *Theranjedutha*, 52, 64.

want the freedom to marry and the freedom to annul one, not the freedom to commit adultery.⁵⁴

In a critique that can be construed as similar to the current postcolonial critiques Devadas was particularly scathing on the progressive writers who blindly valorized Western culture and education without seeing their constitutive role in Western imperialism and also their role in debilitating indigenous culture. For them Indian culture is nothing but feudalism and classicism and they do not see any positive aspect in it. Revolution and progress, for these writers, can only originate in Western capitalist system.⁵⁵

This seemingly postcolonial critique actually does not operate on an East-West binary but criticizes the progressive writers only for borrowing from the most decadent phase of Western capitalism—imperialism, and ignoring its other significant contributions to world history.⁵⁶ It criticizes the progressive writers for ignoring the fact that Western culture now is indissociably linked with the commodification of all human relations including marriage and sees the uncritical romanticization of this culture as a sign of subservience to cultural imperialism. At the same time, in the name of a counter hegemony it does not prop up tradition; on the contrary it is as critical of indigenous feudal decadence and the colonial order which has actually given it a lifeline. Devadas' critique stresses that the new culture to be built does not have to be confined to the narrow choice of bourgeois and feudal cultures. In fact, an alternate culture which moves away from both is already immanent in people's culture.⁵⁷

The Communist project seemed to be more in sync with the pulse of the popular than the progressive writers. Devadas did not question, like some of the progressive writers,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 43-44.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 43.

traditional notions like the sacredness of the institution of motherhood. At the same time these notions were expanded to incorporate ideas like the complete equality of men and women in all spheres. While Devadas rejects what he considers as the decadent aspects of Western civilization, he praises the progressive policies that the Soviet Union has implemented towards the realization of gender equality: state provision of support for unwed mothers, to terminate a pregnancy, sexual education in school and so on.⁵⁸ These were quite radical proposals for a society like Kerala marked by great gender inequality. Despite these views it is ironical that progressive writers like 'Kesari' Balakrishna Pillai, accused the Communists of being conservative on issues of sexuality and against modern values.⁵⁹ This lends credence to Devadas' critique of some of the progressive writers as merely imitating Western culture. Their advocacy of sexual licentiousness as a critique of tradition seemed not only at a far remove from people's needs but also as formulated in abstraction from the material conditions.

Communists had the intention of making the laboring class the producers in all spheres of art and culture including literature.⁶⁰ What Marxist criticism in literature did was to mount a strong critique of the tendency to evaluate Malayalam literature solely by the standards of the canon in English, French, Russian and German. Namboodiripad argues that the greatest weakness of this trend is its failure to situate Malayalam literature in the context of Kerala's socio-historic transformations, particularly the emergence of the bourgeois and working classes.⁶¹ Here the Communist project could be seen overcoming the two types of alienation that Laroui posits as characterizing the non-Western intellectuals' (in this case Arab) encounter with the West:

⁵⁸ Ibid., 51-2, 64.

⁵⁹ Chandrashekar, *Communist*, 62.

⁶⁰ Namboodiripad, *Theranjedutha*, 230

⁶¹ Ibid., 234.

The one is visible and openly criticized, the other all the more insidious as it is denied on principle. Westernization indeed signifies an alienation, a way of becoming other, an avenue to self-division... But there exists another form of alienation in modern Arab society, one that is prevalent but veiled: this is the exaggerated medievalization obtained through quasi-magical identification with the great period of classical Arabian culture.⁶²

De-Sanskritization

Despite the failures and the alienation of many writers from the movement, the overall impact of the Marxist intervention has been positive especially in the sphere of de-sanskritization. In his speech in the PLM meet in 1945, M. P. Paul pointed out that Malayalam has been slavishly following the dictates of Sanskrit for centuries. Literature has not been able to capture the ethos of its own land. Without anchoring itself in its own culture, common sense and language, literature can hardly be called so. Not only will it not be able to penetrate the hearts of people but also appreciate other literature.⁶³ The hegemony of Sanskrit was not one of language alone but of an entire ideology of Brahminism. The laws of the Sanskrit *kavya* tradition guided the evaluation of Malayalam literature. The elite upper-caste domination of art had ensured that most of the performing arts could be performed only in temples and shrines or feudal mansions (from which the lower castes were excluded). Examples were *Chakyarkoothu*, *Patakam*, *Kathakali* and so on. So the common folk had nothing to do with them. The exclusion of the lower castes from education and knowledge was the main form of domination exercised by the upper castes. The historian Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai estimates that till 1600 known as the Age of the Namboodiris, less than one percent of the common people in Kerala had any kind of education.⁶⁴ Needless to add, the dominance of Brahmin orthodoxy and the people-intellectual separation brought about by it

⁶² Laroui, *Arab Intellectual*, 156.

⁶³ Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 90

⁶⁴ Andalat, *Purogamana*, 53.

is not unique to Kerala. Only the degree varies across different parts of the country. In Tamil Nadu too, the Brahmin orthodoxy virulently guarded the sacerdotal status of Sanskrit. It argued that Tamil language and literature were mere derivatives of Sanskrit. This was part of the large system of exclusion which legitimized Hinduism and its caste-based inequalities.⁶⁵

The questioning of the Sanskrit canonical tradition was fully in place only with the emergence of the Communist movement. The Communists' construction of new culture relied extensively on the folk tradition thus displacing the hegemony of Sanskrit. Intellectual P. K. Pokker is right in arguing that the later day counter cultures were possible precisely because of the foundation laid by Communist 'agitprop' and PLM. Without dismantling the traditional paradigm it is impossible to inaugurate a new problematic.⁶⁶ The same point is made by KEN when he argues that the subalternization of language made possible by the Marxist intervention led to the cultural practices of subaltern groups gaining a place in the aesthetic imagination of Kerala.⁶⁷

As early as the mid-forties Namboodiripad in his work *Keralam: Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi* (Kerala: The Motherland of Malayalees), the first Marxist study of Kerala history, had shown that the Sanskrit and Brahmin-dominated minority culture had designated the arts of the common people like *Poorakkali*, *Thacholipattu*, *Pulluvanpattu* as something not fit to be included in the arts of Kerala. He also pointed out that no major litterateurs have emerged from the untouchable Paraya and Pulaya communities.⁶⁸ His critique of Sanskrit did not arise from a cultural reason or hatred towards it, but from the

⁶⁵ M. S. S. Pandian, "Towards National-Popular: Notes on Self-Respecters' Tamil," *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 21, 1996): 3323-4.

⁶⁶ Interview by author, May 21, 1999, Kozhikode, tape recording.

⁶⁷ K. E. N., "Varenaya Navoathanathinte Athirukal: Varenaya Samudayangalile Navoathanavum Malayala Sahityavum" (The Limits of Elite Renaissance: Renaissance in Elite Communities and Malayalam Literature) in *Nammude Sahityam, Nammude Samooham*, vol. II, ed. M. N. Vijayan (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2000), 107. It should be noted here that a full-fledged *dalit* critique emerged only by the 1970s, comparatively late and a major lacuna of the renaissance (99).

⁶⁸ Pokker, *Varnabbedangal*, 34.

fact that it was never a people's language. His critique parallels that of the Self-Respecters' Movement in Tamil Nadu started by E.V. Ramasamy which also did not view Sanskrit and Tamil as absolute opposites. According to Pandian, the campaign for Tamil became not only a linguistic movement but also "a site for a 'national-popular' project by encompassing a range of democratic concerns connected with caste, gender and region, and involving different subaltern groups." The anti-Hindi agitation in the late thirties saw the participation of subordinate groups like sudras, Adi-Dravidas, women and illiterates. This demonstrates how language had become the instrument of empowerment for a range of subalternities.⁶⁹ It is my argument that the Communist project in Kerala went beyond this for the campaign for linguistic identity was inextricably linked with the question of class too, which was absent in the case of the Dravidian movement. Also, the Communists avoided the kind of valorization of English that the Dravidian movement undertook. While it did not romanticize the Tamil language in an ahistorical fashion and also sought to refashion it to eliminate its own exclusions, it viewed the knowledge of English as having "kindled the spirit of freedom in our people who had been cherishing enslaved lives" and given the "knowledge to say 'no' to monarchy and 'yes' to republic...[and] that men and women are equals."⁷⁰ While this position avoided the pitfall of the East/West dichotomy, it reinstated another one—that of modernity/tradition. It does not see the critical potential extant in tradition, it merely struggles for a Tamil linguistic identity. On the other hand, the Communists saw their project as a continuation and completion of the various counter-hegemonic movements carried out in traditional and modern periods of history. They also, unlike the Dravidian movement, understood the ill effects of the dominance of English.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Pandian, "National-Popular," 3323, 3328.

⁷⁰ E. V. Ramasamy quoted in *Ibid.*, 3324.

⁷¹ Namboodiripad, *Theranjeduatha*, 151-2.

Of course, the critique of Brahminism in the modern period had begun much earlier, during the mid-nineteenth century through caste critiques and social reform movements. Even though formally the cultural renaissance begins in 1888 with Sri Narayana Guru striking at priestly orthodoxy by consecrating an 'Ezhava Siva', as early as 1836 Vaikuntam Swamikal, a lower caste reformer had founded 'Samatha Samajam' (Society of Equals).⁷² This critique by the 1930s had been taken up within the Brahmin community itself through the *Yogakshema Sabha* and its radical youth wing *Namboothiri Yuvajana Sangham*. If the SNDP had adopted sanskritisation as a deliberate method of questioning Brahminism, the *Sangham* advocated de-sanskritisation and the willful shunning of privileges that were vested in Brahmins as the highest caste.⁷³

The Communist attempt to create a united Kerala based on a linguistic identity also was very markedly conscious of divesting it of elite upper-caste symbolism. For example the movement was resolutely against the attempts to construct a united Kerala on the basis of the retrieval of a Golden Age of the past. Namboodiripad opposed these attempts to reinstate the Brahminical mythologies which have their "origin in the feudal-militarist ruling classes of mediaeval Kerala." But now the bourgeoisie was the main sponsor of such a nationalism and true to passive revolution, the feudal classes were also supporters of the idea as seen in the role of the Maharaja of Cochin in the United Kerala movement.⁷⁴ Criticizing the United Kerala movement's evocation of the Brahminical legend of Parashuram, leftist intellectual Kuttippuzha Krishna Pillai wrote:

Does the reference to *Keraleeyar* [Keralites] point only towards the Hindus? What value does this story of Parashuraman have for followers of other religions? Do not Christians, Muslims and Jews have equal status in the united Kerala? The propriety of mounting (*a picture*) of a Brahmin brandishing a weapon, a Hindu invention, which

⁷² K. E. N., "Varenaya," 81. Siva is a major Hindu deity.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁴ Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 187, 186.

serves to allude to the Brahmins' (*traditionally-claimed*) rights over the land, right in front of a United Keralam Conference held for all *Keraleeyar*, irrespective of caste and creed, is worth pondering upon.⁷⁵

This does not mean that Communists denied the past. Instead they drew upon a different kind of mythology, one that evoked equality. This is the mythology of the *Mahabali*, the legendary demon king.⁷⁶ But this tradition was not considered as a real past, but one which was to be realized in the future. Thus in Namboodiripad's words: "a new Kerala in which equality and freedom reign, in which poverty and unemployment will be unknown, will begin to emerge. That *Mavelinadu* [the kingdom of Mahabali], which exists only in our imagination, will become a reality in the 20th century."⁷⁷

Universal and the Particular

It has been my contention that the socialist and Communist-inspired movement in culture was markedly different from the nationalist project, which according to postcolonial theory, "was posited not on identity but rather on a *difference* with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West."⁷⁸ Here there is no question of positing a false dichotomy between the indigenous and the alien, especially in conditions of colonial modernity where it is difficult to determine the authentic or indigenous form of each institution.⁷⁹ Rather the Communist project is operating on the principles of a dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular. That is why even in the sphere of Chatterjee's 'inner domain' of national culture, it is not afraid to borrow from alien sources

⁷⁵ Quoted in J. Devika, "A People United in Development: Developmentalism in Modern Malayalee Identity," Unpublished Manuscript (2003), 6.

⁷⁶ As the popular folk-song goes, under his reign, "all men were alike/ there was no falsehood, no cheating, no lying/ no danger to anyone".

⁷⁷ Quoted in Devika, "People United," 7.

⁷⁸ Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 5.

⁷⁹ Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh, "Shifting Imaginaries: Decolonization, Internal Decolonization, Postcoloniality," in *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power* (London: Zed Books, 1995), 3.

even as it created a new linguistic identity based on indigenous tradition. It also does not falsely separate the cultural and material dimensions and instead explores how the former has been shaped by the latter and vice versa. It operates with the belief that decolonization “requires not the restoration of a historically continuous and allegedly pure precolonial heritage, but an imaginative creation of new form of consciousness and way of life.”⁸⁰ Therefore while the PLM was inspired by the literary and cultural movements in Europe, it was committed to creating a local cultural sensibility. It was a product of the Communist International’s call to build a united front against imperialism and fascism. This call was supported by writers like Maxim Gorki, Henri Barbusse and others. As Chattopadhyay highlighted in his speech in the 1945 PLM speech: “the PLM in Kerala is a branch of the national PLM which itself is a conduit for the world wide movement.”⁸¹ Similarly, Mundassery too points out that the outlook of progressive literature should be universal.⁸² In 1935 Balakrishna Pillai had argued that differences among different nations were superficial. “The knowledge of different customs only brings people together. Literature unites those divided by religions, customs and beliefs.”⁸³ The Soviet Union, as an inspiration for an alternative world, captured the imagination of even non-Communist poets like G. Shankarakurup, Changampuzha, and Vallathol. If Shankarakurup saw the liberation of the colonized flying high with the aid of the red flag:

Rejoice, heart, Rejoice!
 Beat the drums of victory
 For the Russian soldier.
 Not the urge to wage war,
 In the days of suffering,
 His sword gleams with the
 Desire for peace, the

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Quoted in Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 89.

⁸² Ibid., 91.

⁸³ Quoted in Balaram, “Swathathinteyum,” 157.

Love for humanism...
That crescent-moon on the
Evening-sky that
Captures light from darkness
Will kiss its friend on the
Red flag.
Rejoice, heart, rejoice!
Throb under the spreading
Wings of world liberation.

Changampuzha sang:

Let me tell you the
philosophy of sickle.⁸⁴

And Vallathol took the names of Gandhi and Lenin in the same breath.⁸⁵ Among the Communist writers, the identification was, obviously, more explicit. O.N.V. Kurup's poem on the Vayalar rebellion was titled "Keralathinte Paris Commune" (Kerala's Paris Commune):

Kerala's Paris Commune!
That is Vayalar! Salute.⁸⁶

It was not that writers borrowed from Communist and socialist inspired literature alone. Kesavadev's 'Odayilninnu' "drew heavily in both content and ideology from Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*."⁸⁷ The other influences were Chekhov, Maupassant, Tolstoy, Steinbeck, Knut Hamsun, Dostoyevsky. What emerges is the influence of a *mélange* of traditions, Western and Indian. It is not merely an attempt to imitate the West in the material dimension and create an indigenous ethos in the cultural domain.

The universalism of the age is visible in works like Basheer's *Balyakala Sakhi* (Childhood Friend, 1944) in which the father of the protagonist Majeed pushes him out of

⁸⁴ Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 147(my translation).

⁸⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁶ Chandrashekar, *Communist*, 67(my translation).

⁸⁷ Zook, "Farcical".

the house asking him to roam around the country and to learn from the experience. Then Majeed undertakes the journey in which he dons different roles and takes up different jobs. He travels thousands of miles all over the country from little towns to large cities. “To see what? To hear what? That man is the same everywhere. Only there is a difference in language and dress.”⁸⁸ Travels occupy the central place in Basheer’s oeuvre; they enable one to dissolve all the hierarchies of a traditional society. This is especially so because travels were ritually prohibited for many sections of the society.

The universalism of the Marxist and non-Marxist intellectuals of the time cannot be dismissed as what Gramsci terms as the “vague ‘cosmopolitanism’” and “universalism of the Catholic Middle Ages” in Italy.⁸⁹ Unlike the Italian experience, here the universalism was complemented by a strong national consciousness too. While it is absolutely imperative to understand the translation of Marxism into the vernacular and its appropriation of different cultural traditions,⁹⁰ it is also necessary to understand the universality of the Marxist project. While the dominant tendency has been to study Marxism in different cultural contexts as merely expression of a universal theory, the recent tendency has been to study it only in its specificity and particularity.⁹¹ It is in the dialectical relationship between the two that the Marxist project has been unique, compared to other projects of liberation like nationalism. Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory by one-sidedly focusing on the Communist project as a faithful translation of the European Enlightenment miss the agency associated with the critical appropriation of the same.

Raveendran argues that the progressive literature proponents like Thakazhi, Varkey, Kesavdev, and so on were caught in an ambivalent relationship with colonial modernity. On

⁸⁸ Quoted in Balaram, “Swathathinteyum,” 159 (my translation).

⁸⁹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 274.

⁹⁰ See Rajarshi, “Rhyiming Revolution,” 80.

⁹¹ See Menon, *Communism in South India*.

the one side they were supporters of nationalism, social reform and resistance and on the other, the admirers of modernization and westernization. Therefore he calls them mere reformers within the romantic realist stream.⁹² While there is an element of truth in this, it does not account for the strong socialist and anti-capitalist ideology in their works. The paradigmatic shift to socialist realism (despite strains of romanticism) is also not acknowledged. Similarly, the poets like P. Kunhiraman Nair, Edasseri, Vyloppilli who were not part of the Progressive Literature Movement are also said to be all implicated in the modernity project even though they were not associated with Progressive Literature movement. According to Raveendran, they were very much believers in ideas of progress, modernity, development, etc. Therefore there is a dualistic quality to their thinking. Colonial modernity and modernity becomes one here. The characteristics of this ideology are belief in scientific thinking, rationality, development, humanism, respect towards western values, nationalism, and inclination towards aestheticism. All these values are found in romanticism to modernism, according to him.⁹³ V. C. Harris makes a similar argument too. He sees an irresolvable tension and contradiction in the social reform movements that while critiquing colonialism were deeply implicated in colonial modernity. There is a certain valorization of Western thought, institutions, English education and so on. He finds this in the works *Duravastha* and *Adukkalayilninnu*. He finds the elements of colonial discourse and bourgeoisification in the Progressive Literature as well as the Communist movement.⁹⁴ While it is imperative that the ambivalent nature of anti-colonial resistance be uncovered, arguments like that of Raveendran's and Harris' which follow the postcolonial position are

⁹² P. P. Raveendran, *Adhunikanantharam: Vicaharam, Vayana* (Postmodernism: Thinking, Reading) (Thrissur: Current Books, 1999), 119.

⁹³ Ibid., 109-10.

⁹⁴ Interview by author, May 15, 1999, Kottayam, tape recording. Also see his *Ezhubum Vayanayum* (Writing and Reading) (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravaraathaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1999), 139.

deeply problematic for they conflate modernity with colonialism itself. That is why scientific thinking and rationality are associated with colonial modernity alone. Nor is it clear as to what real de-colonization looks like. Therefore these positions can easily degenerate into a discourse of cultural authenticity which merely reproduces the binarizing and essentializing logic of the colonial project.⁹⁵

Bridging the Divided

The Communist project's attempt at bridging the divided domains reflected its concerns about the social nature of literature and art in general. That is why the significant focus on the linking of the art and literature to life in which it succeeded to a great extent. And it was later acknowledged by virulent critics of PLM like Kuttikrishna Marar.⁹⁶ In 1948 Namboodiripad argued that the belief in the primacy of form stems from an ahistorical view of reality, the misplaced notion that there are immutable laws of form which do not change even if social relations and content of literature change. Instead all major transformations in art and literature are contingent upon revolutionary changes in society.⁹⁷ The most significant contribution of the Marxist intervention in literature was the espousal of the idea that there is nothing like art for art's sake and all art is inextricably intertwined with human life. The privileging of the 'pleasure' of producing and enjoying art for itself in the bourgeois aesthetic was questioned. Instead, pleasure was posited as a social category.⁹⁸ At times, as we noted before, the over-emphasis on the political content of art had led to moral rigorism. Even though the committed literature of the activists produced works which attracted the oppressed masses, they lacked in aesthetic quality and also did not capture the imagination of

⁹⁵ Pieterse and Parekh, "Shifting Imaginaries," 9.

⁹⁶ Gopalakrishnan, *Purogamana*, 135.

⁹⁷ Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 209.

⁹⁸ Namboodiripad, "Humanism."

the people who were outside the socialist fold. This is what Namboodiripad saw as a major weakness of the movement and it was taken up by the people who argued for the priority of form in literature. Anyway, after the split of the PLM the resolution was in the Marxists formulating a combination of form and content.⁹⁹

The questioning of the division between elites and masses and high and low had seen Namboodiripad assert (in a 1947 interview) that a true progressive writer would not consider the writer as an upper caste and the reader as a lower caste. It is inconceivable to him that only writers should have the power to participate in literary debates. Also, he wants to extend the individual freedom that writers seek to the readers too.¹⁰⁰ This is when writers like Sukumar Azhikode were strongly criticizing the involvement of political activists in literature.¹⁰¹ Even in 1947 when the debate was raging between the need for independence of writers and the need for commitment to a political cause, Namboodiripad had argued that independence is absolutely needed not only for art but also for all spheres of creativity.¹⁰² Of course, for him, independence is conceived in relation to society.

Even though the literate populace was still not very high in the forties and fifties the democratization of culture brought in more people into the fold of the appreciators of literature simply because of the paradigmatic shift in the language. The level of appreciation among the ordinary people went up significantly in this conjuncture. The literary discourse conceived as an internal self-referential one thoroughly disengaged from social practices was one of the ideologies that gained hegemony during the period of colonial modernity. The ideology of the aesthetic was the dominant one after romanticism and is the main component of modernism. The philistinism that was part and parcel of this ideology was

⁹⁹ Namboodiripad, *Theranjedutha*, 322.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰¹ Devadas, *Theranjedutha*, 106.

¹⁰² Namboodiripad, *Theranjedutha*, 24.

substantially negated during the movement initiated by the Communists. Contrary to the ideology of the aesthetic, in this period writers (Communists and many others) were actively involved in the struggles against colonialism, imperialism and feudalism.

Modernity and Tradition

E.M.S. Namboodiripad, even in his early works like *Onnekal Kodi Malayalikal* (One and a Quarter *Cröre* Malayalees)¹⁰³ and *Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi* (Kerala: The Motherland of Malayalees), had sought to go beyond the dichotomy of modernity and tradition. But he was equally critical of the mechanical repetition of rituals and the blind following of tradition. He draws from his own childhood experience of being brought up in a Brahmin household and being forced to learn Hindu sacred texts like *Rig Veda* by rote without knowing its meaning.¹⁰⁴ Instead he is looking for a creative and democratic reinterpretation of tradition and in fact, commends the poet Vallathol--despite his criticism of him being a bourgeois democrat-- for engaging in such a task. The features that he finds in Vallathol are a respect towards the past and tradition, the interpretation of the present in terms of the past but at the same time imbued with the desire for democracy. He, in Namboodiripad's view, astutely combines the ancient Hindu culture with a modern viewpoint.¹⁰⁵ Namboodiripad is following here the activist conception of tradition seen in the Marxist culturalism of E. P. Thompson and others. For him tradition is not a "burden of the past upon the present, an inert legacy that shapes the consciousness of people with its own prerogatives, but as an activity in the production of a past that is rooted in the social struggles over hegemony."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ One *cröre* is equal to 10 million.

¹⁰⁴ Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 60.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 65, 66.

¹⁰⁶ Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 33.

But Namboodiripad, unlike the subalternists, also carried out a revolutionary attack on those aspects of tradition which had become totally oppressive, by burning the sacred thread and sending the ashes to the priest. He was closely associated with the reform movement in the Brahmin community and gave the famous call to make the Namboodiri into a human being in the 1944 meeting of the *Yogakshema Sabha*. The extent to which he questioned reactionary practices is evident from the fact that he even reminded the traditionalists that practices like cigarette smoking are not against tradition, though harmful to health.¹⁰⁷ But in creating a new imaginary, Communist plays and art did not go the way of many social reform plays like that of *Adukkalayilninnu* which began with the mocking of the learning of Hindu sacred texts like *Vedas* and ended with the words of ‘Hip Hurray’. Its author V.T. Bhattatiripad also gave the call to burn all the temples.¹⁰⁸ Here again a contrast with the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu is instructive which, even accounting for the particular context and the extreme nature of caste-based oppression, one-sidedly criticized Hindu sacred texts like *Ramayana*. Ramasamy did not spare even its Tamil version written by Kamban: “They say [Kamba] *Ramayanam* is a rare literature. What is the use? However starved one is, would one pick up food from shit. . . How can anyone who desire self-respect read *Ramayanam*?”¹⁰⁹ Namboodiripad’s views on *Ramayana*, as we have seen, are dramatically opposed to this. They are very similar to what Fredric Jameson was to prescribe later:

Marxism

can no longer be content with its demystifying vocation to unmask and to demonstrate the ways in which a cultural artefact fulfills a specific ideological mission, in legitimating a given power structure . . . [It] must not cease to practice this essentially negative hermeneutic function . . . but must also seek, through and beyond this demonstration of the instrumental function of a given cultural object, to

¹⁰⁷ K. E. N., *Varenya*, 95.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Pandian, “National-Popular,” 3326.

project its simultaneously Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity.¹¹⁰

The Communist understanding of *Ramayana's* ideological and utopian dimensions goes against postcolonial theory's argument that Marxist scholarship in India views the world as 'disenchanted' and that it "displays [an] antipathy to anything that smacks of the religious. The result has been a certain kind of paralysis of imagination, remarkable for a country whose people have never shown any sense of embarrassment about being able to imagine the supernatural in a variety of forms."¹¹¹

In a 1972 interview Namboodiripad argues that materialism has been a part of Indian culture and the hegemony of idealism is not a peculiar cultural trait but only a part of the social process.¹¹² He also positively evaluated the translation of Hindu texts like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* into Malayalam in the 16th century by Ezhuthachan, the father of the Malayalam language. The process of development of modern Tamil, Telugu and Kannada along with Malayalam as independent languages occurred roughly at the same time and because of "the popularisation of the Hindu scriptures through the use and development of the various spoken languages for conveying the ideas contained in the classical works of Sanskrit."¹¹³ Even though the renaissance associated with Ezhuthachan was basically religious in content, Namboodiripad argues that it was also nationalist considering the impact it had on other religious communities and the access that it gave to the common people to these texts in a language other than Sanskrit and Tamil. He also recognized the reactionary elements in the renaissance because of the absence of any

¹¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 291.

¹¹¹ Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 25.

¹¹² Namboodiripad, *Theranjedutha*, 79.

¹¹³ E. M. S. Namboodiripad, "Evolution of Society, Language and Literature in India", in *Selected Writings*, 375.

material solution. While Ezhuthachan definitely played the role of democratizing culture, there was also a severe limitation for the fact that the sacred texts may have been popular among the upper castes but they were not so among the untouchable communities (and also non-Hindus).¹¹⁴ What is remarkable here is the tracing of the origins of nationalism to pre-modern and pre-capitalist era, before the era of “print-capitalism”, in marked contrast to Benedict Anderson’s formulations on nationalism.¹¹⁵ Namboodiripad’s theorization breaks the linear narrative of unproblematic transition from religious time to secular time as implied in Anderson. On the contrary, not only nationalism is not an exclusively ‘modern’ phenomenon, even the religious can contribute to its imagination.

The remarks about the burning of Ramayana were not fully supported by all the members of the Lively Literature movement. But they were blown out of proportion by the opponents. Marxists were more sensitive to tradition than poets like Changampuzha who argued that the future of Malayalam literature should be based on European literature alone.¹¹⁶ Namboodiripad always has stood for overcoming the binary of

glorifying the past culture of India or decry[ing] the whole past, ignor[ing] the enormous treasure-house of culture produced by society... This trend, in other words, denies the role played by our people in producing this culture, though it was appropriated and misused by the upper layers of society and cuts off the scholar, the administrator, the publicist and the politician from the mass of the Indian people and their socio-cultural milieu.¹¹⁷

The Gramscian and Habermasian problematic are clearly visible here. There is no radical rupture in the Marxist project:

there is continuity in human society, continuity of culture. The continuity is of course not absolute, along with it there are also break [sic]. Every time the past continues but there is always a break from the past. This is the dialectical process of

¹¹⁴ Namboodiripad, *Therenjedutha*, 240.

¹¹⁵ See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹¹⁶ Chandrashekar, *Purogamana*, 191.

¹¹⁷ Namboodiripad, “On ‘People’s Culture’,” 405.

the development of human society... It is through the improvement of the past, through the continuation of the past as well a [sic] changing that past, that we as representatives of the modern working class are trying to create a new society.¹¹⁸

The above statements sum up the Communist project's views on tradition and modernity very well.

The future beckoned and it was not something to be condemned. In a K. P. G. poem he praises the bravery of:

Those who write
In their own blood the
New history of
Independent India.
Those who fly the
Bloodied-flag
In the battle of the
Oppressed people.¹¹⁹

Here the future is what is being looked forward to. Unlike in Partha Chatterjee's account the present is not a site from which one "must escape,"¹²⁰ but is one that leads to an egalitarian future.

The Communist intervention in culture and the resultant emergence of a proletarian public sphere backed by non-socialists was by no means a completely entrenched one. It still had not fully used the potentialities of the oral tradition. Even if the hegemony of Sanskrit was questioned, the ever-increasing influence of English could not be curbed, especially in knowledge related to science and technology. This made it difficult for ordinary masses to access it.¹²¹ According to K. N. Ganesh many writers were mere imitators of Western literary schools and were also implicated in the "missionary-colonial culture" and

¹¹⁸Ibid., 404.

¹¹⁹ Azad, "Thozhilali Varga Samarangalum, Malayala Sahityavum," in *Nammude Sabityam, Nammude Samoobam*, vol. I, ed. M. N. Vijayan (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2000), 212 (my translation).

¹²⁰ Chatterjee, "Our Modernity," 15.

¹²¹ K. N. Ganesh, "Varenaya," 640.

the ideas of capitalism. Even the progressive literary movement was not totally successful in charting out a different path, in going beyond the cultural paradigm inaugurated by colonial modernity. He argues that this literature (with a few exceptions) did not criticize the institutions of colonialism like the courts, bureaucracy, political and educational structure. He also finds that the critique of capitalism did not go deep enough even though Dev and Bhasi did articulate a resistance. Mostly he finds an open critique of capitalism which went along with its covert acceptance like the novels of Thoppil Bhasi. But what he actually means by this critique is understood by his definition of capitalism where bureaucracy, science and technology, urbanization etc. are all associated with it.¹²² Thus he argues that there is only political decolonization without cultural decolonization: what thrived in the absence of the latter were propagandist art and literature and servility to forms of colonial modernity.¹²³ Here there is, as we have seen, a conflation of modernity and colonial modernity, like in postcolonial theory. The significant shift to a popular aesthetic and the democratization of language through theater, ‘marching songs’ and the de-Sanskritisation of elite culture are ignored here. While it cannot be denied that the subalterns were being represented by the middle-classes who desired their liberation, it cannot be argued that the culture that emerged in the period till the 1957 victory of the Communists was a middle-class one which hardly differentiated itself from forms of colonial modernity.¹²⁴ Here there is a tendency to keep the subaltern sphere completely separate from other spheres. Therefore his critique, like that of Raveendran’s before, goes the way of post-colonial anti-modern critiques. Communists, to a large extent, managed to avoid the indulgence in binarisms and simplifications in the understanding of social reality. These antagonisms like elite/subalterns, rich/poor,

¹²² Ibid., 640-3.

¹²³ Ibid., 644.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

tradition/modernity, village/city were dominant, instead of a complex analysis, in many writers like Changampuzha and Vallathol. The former, for example, constructed the landlord's exploitation as an ahistorical phenomenon.¹²⁵

What this and the last chapter show is that changes in the material sphere cannot be understood unless the cultural/ideational sphere which influences them and is influenced by them is also understood. The Communist hegemony would not have been possible without the massive shift in the aesthetic dimension, both in the elite and popular segments. The Communist intervention in culture that we have studied so far is a classic example of the construction of a national-popular will in the aesthetic sphere. Even though Communists suffered after the PLM split, the aesthetic discourse had irreversibly shifted under their influence. The conditions before under feudalism and Sanskrit hegemony could be understood by Gramsci's description of Italy:

neither a popular artistic literature nor a local production of 'popular' literature exists because 'writers' and 'people' do not have the same conception of the world. In other words the feelings of the people are not lived by the writers as their own, nor do the writers have a 'national educative' function: they have not and do not set themselves the problem of elaborating popular feelings after having relived them and made them their own.¹²⁶

The Communists tried to overcome the above split between culture and the people. The PLM is an excellent example of this. All the writers of the movement tried to live the feelings of the people and also set them the educative task of elaborating these feelings. Also a 'common national vernacular,' which failed to develop in Italy, evolved by sloughing off the influence of Sanskrit and Tamil and above various spoken dialects. As in Gramsci, the cultural project cannot be read as separate from the political project in the Communist movement in Kerala. The former provides the base for the latter.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Gramsci, *Cultural Writings*, 206-7.

For Gramsci culture “is the sphere in which ideologies are diffused and organized, in which hegemony is constructed and can be broken and reconstructed.”¹²⁷ And what was impeded in the Italian case—the molecular diffusion of “a new ideology, a new commonsense based on historical materialism”—fructified in Kerala. The “historical task as educators and elaborators of the intellect and the moral awareness of the people-nation” was taken up by the Communist activists. They were able to reach the “simplest and most uneducated classes.”¹²⁸ Namboodiripad and his fellow Communists had recognized the need to construct a “unified national language” and also that the intervention in this regard, to be effective must be “organically tied to tradition.” The importance of the concept is that it “recognizes the specificity of national conditions and traditions.”¹²⁹ The Kerala Communists’ views on Hindu sacred texts and Sanskrit, their understanding of Marxist aesthetics as a continuation and fulfillment of the democratization of culture initiated by the ‘pre-modern’ counter-hegemonic movements like *Bhakti*, and their attempt to develop a popular aesthetic by bridging the gap between the intellectuals and people, demonstrate that, despite inadequacies and failures, they had significantly moved to understanding what Gramsci had outlined as:

The premises of the new literature cannot but be historical, political and popular: it must work towards the elaboration of what already exists, whether polemically or in other ways does not matter. What matters is that it sink its roots in the humus of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and tendencies and with its moral and intellectual world, even if it is backward and conventional.¹³⁰

At the same time Communists avoided the culturalist assumptions of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory. Culturalism can be defined as the

¹²⁷ Forgacs, “National-Popular,” 186.

¹²⁸ Gramsci, *Cultural Writings*, 211.

¹²⁹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 350.

¹³⁰ Gramsci, *Cultural Writings*, 102.

ensemble of intellectual orientations that crystallize methodologically around the reduction of social and historical questions to abstract questions of culture and responsible therefore not only for legitimizing hegemonic relations between societies, but also for mystifying hegemonic relations of exploitation and oppression within societies.¹³¹

The culturalist assumption sees only one aspect of culture that is as a way of seeing the world, as a “way of organizing the world, its time and space”. But it does not take into account the other aspect of culture—that is as a way of making and changing the world. The first definition “mystifies its second sense, of which it is logically and historically the product, but to which it bears a contradictory relationship.”¹³² The Communist movement was able to view culture in both its senses. In contrast Subaltern Studies is caught between two notions of tradition: as ‘invention of tradition’ that is the “organization of the past in terms of the present”,¹³³ and Marshall Sahlins’ definition of culture as “the organization of the current situation in terms of the past.”¹³⁴ But Subaltern Studies does not tell us how the past and present interact in creating culture. Moreover its focus on ideational elements alone do not allow us to understand the production of material culture like “clothes, food furniture, living and working conditions, housing technology, the financial system, political system, trade and the impact of these features on people’s lives.”¹³⁵

Communist negotiation of modernity in the cultural sphere was again marked by a strong sense of agency in which there was a constant admixture of what was received and what was new. It avoided high rationalism and economism and was able to translate the substantive content of the values of Enlightenment into the vernacular, without necessarily seeing the latter as ‘backward’ or ‘irrational’. It, at the same time, reinterpreted and

¹³¹ Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 26.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³³ K. Sivaramakrishnan quoted in Bahl, “Subaltern Studies,” 101.

¹³⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

appropriated the critical aspects of the existing traditions. To conclude the Communist intervention in the aesthetic sphere could be seen as an attempt to create a

new culture which is neither of the West nor of the past, in other words, which can be national without being parochial and cosmopolitan without being alien—a new culture, the making of which must accompany the making of the new world, but without which the latter cannot be conceived.¹³⁶

This is a culture “that is at once universal and particular...[and is] forged out of the ingredients of present society, for any other alternative must of necessity reintroduce alienation into the cultural process.” The Communist movement in attempting this could be said to have combined “an activist epistemology (an anti-abstractionist historicism) with revolutionary practice.”¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 27.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

Chapter 6

Redistribution and Recognition: The Land Reforms and the Workers' Act

The most important dimension of the construction of the national-popular will by the Communists was bridging the material-symbolic division of social existence which had characterized the bourgeois nationalist imagination and also the caste reform movements before it. Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory through their culturalist reading accentuated this division. The developing schism in social theory between society and culture on one side and state institutions and political economy on the other was dramatized by Subaltern Studies.¹ This chapter will show that the struggle for land reforms and labor legislation is a demonstration of the inseparability of the material and symbolic dimensions. The fundamental argument is that the Communists' negotiation of the transition to capitalist modernity crucially recognized that the empowerment of lower peasantry, agricultural labor and lower castes and their enjoyment of citizenship rights required the amelioration of their material condition. As Gramsci asks,

Can there be cultural reform, and can the position of the depressed strata of society be improved culturally, without a previous economic reform and a change in their position in the social and economic fields? Intellectual and moral reform has to be linked with a programme of economic reform – indeed the programme of economic reform is precisely the concrete form in which every intellectual and moral reform presents itself.²

The enormous support that the Communist Party got from the peasantry and agricultural labor and the intense struggles that followed for land reforms and labor legislation belie the culturalist analysis of Subaltern Studies. The land reforms were attractive to all classes. The slogan 'land to the tiller' drew the cultivating landowners, tenants and

¹ Ludden, "Brief History," 5.

² Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 133.

laborers of all castes.³ At the same time, they should not be considered as a ‘material’ struggle alone. There has been a tendency to see peasant movements as fighting for economic interests only.⁴ The land reforms were just not the end result of a process merely motivated by ‘land hunger’ as Jeffrey Paige has argued with regard to peasant revolts of early modernity which were “little more than simultaneous land rushes by thousands of peasants bent on obtaining land that they may legally regard as theirs.”⁵

Subaltern Studies’ critique of modernity and the reinstatement of the subaltern, based as they are on the celebration of subalternity, do not involve the material transformation of the subaltern. Therefore it is not clear as to how the subalternists’ aim of inaugurating a “democratic project... [with] the peasant as citizen in contemporary political modernity”⁶ can be fulfilled. The basic problem stems from the fact that Subaltern Studies considers the notion of class as an external phenomenon, implanted in India via colonialism. Moreover the concept of class is defined in non-economic terms, in terms of power relations. Hence the broad category of the subaltern and the elite classes.⁷ In the colonial period, the peasant’s subjection to the state, moneylender and the landlord “ was primarily political in character, economic exploitation being only one, albeit the most obvious, of its several instances... Indeed the element of coercion was so explicit and so ubiquitous in all their dealings with the peasant that he could hardly look upon this relationship with them as anything but political.”⁸ Here there is no understanding of class as the “performance, appropriation, distribution, and receipt of surplus labour.”⁹

³ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 37.

⁴ Skocpol, “What Makes Peasants Revolutionary?” 364.

⁵ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 356.

⁶ Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 19.

⁷ Chakrabarty and Cullenberg, *Transition and Development*, 106.

⁸ Guha, *Peasant Insurgency*, 8.

⁹ Chakrabarty and Cullenberg, *Transition and Development*, 106. The agricultural laborers in Kerala were as much troubled by economic exploitation as by social oppression of landlordism as revealed by *The Report of the*

Without the material transformation of the condition of the marginalized classes many postcolonial Third World democracies have turned out to be formal democracies. Formal democracy guarantees civic liberties, pluralism, the system of contract, and the principle of representation. But it “does not reveal anything of the economic structure of society, its relations of contract, and correspondingly its power relations.” Therefore it becomes the paradox of formal democracy that the right to property in practice “excludes *de facto* the majority of population from that property”.¹⁰ Therefore the transition from feudalism to capitalism does not bring about any substantial change in the life chances of the peasantry and agrarian labor. This paradox can only be solved by formal democracy turning itself into socialist democracy and by generalizing ownership.¹¹ Subaltern Studies’ critique of bourgeois (Western) ideas of equality does not allow it to formulate an effective solution to the paradox. It seeks a revival of community as answer to the onslaught of capital.¹² But this presupposes society expressing one homogenous will, which does not exist in actuality. Therefore the system of contracts which protects the interests and will of every constituent of society becomes an inevitability.¹³

Communism in Kerala was from the beginning under no progressist illusion that it had to construct an industrial working class and capitalism before it could think about socialism. It understood very well that it was absolutely based on the peasantry and its struggles since Kerala was an agriculture-dependent society. Very early on, it was clear that

Agrarian Problems Enquiry Committee. The four main problems they faced were “the insecurity of employment, fear of losing employment in the slack season, fear of eviction from house-sites and fear of recall of loans which can never be repaid”(Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 169).

¹⁰ Agnes Heller, “On Formal Democracy,” in *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives*, ed. John Keane (London: Verso, 1988), 138-9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹² See Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 163.

¹³ Heller, “Formal Democracy,” 143. But Subaltern Studies will not accept something like ‘interests’ because that is premised on bourgeois notions of the individual. On the contrary the peasantry act on the basis of community: “Collective action does not flow from the contract among individuals; rather individual identities themselves are derived from membership in a community” (Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 163).

the party's success was due to support of the peasantry. It also recognized that the conditions in which it functioned resembled the Chinese situation more than the Soviet one.¹⁴ Unlike the subalternist critique of Marxist and Communist belief in the mode of production teleology, here the Communist mobilization is premised not on the 'death of the peasant', as we saw in the period of the construction of Communist hegemony. In essence the transition to capitalism "was not led by a commercializing landed elite, but by tenants and landless laborers. The tenants freed land and the laborers freed themselves from the clutches of precapitalist social institutions."¹⁵

Prelude to Land Reforms

It was, as we have seen, the ability (and the promise) to simultaneously address exclusions based on material and symbolic aspects and the bringing to the fore of the dimension of material oppression that entrenched Communists in the society. But until the Communist movement secured state power, it did not have the power to fundamentally alter social relations. What is known as the present-day state of Kerala came into existence in 1956 by unifying the three administrative regions of Malabar, Travancore and Cochin. In the first elections held in 1957, the Communists assumed governmental power, which was the result of a two-decade long ideological struggle. Initially, as we have seen, in the thirties and to an extent in the forties, the peasant movement had operated within the moral economy framework. Even though they raised slogans like 'land to the tiller' and the reduction of rent etc., they were mainly against the 'illegal' feudal exactions which went above the rent amount. The leadership had accepted the slogan 'land to the tiller' by the mid-thirties but it took nearly two decades for the peasants and agricultural laborers to really assert their rights.

¹⁴ *Draft Kisan Report*, Communist Party of India, Kerala State Committee (February 1943).

¹⁵ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 85.

The Communist Party itself put forward specific demands by 1954 which included the suspension of evictions, conferring of ownership rights on those who had possession rights of 12 years, ceiling of acres on holdings and so on.¹⁶ The push to the land reforms got a fillip with the unification of the all the regional *Karshaka Sanghams* into a state unit called the Kerala *Karshaka Sangham* (KKS) in 1956 in a conference held at Shoranur. It claimed a membership of 130,000. The conference put forth the demands for the suspension of evictions, implementation of land reforms, debt relief for peasantry and so on.¹⁷ But the strength of the landed classes can be gauged by the fact that even after two decades of peasant struggle, the agrarian structure had remained almost unaltered.¹⁸

With the rise of the Communist movement, there was an increasing fear among the propertied classes.¹⁹ The non-Communist government that came to power in 1954 in Travancore-Cochin piloted seven Land Reform Bills, but had to face the stiff opposition of the vested interests. The landed classes toppled the ministry before it could pass the bills. The Congress government that followed it actually passed five land Reform Acts which did not have any radical content in them and therefore did not evoke any opposition.²⁰ The Malabar Landholders' Association, for example called the legislation of the Madras government to amend the Malabar Tenancy Act in the 1950s as "class legislation" that "has caused widespread discontent and apprehension in the public mind."²¹ Here it is interesting

¹⁶ T. K. Oommen, "Agrarian Legislations and Movements as Sources of Change: The Case of Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 4, 1975): 1575.

¹⁷ T. K. Ramakrishnan and M. P. Narayanan Nambiar, *Keralithile Karshaka Prasthanam* (Peasant Movement in Kerala), (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1990), 35-6.

¹⁸ T. V. Sathyamurthy, *India since Independence: Studies in the Development of the Power of the State*, vol. 1, *Centre-State Relations: The Case of Kerala* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1985), 190.

¹⁹ As one of the characters in Thakazhi's magnum opus *Coir* says: "First it will be decided as to how many acres of land can be held by one family. Then the government will confiscate anything above that" (Manalil, *Kalathinte*, 138).

²⁰ Oommen, "Agrarian Legislations," 1574.

²¹ Letter from the Secretary, Malabar Landholders' Association to the Prime Minister, Government of India, dated August 10, 1950, *G. O. 433 dated February 21, 1951, Revenue Department, Government of Madras, 1951* (KSA).

to note how the interests of the landed class have been disguised as that of the public. There were a variety of arguments proffered against the move which included the recourse by the feudal classes to the market logic of increasing productivity.²² While Subaltern Studies criticizes the evolutionism of teleological theories to show the persistence and inevitability of pre-capitalist elements in modernity, it misses the adoption of languages of modernity—"the public", "productivity" and so on—by the feudal propertied classes in a quest to legitimize their power. If the feudal propertied were threatened, the emerging capitalist classes, like the Christian business class in Kerala had a strong vested interest in the scuttling of land reforms. They had invested vast amounts of capital got from business in agriculture and their primary interest was in expanding market forces in agriculture. The ceilings sought to be imposed by land reforms would have been a great impediment to these classes' aspirations for an unrestricted development of capitalism. They held high positions within the Congress party and were able to successfully thwart any attempts (even mild ones) at reform of the land structure.²³

The government was even warned that the proposed agrarian bill, "instead of appeasing the communists, it will only tend to swell the number."²⁴ But the relentless push by the Communists ensured that the amendment was passed. It secured some concessions and independence to the poor tenants but without dismantling landlordism.²⁵ The question of abolishing landlordism was all the more urgent in Malabar where in 1958, 85 percent of the cultivated area was held by tenants whereas in Travancore, 77 percent of the land

²² See the petitions by V. G. Sukumaran to the Chief Minister, Government of Madras, dated August 4, 1950; K. Unnikrishna Menon, to the Secretary, Legislative Department, Government of Madras, dated August 6, 1950, *G. O. 433 dated February 21, 1951, Revenue Department, Government of Madras, 1951 (KSA)*.

²³ Sathyamurthy, *India*, 187.

²⁴ Petition (author unknown) to the Minister for Land Revenue, Government of Madras, dated March 1, 1950, *G. O. 433 dated. 21 February, 1951, Revenue Department, Government of Madras, 1951 (KSA)*.

²⁵ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 70.

belonged to owner-cultivators.²⁶ In 1951 the distribution of agrarian classes in Kerala was in this order (figures for India in parentheses): land owners: 35.3 per cent (67.8), tenants: 23.1 per cent (12.6), agricultural laborers 39.2 per cent (17.9), non-cultivating rentiers: 2.4 per cent (1.8).²⁷

The incompleteness of earlier reforms like the 1930 Malabar Tenancy Act has already been seen in chapter 2. The land tenure system of Kerala has been considered as one of the most complex and bewildering systems in India with a “maze of intermediary rights, esoteric usufructuary mortgage tenures, complex subinfeudation.”²⁸ But to simplify it, we could characterize it, following Daniel Thorner, as a “many-tiered edifice of interests in land—janmies [land-lords], kanamadars [superior tenants], verumpattadars [tenants-at-will]—rests on a mass of landless laborers known as Cherumas, Pulayas, or Poliyars [untouchable castes].”²⁹ The most significant aspect of the tenure system was the strong class-caste correlation that characterized it. As noted before, the Namboodiri Brahmins and upper caste Nayars controlled most of the land as landlords and superior tenants. High-ranking Christians (Syrian Christians) and Muslims too had superior rights on land even though the lower castes among them were similar to the Hindu low castes.³⁰ The latter consisting of the Tiyya/Ezhava and the untouchable castes were the actual cultivators of land with hardly any rights on land or without any land at all.³¹ Because of the strong class-caste correlation, the question of abolition of landlordism was not merely an economic issue, but deeply

²⁶ This did not mean that the repressive labor regime characteristic of feudalism was abolished because of the greater commercialization of land. In fact, while commercialization eroded many of the traditional rights of the laborers, exposing them to the vagaries of the market, they were simultaneously oppressed by pre-capitalist social institutions (Ibid.). Again the tradition-modernity dichotomy collapses here.

²⁷ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 160.

²⁸ Ibid., 157.

²⁹ Quoted in Ibid.

³⁰ Christianity and Islam in South Asia have been characterized by caste divisions similar to the Hindu social structure.

³¹ G. K. Lieten, *The First Communist Ministry in Kerala, 1957-9* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi & Co., 1982), 4-5; Namboodiripad, *Kerala*, 11-12.

intertwined with issues of recognition.³² As in the phase of the construction of hegemony, the Communists, in this phase of the implementation of the land reforms, perceived and attacked landlordism in structural and systemic terms.

The Arduous Road to Land Reforms

The question of tenancy reforms, which was on the agenda of the Communists since the movement began, became the most important issue confronting the newly formed Communist government. The weight of expectations on the new government could be gauged by the fact that within a week it passed an ordinance staying all the evictions of tenants and hutment dwellers, and barring the courts from entertaining fresh eviction suits till the time the *Agrarian Relations* bill could be introduced in the Assembly.³³ The whole historical momentum was for the resolution of the land question. The bill itself was introduced in December 1957, and after a long-drawn process of discussions and consultations with all the interest groups and in the Legislative Assembly, the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill (KARB) was passed on June 10, 1959.³⁴

The main features of the 1957 bill were: the fixing of a ceiling for the extent of holdings, the fixation of maximum rates of fair rent in respect of various classes of land, the surrender of land in excess of the ceiling, compulsory purchase of the rights of the landlord by permanent tenants on payment of a purchase price, rights of tenants to fixity of tenure and so on.³⁵ The reaction to the bill was on expected lines. There was a huge counter-

³² Santhosh, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, August 21, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; T. V. Thomas, contractor, interview by author, May 17, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording. Thomas hailing from a Christian lower peasant family described the relief in not having to perform the deferential obligations to the Hindu landlord after the land reforms.

³³ *Mathrubhumi*, April 19, 1957.

³⁴ *Mathrubhumi*, June 11, 1959.

³⁵ *The Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill 1957, L. S. Bill No. 51 of 1957* (Thiruvananthapuram: Government Central Press, 1957).

mobilization of the landed interests. The opposition to the bill by even members of a party like the *Praja Socialist Party* (People's Socialist Party) showed the kind of interests ranged against land reforms. One of its members, in a discussion of the Select Committee Report on the bill in the Assembly described the implications thus:

Tens of thousands of murders will take place after the passage of the bill. What has come down through many generations will breakdown and disappear... It is a sin to take away somebody else's land and wealth, equivalent to murder... I had felt earlier that it is not yet time to introduce adult suffrage here. That is the reason why they [Communists] have been able to come to power and introduce this expropriatory bill.³⁶

It is interesting to note the view that democracy is responsible for the Communists coming to power. It was also not unsurprising that huge public demonstrations took place, just two days after the bill was passed, led by the Catholic Church and the National Service Society of the Nayar caste, the two communities which were going to be substantially affected by the land reform bill and the education bill (which sought to regulate the private ownership of educational institutions). Of course, the 'counter-revolution' called the *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle) could not be built on the premise of the threat to 'material' interests of the mainly upper classes of these communities, it had to involve a symbolic discourse as well, which was the supposed threat to religion posed by the 'satanic' force of Communism. Among the Christian laity especially, this was an important factor that mobilized it against the Communist government.³⁷ A Catholic Bishops conference was held which explored 'material and spiritual' ways of overthrowing the Communist government.³⁸ The 'Struggle' was a grand coalition of religious and casteist interests consisting of the Nairs, Christians and

³⁶ *Navajivan*, April 18, 1959.

³⁷ 'Mary Chacko', a middle-class Christian described with great passion her participation as a young girl in the 'Liberation Struggle' against the "atheistic Communists" (interview by author, May 6, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

There was also the incident of a Christian woman trying to sacrifice her newly born child as a mark of protest against the Communists ('T. Sri Kumar', interview by author, retired professional, July 18, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

³⁸ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 232.

the Muslims which lasted for six weeks and was able to secure the assent of the central government which had no qualms in undemocratically dismissing the communist regime. As A. K. Gopalan argued: “The bourgeoisie swears by democracy only as long as the balance of power remains in their demands. When it begins to slip away, they will resort to anti-democratic and fascist methods to retain it.”³⁹ The coalition of the propertied classes of all the communities and their virulent evocation of religious symbols contradicts the Subaltern Studies’ positing of the community and capital as antithetical universals.⁴⁰ This conceptualization is as historicist and evolutionist as the theories that Subaltern Studies seeks to criticize. It does not see the myriad forms that community has assumed in the present day conditions.

Chatterjee argues (by following Marx, as he claims), “community, in the narrative of capital, becomes relegated to the latter’s pre-history, a natural, pre-political, primordial stage in social revolution that must be superseded for the journey of freedom and progress to begin.” But according to him what Marx did not see “was the ability of capitalist society to ideologically reunite capital and labor at the level of the political community of the nation”.⁴¹ Chatterjee does not, however, acknowledge the unity of capital and community (at a level other than the nation). Therefore it stands in contradiction with capital. “Community, which ideally should have been banished from the kingdom of capital, continues to lead a subterranean, potentially subversive, life within it because it refuses to go away.” Community “marks a limit to the realm of disciplinary power.” It is only by “uncovering a necessary

³⁹ Ibid., 234.

⁴⁰ In an account of a lower level Communist activist from an erstwhile landlord Christian family, his family’s hatred towards an atheistic Communism was hardened when it lost land due to the land reforms (Saju, interview by author, August 21, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording). Of course, there were radical interpretations of religion too. In the account of a strong believer, the land reforms were a good policy for they catered to the interests of the poor and any Christian could not disagree with that (M. A. Jose, small industrialist, interview by author, July 21, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

⁴¹ Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 236.

contradiction between capital and community,” we can move to a fundamental critique of modernity from within itself.”⁴² This ignores the ways in which community becomes a terrain of disciplinary power and also as a site for the reproduction of capital by trying to paper over the inequalities with in it. This was demonstrated in no uncertain terms in the Liberation Struggle against the Communist ministry. The growing demand for land reforms led to the formation of a landowners association drawing members from across communities, which indulged in violent campaign against the laborers and trade unionists.⁴³

What was interesting was that after the fall of the Communist government and the dilution of the KARB by various non-Communist governments, the peasant mobilization, instead of slackening, only acted as a catalyst for “continuous debate, struggle, and movement.”⁴⁴ After the Communist government fell, there was a peasant *jatha* under A. K. Gopalan’s leadership which traversed from one end of the state to the another with the purpose of putting pressure on the new government to pass the KARB without any amendments. Numerous meetings were held and hundreds of pamphlets were distributed. The scale was unprecedented, covering 425 miles in 26 days of walking, and selling 35000 pamphlets to the people.⁴⁵ Until the last day Gopalan reportedly addressed one million people in 266 public meetings.⁴⁶ The peasants started asking for receipts for the rent paid and even marched on *jathas* to the *janmi*’s houses.⁴⁷ The Communist party organized many meetings and study classes to sensitize the public about the character of the KARB and the need to oppose amendments to it. Before the 1964 Land Reform Act was passed by the Congress government, a new organization called the *Karshaka Niyama Raksha Samiti*

⁴² Ibid., 236-7.

⁴³ Osella and Osella, *Social Mobility*, 200.

⁴⁴ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 76.

⁴⁵ *Deshabhimani*, July 23, 1960; Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 248, 252

⁴⁶ Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 130.

⁴⁷ *Deshabhimani*, November 5, 1961.

(Council for Protection of Land Reforms) was formed to press for the implementation of the KARB.⁴⁸ The party and the peasant unions relentlessly “organized marches, satyagrahas, picketing, hunger strikes by the leadership and even a ‘Land Reforms Act Burning Day’ during which copies of the 1963 Act were publicly torched.”⁴⁹ In order to heighten the awareness of the peasants the party for instance tried to organize a volunteer squad by the name of ‘*kisan service squad*’ in every village with the intention of making the All India *Kisan Sabha* meeting which was to be held in Kerala a grand success. The meeting was to formulate a plan of action with regard to the solution of the problems facing the peasantry especially the question of tenure reform.⁵⁰ The peasant unions elected a representative from each block in the state to send to the All India meeting. To sensitize the peasantry to the larger issues involved and the program to be undertaken, *jathas* were constantly undertaken under the aegis of the *karshaka sanghams* which went house to house and also held public meetings. Struggle councils were formed and peasant volunteers were recruited with the purpose of winning the rights of the peasantry.⁵¹ The KKS had organized in the early sixties a special conference for oral tenants that is for those without any written records of rights or the receipts of rent paid. Similarly the KKS won a significant demand regarding the creation of record of tenancy for those tenants with disputed rights.⁵² The demand for modern forms of legal system is visible here and they are not merely imposed on a ‘traditional’ order. The distance traveled from the early years of peasant activism can be gauged from the fact that

⁴⁸ Oommen, “Agrarian Legislations,” 1578.

⁴⁹ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 76.

⁵⁰ *Deshabhimani*, January 11, 1961.

⁵¹ *Navajivan*, November 4, 1961.

⁵² Sathyamurthy, *India*, 136.

there was hardly any participation in public meetings in the countryside then. As Keraleeyan reminisced, the activists had to speak mostly to air and the trees.⁵³

On the other hand, the fall of the Communist ministry and the eight-year gap until the next one was elected gave ample time for the landed classes to prepare for the impending legislation of another agrarian reform bill. In the meantime the non-Communist governments passed legislation that hollowed out the core of the KARB. For example, the Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1964 removed the provision for the compulsory vesting of the rights of the landlord in the government for transfer to the tenants thus putting off the agenda of the abolition of landlordism. It included tenure reform rather than 'land to the tiller', increase in the ceiling limit, doubling the amount of land which can be owned by a 'small-holder', increasing the amount to be paid by tenants for the purchase of the land cultivated and so on.⁵⁴ If the government was lenient, landlords themselves used many innovative methods to evade the law like mortgage arrangements which concealed tenancy, partition and transfer of tenancies (most of which were bogus), etc.

The Act itself encouraged sales and transfers of land on a big scale. Replicating the all-India land-reform experience, during the Congress government, which followed the Communists, in fact more tenants had been evicted than granted fixity!⁵⁵ The Revenue Minister of the government pointed out that the rationale behind the new bill was that "It should not be the case that the benefits of any social reforms should go to only one section of the population and thus by implication, the disadvantages borne by another section. All

⁵³ Quoted in C. H. Kanaran, *Vegam Pora* (Not Fast Enough), vol. 1, ed. Andalal (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1978), 198.

⁵⁴ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 175; *Navayugam*, November 2, 1963.

⁵⁵ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 176, 178, Radhakarishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 177. For details of the various amendments sought by the various non-Communist parties which basically sought to dilute the KARB, see *Deshabhimani*, July 27, 1960.

groups of people should be equally considered and the whole process should be just.”⁵⁶ In essence the minister was hinting at the fact that legislation of the kind that the Communists sought to pass were expropriatory in nature and would undermine the position of the propertied. Questions like the historical origins of property and how its ownership is blatantly skewed are not gone into here and the propertied harbor a sense of being the victims.⁵⁷

It was only with the coming back to power of the Communists heading the United Front ministry in 1967 that they could once again address the question of land reforms.⁵⁸ The ministry introduced the comprehensive land reforms amendment bill in the Assembly on August 19, 1968 and passed it (Kerala Land Reforms Amendment Act, KLRAA) on October 17, 1969 “as a successful attempt to restore the major provisions of the KARB of 1959.”⁵⁹ But the story of land reforms was yet to be completed for the mere act of passing of legislation does not mean much in a formal democracy.⁶⁰ The CPM knew that unless tremendous pressure was brought upon the government from below, the Act would go unimplemented.

In December of 1969, soon after the passing of the Land Reform Act, the CPM held a peasant and agricultural labor convention inaugurated by A. K. Gopalan, the president of the All-India Kisan Sabha. It was reported that nearly 300,000 people attended the main

⁵⁶ *Navayugam*, November 2, 1963.

⁵⁷ Thus it is even argued that measures like land reforms are possible under the Communists because “they do not respect the right to property” (‘George Plackan’, interview by author, Christian landowner, July 25, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; ‘Simi Plackan’, professional, interview by author, July 25, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

⁵⁸ In the meantime in 1964, the Communist Party had split into two on the issue of the kind of relationship to be adopted to the Congress party. The new party was called the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—CPM. CPM became the dominant party in Kerala and in many other states too. Since 1980 both CPM and CPI are part of the Left Democratic Front.

⁵⁹ Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 146.

⁶⁰ Soon after the legislation was passed the CPM-led ministry fell due to internal differences among the constituent parties of the United Front. The CPI left the front to head a new ministry with the support of the Congress party.

rally, which was so large that it impressed the propertied classes. Three campaign *jathas* converged from different parts of the state traversing through many villages and addressing many meetings.⁶¹ Again what is to be noted is the extra-local mobilization of people with the regional and national imaginary strong. In the meeting it was declared that the “peasants themselves” would take the initiative to take over the land and “secure... all benefits under the Act.” According to A. K. Gopalan, “no Government machinery could succeed in implementing land reforms.”⁶² The CPM exhorted its *Karshaka Sanghams* to implement the act through direct action without waiting for the government to do so. It was decided that no rent should be paid, the hutment-dwellers (agricultural labor who were attached to the landlords and who lived in hutments provided by the latter) should fence off ten cents of land around his/her hut, all excess land should be occupied, and that all attempts by the government, police and courts should be resisted.⁶³ This was a major issue of confrontation between the government and CPM activists. The party claimed the deaths of 32 peasants and the arrests of 50000 activists.⁶⁴ According to Gopalan ‘massive repression’ was undertaken by the government against the struggle including the razing of huts and the raping of women laborers.⁶⁵

The hutment dwellers could be easily mobilized because they bore the brunt of the bureaucratic red-tapism.⁶⁶ The land-grab agitation that was launched on the first day of the KLRAA coming into existence had the primary goal of encouraging hutment dwellers to fence off their land to thwart this invariable cumbersomeness of bureaucracy. The landless agricultural laborers in many places put up huts on government and private lands and

⁶¹ *Mathrubhumi*, December 13, 1969; Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 176.

⁶² Jeffrey, *Women and Wellbeing*, 177.

⁶³ *Deshabhimani*, December 16, 1969.

⁶⁴ Sengupta, *Communism*, 278.

⁶⁵ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 290.

⁶⁶ Oommen, “Agrarian Legislations,” 1579.

hoisted the Communist Party flag. About 150, 000 laborers are supposed to have got land in this manner.⁶⁷ This conflict was an important event in bringing to the fore the class contradictions between the landless laborers and the other classes.

It was obvious that without pressure from below, the bureaucracy would not act. For example in the district of Alleppey, by 1973 only 13 families surrendered 392.54 acres of excess land.⁶⁸ The 'Excess Land Agitation' itself was specifically launched in 1972 as a counter to the government's failure to implement ceiling provisions. In the exercise of identifying excess land held, it was impossible to do so without the local participation of the people. A *Samara Samiti* (struggle council) was formed to identify land holdings; the results were matched with Revenue Department figures.⁶⁹ It had become a common practice for the *Samiti* volunteers to enter surplus land belonging to landlords and start cultivating and harvesting crops. The fact that the land was occupied was indicated by planting the red flag of the Communists.⁷⁰ Armed resistance became the norm in areas where peasant mobilization has been strong. The peasantry has taken over illegal surplus lands held by landlords and also protected their crops against the might of the landlords, the police and the hoodlums hired by the landlords. Almost 200 and 300 volunteers were getting arrested every day.⁷¹

A. K. Gopalan again led a jeep procession through the state in 1972 as a part of the campaign to identify excess land during which the objectives and needs of the agitation were explained to the people.⁷² The end result of the process was the identification of almost

⁶⁷ Muralidharan, *Dynamics*, 134.

⁶⁸ Oommen, "Agrarian Struggles," 1579.

⁶⁹ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 203.

⁷⁰ Sathyamurthy, *India*, 259.

⁷¹ Sengupta, *Communism*, 294, 306; *Kerala Kaumudi*, May 26, May 27, June 17, 1972.

⁷² *Keralakaumudi*, July 5, 1972.

200,000 acres of surplus land.⁷³ Gopalan spent 23 days in jail for taking part in the struggle.

He himself noted in irony that he was in prison when India became independent in 1947 and also in the 25th year of its independence.⁷⁴

The Abolition of Landlordism

The cumulative result of almost three decades of struggle was that it bestowed on “Kerala the unique distinction among the Indian states of having abolished feudal landlordism lock, stock and barrel.”⁷⁵ The immediate result of the land-grab and excess land agitation was the accrument of substantial benefits to the agrarian underclass. The main achievement was the inclusion of the Land Reform Act in the Ninth Schedule of the Indian Constitution which put it beyond the purview of judicial review.⁷⁶ A variety of other demands of the Struggle Council like the publication of the ceiling returns, penal sanctions against those in violation of the provisions of the Land Reform Act, inclusion of people’s representatives in the distribution of excess land and so on were met.⁷⁷ The Communist leaders themselves saw the bigger achievement as the politicization of the peasants and agrarian labor with the participation of nearly 200, 000 volunteers in the struggle.⁷⁸ One of the early indicators of the popular support for the mobilization undertaken by the Communists was the increase in votes received by CPM, which went up from 1.5 million

⁷³ Muralidharan, *Dynamics*, 140.

⁷⁴ *Cause of the People*, 296.

⁷⁵ Oommen, *Kerala Economy*, 3.

⁷⁶ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 298.

⁷⁷ Sathyamurthy, *India*, 259.

⁷⁸ *Chintha*, October 13, 1972.

votes (in 1967) to 1.75 million votes in 1970.⁷⁹ It was through the land reforms that the Communist Parties virtually secured its hegemony over the poor peasantry.⁸⁰

Even though the definition of ‘personal cultivation’ was broadened by the Land Reform Act to include ‘supervision’, which negatively affected the slogan, ‘land to the tiller’, the land reform of Kerala leave behind the reforms in other states by a great distance.⁸¹

Despite the fact that the agricultural proletariat was not the main beneficiary of the land reforms,⁸² the provision of allotting 10 cents (1 acre=100 cents) to the hutment dwellers attached to the landlords (and composed mainly of former agrestic slaves) which benefited nearly 300,000 landless households was an important achievement. As a result the percentage of agricultural labor which was without land was reduced from 30 percent in 1963-64 to 7.8 percent in 1983-84.⁸³ What this did was to end the “threat of eviction as a source of landlord control and power”.⁸⁴ Similarly the percentage of other rural labor without land was reduced from 40 percent to 5 percent in the same period.⁸⁵

As Herring has pointed out the “the core of the reforms—the abolition of landlordism was remarkably successful, despite delays, setbacks, and evasion.” He puts the number of tenant beneficiaries at almost 1.3 million which constituted 43.3 percent of the

⁷⁹ Sathyamurthy, *India*, 251.

⁸⁰ In one activist’s account, his family’s faith in Communism and their allegiance to it was sealed with the land reforms (Santhosh, interview).

⁸¹ The normative assumptions behind the ‘land to the tiller’ reform may be construed as bourgeois rather than socialist. It is especially so when ‘tiller’ means not only someone who engages in ‘self-cultivation’, but also who hires and supervises labor. Thus Herring argues that it is more appropriate to term it as a part of bourgeois revolution than socialist revolution (Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 155). But the capitalism that emerges is a regulated one; therefore it cannot be termed just a bourgeois revolution either.

⁸² As Sathyamurthy points out: “Because the legislation defined the term ‘tenant’ in terms of property relations and made no attempt to distinguish between different classes of tenants—in terms of production relations... there was a wide variation in the level of benefit accruing to different classes of tenants as a result of the legislation. Thus, the better off tenants benefited far more, proportionately speaking, than the not well off tenants who controlled less land and employed fewer labourers” (Sathyamurthy, *India*, 287).

⁸³ Oommen, *Kerala Economy*, 4-5.

⁸⁴ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 78.

⁸⁵ Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 179.

agricultural households,⁸⁶ a very significant number by any standard. Of course, the Communists were very well aware of the limitations with which they had to function. And also the fact the reforms would remove only feudalism, not capitalism. “In its anti-feudal character, land reform in Kerala was revolutionary; in other respects, it was reformist and may even be considered to be radical, but was certainly far from revolutionary.”⁸⁷ But it did constrain capitalism, forcing it to be democratically mediated by the organized power of the working class and peasantry.⁸⁸

The magnitude of the transformation has not really been understood; this may be due to what the poet G. Shankara Kurup has outlined: the reforms “with its painless, yet leveling approach geared to distributive justice is not appreciated in its far-reaching implications by many, merely because we have been conditioned to the theory of blood-soaked revolutions.”⁸⁹ But in the minds of people who have suffered under feudalism, the impact of the reforms was nothing but revolutionary. As one of the beneficiaries put it, his family “could not believe the fact that they got rights over the land they have been cultivating over a hundred years.”⁹⁰ Similarly, for the untouchable castes, the securing of land from the landlords and the granting of rights to the homestead were the most significant achievements.⁹¹ Their importance from a comparative perspective emerges clearly when we place them against the experience elsewhere, and the overall story is that of the “long history of failed agrarian reforms.” Even where they have been successful, they have not come about through a democratic mobilization. The most famous irony is that of the

⁸⁶ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 211.

⁸⁷ Satyamurthy, *India*, 289.

⁸⁸ For a detailed understanding of this process see Heller, *Labor of Development*.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 272.

⁹⁰ Santhosh, interview.

⁹¹ ‘Shantha’, *dalit* Communist activist, interview by author, July 22, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

failure of agrarian reforms in the oldest liberal democracy, the United States.⁹² Despite risking embourgeoisement, the Communist Party was clear that until the peasants got permanent rights on the land they tilled, the laws regarding rent reduction and so on were not going to be effective.⁹³ This can be contrasted with the other argument for the indirect alleviation of poverty through higher growth rates that would trickle down. But Ronald Herring argues persuasively that this has not been proved; citing the example of the United States and the failure of land reforms, he points out: “Despite impressive growth in aggregate wealth, the descendants of slaves remained disproportionately poor and excluded for generations. Social democracy was disabled on both fronts: economic justice and political participation.”⁹⁴ The dramatic transformation brought about by the peasant activism under Communism also questions the argument similar to that of the Subaltern Studies put forth by Gail Omvedt that the Communists had a negative attitude towards the peasantry and always wanted the latter to be subordinated to the “leadership of the working class.”⁹⁵

Workers’ Rights

If the land reforms primarily benefited the better off among the tenantry and to some extent the agricultural laborers who lived on hutment sites attached to the landlords, and not the landless agricultural laborers who were actually the actual tillers of the soil, the latter won a significant victory through the legislation of the Kerala Agricultural Workers’ Act (KAWA)

⁹² Ronald J. Herring, “Beyond the Political Impossibility Theorem of Agrarian Reform,” in *Changing Paths: International Development and the New Politics of Inclusion*, ed. Peter P. Houtzager and Mick Moore (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 59, 72.

⁹³ See *Political Resolution of the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party of India* (New Delhi: New Age, 1956).

⁹⁴ Ronald J. Herring, “Contesting the ‘Great Transformation’: Local Struggles with the Market in South India,” in *Agrarian Studies: Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge*, ed. James C. Scott and Nina Bhatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 257.

⁹⁵ Gail Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements in India* (New York: ME Sharpe, 1993), 19.

in 1974, called “the most progressive agrarian legislation up to date anywhere in India.”⁹⁶ This was also the result of a protracted struggle of the agricultural labor, which as we have seen, started in the early forties. The first Communist ministry was dismissed before it could enforce the Minimum Wages Act that it passed. With the impending actualization of land reforms, the agrarian coalition mobilized against feudalism began to collapse. Unlike the subalternist emphasis of an undifferentiated peasant community, the class differentiation was becoming all the more prominent and it was clear that many of the farmers who were resisting the demands of the laborers were ex-tenants and Communist backers.⁹⁷ The CPM increasingly realized that it had to mobilize the landless laborers and the poor peasantry on a bigger scale than before. In Gopalan’s words: “Agricultural laborers now constitute 25 to 40 percent of the population in most of the states and we have to make them *the hub of all our activity*. Reluctance to take up their demands, fearing that this will drive the rich and middle-level peasant away will have to be given up.”⁹⁸ The statewide independent agricultural laborer’s union of the CPM, the *Kerala Karshaka Thozhilali Union* (KSKTU) was formed in 1968, the main aim of which was to fight independently for the rights of the laborers. Their demands were focused on the issue of wages and the right of attached workers to exclusive control over harvesting operations. The farmers were against the raising of wages and also sought to break the labor agitation by importing cheaper workers from neighboring states.⁹⁹

The entire struggle of agricultural labor was to end the reign of feudalism and also despotic capitalism. For a whole day’s backbreaking work of 12-14 hours, sometimes the wages paid were two rice pancakes!¹⁰⁰ One of the important demands won by labor was the

⁹⁶ Sathyamurthy, *India*, 262.

⁹⁷ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 82.

⁹⁸ Original emphasis. *People’s Democracy*, February 11, 1968.

⁹⁹ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 82-83.

¹⁰⁰ Saju, interview.

introduction of the system of sirens to mark the beginning and the end of the day's work, which was earlier decided by the discretion of the landlord. Traditional forms of entitlements like the *theerpu* (payment of paddy to the laborers) were sought to be institutionalized into annual bonus payment for the agricultural laborers.¹⁰¹

Here unlike the emphasis of Subaltern Studies what the laborers are seeking is to establish the rational-legal system of the modern state rather than be subjected to the traditional charismatic authority. At the same time they would resist the logic of accumulation of the modern capitalist state. The KAWA was a culmination of the struggles of landless agricultural labor. In 1973, KSKTU organized a massive harvest strike which mobilized 150,000 laborers; there were also violent confrontations between laborers and the farmers.¹⁰²

KAWA strengthened the provisions for regular hours and payment of wages and established a provident fund for workers. The Act granted the status of 'permanent worker' to any laborer "bound by custom or contract or otherwise to work in the agricultural land of that landowner."¹⁰³ Thus what KAWA did was to fulfill the demand of workers for security of attachment which was the feature of the moral economy of feudalism, but without its hierarchies.¹⁰⁴ Here again the continuity between tradition and modernity and also the disjuncture between the two emerges unlike the one-sided emphasis on the dichotomy in culturalist and modernization paradigms. KAWA also limited the daily hours of work to eight.¹⁰⁵ By 1980 the Communist-led government introduced old age pensions for the workers, which covered almost 170,000 workers in a year's time. The strengthening of labor

¹⁰¹Sathyamurthy, *India*, 186.

¹⁰² Heller, *Labor of Development*, 83.

¹⁰³ *Kerala Agricultural Workers' Act* (Government of Kerala, 1976), section 70.

¹⁰⁴ Herring, "Contesting the Great Transformation"

¹⁰⁵ It was also provided that the wages should be paid at the threshing floor itself (section 19).

evoked the ire of the landowners who called the KAWA 'the factory acts'.¹⁰⁶ The real effect of the powerful movement led by the agricultural labor class was the rise in real wage rates of agricultural labor. By 1987 real wages in Kerala lagged behind only the states of Punjab and West Bengal for men, and Punjab for women despite lagging way behind in agricultural production.¹⁰⁷ As early as 1968, Alleppey and Palghat districts, the strongholds of Communist labor mobilization, had recorded the maximum percentage increase in wage rate compared to even the Green Revolution areas of Punjab, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu.¹⁰⁸

Against Governmentality

The implementation of the land reforms and workers' rights was possible only through the mobilization of classes beyond segmented identities. It was successful because the people "goaded, threatened and shamed the government."¹⁰⁹ There was the relentless emphasis on the fact that the rights can be won over only by agitations and struggle.¹¹⁰ T. K. Oommen has rightly argued that in a society characterized by extreme concentration of wealth and power, the state machinery, the court, the press and so on are hardly sympathetic to any social change in favor of the poor. In this scenario, legislation is necessary, but not a sufficient instrument to institutionalize social change. Therefore, there is a need for "pressure built from below through militant protest movements."¹¹¹ According to CPM, it was foolhardy to believe that the bourgeois government, which was thoroughly constrained by the feudal forces, would implement the land reform by itself:

¹⁰⁶ Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 184.

¹⁰⁷ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 91.

¹⁰⁸ A. V. Jose, "Wage Rates of Agricultural Labourers in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Issue (February 1973): 281-88.

¹⁰⁹ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 205.

¹¹⁰ See *Janayugam*, November 1961.

¹¹¹ Oommen, "Agrarian Struggles," 1572.

Experience has proved that the efforts to solve the problem of redistribution of land through legislation fixing ceilings on land-holding are totally ineffective... Our Party should ceaselessly educate the peasantry and agricultural labor masses that the basic slogan of abolition of landlordism without compensation and the giving of land to agricultural laborers and poor peasants free of cost is to be realized through the mass action of the entire peasantry.¹¹²

Communists never faced the problem of mobilization. The tenantry and the agricultural workers were always a step “ahead of the party as a whole in their willingness to engage in militant political action and to struggle against oppression.”¹¹³ But what Subaltern Studies has not recognized is the need for the channelization of the spontaneity into coherent large-scale action which is what the struggle for land reforms did. The success of the implementation can be gauged by the fact that by 1982 the implementation agencies were able to clear 99.8 percent of the total applications for assignment of ownership rights to cultivating tenants, 99.1 percent of the total applications for purchase of hutments, and 97.2 percent of the total land ceiling returns.¹¹⁴

The process of the legislation and the implementation of land reforms and workers’ rights shows that the effects of transition to modernity are not pre-determined and inexorable but are shaped by human agency and collective action, through parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles. Sometimes even force was required to overcome the might of the ruling classes and the state ruling in their favor. As Marx noted: “the arm of criticism can certainly not supplant the criticism of arms. Material force must be overthrown by material force”.¹¹⁵

The alteration of a social order characterized by the concentration of wealth and power took place not by a denial of ‘modern’ institutions but through them, significantly

¹¹² Cited in Sengupta, *Communism*, 310.

¹¹³ Sathyamurthy, *India*, 205.

¹¹⁴ Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 163.

¹¹⁵ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. Introduction’, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 60.

transforming them at the same time. These very ‘alien’ institutions were appropriated and molded by the disadvantaged groups and classes to their benefit. Thus what was achieved was a substantial subversion of the modern forms of governmentality. Governmentality, a key term in Foucault’s theory and used extensively by Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory, designates power which goes beyond spontaneous forms of its exercise, it is the “regulation of conduct by the more or less rational application of the appropriate technical means.”¹¹⁶ More importantly, Communist peasant activism, through land reforms, achieved a different kind of leveling by eroding pre-modern feudal modes of power, something which has been obfuscated by postcolonial theory in its excessive focus on the critique of modernity. In fact, the peasantry and agricultural laborers could be mobilized under one umbrella beyond class distinctions precisely because of the extreme oppression suffered under feudalism.

The nature of oppression perpetrated by the landlords was severe in many cases with physical violence against the poor tenants and labor being the dominant feature.¹¹⁷ What was being sought through land reforms was the “reversal of the political axis of individualization”,¹¹⁸ the concentration of power in one individual which was characteristic of the feudal system. Rather than operating with a tradition/modernity binary, the Communist discourse was simultaneously resisting the direct forms of power and violence associated with the ‘traditional’ order and also the new “human technologies of rule”¹¹⁹ that characterize modernity. That is why we will argue that the political order sought to be

¹¹⁶ Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 106.

¹¹⁷ Saju, interview. Saju belonging to an erstwhile feudal landed family describes how he grew up with stories of there being a curse on his family because of the atrocities committed by his forefathers. The discourse of recognition is unmistakable. According to Joykunju, a *dalit* Christian laborer, until his father’s generation, they lived like “slaves”, even food being given by the upper caste lords were served on leaves in a hole dug in the ground (interview by author, July 28, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

¹¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 192.

¹¹⁹ Nikolas Rose quoted in Stuart Corbridge et al. *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10.

established by the Communists is qualitatively different from the parliamentary democracy that Foucault describes (quite erroneously) as being, in essence, the same as the feudal system that preceded it.¹²⁰

The other main objective was to reorganize the relations of production through land reforms and workers' rights without which emancipation of the peasantry and agrarian labor was not possible. In an agrarian society, the control of land by the lords and the landlessness of the majority of the agrarian producers led to the suppression of citizenship rights of the latter.¹²¹ Post-colonial theory following Foucault had problematically excluded the analysis of relations of production in its critique of modernity and focused exclusively on power relations, as we have seen. And power itself, in the modern era, unlike the overt violence and haphazardness of feudalism, operates "through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures, and all their daily actions."¹²² For Foucault, power does not originate or is possessed by an individual or groups of individuals: it is "a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised."¹²³ While this analysis is a brilliant exposition of the anonymity of modern forms of power, it is seriously deficient in the understanding of class domination, and as a result it fails to make sense of Third World societies like that of India characterized by despotic capitalism, in which traditional forms of exploitation are conjoined with capitalist ones.¹²⁴ Before the post-structuralist turn, Subaltern Studies had undertaken an effective Gramscian analysis of the Indian society. But even then the lack of an adequate

¹²⁰ "It is the same theory of sovereignty re-activated through the doctrine of Roman Law, that we find in Rousseau and contemporaries... now it is concerned with the construction, in opposition to the administrative, authoritarian and absolutist monarchies, of an alternative model, that of parliamentary democracy" (Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press 1980), 103.

¹²¹ See Herring, "Agrarian Reform," 60.

¹²² Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 152-3.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹²⁴ See Heller, *Labor of Development*, 43.

class analysis was visible,¹²⁵ a tendency that reached its apogee with the cultural turn of Subaltern Studies. This is a major lacuna which prevents us from understanding the normative discourse behind land reforms. The historic struggles behind their implementation were as much as for recognition as they were for material redistribution. The latter is obfuscated in the Foucauldian analysis (Foucault himself, with his questioning of the notion of subjecthood, would not be able to account for recognition either).

Beyond Passive Revolution

Partha Chatterjee has argued: “passive revolution is in fact the general framework of capitalist transition in societies where bourgeois hegemony has not been accomplished in the classical way.”¹²⁶ As a result, while the Indian state in the 1950s sought to undertake rapid industrialization without seeking to disturb the rural power structures, “the logic of accumulation in the ‘modern’ sector inevitably altered the agrarian structure as well and “even subsistence peasant production was deeply implicated in large-scale market transactions, that the forms of agricultural surplus now combined a wide variety and changing mix of ‘economic’ and ‘extra-economic’ power”.¹²⁷ The new Indian state resultant of the anti-colonial struggle did

not attempt to break-up or transform in any radical way the institutional structures of “rational” authority set up in the period of colonial rule... it also does not undertake a full-scale assault on all pre-capitalist dominant classes: rather it seeks to limit their former power, neutralize them where necessary, attack them only selectively, and in general bring them around to a position of subsidiary allies within a reformed state structure.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ See Terence J. Byres, “State, Class and Planning,” in *The State, Development Planning and Liberalisation in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 74.

¹²⁶ Partha Chatterjee, “Development Planning and the Indian State,” in *ibid.*, 95..

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

The land reforms brought about under the aegis of the Communist mobilization, I will argue, have fundamentally moved away from this general trajectory of passive revolution that characterized the larger Indian social transformation. In fact, the land reforms in Kerala were crucial to the avoidance of the Indian denouement. Both the impediments in the form of the nature of the inherited colonial state and the power of pre-capitalist ruling classes were overcome by the Communist mobilization and administration which flattened the power of the pre-capitalist dominant classes and also changed the nature of the state established after independence.¹²⁹ The Communists could be seen as completing the bourgeois democratic revolution, a task which the bourgeoisie could not undertake in any effective manner.¹³⁰ But the elimination of the feudal and parasitic elements does not lead to the entrenchment of the bourgeoisie, rather a capitalism regulated by the power of the subordinate classes. Subaltern Studies after recognizing passive revolution, goes onto posit it as the 'general' framework for Third World societies. This is again falling back into historicism and evolutionism which negates a different trajectory (as in the Kerala case) to modernity. Moreover, it valorizes passive revolution for it sees the pre-capitalist community as a critique of capital and modernity. This obfuscates the exploitation within the moral economy of feudalism.

Chatterjee argues that after the initial years the Indian state had moved away from programs like 'community development' to the distribution of 'poverty removal' packages directly to the selected target groups among the poor "as a gift from the highest political leadership." For him such 'pre-modern' and traditional charismatic forms of legitimation are not an aberration but the "unity and the indeed the representative character of the 'modern'

¹²⁹ More about this in the next chapter.

¹³⁰ P. Eashvaraiah, *The Communist Parties in Power and Agrarian Reforms in India* (Delhi: Academic Foundation, 1993), 87.

sector as the leading element within the nation has to be legitimized precisely through these means.”¹³¹ This becomes a justification for the perpetuation of individualized modes of power characteristic of feudalism. The Kerala experience again goes against this formulation as the mobilization from below not only renders useless the role of the state as a benevolent patron but also reinstates another facet of the traditional order, the (comparative) security and permanence enjoyed by the subaltern classes in the feudal order.¹³² The latter is achieved through the modern forms of legislation enacted by the political order. The legitimation of the ‘modern’ political order comes not by propping up the power of the feudal propertied and ruling in alliance with it, but by realizing to a great extent the aspirations of the pre-capitalist producers.

Chatterjee further argues, “‘rational’ planning and the other of ‘irrational’ politics—are inseparable parts of the very logic of this [developmental] state conducting the passive revolution.”¹³³ According to him there is a profound ambiguity in the “relations between the ‘modern’ sector and the rest of the people-nation” because of the mobilizations based on “pre-existing cultural solidarities such as locality, caste, tribe, religious community or ethnic identity.” The more fundamental ambiguity is that of a “state process which must further accumulation while legitimizing the ‘modern’ sector itself as representative of the nation as a whole”,¹³⁴ or that of “combining accumulation with legitimation while avoiding the ‘unnecessary rigours’ of social conflict.”¹³⁵ Again the dichotomy of modern and tradition is operative here. State is associated with the modern while tribe, caste, religious community are pre-modern. There are no fractures within the latter; they are homogenous wholes which

¹³¹ Chatterjee, “Development Planning,” 101.

¹³² See Herring, “Contesting the Great Transformation.”

¹³³ Chatterjee, “Development Planning,” 101.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

resist the modern. This is an assertion that bears no relation to the reality of peasant and labor struggles in Kerala. These struggles question the ambiguities which Chatterjee posits as the “*necessary* consequences of the specific relation of the postcolonial development state with the people-nation” and also the assertion “that these ambiguities cannot be removed or resolved within the present constitution of the state.”¹³⁶ Of course, this comes about with the questioning of the logic of accumulation itself or primitive accumulation which meant the “expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil”.¹³⁷ What the land reforms prevented was the further expropriation of the direct producers. They do not perpetuate the pre-capitalist community as it is, but reconstitutes it by eliminating its hierarchies and exploitation. The order of capitalism is now regulated by the peasantry and working classes, unlike in passive revolution, where it establishes its hegemony by incorporating dominant precapitalist classes by making them the subordinate partners.

Redistribution and Recognition

I have argued so far that the struggle for land is not merely a ‘material’ struggle but also simultaneously as a symbolic struggle against oppression. Here, to revisit Nancy Fraser, redistribution and recognition are irreducibly bound together. Justice according to her “requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition.”¹³⁸ It is only analytically that we can make the distinction between the two for

(e)ven the most material economic institutions have a constitutive, irreducible cultural dimension; they are shot through with signification and norms. Conversely, even the most discursive cultural practices have a constitutive, irreducible political-economic dimension, they are underpinned by material supports. Thus, far from

¹³⁶ Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 217.

¹³⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 667.

¹³⁸ Fraser, “From Redistribution,” 68.

occupying two airtight separate spheres, economic injustice and cultural injustice are usually interimbricated so as to reinforce one another dialectically.¹³⁹

Once we bear this in mind it becomes easier to conceptualize that even “[r]edistributive remedies generally presuppose an underlying conception of recognition.”¹⁴⁰ The Communist land reforms, in our view, are an excellent example of this mutual constitutiveness. Post-colonial theory obscures this interconnection by focusing on the cultural in isolation.¹⁴¹ Early accounts like that of James Scott had begun this tendency with the notion of the ‘moral economy’ which has influenced Subaltern Studies and post-colonial theory to a great extent. According to Scott,

The problem of exploitation and rebellion is ... not just a problem of calories and income but is a question of peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, of reciprocity. ... [Thus] the study of the moral economy of the peasantry, while it begins in the domain of economics must end in the study of the peasant culture and religion.¹⁴²

While this is valid to a certain extent in analyzing the moral economy of the peasant, it is extended as a general framework by Scott and as well as Subaltern Studies. Here the problem of exploitation is conceived as a problem of recognition, and then the latter is stripped of its “social-structural underpinnings,” and is equated with “distorted identity. With the politics of recognition thus reduced to identity politics, the politics of redistribution is displaced.”¹⁴³ Even nuanced post-structuralist accounts like that of Arturo Escobar indulge

¹³⁹ Ibid., 72. This is not to deny the existence of ideal-typical collectivities that are located purely in the political economy and cultural ends of the spectrum. One example of the latter is groups that are oppressed on the basis of sexuality (Fraser, “From Redistribution,” 74-77).

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 73.

¹⁴¹ The split between the material and cultural aspects is complete in post-developmental arguments like that of Stephen Marglin, “[C]ulture is seen by all of us as foundational. That is we see culture as neither reflective nor instrumental. Culture is not a superstructure that emerges from and reflects a given material base. Nor is culture to be understood as the instrument which may facilitate or obstruct improvement in the material standard of living” (“Towards the Decolonization of the Mind,” in *Dominating Knowledge: Development, Culture and Resistance*, ed. F. Apffel Marglin and S. Marglin (London: Clarendon, 1991), 23.

¹⁴² Scott, *Moral Economy*, viii.

¹⁴³ Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition,” *New Left Review* 3 (May-June 2000), 110-11. The identity model transposes the problem of recognition to the cultural and political terrain. To suffer misrecognition is to be subjected to

in the mystification of the cultural. While he rightly recognizes that “peasant resistance reflects more than the struggle for land and living conditions”, he goes to the extent of arguing: “it is *above all* a struggle over symbols and meanings, a cultural struggle.”¹⁴⁴ Escobar argues that the countryside is characterized by two economies, “one based on livelihood, the other on acquisition” with the former dominating the peasant economy. The livelihood economy is not governed by the logic and rationality of the market even though the latter is displacing the former. This reliance on use-value rather than exchange value is attributed by Escobar to the “sheer fact of cultural difference.”¹⁴⁵ In this analysis, the pre-capitalist economy is ‘cultural,’ there is no class differentiation within the peasantry which is a homogenized category. As in Scott¹⁴⁶ and Subaltern Studies, the concept of class is equal to peasant. Subaltern Studies also believes that only capitalism is economic, while pre-capitalism is cultural.¹⁴⁷

While it is true that the ‘peasant economy’ is characterized less by market rationality, it is surprising to learn from Escobar the absence of exploitation/oppression, economic or otherwise, within it. This resembles the classic Chayanovian ‘middle peasant thesis’ which posits the reproduction of the family labor farm irrespective of the presence or absence of feudalism, capitalism or socialism. It is not dependent on the fluctuation in wages, profit, interest and rent and so on. Change itself is endogenous and is linked to demographic

devaluation by the dominant culture, and consequently ends up internalizing the negative view held by the dominant other. The only remedy for this is for the misrecognized group to counter the hegemonic representation by developing a new affirmative culture in which it is not discriminated against. Fraser points out that the identity model largely ignores economic maldistribution and also sees cultural representation as a free-floating discourse without any institutionalized underpinnings or its intertwinement with distributive injustice (Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition,” 111).

¹⁴⁴ My emphasis. Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 167.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁴⁶ Tom Brass, “Moral Economies, Subalterns, New Social Movements and the (Re-) Emergence of a (Post-) Modernised Middle Peasant,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 18 (1991): 179.

¹⁴⁷ See Chakrabarty and Cullenberg, *Transition and Development*, 159.

differentiation and consumption requirements.¹⁴⁸ What is most problematic in this picture of the ‘eternal’ peasant economy outside history portrayed by Escobar and Subaltern Studies is that it fails to theorize the possibility or the desirability of emancipation among the ‘peasantry’ and implicitly participates in the affirmation of statusquoism.¹⁴⁹

Scott’s main theme is that peasants are governed by a ‘subsistence ethic’ which means that their fundamental motive is to ensure themselves a reliable subsistence, rather than to seek maximization of profits as visualized in neo-classical economics. Pre-capitalist communities were built around this ‘subsistence ethic’ and subsistence security was guaranteed through “traditional forms of patron-client relationships, reciprocity, and redistributive mechanisms”.¹⁵⁰ Scott argues that the “minimal formulation was that elites must not invade the subsistence reserve of poor people; its maximal formulation was that elites had a positive moral contribution to provide for the maintenance needs of their subjects in time of dearth”.¹⁵¹ What provoked peasant rebellions was the radical undermining of this moral economy of the ‘subsistence ethic’ by the imposition of capitalism and the development of the modern state under colonialism. This is similar to Chatterjee’s notion of the imposition of class from outside. The peasant revolts could thus, be essentially seen as attempts to reestablish the traditional practices – the moral economy of the pre-capitalist community.¹⁵² Scott also fundamentally reverses the Marxian notion of exploitation in which the proportion of the product expropriated was the measure of exploitation. On the contrary, here, from the ‘existential’ viewpoint of the peasant, exploitation is seen as not

¹⁴⁸ Brass, “Moral Economies,” 175.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁵⁰ Scott, *Moral Economy*, 9.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 7.

‘how much is taken’ but ‘how much is left’.¹⁵³ It is this ‘safety-first’, ‘risk averse’ behavior of the peasant that makes him resist capitalist penetration, which threatens subsistence, and not feudalism, which guarantees it. Also, the main mode of resistance by the peasantry is not of a mass revolutionary nature but of a small-scale, spontaneous “everyday forms of peasant resistance” characterized by “poaching, foot-dragging, pilfering, dissimulation and flight.”¹⁵⁴ I am not arguing that revolutionary activity is the main mode of peasant resistance but to recognize the potentiality that exists as a part of the peasants’ contradictory consciousness.

Like Subaltern Studies’ celebration of subalternity, Scott “is relatively uninterested in the consequences of resistance, celebrating the fact of the ‘weapons of the weak’ and leaving one in no doubt as to where his sympathies lie, but ultimately pessimistic about the possibilities of change.”¹⁵⁵ The push for land reforms by the lower classes can only be understood by going beyond the moral economy which “denies the active striving of the different components of the rural population as class subjects; that is, either by rich peasants to become small agrarian capitalists or by poor peasants and agricultural laborers to improve their position as workers.”¹⁵⁶ In contrast, the Communist mobilization could succeed precisely because of the existence of aspirations of emancipation among the oppressed classes and its ability to connect with them. Here material exploitation was a crucial factor. As one Communist activist recounted his experience growing up in a poor peasant family in the 1950s: for the poor peasantry “paddy was God”; one works all day in the field and at the end of it when the harvest is taken away by the landlord, it was “heart wrenching”. This was when Marxism began to appear as ‘divine’ and ‘godly’. It was Marxism that made them

¹⁵³ Ibid., 31

¹⁵⁴ J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xiii.

¹⁵⁵ J. Hariss, “Between Economism and Post-Modernism,” in *Rethinking Social Development: Theory, Practice and Research*, ed. David Booth (London: Longman, 1994), 192.

¹⁵⁶ Brass, “Moral Economists,” fn. 7, 196.

understand that what one produced through one's hard labor belonged to him. Earlier it went to the lord. "Only Communism can provide a solution to material problems in the world."¹⁵⁷

The notion of subsistence itself began to change as "comparative social learning expanded significantly the standards of what subsistence should mean. If former tenants can wear shirts of synthetic cloth and wristwatches, young laborers ask, why can't they?" Also, "public policy provided crucial cues about rights and social justice, which revised expectations and were incorporated strategically into the struggle."¹⁵⁸ As the character Kelan (an agricultural laborer) says in the novel *Cair*: "Now everyone one can walk anywhere wearing a shirt and a head cloth, singing a song and smoking a *beedi*."¹⁵⁹

Rather than yearn for the pre-market era with its guaranteed subsistence and the benevolence of the patron, the under classes in the post-land reforms era are participants in further struggles to democratize and socialize the means of production. They are also reluctant to work for the former landlords. The sarcasm with which the tenants treat their former landlords is very evident as seen from the following account at a fair-price shop, the tenant asks: "Once when I brought your *varam* [lords' share of the crop] promptly, you returned it asking me to dry it again. Now what will you tell this shop-keeper when he supplies you rotten and stinking rice?"¹⁶⁰ Most importantly, the intertwinement of the material and symbolic is visible from the fact that derogatory practice towards the lower castes could not be sustained anymore for the lack of material basis. No longer practices like coercing women from tenant families into sexual relations with the landlord with the threat

¹⁵⁷ 'Basheer', interview by author, August 21, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

¹⁵⁸ Herring, "Contesting the Great Transformation," 255. But I do not agree with Herring's affirmation of James Scott's thesis for he does not take into account the problems with it that we have discussed.

¹⁵⁹ Manalil, *Kalathinte*, 140.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 239, 240.

of eviction for unpaid rent were possible.¹⁶¹ Before it was common for the tenants of polluting castes to deliver the crop through persons of non-polluting castes. But after the reforms, the polluting castes have refused to adhere to such humiliating practices even threatening to take the crop back if the lords refused to accept it. This was possible only because of the elimination of the fear of eviction with the conferment of ownership rights on the tenants.¹⁶² Such attitudes of defiance had become quite common.

The allotment of hutment sites and the resultant improvement in the status of the agricultural laborers had an unmistakable dimension of recognition. Jeffrey notes how the mainly lower-caste poor were able to “walk without self-debasement” because of the minimum security, guaranteed by the hutment.¹⁶³ The status misrecognition suffered by the lower classes found a strong rectification with the ascendance of the Communist Party. The majority of the supporters of the party were considered by the elites and middle classes as a part of a class “with very little at stake and much less faith in dignified behaviour, decent language, or drawing room courtesies.” They were the “unknown, uncultured and uneducated people suddenly shooting up to positions of power”.¹⁶⁴

The derision towards the lower castes (more than lower classes) is something that persists till today and is seen in the way the upper castes talk about the lack of charisma among the Communist leaders which is an allusion to their lower caste origins and the darker skin color.¹⁶⁵ Or these would take the form of upper castes mocking the lower caste attempt to adopt upper caste names or even ‘Communist’ names like Chou Enlai or Stalin.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Saju, interview.

¹⁶² See Ibid.

¹⁶³ Jeffrey, *Women and Well-being*, 180. See also Joseph Mathew, *Ideology, Protest and Social Mobility: Case Study of Mahars and Pulayas* (Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1986), 107.

¹⁶⁴ Lieten, *First Communist*, 128.

¹⁶⁵ ‘Mohan Unnithan’, retired professional from a prominent landed Nayar family, interview by author, May 10, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

¹⁶⁶ ‘A. K. Nair’, retired school teacher, interview by author, July 25, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

But these remain only at a symbolic level, and that too in the private sphere, with no real power to revert to earlier practices. Thus there is a certain resignation to the present system in which the “forward [upper] castes have no place”.¹⁶⁷

What the emergence of Communism did was to put a stop to the lower caste attempts at attainment of recognition by the method of conversion to semitic religions like Christianity and Islam, only to suffer discrimination within their fold.¹⁶⁸ The struggle for recognition was now interlinked with the struggle for redistribution of material resources without displacing the latter. Here the Communists are moving from an identity model to a status model “which understands social justice as encompassing two analytically distinct dimensions: a dimension of recognition, which concerns the effects of institutionalized meanings and norms on the relative standing of social actors; and a dimension of distribution, which involves the allocation of disposable resources to social actors.”¹⁶⁹

What land reforms did was to break the economic dependence of the lower castes on the upper castes and the consequent religious dependence. The upper castes controlled the temple complex and each low caste had a specific function according to the rank in the performance of temple rituals and festivities. The temple-based culture of hierarchies collapsed because the land reforms struck at the base of the material power of temples—the extensive ownership of lands.¹⁷⁰ Even though the religious dependence may persist in the post-reforms era, it has become a mere vestige of former practices.¹⁷¹ As Filippo and

¹⁶⁷ ‘Janamma Nair,’ retired government employee, interview by author, July 26, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

¹⁶⁸ Lieten, *First Communist*, 162. Even among (upper caste) Christians, there was a ‘taboo’ about interacting with lower castes. In schools run by the Church, there were in the 1950s instances when the students were treated differently according to their caste status. The lower caste students were even made to work (without pay) on the school premises (‘Annie Jacob’, housewife, interview by author, July 27, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

¹⁶⁹ Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition,” 116.

¹⁷⁰ Saju, interview.

¹⁷¹ See Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 252.

Caroline Osella write: The upper caste “Nayars appear to have made temples their ‘last stand’ for the maintenance and assertion of caste distinction, an arena for preservation of monopoly cultural capital.”¹⁷²

Just as the land reforms, the institutionalization of the rights of agricultural labor not only contributed to their material amelioration, but also to the amelioration of the malrecognition suffered by them. What the contractual relationship did was to move away from the “personalized ties, bounded information, discretionary gifts, and caste subordination that governed traditional exchange relations.”¹⁷³ The breakdown of patron-client relations and the caste hierarchy was the most significant outcome. The traditional patron was substituted by the state and labor-tying arrangements by contractual obligations; the state could now interfere in the disputes between landowners and laborers.¹⁷⁴ The emboldening of the workers was palpably demonstrated by the fact that the number of agricultural disputes referred to the Labor Department went up from 444 to 4279 in the two years after the legislation of KAWA.¹⁷⁵ According to a laborer, earlier “if you asked for wages, you could get beaten up, now proper wages are demanded “as matter of right,” not as charity from the lord.”¹⁷⁶

Even the attitude of the employers has changed: “It has become the norm to respect the laborers.”¹⁷⁷ The craving for recognition as an equal member and citizen of society is evident from the account of an untouchable laborer: “In the past, we would have to go to the landlords’ house to get our pay. We would stand with our head bowed and our hands open. Now he must come to the field to pay us. If he doesn’t have exact change, we send

¹⁷²Osella and Osella, *Social Mobility*, 185.

¹⁷³ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 102.

¹⁷⁴ Section 23, *Workers’ Act*.

¹⁷⁵ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 139-40.

¹⁷⁶ Selvan, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, May 10, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

¹⁷⁷ M. A. Jose, interview.

him off to get it.” Similarly in the words of an activist of KSKTU: “in the past laborers were slaves. They depended on the charity of the landlords. But the [Communist] party has taught them the right to demand fair wages.”¹⁷⁸ Even though the latter quote discounts the fact that the laborers themselves are invested with a critical (albeit contradictory) consciousness, it shows the extent to which the Communist Party had brought about a new discourse. In *Coir* we again see how the first strike of agricultural labor declared by the Party in the early days was mocked at by the landowners, but the latter soon realized that not a single laborer came to work delivering a blow to patron-client relations.¹⁷⁹ Now the matter of wages is something that is beyond dispute.¹⁸⁰ The struggle so far has been not been in terms of collective rights of workers and peasants alone, but it was also a struggle for the assertion of the individual. Subaltern Studies, as we have seen, in privileging community does not allow any scope for individual rights which are mere bourgeois manifestations. The emphasis on love and kinship stand as dichotomous with the claims of the individual.¹⁸¹ In contrast the persistent theme of the accounts part of this study is the assertion of the individual along with the collectivity.¹⁸²

The success of the land reforms was the cumulative combination of legislation and agitation even though “the volume and density of the benefits accruing from land reform legislation have not at all been proportionate to the intensity of struggles waged by these strata of the Kerala peasantry.”¹⁸³ The unprecedented mobilization of peasants and

¹⁷⁸ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 95.

¹⁷⁹ Manalil, *Kalathinte*, 135.

¹⁸⁰ Satheesan, Joykunju and M. A. Jose, interviews.

¹⁸¹ See Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 239.

¹⁸² In one laborer’s account, under feudalism, the superior could do anything, “make anyone sleep or stand”. Now if anybody, including the employer, violates his space, he would not tolerate it (Selvan, interview). Even in the seventies the Communists were leading a struggle against the practice of landlords (and even their children) addressing adult laborers as *chekken* and *pennu* (boy and girl) (see *Deshabbimani* 19, 2004).

¹⁸³ Sathyamurthy, *India*, 274.

agricultural laborers, indicated by the huge numbers in which they participated is an indicator of the importance of the discourse of the ‘material’ in the transition to modernity. The effectiveness of the Communist project was in the recognition and the synthesis of this element. At the same time an economistic conception of the peasantry—as the ‘backward’ stratum which has to be made capable of producing efficiently for the market—was avoided. The “physicalist and probabilistic” discourse with a “purely instrumental conception of nature and work”¹⁸⁴ has been the overriding characteristic of development projects in Third World. Communism in Kerala went beyond this conception to see peasants as leading a “whole way of life”.¹⁸⁵ This is seen in the Communists’ sharp understanding of the cultural dimensions of feudalism—the systematic misrecognition suffered by people across classes.

But this, as we have seen, was not by adopting a culturalist position, which argues that “the economy is not only, or even principally, a material entity. It is above all a cultural production, a way of producing human subjects and social orders of a certain kind.”¹⁸⁶ Of course, there is no denying the fact that the emergence of a new mode of production requires changes in the moral and cultural sphere as well. Habermas has questioned the attribution of the status of independent variable to forces of production in the Marxist

¹⁸⁴ Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 160

¹⁸⁵ See *Ibid.*, 162. The Communist project, even though was part and parcel of the modernity project, was not implicated in progressism, especially in its popular versions. In its attitude towards development, it was very sensitive to the human cost of big development projects. In the early sixties, for example, A. K. Gopalan led a popular movement of the people summarily evicted in an area earmarked for an hydro-electric project. The police adopted very harsh methods including the destruction of huts and standing crops (Sathyamurthy, *India*, 219). While he accepted that evictions might have to be undertaken sometimes, he wondered whether it should be done at the expense of the proper rehabilitation of the people involved. If the latter is the case, “it only means the destruction of thousands of human-beings in the name of national reconstruction” (Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 236). The KKS organized ‘block *jathas*’ in many parts of the state and also house-to-house campaigns, discussions and meetings (Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 135). There was a statewide agitation against another eviction for a forest conservation project in which picketing of collectorates and *taluk* offices were undertaken. The peasant *jatha* reached the state capital and the confrontation with the police resulted in 1986 Communist activists being arrested on the spot (*Mathrubhumi*, December 12, 1961). In support of the peasant struggle, the working class unions under the Communist Party struck work and the number of workers involved were over 100,000 (Muralidharan, *Dynamics*, 122).

¹⁸⁶ Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 59.

analysis. Instead, according to him: “The introduction of new forms of social integration...requires knowledge of a moral-practical sort and not technically useful knowledge that can be implemented in rules of instrumental and strategic action.”¹⁸⁷ But the fact that instrumental, strategic, and market-related action has made spectacular incursions into variety of cultural spaces without necessarily altering them proves the predominance of the ‘material’ in determining a social formation. As Gramsci had recognized: “mass ideological factors always lag behind mass economic phenomena”.¹⁸⁸ Therefore to reduce the economy to merely or mainly a cultural system is to see social reality in terms of categories like tradition and modernity without paying attention to production relations and forces of production within these. Here exploitation within feudalism, which we have seen, so far, gets absolved with capital, technology and the state considered as the oppressors of the peasantry. While the “heterogeneity of the peasant reality” is considered, class differentiation in the form of categories like proletarians, small farmers and capitalist farmers is not considered part of this heterogeneity.¹⁸⁹ This culturalist approach adopts an ahistorical approach seeing all peasant villages as “communal, subsistence-oriented, nonexploitative, culturally in tension with ‘outside’ dominant classes, and economically on the defensive against encroaching capitalism or imperialism.”¹⁹⁰ Jeffrey Paige has demonstrated that exploitative class relations and conflict can exist within subsistence-oriented villages.¹⁹¹

The most important dimension of the Communist negotiation of modernity in this phase of the struggle for land reforms and labor legislation was the fusing of the material and the symbolic, rather than see these dimensions in isolation. It crucially recognized that

¹⁸⁷ Quoted in Heller, “Habermas,” 37.

¹⁸⁸ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 168.

¹⁸⁹ See Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 144-5.

¹⁹⁰ Skocpol, “What Makes Peasants Revolutionary?” 360.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

substantive democracy could not be realized without material redistribution of resources.¹⁹²

But the struggle for redistribution was aided by the struggle for recognition, without the latter displacing the former.¹⁹³ What is important is to recognize the tremendous push by the subordinate classes to end pre-capitalist forms of domination, unlike the arguments that have merged as a part of all 'post' discourses. The Communists were merely critical catalysts of this motivation. Even though we do not have to accept the progressist and linear tenor of Marx's early formulation of imperialism as an "unconscious tool in history", his conceptualization of idyllic village communities as "the solid foundation of Oriental despotism... enslaving [the human existence] beneath traditional rules... contaminated by distinctions of caste and slavery" is definitely what the peasantry and the agricultural labor in Kerala villages would have agreed with.

The mass support for land reforms and the workers' legislation demonstrates in no uncertain terms the questioning of the romanticization of feudalism. Here a rethinking of the Polanyian problematic is needed: while embedding of production relations in society is imperative, it is also necessary to see that disembedding is liberatory. Communist success was in the contribution to the "depersonalization of social relations, disembedded from social conditions of servitude, diffuse claims, or extra-economic domination but reembedded in new social institutions in the form of public law."¹⁹⁴ But what is significant in the

¹⁹² Land reforms and the Workers' Act were one of the main reasons for the phenomenal decrease in poverty levels in Kerala. In one poor peasant's view, unlike under feudalism, at least there is some security after land reforms and "there is not a house which goes without gruel" (Kochavan, interview by author, July 28, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording). One of the important results of labor activism under Communism is that the informal sector is as organized as the formal sector, unlike other parts of India. The daily wage rate of paddy field workers increased from Rs. 11 in 1981 to Rs. 36 in 1991 and to Rs. 112 in 1998-99 (*Economic Review*, State Planning Board (Government of Kerala, 2000).

¹⁹³ The poor in Kerala are now imbued with "a sense of *power* and *self worth*". Unlike the feudal era, the lower castes now do not take oppression lying down. As one person put it: "it is not whether he 'can', rather now it is that he 'will' retort" if wronged by the elite (Ann George, "Multiple Dimensions of Well-Being: A Micro-level Study of the Poor" (M. Phil dissertation, Centre for Development Studies, 2001), 67-68.

¹⁹⁴ Herring, "Contesting the Great Transformation," 255.

struggles against feudalism is the reinterpretation of, and the dialectical carrying forward of, the critical elements within it. Thus permanent employment, which was a feature of the traditional feudal arrangement, was now reinstated in KAWA without the accompanying servility of the former.

Even though the land reforms benefited the different classes and castes disproportionately, its effect on the breakdown of caste hierarchies was unmistakable. This was basically due to the removal of material underpinning of caste hierarchy. The greatest loss of land was suffered by the (so far hegemonic) Brahmins, mainly the landowning class and the net gainers were the Tiyyas/Ezavvas and the Nayars leading to the end of caste-class correspondence. Some of the upper castes were now seen engaged in manual labor and even as dependents of lower caste patrons. The control of landlords on village life manifested in practices such as their *illam* (house) serving as a court to decide all village disputes ended and was substituted by the mediatory role of the peasant union and the Communist Party.¹⁹⁵

The successful negotiation of the transition to capitalist modernity through land reforms and worker legislation also shows the inadequacy of resistance mounted only on a cultural level as theorized in the writings of Subaltern Studies. Ludden cogently argues that there is a similarity among Subaltern history, neo-classical economics and rational choice theory, in that “they all depict social actors who are driven by strict rules of behaviour and consciousness, established in theory.”¹⁹⁶ What is missing in the subalternist portrayals is social change, social mobility, or even the fact that subalterns can themselves turn into elites.¹⁹⁷ The social transformation in Kerala belies the subalternists’ ahistorical depiction of

¹⁹⁵ See Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles*, 213 ff.

¹⁹⁶ Ludden, “Subalterns,” 212.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

peasant struggles as merely against state and modernity. The class conflict, the struggle against feudalism and capitalism, the craving for equality point to this. The subaltern theory on the other hand, is more interested in recovering 'difference' as a criterion in history. For it capitalism is never foundational or universal, there is always 'ambivalence' and 'alterity' present in its constitution. The story of capitalist modernity in the third world is characterized by 'incompleteness' and 'failures'. Its universality marred by the particularities in the form of race, nation, religion and so on.¹⁹⁸

In Kerala capital has been resisted not because of the operation of difference, but fusing together of these differences, and at the same time by the internal critique of these essentialized differences. Nation, caste and religion at various times in the struggle, unlike in the subaltern narrative, were mobilized in the service of capital and power. If this has been overcome, and the subjection of the peasantry and agricultural labor to the processes of primitive accumulation and the resultant fate of proletarianization have been avoided, it has primarily to do with the qualitatively different political and social mobilization that emerged under the Communists. Even when difference is claimed it is about the inauguration of new dispensation which was radically different from the older power structures and other states in India. The land reforms (along with the regulation of work conditions) were considered as the "greatest contribution" of Communism. Communist leaders and activists are particularly proud of this fact especially when compared to other Indian states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where feudal forms of oppression are extremely severe.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Prakash, "Post-Orientalist".

¹⁹⁹ P. G. Suresh Kumar, former middle rung Communist leader, interview by author, July 27, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; Selvan, Kochavan, Saju, interviews. According to Selvan, in relatively advanced states like Tamil Nadu people are bought and sold like cattle for Rs. 20,000. Even non-Communists compare the achievement of Kerala with the north Indian states where "there is no respect for life" or economic security for the workers ('Pradeep Kumar', interview by author, July 19, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; 'Sunil Kumar', interview by author, July 19, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; 'Divakaran Menon', interview by author, August 18, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

Chapter 7

Reconstituting the Political: The People's Plan Campaign

If the last chapter saw the Communist negotiation of modernity in the sphere of political economy with regard to the land reforms and the workers' Act, in this chapter we will look at its negotiation of the 'political' by specifically focusing on the decentralization program called the People's Plan Campaign initiated by the CPM-led Left government in the period 1996-2001.¹ Despite the critique of modernity, the biggest lacuna in postcolonial theory is the absence of a conception of an alternative to the present modern political system. It wants to expose the "contingency of instituted forms of politics and open up new forms of political sociability,"² or in Chatterjee's words, to fashion a language that "must allow us to talk about community and the state at the same time".³ But the major difficulty is that these arguments do not specify with any detail what the contours are of these 'new forms of political sociability', or the kind of community they have in mind—if we assume that it is not the existing communities with their hierarchies. It will be argued that the People's Plan constitutes another moment in Communism's appropriation of the critical potential of modernity, of the inauguration of new forms of political sociability which are not just anchored in older forms of community, and of the radical restructuring of the role of the state itself.

More than the successes and failures of the Plan,⁴ this chapter will be more interested in the kind of discourse that it has inaugurated and its implications for the trajectory of

¹ I will also trace the lineages of the program.

² Vivek Dhareshwar, "Postcolonial in the Postmodern: Or, The Political after Modernity," *Economic and Political Weekly* (July 29, 1995): PE-109.

³ Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 11.

⁴ Moreover, since the project itself was suspended due to the defeat of the CPM-led government in 2001, it has hardly reached its conclusion. This research shows that the People's Plan will be taken up on a renewed scale again and this has been stated by the Communist-led front which has recently come to power again.

modernity in Kerala. I will argue that the People's Plan constituted another significant effort at the extension of popular sovereignty which again fundamentally puts into question postcolonial theory's understanding of the relationship between state, civil society, and modernity in Third World societies. The discourse of democracy, once introduced, takes on an inexorable logic. "[A]s de Tocqueville clearly understood, once human beings accept the principle of equality in one sphere they will attempt to extend it to every other sphere of life."⁵ The People's Plan could be seen as the expansion of the agenda set by the Communist movement in its seven-decade struggle, taking on new issues after the momentous struggle for land reforms and workers' rights.

Here what emerges through the People's Plan is also the importance of the role of political intervention, and the overcoming of economic reductionism by the Communist movement. The "constitutive role of political intervention" is a "supplementary logic" that is already present in Marx's texts,⁶ but has largely been ignored. In Gramsci, this takes center-stage: "it is not the economic structure which directly determines political action, but it is the interpretation of it and of the so-called laws which govern the course it takes." Further, according to him:

The term 'catharsis' can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political sphere, that is the higher elaboration of the structure into superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from 'objective' to 'subjective' and from 'necessity' to 'freedom'.⁷

All this happens in the sphere of the civil society, which for Gramsci is not merely the sphere of private interests that sustained the hegemony of the bourgeoisie, as it was for Hegel and Marx, but is also the terrain in which the struggles for counterhegemony are

⁵ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe quoted in Anna Marie Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 7.

⁶ Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe*, 63.

⁷ Antonio Gramsci quoted in Norberto Bobbio, "Gramsci and the Concept of Civil Society," in *Civil Society*, ed. Keane, 86, 73-100.

launched. For Gramsci, the “‘proper relation between State and civil society’ suggests that the State should rest upon the support of an active, self-conscious and variegated civil society and should, in turn, sustain and promote the development of the constructive forces in that society.”⁸ In the case of the Marxist project in Kerala, this relationship was given a new resonance with the latter dimension assuming great importance. Thus, remarkably, the People’s Plan was the product of a State-led initiative. If Gramsci had insisted that the revolution must first occur in civil society before it can take place in the state,⁹ here the relationship is almost reversed, even though we are not referring to anything that resembles a revolution. Nevertheless, what we can gain from Gramsci is the insight that the resolution of the historic problem of the oppressed class cannot happen merely in the sphere of economic relations: “an exclusive concentration on the base...leads the working class towards a sterile and indecisive class struggle.” While material conditions have to be transcended, they cannot also be done so by mere domination without consent.¹⁰ The Communist movement’s initiation of People’s Plan showed an acute understanding of these dimensions.

The Material Context

If the economic structure of Kerala society remained relatively unchanged till the implementation of the land reforms, it underwent tremendous changes following it. The success of the land reforms and workers’ struggles themselves generated new problems. From the point of view of the Communist movement what was significant was the emergence of a new class of capitalist farmers from the previously oppressed class of

⁸ Robert Cox, “Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium: Prospects for an Alternative World Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8; Bobbio, “Gramsci,” 90.

¹⁰ Bobbio, “Gramsci,” 90.

tenantry.¹¹ Unlike the Subaltern Studies' narrative of a unified peasantry above class, the institutionalization of workers' rights and the liberation of tenantry led to the fracturing of the Communist class coalition which had mobilized against feudal landlordism. Regulated capitalism has resulted, according to some commentators, in a "stalemated class conflict" because of the contradiction between agrarian capital and labor.¹² Land reforms resulted in new class conflicts arising out of the issue of the distribution of the 'rent fund' and the problem of the embourgeoisement of the peasantry. In many farmers' account the CPM had even become "a party of labourers".¹³

After the land reforms, the agrarian structure is characterized by the absence of large landholders outside the plantation sector. Nearly 80 percent of the landholders are small-scale landholders whose average size of landholding is one third of an acre. Since it is not possible for these smallholders to meet their subsistence from agriculture, most of them are forced to seek outside wage or salary employment. This peculiar situation makes it necessary even for smallholders to employ wage laborers to cultivate the land. Thus there is the coexistence of smallholdings with high incidence of wage employment in agriculture. "Such a situation renders it difficult to build the unity of rural masses... The wage question tends to divide landholders, whether small or large from the wage labourers. The situation has become precarious in the context of stagnant productivity."¹⁴ The land question ceased to be an important issue of mass mobilization. Extreme fragmentation, compounded by failures

¹¹ N. Krishnaji, "Agrarian Relations and the Left Movement: A Note on Recent Trends," *Economic and Political Weekly* (March 3, 1979): 517.

¹² Ronald J Herring, "Dilemmas of Agrarian Communism: Peasant Differentiation, Sectoral and Village Politics," *Third World Quarterly* 11 (1) (January 1989): 94.

¹³ Ibid., 96, 98. Since the CPM had been in the forefront of agrarian struggles with the (mainly Christian) landed interests, this view is especially strong among the latter and the party representing such interests, the Kerala Congress (Sunny Mannathukaran, Kerala Congress leader, interview by author, June 8, 2003, Muvattupuzha).

¹⁴ T.M. Thomas Isaac and S. Mohana Kumar, "Kerala Elections, 1991: Lessons and Non-Lessons," *Economic and Political Weekly* (November 23, 1991): 2695.

of efforts at collective mobilization like cooperative farming, has prevented rational cultivation. The high cost of labor and the increasing non-productivity of agriculture made farmers turn to practices like leaving land fallow or leasing it out illegally to poor tillers.¹⁵ Peasants tried to minimize their dependence on workers by looking for alternative investment opportunities. As a result investment mainly took place in areas where labor is not well organized like in commerce which includes outright speculation in real estate (itself occasioned by the increasing rate of urbanization), banking and so on.¹⁶

From the seventies to the late eighties Kerala's economy underwent severe stagnation in the spheres of material production and was characterized by soaring unemployment, acute fiscal crises, and erosion of the sustainability of its famed social welfare expenditures. Kerala was one of the few Indian states whose economy did not show signs of acceleration from the late seventies. In fact, the State Domestic Product (SDP) growth rate in the eighties was not only markedly lower than the national average but also significantly lower than the SDP growth rates achieved during the previous decade.¹⁷ Agricultural stagnation was compounded by the shift in cropping pattern to commercial crops (which are subject to the vagaries of the international market) like coconut and rubber which has been taking place since the mid seventies.¹⁸ Similarly the industrial performance too has been dismal. As a result the share of the manufacturing sector in SDP has tended to decline.¹⁹ With the stagnation in agricultural and industrial sectors, the unemployment

¹⁵ K. K. Easwaran, "Reemergence of Land Leasing in Kerala: The Case of Kuttanad," *Social Scientist* 18, nos. 11-12 (November-December 1990): 64-80.

¹⁶ Olle Tornquist, *Whats Wrong with Marxism? Vol. 2, On Peasants and Workers in India and Indonesia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), 27.

¹⁷ C. T. Kurien, "Kerala's Development Experience: Random Comments About the Past and Some Considerations for the Future," *Social Scientist*, 23, nos. 1-3 (January-March 1995): 50-69.

¹⁸ K. P. Kannan and K. Pushpangadan, "Dissecting Agricultural Stagnation in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly* (September 8, 1990): 1991-2004.

¹⁹ K. K. Subramaniam, "Industrial Strategy for Kerala: A Perspective," *International Congress on Kerala Studies-Abstracts (ICKS-A)*, vol. 2 (Trivandrum: A. K. G. Centre for Research and Studies, 1994), 19-20.

situation in the state has worsened. The unemployment rate was around three times the national average in the mid-nineties.²⁰ But the crisis in the Kerala economy has been camouflaged by emigrant remittances from the oil-rich Gulf region from the mid-seventies, the same period in which the economy began to stagnate. These remittances constitute as much as 25 percent of the GDP.²¹ The migrant family savings were mainly diverted to non-productive activities like consumption heralding a new era of consumerism.²²

With the resolution of the major issues relating to land and labor, the Communist movement itself had entered a phase of relative stagnation from the mid-seventies with its electoral support stable at the 40 percent achieved in the 1960 elections. In a self-critical account of the Left, it

found itself incapable of making any decisive breakthrough in the compartmentalization of political life and bring about a realignment of political forces. Its success in mass mobilization in numerous struggles for radical reforms, redistribution and democratic rights failed to get reflected in the electoral strength of the left.²³

²⁰ Mridul Eapen, "Employment and Unemployment in Kerala: An Analysis of Recent Trends," *ICKS-A*, vol. 2, (Trivandrum: A. K. G. Centre for Research and Studies, 1994), 66.

²¹ P. R. Gopinathan Nair, "Broad Trends in Migration to the Middle East: A Note," *ICKS-A*, vol. 2 (Trivandrum: A. K. G. Centre for Research and Studies, 1994), 75-76;

²² What I am outlining here is some of the features of the stagnation of the Kerala economy till the late eighties to show the context in which the democratic decentralization program was envisaged. Since then the economy has turned around, studies of which are only beginning to come out. This is because of the time lag in the manifestation of economic phenomena and also that "[e]conomic analysis is very often conducted on an ex post basis." If in the period from 1970-1 to 1986-87 the Net State Domestic Product grew at 2.13 per cent, from 1987-88 to 2002-03 it grew by 5.99 per cent more than the All-India average (K. P. Kannan, "Kerala's Turnaround in Growth: Role of Social Development, Remittances and Reform," *Economic and Political Weekly* (February 5, 2005): 548, 549). One of the major reasons for the turnaround is the initial investment in health and education and the empowerment of the lower classes through measures like land reforms and labor rights which had not yielded immediate economic results. Therefore neo-liberal arguments (which have been prominent in explaining the stagnation in Kerala) which have stressed that state intervention and mobilized pressure from below may lead to high levels of social development but come at the cost of economic development are not persuasive. Instead, as the Kerala experience shows, "the relationship between human development and economic growth is one of complementarity" (Chakraborty, "Development Narratives," 542.) Despite the overcoming of stagnation, some of the problems like lack of growth in commodity-producing sectors (the tertiary sector is the most dynamic), low agricultural growth, the fiscal crisis of the state, continuing unemployment and the culture of rent seeking persist (Kannan, "Kerala's Turnaround," 548.) From the point of view of the Communist movement, important questions like the egalitarian nature of growth still remain.

²³ Isaac and Kumar, "Kerala Elections," 2695.

The elimination of landlordism, of course, did not mean that exploitation came to an end. What happened was the emergence of alternative bases of power “such as influence within religious communities, the ability to manipulate markets and the supply of credits, and political and administrative positions.” The landlord was replaced by the state and bureaucracy as the new ‘super patron’.²⁴ “The broad-based social movements that saw the expansion of social citizenship have been displaced by more narrow and sectoral interests, most notably industrial unions in the public sector and public employee associations.”²⁵ Further democratization depended on the democratization of ownership and control of the means of production other than land.

While it is a fallacy to argue that the land reforms contributed to agricultural stagnation, it is true that the Communist movement had generally put questions of economic development on the backburner and had failed, at least until the nineties, to make the difficult transition “from a social transformational force to a force of accumulation”.²⁶ The main trajectory of development so far as was bureaucratic, top-led development. Even when the Left tried to extend democracy, it was mainly in the form of state programs and co-operatives which were under the control of politicians and bureaucrats leading to “centralism, politicised vested interests, factionalism and compartmentalisation, and for collective and individual clientelism as well.”²⁷ According to Tornquist Communists had mainly concentrated on the privately owned means of production without paying attention to publicly owned means of production. The fact that they tried to fight corruption by a

²⁴ Tornquist, “What’s Wrong with Marxism?” 31, 39.

²⁵ Patrick Heller, “Moving the State: The Politics of Democratic Decentralization in Kerala, South Africa, and Porto Alegre,” *Politics and Society* 29 (March 200): 149.

²⁶ Herring, “Agrarian Communism,” 105; Tornquist, “What’s Wrong with Marxism,” 33, 37.

²⁷ Olle Tornquist, *The Next Left? Democratization and Attempts to Renew the Radical Political Development Project: The Case of Kerala* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 1995), 25-6.

centralized and disciplined organization did not solve the basic problem of a top-down government.²⁸

Early Attempts

This was the context in which the Communists initiated the new project of democratization in the late eighties first. But by no means, the project itself was intended as merely an instrument to increase economic production. The decentralization of state power was seen as an integral part of democracy. Namboodiripad called it democracy built on four pillars.²⁹ As early as the 1958 Report of the Administrative Reforms Committee, submitted during the first Communist ministry and under the chairmanship of Namboodiripad, had one of its main terms of reference as “[t]o suggest methods for democratization of the organs of Government at the various levels with a view to effective participation of local self-governing institutions or other representative bodies in the administration.”³⁰ Tornquist argues that there have been two major schools of thought within the broad Communist movement—the *state-modernist* and the *popular-developmental* school. The former, characteristic of the leaders of the newly independent countries of fifties and sixties, believed in top-down development, large-scale industrialization and efficient state intervention. The latter school, which was marginalized within the Left (until the late eighties) was for a popular and bottom-up approach to development, for people “developing their own capacity to increase production and improve their standard of living” and for them “to promote their own future through collective organization and action based on common

²⁸ Ibid., 36.

²⁹ T. M. Thomas Isaac and E. M. Sridharan, eds., *EMSum Adhikara Vikendrikaranvum* (EMS and the Decentralization of Power) (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2002), 90.

³⁰ *Report of the Administrative Reforms Committee, 1958*, vol. 1, parts I & II (Government of Kerala: Trivandrum, 1958), 2.

interests and ideas instead of relying on individual solutions, patronage or communal loyalties.”³¹ While this kind of a categorization allows us to understand the differences between the two schools, this does not throw light on the important initiatives taken by the so-called state modernizers. In Tornquist’s schema Namboodiripad is in the first school, which ignores the fact that he was the most important figure in the initiation of the People’s Plan. His interest in democratic decentralization goes back as far as 1938 when he wrote a piece on the subject. Both 1957 and 1967 ministries under Namboodiripad made serious efforts at inaugurating village democracy. According to the 1958 Reforms Committee:

For almost all activities of Government there are departmental agencies down to the village level. Thus, there are separate functionaries for different departments like Public Works, Public Health, Education etc., all of whom function independently of the Panchayat [lowest elected body] and, by and large, of each other also. The revenue administration of the village is done by the revenue staff which forms part of the general administrative arm of the Government. There is urgent need for coordinating the activities of these functionaries and bringing them under the control of a local and immediate elected body like the Panchayat, if the results of our planning and development are to be lasting and permanent.³²

The main difference between the proposals of this Committee and the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee appointed by the Government of India was that the latter saw the lower level elected bodies as merely development agencies.³³ In 1958 there were two viewpoints regarding District councils—the proposed units of administration at the district level. One view argued that the councils should have an advisory role alone and should be constituted by indirect elections or nominations. The other side was for the vesting of entire responsibilities regarding administrative and development matters with the councils, and was also for the direct elections of the councils. Namboodiripad who was a strong advocate for

³¹ Tornquist, *Next Left?* 40, 52. Heller argues that even though the CPM historically did not have any affinity to decentralization [based as it is on democratic centralism], “there was always a strong grassroots democratic faction in the party” which he calls as the social movement faction (Heller, *Labor of Development*, 149).

³² *Administrative Reforms Committee*, 26-7.

³³ Isaac & Sridharan, *EMSum*, 95.

the latter group and the bill incorporating its views could not be passed only because the government fell. Even the 1980 Marxist-led government failed to legislate on the matter because of opposition from its own coalition partners. It was only in 1987 that the District Council Act was passed by the Left government.

To understand the People's Plan, these earlier attempts have to be understood. A more important cue to the seeds of the People's Plan, in my view, lies in the attempts to democratize the implementation of the land reforms. Remarkably, even more so for a Marxist of a 'Stalinist' party, Namboodiripad was in the forefront of the moves to develop a bottom-up perspective on development long before the concept had entered the discourse of development. Intervening in the debate on the proposal by the Congress Party appointed Agrarian Reforms Committee for 'bureaucratic collectivization', Namboodiripad argued in 1954:

Those who are serious about carrying out agrarian reform should... depend not so much on the merits and demerits of a particular schemes of land reform as on the question of which schemes or schemes are those that have been evolved and are being implemented by the mass of peasants. It may be that the mass of peasantry would like to have a particular scheme of land reforms which, from a scientific point of view, is not so good as some other scheme worked out by certain intellectuals; that however, should not lead any revolutionary, who is serious about carrying out real agrarian reform, to the rejection of the scheme evolved by the peasants themselves, based on their own experience and understanding.³⁴

This is an excellent example of the way in which the Marxists negotiated modernity in Kerala. The scientific rationality of a particular scheme was not the sole criterion for its effectiveness, it had to be simultaneously in accord with the 'commons sense' of the peasantry. Moreover, development is not something conceptualized and administered by intellectuals from above. Even the best intellectuals of the socialist tradition "coupled their overt contempt for capitalism with covert contempt for the empirically existing working

³⁴ Quoted in Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 169.

class.”³⁵ But in the Kerala case, as we have seen, the peasantry is not a backward looking reactionary force which needs to be led and liberated by the organic intellectuals and the industrial working class; it is, as Gramsci had argued before, imbued with a critical consciousness. According to Namboodiripad, the details of the land reforms must be left to the “innate, revolutionary common sense of the peasants themselves, organized in their own associations and committees.”³⁶ It is interesting to note that Namboodiripad was arguing for more than fifty years ago what post-colonial and post-developmental theorist are advocating now, to “conceive of the peasantry in terms of not lacks but possibilities, that is, as a social sector in its own right [which] in turn requires an effective respect for peasants in terms of establishing new rules of the game to satisfy peasant demands.”³⁷ For knowledge created for development to be useful, the gap between the knowledge creators (researchers), knowledge users (planners) and the beneficiary community (peasants, for example), need to be reduced and this can happen if peasants’ self-understanding is taken into account.³⁸

The only difference being that Namboodiripad and other Communists, unlike the post-colonialists, insisted on the bottom-up perspective meeting with the top-down one simultaneously. Lest Namboodiripad’s statement be considered a mere rhetoric, it should be pointed out that the various Land Reform bills introduced by the Communists were the result of thorough deliberations by the people who were to benefit from them. The *Karshaka Sanghams* were again the catalysts in this process, synthesizing the demands and views of the peasantry at the various study classes, meetings, and conferences organized by them.³⁹ The Land Reform provisions since the first bill introduced in 1957 had a component of people’s

³⁵ Heller, “Formal Democracy,” 132.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

³⁷ Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 151.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

³⁹ See, for one example, working committee of the KKS held at Trivandrum in May 1957 which discussed the Agrarian Relations Bill at length (*Mathrubhumi*, May 18, 1957).

participation (through representatives) in the implementation process in the form of Land Tribunals and a Land Board, which adjudicated on matters, removed from the purview of courts.⁴⁰ The former would have members elected by the local bodies while the latter would have one member elected by the State legislature. This was a significant blow to the traditional power structures.⁴¹ The Congress and other parties mounted a strong opposition to the inclusion of popular elements in the implementation process. The Communist government before tabling the draft legislation had also engaged in a wide consultative process to involve a vast section of the masses.⁴² Another striking policy of the Communist government was that of divesting the police of powers to intervene in conflicts between the workers and peasantry on the one side and the bourgeoisie and landlords on the other. It reduced the powers of the police to ordinary crimes.⁴³ This took away one of the main arms of the “Repressive State Apparatus”⁴⁴ from the traditional role of suppressing the peasantry and workers. There were also (unprecedented) instances of the police helping the poor peasants to get their share of land and crops.⁴⁵ The contrast with the role of the police before during colonialism and even during the initial years after independence (Chapters 2 & 3) could not be starker. This demonstrates in no uncertain terms the extent to which the coercive institutional mechanisms of modernity can be appropriated through democratic

⁴⁰ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 173.

⁴¹ In a discussion on the Kerala Village Courts Bill in 1960, E. P. Gopalan, the Communist Member of the Legislative Assembly (M. L. A.) argued that democracy should percolate down to the lowest levels. Instead of nominating judges, the CPI called for the direct election of the members of the Village Courts (*Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly*, vol. X, no. 7 (1960)).

⁴² Sathyamurthy, *India*, 195, 207.

⁴³ Prakash Karat, ‘E. M. S: Marxist Vazhikatti’ (EMS: Marxist Pathbreaker) in *E. M. S.: Vakkum Samuhavum (EMS: Words and Society)*, ed. K. Gopinathan (Thrissur: Current Books, 1998); Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 1983;

⁴⁴ See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Press, 1971).

⁴⁵ Sengupta, *Communism*, 317.

struggles. Herring argues that even though the first Communist ministry could not implement the agrarian reform, it provided for “novel forms of nonofficial participation.”⁴⁶

By the time the final version of the bill was passed in 1969 the popular struggles for over a decade had ensured that the bureaucracy’s power in the implementation and the power of judiciary in adjudication would be whittled down to quite an extent. There was a clear recognition among the Marxists that the judiciary is one of the main instruments of class rule.⁴⁷ This is borne out in an emphatic and unconcealed manner in the significant judgment on the 1969 Land Reform Act which was rejected as not ‘reform’ because it was not a ‘change for the better’ and not in the ‘general interest’. It was obvious on which side the sympathies of the court lay: “The produce from the land is not solely of the tenant’s own making. The landlord provides the capital asset necessary for the purpose, namely the land, and it cannot be in the interest of the general public to deprive him of his due share of the produce.”⁴⁸ The 1957 bill passed by the Communist ministry was declared ultra vires by the Supreme Court in 1961.⁴⁹ About the inclusion of popular participation in the implementation of land reforms, the courts had the following to say: “The very association of an extraneous body such as a popular committee with the discharge of the statutory functions of the Tribunal is noxious and strongly to be deprecated.”⁵⁰ The Communist party, on the other hand, was demanding from the late fifties a tribunal in every *panchayat*.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 174.

⁴⁷ See E. M. S. Namboodiripad, “Marxism-Leninism and the Bourgeois Judiciary,” in *Selected Writings*, 297-315. He quotes the CPI assessment of the judiciary: “The judiciary, which is an important organ of state power, is weighted against workers, peasants and other sections of the working people. The laws, procedures and the system of justice, though holding the rich and poor equal and alike in principle, essentially serve the interests of the exploiting classes and uphold their class rule” (305).

⁴⁸ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 198-9.

⁴⁹ Eashwaraiah, *Communist Parties*, 130.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵¹ *Deshabhimani*, January 31, 1961; *Deshabhimani*, November 12, 1961.

The 1969 Act had the provision for a Land Review Board with six non-official members, which had the role of supervising the implementation machinery. Also, popular committees were to be constituted to help land boards in the distribution of excess lands.⁵² The Land Board itself was decentralized by the establishment of *taluk* boards which had a majority of non-official members. The Communist chief minister was of the view that the administration could not be expected to function until “the people organised and shook the bureaucrats.”⁵³ If the CPM-led ministry of 1967 did make departures from its earlier commitment to popular participation in implementation, it was not due to a reversal to the belief in top-down development but due to the constraints imposed by the central government which was thoroughly opposed to the idea of popular participation.⁵⁴

To sum up, even before the local bodies enjoyed any kind of substantive powers, they were being used by the Communist councilors in an effective manner. Kathleen Gough’s study in the sixties had pointed out that these became the instruments of class struggle “among people without power or property against men who have property and power”.⁵⁵ It is obvious that the efforts towards the democratization of the state had begun years before the People’s Plan had come into effect through the process of the formulation and implementation of land reforms. These were mainly informal in nature conducted through the local channels of the Communist party and its mass organizations, and not through the institutionalized legal channels. Nevertheless it was a question of democracy percolating down to the local level. The main difference between West Bengal (the other state where Communism has been strong) and Kerala is the fact that in the former

⁵² Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 140.

⁵³ Sathyamurthy, *India*, 259.

⁵⁴ Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, 189-90.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Lieten, *First Communist*, 20.

Communists were able to link the land reforms with the project of decentralization and the reforms were implemented by the *panchayats* themselves.⁵⁶

With the victory of the Left in the 1987 elections, the stage was set for the new initiatives regarding decentralization. We already saw the context which hastened the turn away from older forms of administration. The popular developmentalists now were finally in a better position to push forward their agenda of creating preconditions for meaningful democracy. If land reforms eliminated one of the major forms of extra-economic oppression, it did not mean that all forms of patronage and nepotism had ended even though their feudal-like foundations had been eroded. The attack on these could be mounted only by an ideological struggle and also a material one to improve and democratize the welfare state.⁵⁷ One of the biggest campaigns undertaken by the Left government under the impetus of the popular developmentalists was the Total Literacy campaign. It involved nearly 800,000 volunteers and was successful in making the state completely literate. It was undoubtedly a spectacular achievement, especially considering the history of literacy programs in India. The whole intention of the program was to empower people by making them aware of their rights and thus creating the successful preconditions for democracy. The program in this particular longer goal, that is the transformation of literacy centers into stages for wider developmental activities, was not immediately successful.⁵⁸ But I will argue that it did have long-term effects and was definitely a factor in the effective functioning of the People's Plan in the late nineties. In that sense the criticisms that have emerged from within the Left itself about the bourgeois nature of programs like literacy campaign is

⁵⁶ Isaac & Sridharan, *EMSum*, 101. The fact that the West Bengal Communists have been in government since 1977 without a break has helped in initiating and consolidating the decentralization program.

⁵⁷ Tornquist, *Next Left*, 51.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

untenable.⁵⁹ The other initiatives undertaken during the period were group farming and local resource mapping.

In the post-land reform dispensation and in a context in which big capital in agriculture was looked down upon, group farming was encouraged by the state in increasing agricultural production and also a method to decentralize agricultural development. Similarly, mapping of key physical resources from the village up through people's participation, again to serve the twin purposes of improving economic development and fostering peoples' participation. Both these programs were also not successful in its intended goals mainly because of the fact that they failed to become a mass program and remained a state initiative. This was because these programs were not linked with a decentralized administration, for decentralization in the form of District Council Act could be passed only by the fourth and final year of the Left rule. Not surprising considering the stiff opposition to the idea from within the CPM and also the bureaucracy.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, what interests us is the emergence of new participatory initiatives from within the interstices of state. The inputs for these initiatives were provided by groups within civil society like the *Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishath* (KSSP—Kerala Science and Literary Movement), one of the most important Non-Governmental Organizations in India which has played a significant role in Kerala's social transformation through its motto of 'science for social revolution.'⁶¹ The Group Approach

⁵⁹ T. K. Ramachandran, interview. Similarly Paul Cammack sees education and health programs as delivering workers to capitalism, creating the "infrastructure necessary for capitalist production, but not actually produced by capitalists themselves [although he is referring specifically to the World Bank-sponsored anti-poverty program]" ("Attacking the Poor," *New Left Review* 13 (Jan-Feb 2002): 127). Such one-sided interpretation would foreclose the critical potentialities of a general improvement in health and education of the poor in any part of the world.

⁶⁰ Tornquist, *Next Left*, 65, 80-82.

⁶¹ KSSP's significance can be gauged from the fact that it has grown from 139 units and with 3313 members in 1978-79 to 2190 units with 66093 members in 1991-92 (Ibid., 70). KSSP while using science as an instrument to raise the social consciousness of people and promote 'rationality' was at the same time trying to promote a balanced view between man and nature. In fact, it has been one of the main forces in successfully pushing the Left for an ecological oriented approach to development (these complexities cannot be mapped by postcolonial theory with its dichotomies of modernity/tradition and West/East). Of course, this has generated a lot of

for Locally Adapted and Sustainable Agriculture, an enhanced version of group farming, had its main goal in the “development of local infrastructure, institutions and policies” and for this purpose it wanted to “mobilise the rural resources and manpower with the active collaboration of all rural development agencies.” There is a need for

shift from the over dependence on energy exhausting inputs to that of in situ input generation; a shift from the universality of technology application to that of contextual technology generation; a shift from the conventional pattern of technology dissemination through selected field demonstrations to that of taking the whole (...) micro-watershed as a single unit etc.”⁶²

The People’s Plan

This philosophy was carried forward into the People’s Plan when it was implemented starting in 1996, the first year of the new CPM-led government. The state-led initiative was again deriving its resources from civil society. For example the People’s Plan drew a lot from the micro-level experiments in participatory planning already conducted by Left-dominated *panchayats* with the help of KSSP.⁶³ But what is remarkable is the role played by the bureaucracy, the State Planning Board, in pushing forward the entire process. There was no great demand for decentralization from the people when it was launched. It would not have been possible without the State Planning Board, many members of which were supporters of CPM.⁶⁴ First of all the Plan, it dramatically involved the devolution of 35-40 percent of total plan outlay of the state budget for the local bodies. It was a huge sum considering the kind

conflict within the Communist movement, especially drawing opposition from the trade union wing within the CPM which has alleged that the KSSP is anti-industrialization (*The Hindu*, September 23, 2003). But according to the KSSP, it “has been opposing only those industries that are polluting, energy-intensive and less labour generating” (*The Hindu*, September 25, 2003).

⁶² Quoted in Tornquist, *Next Left*, 65.

⁶³ Jos Chathukulam and M. S. John, “Five Years of Participatory Planning: Rhetoric and Reality,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 7, 2002): 4917-4926.

⁶⁴ Chathukulam and John, “Five Years.” Again this shows, unlike the postcolonial narrative, the role of bureaucracy cannot be one-sidedly determined.

of finances that they controlled before.⁶⁵ The Congress government immediately before the Left government, for instance, had allocated only one-sixtieth of the amount now available to the local bodies. Such massive devolution at least ensured that the finances would act as a spur towards a politics of participation, for ideally no administrative body would like to renounce the financial, administrative and political power enjoyed by it.⁶⁶

The entire process of planning was now to start from the village-up. The *grama sabha* (the village assembly consisting of all the voters in the village) was the primary unit of planning. It had to convene itself once in three months and the quorum could be fulfilled only if ten percent of the voters were present. It had the main responsibility of formulating plans and identifying the beneficiaries for its plans. The order of priority for beneficiaries and plans decided by the *gram sabha* could not be revised by the *panchayat*, the elected representative body of the village.⁶⁷ That is the kind of power enjoyed by the *sabha*. Any information sought by any voter regarding the functioning of the local bodies has to be provided by them. The basic idea was to promote mass participation in the formulation of plans and not just by elected representatives. The people would be assisted in the task by nonofficial experts and volunteers in the preparation and formulation of reports and the drafting of plans. The whole process itself was a detailed one going through many phases.⁶⁸ In the first year, for example, *gram sabhas* (and ward conventions in urban areas) met to identify the needs of the people. Of course, it was not practical, from the deliberation point of view, to gather all the people of the village in a single meeting (typically, each village

⁶⁵ For an example from the micro level, the Thirumarady *Panchayat* in Ernakulam district was allotted a sum of Rs. 28 lakhs in 1995, when it had a capacity of generating on its own an income of only Rs. 3.5 lakhs (M. J. Jacob, president, Thirumarady *Panchayat*, interview by author, July 21, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

⁶⁶ Shobha Raghuram, "Kerala's Democratic Decentralisation: History in the Making," *Economic and Political Weekly* (June 17-23, 2000), 2105-7.

⁶⁷ P. Govindapillai and P. G. Padmanabhan, *Janangalkku Vendi Janangalal* (For the People By the People) (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2000), 9.

⁶⁸ The information below including the next paragraph relies on T. M. Thomas Isaac, "Campaign for Democratic Decentralisation in Kerala," *Social Scientist* 29, nos. 9-10 (September-October 2001): 13.

constitutes about 25,000 people). Therefore after a brief common gathering, the participants dispersed into smaller groups each one dealing with a particular development sector. 2.5 million people participated in the *gram sabhas*. In the second phase participatory studies were conducted with the objective of making an assessment of the human and physical resources in each locality. The idea was to create a judicious blend between the local needs and the resources available in the locality. 300,000 delegates participated in these studies. The resource mapping was similar to the one we have already seen in the previous Left government. Not only natural resources were mapped, local history was also surveyed using oral testimonies and available records. This was to understand popular tradition and heritage in the area, earlier social movements and so on so that these could be used creatively in the present participatory planning program. It is significant attempt to move away from away conceptualizing development as a merely technical process—the discourse of development that has been dominant since its emergence in the nineteen forties: “the fact that development is about growth, about capital, about technology, about becoming modern, nothing else.”⁶⁹

The result of the participatory studies was the preparation of development reports for each *panchayat* which were discussed in development seminars. In the next phase task forces (with 10 persons in each one, and 12 task forces for different sectors in each *panchayat*) were constituted to prepare projects on the basis of the recommendation of the development seminars, and 100,000 volunteers helped in this process. In the next two phases, meetings of elected representatives took place to formulate plans in the higher tiers, in which again 30,000 volunteers took part. In the final phase meetings of expert committees were held to appraise and approve the plans which too had the contribution of 5000

⁶⁹ Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 162.

volunteers. The expert committees did not have the power to reject project proposals, only they could suggest financial and technical improvements. Voluntary experts were recruited from the retired professionals (and they committed to give at least one day in a week for plan evaluation). The constitution of the expert committees through volunteers was an important step in the debureaucratization of the plan process.⁷⁰ The plans of the higher tiers like the Block and District *Panchayats* were to begin preparation of their plans only after the preparation of the village *panchayat* plans so as to promote integration of various tiers and prevent duplication at the higher tiers. These in a gist are some of the main features of the People's Plan.

Anti Globalization

From the Marxist point of view, the Plan was not only a way to democratize the state but also simultaneously an instrument to counter imperialist globalization.⁷¹ This form of globalization is seen as striking at the decision-making capacity of the people at the local level, especially with regard to the control of vital areas like health and education. In an era when the national government is increasingly ceding its powers to international market forces, the Plan is proposed as a local/regional resistance against capitalist globalization. Such local level resistances have national and global importance.⁷² More importantly, the people's resistance and participatory struggles are meant to be a bulwark against new

⁷⁰ Instead of scientific personnel acting as 'experts' in an autonomous domain, now they were supposed to cooperate with the people in the preparation and implementation of plans (E. M. S. Namboodiripad, Puthiya Anubhavam"(New Experience) in *EMSum*, ed. Isaac and Sridharan, 70).

⁷¹ T. M. Thomas Isaac, interview by author, May 26, 2003, Thiruvananthapuram, tape recording. Isaac is a Marxist intellectual and one of the architects of the People's Plan. He was the head of the State Planning Board during the 1996 ministry; presently he is the Finance Minister of the Kerala Government.

⁷² The momentous anti-Coca Cola struggle in Plachimada in Palakkad district which has attracted international attention is a good example. The benefit of empowering local bodies is seen in the fact that the *panchayat* under which Plachimada falls has cancelled the Coke license after the Coke bottling units had caused the contamination and depletion of groundwater sources and the consequent agricultural ruin (R. Krishnakumar, "Resistance in Kerala," *Frontline* 21, no. 3 (Jan. 31-Feb. 13, 2004): 12-13).

developments like the withdrawal to the private sphere and the emergence of conspicuous consumption as a part of global capitalism.⁷³ Moreover, as village level studies show, the consumption of day-to-day goods like coffee, tea, toilet soaps, toothpaste and so on is determined by multinational or big national capital which produces a vast majority of these goods.⁷⁴ In this sense there is no pure 'local' in existence as insisted by many post-colonial/development theorists. Global capitalism "represents an unprecedented penetration of local society globally by the economy and culture of capital".⁷⁵ One of the programs therefore undertaken in People's Plan was the local production of goods hitherto bought from multinational companies, example being cooperatives of women in *panchayats* producing toilet soaps.⁷⁶ While efforts such as these have been posited as ineffective against global capitalism by critics, they ignore the need to intervene in the sphere of production for an alternative to be conceived.⁷⁷

There have been criticisms, again from within the Left, about the desirability of decentralizing the state when global capitalism is increasingly penetrating the local and even speaking in its language. Such criticisms have alluded to the role of the World Bank in the

⁷³ Kunhananthan Nair, "Panchayati Raj Adhikara Vikendrikaranam: Marxist Veekshanam" (Panchayat Rule and Decentralization of Power: A Marxist View), in *Thaddesha Swayambharanavum Adhikaravikendrikaranathinte Prashnangalum* (Local Self-governing Bodies and the Problems of Decentralization of Power) (Kannur: Patyam Gopalan Smaraka Patanaanveshana Kendram, 1995).

⁷⁴ Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development (hereafter KRPLLD) Report No. 5, 2000-2001 (Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, 2001), 107.

⁷⁵ Dirlik, *Post-Colonial Aura*, 90.

⁷⁶ Isaac, interview. Isaac's Assembly constituency has been one of the areas which has successfully experimented with these ideas.

⁷⁷ In Kerala already 20 percent of the total amount of toilet soaps consumed is produced locally (B. Ekbal, *Puthiya Keralam, Puthiya Rashtriyam*, (New Kerala, New Politics), (Kottayam: D. C Books, 2004), 145). The opposition to multinational products need not have to remain at an ideological level. The economic viability of an alternative local production system is very promising. It has been estimated that a village *panchayat* can generate profits (from soap production alone) that would be able to pay Rs. 2000 each for 50 persons (M. P. Parameswaran, *Nalaam Lokam: Swapnavum Yatharthyaavum* (The Fourth World: Dream and Reality, 2nd ed., (Kottayam: D. C. Books, 2004), 134-5. Even though women working in such cooperatives were earning only one fourth of the wages earned by an agricultural laborer, they get work all year—compared to the 100 days usually logged by a laborer. Other cooperatives run by women include that of printing presses and bakeries (Richard W. Franke and Barbara H. Chasin, "Power to the (Malayalee) People," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 48 (1998): 3064).

devolution of administrative power and the need for maintaining centralized control.⁷⁸ In our view, such orthodoxy ignores the tremendous crisis that the nation-state is undergoing (and its need for reinvigoration, contra postcolonial theory) and also the need to diversify the Left project into incorporating the burgeoning pan-class concerns. Whatever its failures, People's Plan is definitely not in the nature of the recent initiatives by the World Bank to include a participatory component. The latter, as Escobar has argued rightly, is merely rhetoric. Citing the example of the Integrated Rural Development Program in Colombia, he shows how "it is an intelligent and utilitarian imposition than a strategy of empowerment for local communities... [It] understood participation as a bureaucratic problem to be solved by the institution, not as a process circumscribed by complex political, cultural, and epistemological questions."⁷⁹ The one significant difference between the World Bank initiatives and the Peoples' Plan is the strong political and ideological content of the latter and its positioning as not merely an economic solution, but as a comprehensive path to the democratization of society as well, elements which are missing in the former. The formulators of the People's Plan themselves were clearly aware of the kind of initiatives attempted under the aegis of the World Bank. In the World Bank conception, according to Isaac:

The local bodies are... to be transformed from direct providers of services to facilitators. Accordingly the focus has been on developing appropriate management techniques for increasing efficiency. Much decentralization is a rational choice made by state and international agencies. The process is essentially conservative and bureaucratic in nature and a part of the attempts to downsize the state. The overall perspective of the World Bank and other similar international agencies is not to facilitate autonomous collective action, but to co-opt local communities into the global economy.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ See S. Sudheesh, "Sannaddha Sanghangal, Asootranam: Ariyappetathe Pokunnathu," (Voluntary Groups and Planning: What Goes Unknown), *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (December 14-20, 2003): 8-11.

⁷⁹ Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 141.

⁸⁰ Isaac, "Campaign," 15.

The World Bank perspective can be termed as part of revisionist neo-liberalism which “sees institutions and actors in civil society as partners for enabling state institutions. Popular participation is seen as a means for making development interventions more cost-effective and efficient and also a step towards privatization of state services.”⁸¹

Public Control of Public Resources

If the plan sought and succeeded in some extent in charting out a resistance to global capitalism, the other important feature was the attempted democratization of resources other than (privately owned) land something, which, as we have seen, the Communist movement had not focused its attention earlier on. The biggest impact of the Plan was on patron-client like relations that had developed outside land relations, mainly on the state terrain. The stagnation in the productive spheres had led to the hardening of this tendency. So one of the main aims of the plan was to strike at the power of the *regulative rentier* class—the politicians, bureaucrats and village leaders and so on who monopolize public administration.⁸² One of the main modes of patronage and corruption before was in the selection of beneficiaries for state-sponsored programs and resources. The other was in the form of extracting a rent for publicly owned resources. In the People’s Plan the rules stipulated that the *grama panchayats* gave the maximum publicity to the process of the selection of beneficiaries and the prioritization of projects. Notices for the projects and the criteria of selection had to be

⁸¹ Kristian Stokke and Giles Mohan, “The Convergence Around Local Civil Society and the Dangers of Localism,” *Social Scientist*, vol. 29, nos. 11-12 (Nov.-Dec. 2001): 3.

⁸² Tornquist, “What’s Wrong with Marxism”; Ramachandran Nair, retired lower level government employee and Communist activist, interview by author, July 29, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording. Namboodiripad was vehemently against the allotment of huge funds to the parliamentary and assembly representatives (to be used at their discretion) which was, in his view, totally against the concept of democratic decentralization (*Deshabhimani*, April 21, 1997). The Plan Campaign has demonstrated, especially in the areas where it has been successful, that the bureaucracy can be bent if adequate political will is there, especially with the new powers enjoyed by the *grama sabha*. The impact that the Panchayat leadership can have on the bureaucracy is all the more if the former is non-corrupt (M. J. Jacob, interview).

displayed in public places and also printed and circulated. This reduced the possibility of ineligible persons being selected for benefits.⁸³ There has been a strong pro-poor tilt in the plan implementation.⁸⁴ Unlike the earlier system where public works were allotted to private contractors, in the plan the works were to be supervised and administered by the people themselves through their beneficiary committees. What this has done in many cases is to break the nexus between the contractor, politician and the engineer. The committees were to carry out their work in a transparent manner.⁸⁵ The technical sanction for the works was now to be given by expert committees at the block and district levels unlike before when it was the job of the bureaucracy. Now bureaucrats were only members in the expert committees and not the sole deciding authority.⁸⁶

Even though the CPM with its massive influence in the bureaucracy was able to secure its cooperation, it was clear that the latter was clearly against the novel features of the plan.⁸⁷ Administrative positions like the District Collector, relics from the colonial period, continue to maintain their power and status and they have tried hard to reinforce their power within the spaces of the new dispensation.⁸⁸ The People's Plan still has to go some way in eliminating the vestiges of the old order, for it to completely achieve its aims. One of the problems with the plan was that it devolved power too soon before it actually had installed the machinery to implement the projects. One of the main areas, which lagged

⁸³ According to a laborer, it is the vesting of power in the bureaucracy that leads to patronage. He feels that scope for favoritism has been struck down with the People's Plan (Joykunju, interview).

⁸⁴ Chathukulam and John, "Five Years," 4920; of course, this did not mean that all avenues for patronage and corruption were closed. There were reports of deserving beneficiaries being denied assets (Rajendran, autorickshaw driver and lower level Communist activist, interview by author, May 8, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

⁸⁵ With the formation of beneficiary committees, the number of complaints by people have increased as they now exactly know how much money is being spent under what heading (M. J. Jacob, interview).

⁸⁶ Isaac, "Campaign," 29, 36.

⁸⁷ P. M. Ismail, CPM leader and former Chairman, Muvattupuzha municipality, interview by author, July 26, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

⁸⁸ Chathukulam and John, "Five Years," 4921; E. M. S. Namboodiripad, "Adhikara Vikendrikaranavum, Nayanar Governmentum" (Decentralization of Power and the Nayanar Government), *Deshabhimani* (May 20, 1997).

behind, was the support system and the expertise required, despite the voluntary expert committees.⁸⁹ This lacuna helped the bureaucracy to wriggle itself back to contention. The engineers and contractors got together to make things difficult for the beneficiary committees, which suffered from the lack of skills needed to undertake the works. The engineers, for example refused to give technical advice to the committees, deliberately prepared wrong estimates, refused to supervise the works and so on.⁹⁰ As a result, in many cases, even though beneficiary committees were in existence, the actual work was (illegally) done by contractors.⁹¹ Of course, it should be borne in mind that groups like bureaucrats and contractors are not completely dichotomous with the category 'Communists'; mass parties like the CPM invariably have members from these groups and they also act as a pressure group against attempts at democratization.⁹²

The achievements of the plan—in sheer physical terms—have been many: from 1997-2001, 464, 570 houses and 497, 185 sanitary latrines were constructed; 109, 842 wells dug; 17, 489 taps were provided, and 67, 584 kilometers of roads were built. Almost 3 million people received support from the plan for seedlings and fertilizers. All significant achievements compared to past performances.⁹³ Since 1996-97 135 *panchayats* (of the more than 900 *panchayats*) received awards for outstanding performance in meeting targets fixed under the plan.⁹⁴ There were also examples like that of Manjeri municipality, located in a highly backward region with no industrial culture, but under the Campaign it is a thriving

⁸⁹ M. K. Das, "Kerala Decentralised Planning," *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 2-8, 2000): 4300-4303.

⁹⁰ Chathukulam and John, "Five Years," 4924.

⁹¹ T. V. Thomas, interview.

⁹² In the setting up of *benami* (fraudulent) beneficiary committees many contractors (and engineers) have benefited, some of whom have been Communist Party members/sympathizers (Brig. K. G. Nair (retd.) (now deceased), Army officer and Communist activist, interview by author, June 26, 2003, Thiruvananthapuram).

⁹³ Isaac and Sridharan, "Adhikara," 127; Isaac, "Campaign," 42. The impact on sectors like industry and agriculture is not yet clear. One of the main reasons could be the inexperience of members in production related tasks (Chathukulam and John, "Five Years," 4926).

⁹⁴ Das, "Kerala's," 4301.

hosiery manufacturing center and has also contributed a lot to the empowerment of women.⁹⁵

Beyond Political Society

More than these objective achievements we are interested in the way the Plan has contributed to the extension of popular sovereignty and how the categories of the modern have been negotiated in a Third World setting. The fundamental question that the Communist project was grappling with was how to move from an administrative system in which some (ideally) able administrators ran the people's government for the people to one in which the people themselves governed their government for themselves.⁹⁶ Popular sovereignty, of course, is the founding premise of modernity—the conception of every individual as a citizen with a bundle of rights. Freedom and equality are the bases of the modern nation state. But in practice, they have been violated more often than protected and enforced. Nevertheless, the promise of equality and freedom has driven and continues to drive many of the struggles in the world. What we have seen so far with regard to Communism in Kerala is merely one of the examples.

The People's Plan, in my view, is a cogent example of the way in which resources for resisting capitalist modernity can be generated within the so-called traditional societies. It also questions many of the fundamental assumptions of postcolonial theory. According to it in much of the world, popular sovereignty is systematically eroded. Partha Chatterjee, borrowing from Foucault's notion of 'governmentalization of the state', argues that the contemporary regime of power

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ E. M. S. Namboodiripad, "Udyogastharude Bharanathilinnu Janangalude Bharanathilekku" (From the Rule of the Administrators to the Rule of the People), in Isaac and Sridharan, *Emsum*, 8.

secures legitimacy not by participation of citizens in matters of state but by claiming to provide for the well being of the population. Its mode of reasoning is not deliberative openness but rather an instrumental notion of costs and benefits. Its apparatus is not the republican assembly but an elaborate network of surveillance... It is not surprising that in the course of the present century, ideas of participatory citizenship that were so much a part of the Enlightenment notion of politics have fast retreated before the triumphant advance of governmental technologies that have promised to deliver more well-being to more people at less cost.⁹⁷

If citizen carries the “ethical connotation of participation in the sovereignty of the state,” the concept of population means does not mean anything more than a ‘target’ for the government’s policy—in the various spheres of administration. With the increasing depoliticization of societies, especially in the West, this whittling down of popular sovereignty in favor of the ‘management’ of sovereignty has serious implications: governance is not matter of politics but one of administrative policy, something to be run by experts and not political representatives.⁹⁸ We have already seen this mode of functioning in non-state organizations like the World Bank. In post-colonial states like India processes like planning “depended increasingly on the monologic instruments of the state and its bureaucracy rather than dialogical, movement-like forms.” The collapse of the Gandhian language which acted as the mediator between elite and subaltern politics contributed to the widening gap.⁹⁹ This disjunction is posing a serious threat to the extension of popular sovereignty.

According to postcolonial theorists there is needed a better theoretical vocabulary to understand societies like that of India characterized by a modernity different from that of its trajectory in its original location. For example, one of the concepts that is highly inadequate is civil society. Civil society refers to those “characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in Western societies that are based on equality, autonomy,

⁹⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 34.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹⁹ Kaviraj “On State,” 90.

freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision making, recognized rights and duties of members, and other such principles.”¹⁰⁰ Most of the institutions of the Third World do not conform to these standards. Therefore Partha Chatterjee theorizes about another domain of politics in the postcolonial states—that of political society. Most of the Indian citizens are right-bearers only in name, they are not considered by the state as full members of civil society. This does not mean that they are excluded from the purview of the state. They have to be looked after and even controlled by the government agencies, and thus are in a certain political relationship with the state. Also, the government and political parties make instrumental use of these sections for they can vote in the elections.¹⁰¹ Basing himself on the example of the illegal squatters (in the city of Calcutta) on public land and their forming of concrete associational forms to resist governmental action to evict them, he argues that these collective forms cannot be categorized as civic associations nor are they a replication of kinship organizations, even though they talk in the language of community. Since they are illegal, the state cannot recognize them, at the same time, it cannot ignore them too considering there are many such settlements and organizations all over the country.¹⁰² The terrain on which the

community of squatters have managed to conduct their struggle for survival is not that of a civil society of citizens dealing with a state in whose sovereignty they participate but rather that of a political society where claims and benefits can be negotiated between governmental agencies responsible for administering welfare and groups of population that count according to calculations of political efficacy.¹⁰³

What Chatterjee finds unique about the survival strategies of such marginal groups is the

¹⁰⁰ Chatterjee, “Beyond the Nation,” 60.

¹⁰¹ Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 38.

¹⁰² This would apply to all other kinds of organizations representing groups of people whose very livelihood include the violation of law (for example, the illegal use of water or electricity) (Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 40).

¹⁰³ Chatterjee, “Community in the East,” 281.

way in which the imaginative power of a traditional structure of community, including its fuzziness and capacity to invent relations of kinship, has been wedded to the modern emancipatory rhetoric of autonomy and equal rights... These strategies... are not available within the liberal space of the associations of civil society transacting business with a constitutional state.

According to Chatterjee, since the majority of the people in the post-colonial states do not have the “basic material and cultural prerequisites of membership of civil society”, they are denied the “normative status of the virtuous citizen”.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, for them “communities are some of the most active agents of political practice”. The biggest lacuna of Western political theory is its ignorance of community in the theorization of civil society and state. Chatterjee does not deny that the ‘desire for democratization’ is the most important feature of the politics of communities in the East. But unlike the trajectory of democracy in the West, the notions of autonomy and representation are being claimed on

behalf not only of individuals but of communities [and also] that these democratic claims are being made in relation to a state whose governmental functions already encompass the bulk of the population well before the latter have been socialised into the institutions of civil society. The politics of democratization must therefore be carried out not in classical transactions between state and civil society but in the much less well-defined, legally ambiguous, contextually and strategically demarcated terrain of political society.¹⁰⁵

Here Chatterjee rightly questions the absence of community in Western theory (until the recent emergence of communitarianism) and the need to understand the specificity of political practices in Eastern post-colonial societies. He finds that the sharp distinction posited between civil society and state in European thought has the disadvantage of considering the civil society as a depoliticized domain or the other extreme of considering all civil institutions as political.¹⁰⁶ Since civil society

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 282.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Chatterjee, “Beyond the Nation,” 60.

is restricted to only a small section of ‘citizens’, it is imperative that theoretical vocabulary be found for the political practices for the vast majority of the people. Chatterjee decries the common approach adopted in such a scenario—to posit a division between tradition and modernity—which not only essentializes ‘tradition’ but also fails to see the strategies adopted by the so called traditional domain to cope with the modern which fails to conform to the standards of modern civil society. To understand these Chatterjee uses the concept of political society as a domain “lying between civil society and the state”.¹⁰⁷

But what emerges in Chatterjee is also a certain tendency to valorize the community as the essence of political practice in the East. This, as we have seen, draws a wedge between two essentialized categories of the East and the West and ignores the commonalities between the two, for example, the discourse of individual rights, which is increasingly gaining importance. Moreover, it does not allow us to understand the kind of movement that the Communists built in Kerala which simultaneously negotiated different levels of exclusions, not all which can be reduced to that of the community. The narratives that were part of this research show that the emergence of the conception of the individual as a citizen and a bearer of rights was one of the important consequences of the Communist struggles. The strategies that Chatterjee describes as a part of the political practice of the illegal squatters—the array of connections made outside the community with other disadvantaged groups, privileged groups, employers, government functionaries, political leaders and so on—resemble rational-purposive/strategic action.¹⁰⁸ The community itself is built from scratch in a thoroughly secular fashion and its main goal is to secure autonomy and equal

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 27. Here it should be noted that in Gramsci, political society is equated with the state (see *Prison Notebooks*, 12).

¹⁰⁸ Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1985), 285.

rights. Therefore, it is not clear as to why Chatterjee privileges the community when other elements are equally present too.

Importantly, the most relevant question here is how the present conjuncture has come about: the majority of the population having to resort to survival strategies through inventive community actions. It is not only due to the fact that the states have encompassed a bulk of the population before it developing adequate skills for membership in civil society, it is also due to the fact that a particular kind of state was established following the anti-colonial struggle which was hegemonized by the bourgeoisie and the feudal classes. This hegemony has perpetuated itself in the post-independence era, except when it has been dismantled in states like Kerala. While there are inherent characteristics of modern institutions like the state, the authority of the state is not inexorably destined to be the 'technologies of power' as implied by Chatterjee. It is determined by the kind of social forces that are behind it and the state-society relationship that is extant in a society. While postcolonial theory's diagnosis that there has been a gradual governmentalization of the state is correct, the reasons adduced for the same and also the remedies prescribed warrant critical reexamination. The initiation of the People's Plan by the state in Kerala is ample evidence of the fact that the nature of the state needs to be historically determined, not essentially. Corbridge *et al.* have argued that spaces of citizenship are opened up even within the new "technologies of rule" invented by the state.¹⁰⁹ Therefore it is all the more conceivable that the state in Kerala which is radically different from that of other Indian states has overcome governmentalization to a great extent. As Isaac argues, "it was not the state in the abstract, but a state government under the control of the left, that took the decision to decentralize and to launch the [People's

¹⁰⁹ *Seeing the State*, 5, 7.

Plan] Campaign. These were political acts. The explanation for the Campaign has to be sought primarily in the evolution of the political strategy for democratic decentralization.”¹¹⁰

While Chatterjee notes that the “ideas of republican citizenship have sometimes accompanied the politics of national liberation”, he does not explore the mechanisms through which they have been substituted by the “governmental technologies” of the development state. The scuttling of the democratic revolution and its substitution by passive revolution is not something that is seen to have some consequence for the governmentalization of state. Nor is the role played by the ‘pre-modern’ feudal landed classes in maintaining the base of the ‘modern’ development state taken into account. He only takes refuge in the argument that the fuzziness and contextuality of the traditional community has been eroded by the “legal administrative classifications and statistical techniques of enumeration” of the modern state.¹¹¹ Here the state becomes a cultural entity, questions of political economy are obfuscated.

The dominant tendencies of Indian sociology which followed the Western foundational dichotomies of *gemeinschaft/ gesellschaft* (community/ society), West/East, and culture/economy¹¹² have been replayed in the postcolonial schema. Similarly another proposition that is difficult to accept is the dichotomy posited between modernity and democracy—“modernity is facing an unexpected rival in the form of democracy”.¹¹³ This dichotomy leads into the associated one of civil society versus political society, which we have already examined: civil society is associated with modernity and political society with

¹¹⁰ Isaac, “Campaign,” 17.

¹¹¹ Chatterjee, “Community in the East,” 280.

¹¹² See Carol Upadhyaya, “The Concept of Community in Indian Social Sciences: An Anthropological Perspective,” in *Community and Identities: Contemporary Discourses on Culture and Politics in India*, ed. Surinder S. Jodhka (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 32-58.

¹¹³ Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 41.

democracy.¹¹⁴ Modernity/civil society is the domain in which the elites are active while the masses are confined to democracy/political society. The People's Plan, in particular, and the multifarious struggles launched under the Communist movement in general, that we have seen so far, have put a question mark on this dichotomy. The reasons for the flattening of the power of the feudal and capitalist class in Kerala has been precisely because of the fact that every victory of the working classes and the peasantry was institutionalized and made part of the rational-legal order. With each successive mobilization and struggle of the rural poor the state was forced to democratize itself.¹¹⁵ Bureaucratic reason and 'technologies of rule' were circumvented because of the pressure exerted by the mass mobilizations. Participatory planning acts as a mediator between state sovereignty and subaltern forms of knowledge.

Postcolonial theory locates democracy in the popular assertions of the masses but does not take into account that these struggles also draw upon the ideals of modernity and make claims on their basis. Moreover, the struggles have been to attain and extend citizenship, not to remain as manipulable instruments of political society. The theory rightly questions the efficacy of using concepts like civil society alone in understanding the Third World. In that sense 'political society' is a useful concept. It is easy to see that the social transformation brought about by the Communists in Kerala was not always the result of actions in the civil society. And it is also true that the distinctions between civil society and political society are very blurred in the context of a Third World society like Kerala.¹¹⁶ In fact, as we have seen, violence, or rather more importantly, the threat of violence underpinned the social transformation. But this is only one side of the story for the

¹¹⁴ Chatterjee, "Beyond the Nation," 65.

¹¹⁵ Heller, *Labor of Development*, 85.

¹¹⁶ See Devika, "Modernity."

Communist movement (chapters 2 and 3); it was simultaneously responsible for the founding of a civil society, which was not allowed to remain merely the domain of elites. The dualisms that characterize postcolonial theory fail to understand this dimension. Civil society as much as political society was responsible for the democratization process. The classic example in the recent years is the organization KSSP, which was one of the moving forces in the state's adoption of the People's Plan. The recruitment of experts, technical personnel and volunteers from civil society in the Plan is another example of this. The plan is an attempt to legalize and institutionalize popular participation and sovereignty.

What emerges from this discussion is that civil society cannot be reduced to its origins in colonial modernity. The character of civil society is shaped by the struggles launched in society. We cannot see it merely as trying to rein in political society within the parameters of liberal norms and as the domain of the elite in a pedagogical relationship with the rest of the society, or see political society as always violating these norms. This conception reinstates the tradition/modernity dichotomy that Chatterjee had sought to criticize earlier.¹¹⁷ Similarly, Chakrabarty, while he acknowledges the “practical utility of left-liberal philosophies” and also “the importance of the languages and competencies—of citizenship, of democracy, of welfare—be made available to all classes, particularly those subordinated and oppressed”, argues that these put into question the pedagogic drive that is invariably associated with these.¹¹⁸ Again this denies the aspirations of the subalterns to citizenship, democracy and welfare and merely posits the latter as an imposition from above.

¹¹⁷ Chatterjee had argued before that “the identification of all modern institutions of state and politics with the ideology of Western individualism and their conflict with the traditional communities of the East collapses the opposition once more into the familiar terms of modernity versus traditionalism, with the exception that this time it is tradition and primordiality which are privileged over modernity” (“Community in the East,” 281).

¹¹⁸ Chakrabarty, “Radical Histories,” 756.

The basic point postcolonial theory wishes to make is that the paralegal political society is not a pathological condition of modernity, but its inevitable product, a product of the “constitution of modernity in most of the world.”¹¹⁹ This formulation does not allow one to move beyond this specific conjuncture to one in which members can attain full citizenship, rather than rely on temporary solutions provided through the mediation of political representatives. Instead it valorizes the “squalor, ugliness and violence of popular life” even though it is very aware of the conservative nature of popular politics and also the fact that it has a “dark side”.¹²⁰ This is similar to the tendency that we saw in the last chapter to romanticize everyday resistance rather than argue for structural transformation in society.

New Horizons

One of the biggest shifts in Communist politics occasioned through the Plan was the new attention paid to pan-class issues like gender and ecology. If other pan-class dimensions like caste, language and nation were successfully integrated into the Communist movement, these were still not. Of course, the discourse of ecology has only emerged after the seventies. There is an increasingly strong awareness of the need to engage with non-class and post-class issues.¹²¹ This is significant considering that on the gender issue the Communist movement’s record has only been slightly better than other conservative forces.¹²² In this light the conception of women as participants rather than beneficiaries in the Plan is a remarkable change, although it would take a long time to alter the entrenched patriarchal

¹¹⁹ Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 75.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹²¹ Muralidharan, secretary, CPM Muvattupuzha Area Committee, interview by author, August 22, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording. He also underlined the dialogue that is going on in initiatives like the World Social Forum. There is also the recognition that since material issues like land reforms and labor rights have been won, it is imperative that the Left take up other vital issues and also the concerns of the middle classes (Santhosh, interview).

¹²² J. Devika, intellectual and feminist activist, interview by author, July 6, 2003, Thiruvananthapuram, tape recording; see also her “Modernity,” 14.

commonsense and practical aspects like gendered nature of work and so on as studies indicate.¹²³ Similar extension of the traditional class discourse has been seen with regard to ecology. In some of the significant struggles launched in the recent times like the one against illegal encroachment of forests, the use of harmful pesticides, the mining of minerals and the drilling of groundwater, the Left has joined forces with the ecological groups.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, the transition is not easy and there is opposition within the Communist movement.¹²⁵ The trade-union wing is very concerned about the loss of job opportunities for the workers as a result of ecology concerns.¹²⁶ For the Left, this is not an easy debate to resolve. But the fact that the People's Plan has become the main program of CPM (in the teeth of opposition from the trade union wing) shows that high modernism and economic reductionism have again been avoided.¹²⁷

Along with the expansion into non-traditional areas of politics, the Plan also generated new resources within civil society. Unlike the civil society against state discourse that has become dominant in development studies now¹²⁸ (or the positing of civil society as a Western phenomenon in postcolonial theory), the Plan resembles the Gramscian formulation that the state should rest on a strong civil society. Self-help Groups (SHGs) are

¹²³ See KRPLLD Report No. 5, 177-8.

¹²⁴ Ekbal, "Puthiya," 41. Also, the emergence of a trade union bourgeoisie as the Communist movement began to enjoy state power makes the former a strong interest group within the party (K. T. Rammohan, economist, interview by author, June 25, 2003, Kottayam, tape recording; see his "Kerala CPI (M): All that is Solid Melts into Air," *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 3, 1998): 2579-82 for details.

¹²⁵ M. A. Baby, Marxist intellectual, and presently Minister for Education, Kerala Government, interview by author, August 7, 2004, Cherthala, tape recording; Isaac, interview.

¹²⁶ Ekbal, "Puthiya," 141.

¹²⁷ Isaac points out the fact that the ideological position of the People's Plan which was a minority position in the party became hegemonic shows the scope for democratic dialogue within the party (interview). The party and movement always had different ideological positions contesting with one another. For example, a strong environmentalism has coexisted with an instrumental attitude to ecology in the Communist movement in Kerala (Rammohan, "Kerala CPI (M)," 2580). Even the trade-union faction did not have an unbridled faith in modernism. It has opposed mechanization whenever it threatened the livelihood of labor (see T. K. Oommen, *Social Structure and Politics: Studies in Independent India* (New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1985), 175; Sathyamurthy, *India*, 244). In that sense a Polanyian logic is working here.

¹²⁸ See for an influential statement, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edition (London: Verso, 2001).

an excellent example of how new initiatives have sprung up from civil society consequent to the introduction of the People's Plan. SHGs were evolved to overcome the inefficiency of top-down credit delivery systems. They are mainly formed by (poor) women and each group consists around 20 people. They meet all their credit requirements and are characterized by "transparency, regular serving, flexibility, responsiveness, democratic functioning [and] group decision." More importantly, they seek to be governed by minimum external intervention.¹²⁹ The other important development was the formation of Neighborhood Groups, which came up as a spontaneous response from below to the limitations of *grama sabhas*. They were formed in nearly 200 *panchayats*, and in half of them, were successful in undertaking all the functions that would normally be part of the *grama sabha*. Also they were involved in the settlement of family disputes, cultural activities, educational and health programs.¹³⁰ So what emerges is 'state fostered associations',¹³¹ a unique conjuncture in which the state actively encourages groups and associations in civil society contrary to social movement theorists who have argued that engagement with the state would inevitably affect the autonomy of the movement and increase in state intervention would be inimical to the vitality of associational life.¹³²

One of the important shifts, from earlier modes of development, sought to be brought about by the Plan was to initiate a non-partisan approach. The intensely polarized political atmosphere of Kerala had prevented a consensus on even basic issues confronting society. What the Plan envisaged was the cooperation of the different political parties in the

¹²⁹ KRPLLD Report No. 4, 32. Of course, the self-sufficiency of the groups varies from *panchayat* to *panchayat*.

¹³⁰ Isaac, "Campaign," 36; also KRPLLD Report No. 5, 95.

¹³¹ Rob Jenkins, "Civil Society: Active or Passive?" in *Politics in the Developing World*, ed. P. Burnell and V. Randall, 275-285 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹³² Heller, "Moving the Sate," 153.

implementation process and to create a new ‘development culture’¹³³ According to Namboodiripad, “[b]reaking down the watertight compartmentalization that has become entrenched in Kerala...[i]s absolutely necessary for the advancement of the left. To keep the people divided forever is bourgeois politics. The politics of people’s democracy must unite the people.”¹³⁴ The biggest success stories of the Plan have been the ones which have gone beyond narrow political partisanship in the implementation process.¹³⁵ Some have misinterpreted the call for a new development culture beyond political partisanship as an ‘apolitical’ move. Namboodiripad had dispelled notions that it is so. He had argued that ‘apolitical’ and anti party partisanship cannot be conflated. Even while cooperation is sought for the new development culture, the ideological struggle among parties would continue.¹³⁶ The shift to an attention to non-class concerns, the seeking of a new development culture beyond party politics, have all caused tremendous ideological debate within the Communist movement between those who continued to argue for orthodox politics and class primacy and the others who wanted to broaden the movement with the changing times. The KSSP and one of its leading ideologues M. P. Parameshwaran, especially came under attack from the former for its ‘revisionist’ ideas.¹³⁷ The Plan was criticized as privileging civil society, NGOs and social movements over class, trade unions and the state.¹³⁸ The space that was

¹³³ E. M. S. Namboodiripad, “Vikasana Samskarathinte Arthashashtravum, Rashtriyavum”(The Economics and Politics of Development Culture), in Isaac and Sridharan, eds., *Emsum*, 46; also *Deshabhimani*, July 18, 1996; Muralidharan, interview. Also, partisanship could be avoided because of the powers vested in the *grama sabha*, the assembly of all village electors (Ramachandran Nair, interview).

¹³⁴ Quoted in J. Devika and C. Gouridasan Nair, “Fears of Contagion: Conflict over the ‘Political’ in Contemporary Kerala,” Unpublished Manuscript (2005), 11; also, *Deshabhimani* (February 13, 1990).

¹³⁵ M. J. Jacob, president, Thirumarady *Panchayat*, interview; see also, *Deepika* (March 30, 2000). Thirumarady Panchayat won the best *Panchayat* award twice in the state. It is also the first *Panchayat* in the whole of India to achieve total housing and total sanitation (*The Hindu*, (January 9, 2000)). On the Thirumarady story see also *Mangalam* (April 5, 2000), *Deepika* (February 13, 2000) and *Malayala Manorama* (March 28, 2000).

¹³⁶ Namboodiripad, “Vikasana,” 46.

¹³⁷ See Azad, “Parishattinte Rashtriyam, Parameshawarante Rashtriyam” (Parishat’s Politics, Parameshwaran’s Politics), *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (Nov. 21-27, 2004): 22-26.

¹³⁸ P. J. James, “CPM: Pratisandhi Rookshamavum”(CPM: The Crisis will Harden), *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (Feb. 8-14, 2004): 44-46.

sought to be created by the KSSP was allegedly a “village space’ independent of the state” and which hijacked the decentralization program by promoting an apolitical approach based on class cooperation.¹³⁹ Another viewpoint criticized both orthodox and reformist views for being not radical enough, especially the party for being completely deradicalized.¹⁴⁰ The former view wrongly associates the ideology behind the People’s Plan as resembling the postcolonial privileging of the local. Nevertheless, the clash of views, despite its raucous nature, did was to raise some pertinent questions about the future of the Left Project.

In balance, it seems that contrary to the allegations of abandonment of class and politics, the Plan Campaign saw the resolution of the debate in such a manner as to incorporate the pan-class concerns without abandoning the entry-point of class. Effectively, the CPM adopted a position which avoided both the extremes.¹⁴¹ Parameshwaran’s views, for example, had taken a Putnamian hue with a conception of civil society primarily based on private voluntary associations. His emphasis on ‘neighborhood groups’ was an example of this.¹⁴² As in Putnam, the conception of politics was sans power and conflict and couched in the language of trust and reciprocity. It could be said that it was based on the harmony model of power in which “the poor and powerless could acquire tools for self-reliance that would ensure their empowerment without radically transforming power structures in

¹³⁹ S. Sudheesh, “America Keralattil Nadappilakumbol”(Realizing America in Kerala), *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (Jan. 2-8, 2005): 29-30; Azad, “Sastrasahityaparishattinte Putuvazhi”(The New Way of People’s Science Movement), *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (Nov. 16-22, 2003): 14-16.

¹⁴⁰ N. M. Pearson, former Communist activist and intellectual, interview by author, Vadakkan Paravoor, August 21, 2004; see also his “Sastrasahitya Parishat: Corporate Agendayude Ira”(People’s Science Movement: A Victim of Corporate Agenda), *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (Nov. 21-27, 2004): 16-21.

¹⁴¹ According to the former chief minister and Communist leader E K Nayanar, “decentralisation of power is part of class struggle and conflict of class interests, precisely for that reason a polarisation is taking place between those supporting and opposing it. This polarisation is actually a manifestation of class struggle. Making people’s plan campaign a success is thus part of the effort at strengthening class struggle” (*The Hindu*, January 5, 1999).

¹⁴² Devika and Nair, “Fears of Contagion,” 13. For Robert Putnam’s classic statement see *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

society.”¹⁴³ This view was totally rejected by the party and so was the view that advocated no engagement with the civil society. Rather than seek a ‘village space’ the Campaign was trying to forge a new space that was at once mediating between the local and the extra-local. The response to new phase of capitalist modernity was not to take a position which rejected the global to take refuge in the local. The coordination between the different tiers of *panchayats* and their plans, at the village, block and district levels and all these tied to the state ultimately is evidence for this. What the Plan inaugurated was not completely decentralized units but a “‘coordinated decentralization’ in which articulation between levels allows for resource coordination, the diffusion of innovation, and information feedback” which went along with “the maintenance of a bounded aggregated authority—the state— to provide nonlocal public goods (including regulatory frameworks) and to aggressively redress regional inequalities.”¹⁴⁴ Heller has argued that successful decentralization requires three prerequisites: a strong state, a well-developed civil society and “non-Leninist left-of center political parties” with social movement characteristics and a strong commitment to decentralization.¹⁴⁵ These three have come together in the Kerala case, rather than one being pitted against the other, as some critics have pointed out. The subalternist emphasis on an autonomous subaltern space and its lack of concern with larger social transformation will not allow us to understand the processes working behind the Campaign. The Campaign was under no illusion that the local alone—to the exclusion of the global— can be a site of liberation. Instead it was aware that such a viewpoint would only lead to the manipulation of the local by global capital which by virtue of its nature “commands a more comprehensive vision of global totality.” Therefore for the local to be a meaningful site for resistance, it has to be

¹⁴³ Stokke and Mohan, “Dangers of Localism,” 6.

¹⁴⁴ Heller, “Moving the State,” 138. The need for such a bottom-up perspective meeting the top-down one was strongly recognized by Communist activists (Muralidharan, interview).

¹⁴⁵ Heller, “Moving the State,” 139.

translocal at the same time.¹⁴⁶ The Plan Campaign has consistently sought to develop such a consciousness. The international attention that it has attracted, the resultant exchange of ideas, and the active way in which the architects of the Plan have sought inputs and knowledge from similar experiments elsewhere all have gone in this direction.¹⁴⁷

A New State

I started by noting the unique fact of the state-initiated decentralization program. The major feature of the Campaign was the way it tried to strengthen the state by democratizing it. This is also significant considering the now prominent anti-statist discourses like New Social Movements theory which emphasize the autonomy of civil society.¹⁴⁸ Postcolonial arguments that we have seen are only slight variants of this except for the fact that they question the very efficacy of concepts like civil society. The Kerala case shows that the state can be an active agent in fostering civil society. Against Putnam's conception of social capital which implies path dependency and culturalism, here social capital can be the result of not initial endowments but of recent mobilizations in the political sphere and also by state action.¹⁴⁹ State is the fundamental feature of modernity and to believe that resistance can be mounted against oppression, by circumventing the state is, in my view, negating reality. State is also the entity that enforces the present neo-liberal capitalist order: in Marx and Engels, state is the "concentrated and organized violence of society."¹⁵⁰ So, the critique of capitalism

¹⁴⁶ Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 96, 101.

¹⁴⁷ Three seminars of international scope have been held in 10 years in which a significant amount of literature was generated on development in general and decentralization in particular by activists and academics. International attention also acts as a spur to extend and strengthen democratization initiatives. Many international groups, governmental and non-governmental, have visited Muvattupuzha municipality to study some of the success stories (P. M. Ismail, interview).

¹⁴⁸ See Escobar, *Encountering Development*; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*.

¹⁴⁹ Stokke and Mohan, "Dangers of Localism," 11-12.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Bobbio, "Gramsci," 75.

has to involve the transformation of the state as well. All the civil-society centered social theories by remaining at the sub-state level abandon hegemony to global capitalism.¹⁵¹

The importance of the state in the Third World is all the more accentuated. It is the only agency which can aggregate the counter-hegemonic forces in society and also stand up (within limits) to the power of international capital.¹⁵² In that sense, the state in Kerala (despite being a sub-national entity) demonstrates what states can really achieve with the right conditions.

Postcolonial theory with its endeavor to recognize and construct differences rather than totality cannot admit of knowledge forms related to state. It asks,

Can we imagine another moment of subaltern history. Where we stay—permanently, not simply as a matter of political tactics—with what is fragmentary and episodic, precisely because that which is fragmentary and episodic does not, cannot, dream of the whole called the state and therefore must be suggestive of knowledge-forms that are not tied to the will that produces the state?¹⁵³

While thinking of alternatives is totally needed, the position above does not suggest any ways to deal with the concrete reality. The insistence on imagining, in a permanent way, the fragmentary and the episodic is fraught with problems. This ignores the fact that in the age of global capitalism the fragmentary and the episodic are themselves shaped by its mechanisms—that there is no pristine fragmentary/episodic that emerges unscathed from its incursions. So any kind of resistance which seeks to overcome hegemonic hierarchical relations will have to contend with this reality. But the obfuscation of questions of political economy in postcolonial theory does not allow us to coherently theorize about the fragmentary.

¹⁵¹ William Graf, "The State in the Third World," *Socialist Register* (1995): 157.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁵³ Chakrabarty, "Radical Histories," 757.

If the utopia of the complete abolition of state power has to be abandoned and at the same time state tyranny has to be avoided, difficult questions have to be asked about the relationship between state and civil society. If the state is a reality, questions have to be asked as to what kind of state it should be.¹⁵⁴ The Communist project in Kerala posed such questions. Of course, the answers have not been completely satisfactory;¹⁵⁵ nevertheless, they are pointing to the right direction in the present conjuncture of capitalist modernity. Importantly, they contribute to an area, state-civil society relations, about which the original Marxian theory, premised on the abolition of state, had nothing much to say. The distinction between the state and civil society needs to be maintained, without one appropriating the other, leading us back to the Gramscian formulation that we started with.¹⁵⁶ Strong and independent civil society and political pluralism can only be achieved with the existence of an effective and democratic state, not by its abolition.¹⁵⁷ The Campaign inaugurated a unique partnership in which the state and civil society joined together against the market. It was almost a spectacular achievement to have implemented a program of such proportions without at all involving private consultants in the planning process.¹⁵⁸ The state here recaptures some of its past glory of the post WW II era in which it was noticeably successful in de-commodification.¹⁵⁹ This is significant considering the wave of re-commodification that is sweeping much of the Third World under neo-liberalism.¹⁶⁰

The Plan Campaign was another example of the way in which the Communist movement has tried to negotiate modernity, this time in the political sphere complementing

¹⁵⁴ Heller, "Formal Democracy," 142.

¹⁵⁵ For a critique of the Campaign from a civil society point of view, see Devika and Nair, "Fears of Contagion."

¹⁵⁶ However, in the long run, Gramsci too, envisioned the abolition of state.

¹⁵⁷ Heller, "Formal Democracy," 142."

¹⁵⁸ Heller, "Moving the State," 146.

¹⁵⁹ See John Keane, "Introduction," in *Civil Society*, 7.

¹⁶⁰ See William D. Graf, "Democratization 'for' the Third World," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, Special Issue (1996): 37-56.

its struggles in the other spheres. The already existing consciousness that political struggles are an inalienable part of the struggle for equality¹⁶¹ was sought to be transformed into a new level. Of course, the Campaign was not merely a political project but also an economic (and cultural) response to the latest phase of development. It was nevertheless imbued with the understanding that economic exploitation of the most disadvantaged classes cannot be overcome only through an economic solution, but only through the extension of democracy in its widest sense. In this perspective the reforms sought by the Campaign conform to what Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright have termed as Empowered Participatory Governance: “participatory because they rely upon the commitment and capacities of ordinary people to make sensible decisions through reasoned deliberation and empowered because they attempt to tie action to discussion.”¹⁶² These reforms also evoke what has been termed as “high energy democracy” in contrast with the “low energy democracy” that prevails in much of the developed Western world,¹⁶³ or “thick democracy”, instead of “thin democracy”.¹⁶⁴ Here what is happening is the contribution of the ‘periphery’ to the evolution of a global modernity rather than the unfolding of ‘our modernity’. Instead, “postcolonial critiques continue to deny the coevalness of Indian modernity; modernity remains an external, substantially western phenomenon, albeit eventually adapted, transformed and made ‘Indian’.”¹⁶⁵

As we noted before, the Campaign’s history is too short to pass a final judgment

¹⁶¹ ‘Gopakumar’, worker, interview by author, May 30, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

¹⁶² See Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, “Thinking about Empowered Participatory Governance,” in *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (London: Verso, 2003), 5.

¹⁶³ Roberto Unger, “Towards a High Energy Democracy,” *Seminar* 506 (October 2001): 36-39.

¹⁶⁴ Peter Evans, “Development as Institutional Change: The Pitfalls of Monocropping and Potentials of Deliberation,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2004): 30-52.

¹⁶⁵ Osella and Osella, “Social Mobility,” 259.

on its long term impact. Also, it was not without its drawbacks. The total participation in the *grama sabhas* did not go beyond the 10-15 per cent mark.¹⁶⁶ The participation of the educated middle classes has been very low. The percentage of women and lower castes were low in the beginning, but picked up later.¹⁶⁷ The consensus about the Campaign also was not complete. As noted there was still opposition from within the CPM. But it is clear that the present CPM-led government will go ahead with it. Thus the party which is still governed by the principles of democratic centralism is the one which is in the forefront of initiating decentralization. The Campaign has also explicitly put a question mark on arguments which have posited that the Communists were not interested in anything but a total revolution; therefore the reform of existing institutions were outside their program of action.¹⁶⁸ It also significantly strikes at what Roberto Unger has described as ‘institutional fetishism’: the conception that “political values have a unique, single and necessary institutional expression.”¹⁶⁹ This fetishism had combined with the admiration of the West had produced a subservience to “derivative discourses” which prevented postcolonial elites from charting a new path. The fundamental feature of the Communist negotiation of modernity in this period, like the ones before, was to steer away from both high modernism and romanticism of the pre-modern past. It rejected both centralization and autonomous decentralization in favor of coordinated decentralization.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Parameshwaran, *Nalam*, 93. There are also problems like the distance involved in traveling to the place where the *sabha* is convened (Selvan, interview).

¹⁶⁷ Isaac, “Campaign,” 36. In my research, I found that the enthusiasm for the Campaign is quite high even among the most disadvantaged (Joykunju, interview). There was unanimity among those who were interviewed that the Plan was a great idea which only needed improvement in implementation. N. M. Pearson was in the forefront of a local initiative called *Janakeeya Koottayma* (Popular Collectivity) which undertook significant development projects at the panchayat level (interview). As Evans argues: “When systems of deliberation are seen as actually shaping real outcomes, ordinary citizens tolerate their messiness and invest the time and energy required to make them work” (Evans, “Development,” 42).

¹⁶⁸ Yogendra Yadav, “A Radical Agenda for Political Reforms,” *Seminar* 506 (October 2001): 5-8.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷⁰ See Fung and Wright, “Participatory Governance,” 21.

All the theories inspired by post-modernism have generally argued for a completely autonomous decentralization. Patrick Heller categorizes them as the anarcho-communitarians who reject all traditional vehicles of popular mobilization like parties and trade unions and also are opposed to any kind of state intervention. What this line of thinking does is to reify “mobilization at the expense of institutions.” It believes in the utopia that democracy can completely do without bureaucracy.¹⁷¹ This tendency is marked in the postcolonial writings that we have examined so far. The critique of governmentality ignores the fact that forms of enumeration and fixity cannot be avoided in modern governance which goes beyond face-to-face communities. Thus we cannot only remain at the level of recovering “autonomous forms of imagination of the community” or “the imaginative possibilities afforded by the fuzziness of the community”.¹⁷² The collectivity envisaged under the Plan does not resemble a community but evokes what Nancy Fraser has called a counterpublic. If community is based on

the affective language of love... on assumptions of authenticity, homogeneity, and continuity, of inclusion and exclusion, identity and otherness. The notion of a counterpublic, by contrast, [is based on] forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation, but these forms are inevitably experienced as mediated, no longer rooted in face-to-face relations, and subject to discursive conflict and negotiation.”¹⁷³

The other view that is totally opposed to the communitarians is the technocratic one which believes in the power of science and rationality and is characterized by institutional fetishism. In its conception of democracy, politics not only does not find a place but is also something to be afraid of. Mere institutional design (that too narrowly conceived) is thought to be the key to improving democracy.¹⁷⁴ Even when this vision envisages decentralization, it

¹⁷¹ Heller, “Moving the State,” 136.

¹⁷² Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 11, 225.

¹⁷³ Hansen, “Foreword,” xxxvi.

¹⁷⁴ Yadav, “Radical Agenda,” 7.

is a conceived as an “agency for stabilizing the social and political *status quo*.”¹⁷⁵ The Campaign moves away from both these conceptions. State power, rather than being denied, is itself transformed into “permanently mobilized deliberative-democratic grassroots forms.” Instead of valorizing mobilization without institutions, it attempts to institutionalize the participation of the most disadvantaged sections of the population. The idea is to go beyond the brief democratic moments of specific outcome-oriented and campaign-based social movements or the same in the predominant electoral competitions.¹⁷⁶

There have been criticisms against the Campaign that it was based on the avoidance of conflict or the suppression of conflicts as the focus was on deliberation.¹⁷⁷

Deliberative democracy may have the disadvantage because it may discourage radicalism and militancy. Commitment to deliberative processes may rule out more radical methods of challenging power. And if the deliberative bodies become sites for genuine challenge to the power of entrenched classes, then they may seek to abolish these bodies.¹⁷⁸

But I will argue that these factors do not apply in the Kerala case. The program for deliberative democracy itself was undertaken after decades of militant mobilization and conflict in which the power of the dominant classes was substantially eroded. Therefore the process of deliberation, while it seeks to deepen democracy, is already premised on the organized power of the workers and peasants backed by a political party. Radical conflict is merely kept in abeyance, not abandoned forever.¹⁷⁹ Also, despite the economic turnaround, the need to maintain economic growth so as to sustain the welfare state is present. The need for a new development dispensation was imperative. And the progress from conflict to

¹⁷⁵ Cox, “Civil Society,” 11.

¹⁷⁶ See Fung and Wright, “Participatory Governance,” 22-3.

¹⁷⁷ Chathukulam and John, “Five Years,” 4918.

¹⁷⁸ Fung and Wright, “Participatory Governance,” 35.

¹⁷⁹ The militant campaign launched by CPM against the conversion of paddy land into commercial crop cultivation is an example (see Special Correspondent, “Farm Workers’ Agitation: Return to Politics of Confrontation?” *Economic and Political Weekly* (August 16-23, 1997): 2089-2090).

deliberation was precisely possible because of the institutionalization of the rights of workers and peasants. Thus the key to deliberation and collaboration is the existence of countervailing power of the subordinate classes. Where this is absent the rules of collaboration will favor the entrenched classes.¹⁸⁰ Many have seen the labor quiescence and the decline of militant struggles in Kerala since the late 1970s as the cooptation of the Communist movement. But Heller in a path-breaking argument, and against the received wisdom, shows that this is the result of the institutionalization of class conflict: The “decline of overt class struggle does not reflect a shift in the balance of class forces, or the triumph of market forces.”¹⁸¹ While he accepts the initial barriers to growth from labor militancy he cites the increasing levels of production from the 1990s to argue that these barriers have been removed, “not as result of some ineluctable triumph of the logic of capital or the political defeat of labor but through a process of negotiated class compromise.”¹⁸²

What People’s Plan does is to open up the possibility of overcoming the pervasive dominance of what Foucault has characterized as ‘biopower’, the development of knowledge and regulatory controls associated with the production and optimization of life, the inalienable component of which is the governmentalization of social life—the domination of every aspect of life by state.¹⁸³ Unlike in Foucault and postcolonial theory power can be overcome and the discourse of democracy is always not another mechanism of

¹⁸⁰ Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, “Countervailing Power in Empowered Participatory Governance,” in *Deepening Democracy*, 263.

¹⁸¹ Heller argues that the bargaining capacity of the labor has only increased even after labor quiescence. For example, the membership of the agricultural labor union has increased from 47,700 in 1970 to over one million in 1990. The increase in the collective bargaining power of labor is reflected in the fact that no serious reversals of real wage levels have taken place in spite of, for example, the decline in the price of rice, which is even more remarkable because of the decreasing demand for labor and increase in its supply (Heller, *Labor of Development*, 89, 90-93).

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁸³ Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 229.

power, but is inherently generative of criticism.¹⁸⁴ The extension of democracy puts a stop to the imposition of ideas only from above and takes into account the subaltern's vision, her ideas, promotes "people's needs".¹⁸⁵ Dirlik argues that the emergence of the local in the present conjuncture has been due to the fact that it has been suppressed or marginalized in various ideologies of modernity:

Modernist teleology has gone the farthest of all in stamping upon the local its derogatory image: as enclaves of backwardness left out of progress, as the realm of rural stagnation against the dynamism of the urban, industrial civilization of capitalism, as the realm of particularistic culture against universal scientific rationality and perhaps most importantly, as the obstacle to full realization of that political form of modernity, the nation-state."¹⁸⁶

The Communist project, as we have seen, built its hegemony through principles which were at variance with this. People's Plan could be seen as a culmination of this process. With the People's Plan, the local assumed a new importance in the Communist lexicon. But this local, as in the period of the construction of the national-popular, is not one posited against the national or the global. It is constantly seeking to understand the connections that constitute contemporary modernity. More importantly, the Plan was not conceived merely as a mechanism of problem solving with the intention of reforming government, but as in the case of Porto Alegre, Brazil, also as a mechanism for the "empowerment of the poor and social justice, and with the goal of social transformation and rupture".¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ For Foucault, discourse of any kind always produces "domains of objects and rituals of truth" (quoted in *ibid.*, 104).

¹⁸⁵ 'Alias', Communist sympathizer, interview by author, July 28, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; Aliyar Kunju, Communist activist and retired worker, interview by author, August 6, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; Ibrahim, CPM activist, and councillor, Muvattupuzha municipality, interview by author, July 29, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

¹⁸⁶ Dirlik, *Post-colonial Aura*, 86.

¹⁸⁷ Gianpaolo Baiocchi, "Participation, Activism, and Politics: The Porto Alegre Experiment," in Fung and Wright, eds., *Deepening Democracy*, 69.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

The Communist movement in Kerala is one of the most significant mobilizations of peasantry and the working classes in the Third World. But its success lay in its negotiation of modernity, in the way in which it was able to simultaneously address a variety of exclusions based on class, caste, national, and linguistic identities. Rather than see them as ‘particularities’ and ‘fragments’, it was able to build their unity. This thesis has contended that the movement fundamentally puts into question the assumptions of postcolonial theory, especially its understanding of modernity as a merely alien and Western phenomenon, with the rest of the societies adapting themselves to it. The contribution of non-Western ‘peripheral’ societies to the substantive content and practice of modernity is ignored here.

Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory argue that the present difficulties of the nation-state begin from the fact that the nationalists accepted the Orientalist construction of the Indian society.¹ They see this acceptance and also the tendency of passive revolution in Third World societies as inexorable phenomena. This denies the trajectories which have overcome passive revolution, other imaginations of history like that of the Communist movement in Kerala, and the agency involved in these processes. Therefore this study has argued that the Communist negotiation of modernity has not followed the script of an “already told-European drama” as posited by postcolonial theory. Cultural critic Geeta Kapur had posed a very relevant question about the present conjuncture: “Does the third world... as a place of aggregative self-representation and collective nemesis, become a revised anthropologically dictated narrative that excels in revenge histories about otherness

¹ Kaviraj, “On State,” 97.

but lacks the initiative on historical reflexivity for envisaging a future?”² If postcolonial theory has gone on the path of authoring such revenge histories, the Communist movement in Kerala has shown the historical reflexivity necessary for envisaging a different future. The contribution of the present study to the existing scholarship is in the exploration of the dynamics of this process, and the questioning of the increasing influence of works which posit culturalist solutions to problems of the Third World. Through the study of the Communist negotiation of modernity, it provides an empirical substantiation of the theoretical inadequacies of postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies. This dissertation also moves away from the predominant tendency to study Communism solely through quantitative methods which are focused on the programs of the Communist governments. Instead, this research looks at the cultural and ideological aspects and their relation to the larger modernity project. To our knowledge, this is the first work to deal with the Communist negotiation of modernity in Kerala. Also, unlike many top-down studies, it has sought to approach the meaning of Communism and modernity from the bottom-up, while delineating the connection between the elite and subaltern levels. It has attempted the difficult task of integrating concerns which have been traditionally considered a part of political theory and cultural studies with comparative politics. The qualitative-quantitative split is also manifested in the disciplinary division of labor. This research has sought to go beyond such divisions. Other than the new evidence presented, it has also provided, in many places, a new theoretical interpretation to the existing evidence in secondary sources. The conclusions of this study can be carried forward onto a comparative excursus of Communist and non-Communist negotiation of modernity in the Indian and the larger Third World contexts.

² Geeta Kapur, “Globalization and Culture: Navigating the Void,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 202.

Postcolonial theory draws a sharp distinction between modernity and tradition and sees a rupture between the two, thus ignoring the continuities that also exist. Without understanding these, it is impossible to make sense of the social transformation under the Communists. According to postcolonialists, “colonialism ruptures the self-relation of a society through time in such a fundamental way that it becomes difficult to imagine what would be right.”³ This does not take into account that colonialism not only constitutes a break but also a continuity. It reinforced many of the existing features. “This means that colonial rule both introduced and arrested the flow of new values and institutions, and also that it both changed and froze their traditional counterparts. To say that it only subverted or froze the precolonial society is to be guilty of half-truths.”⁴ This is what postcolonial theory implies. In positing the encounter with colonialism as a one-way affair, postcolonial theory misses the changes brought about on both sides as a result. By placing way too much importance on the one specific instance of European colonialism, it not only ignores the present but also the pre-colonial history. Especially in countries like India which have had a long history of foreign invasions, “[British] colonialism introduced no more than one new idiom, one new strand, in the complex mosaic of societies subjected to it.”⁵

Gandhi, despite his tremendous success in bridging the divide between the modern and traditional discourses and thus taking nationalism to the phase of mass mobilization, refused to engage with modernity.

Gandhi did not seek an answer to the problems of the modern condition. He shrewdly refused to deal in modernity’s terms. His answer was not about how modern conditions can be brought under cognitive and moral control, but that modernity as a condition should be abjured. In a sense he embraced a deliberate obsolescence.⁶

³ Ibid.

⁴ Pieterse and Parekh, “Shifting Imaginaries,” 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kaviraj, “On State,” 96.

This refusal to find a solution to the problems of modernity and also the tendency to address historic problems like that of caste discrimination within the straitjacket of tradition is what led the masses to the Communist movement in Kerala which sought to overcome the material-symbolic split. Postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies, despite their stated agenda of overcoming Enlightenment dualisms and recovering the ambivalences and hybridities of Third World societies, ultimately end up resolving these in favor of traditionalism. Their turn to Gandhi as a symbol of resistance against the disciplinary practices and institutions of modernity is an indicator of this. Some of the postcolonial writers had recognized that a pre-modern political language couldn't be brought back.

The modern state cannot go back to high ground in the middle of the circle of communities. The circles themselves cannot be made fuzzy again. There is a certainly a great deal of humanity in the pre-modern languages of social living. Its sentiments are valuable, but its conceptual apparatus cannot work out solutions to modern calamities.⁷

But this is not the general position of postcolonial theory, which as we have seen, has posited binaries like modernity/ democracy ad civil society/political society.⁸

Its focus on culture and the resultant culturalism does not prevent it from adopting an acultural view of modernity. Modernity is ultimately viewed as an assault on traditional societies, with which they are not able to cope. This is where traditionalism, ironically, replicates modernism. Both have the same view on how pre-modern societies enter modernity—through essentially non-cultural processes.⁹ Contrary to this the Communist movement recognized the efficacy of culture while at the same time relating it to the

⁷ Kaviraj, "State," 96.

⁸ Kaviraj's arguments are more balanced because he does not completely adopt the philosophical assumptions of postcolonial theory.

⁹ Bhargava, "Alternative Modernities," 3.

universal nature of changes brought about by capitalism and scientific technological processes.

As this study has argued throughout, Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory do not provide an explanation as to why the masses are attracted to ideologies of modernity. Even when they document the urges and aspirations of the peasant masses, they derive conclusions which run contrary to the realization of the same. An example is Chatterjee's examination of interviews with peasants who participated in the national struggle against the British. The peasants were asked as to why they joined the struggle. Their answers were of this nature: the urge to get freedom, for equality of all, to be free from oppression, servitude and basic wants, for a better life for their children, for the good of the country and happiness of the people. Of course, now (the interviews were conducted in the seventies), there was total bitterness that these aspirations had not been fulfilled. The general refrain was that " 'What have we come to? ... This is not the country we had dreamed about and fought for.'"¹⁰ The sense of betrayal by the leaders and organizations among the masses in this scenario was totally understandable. But from this Chatterjee's conclusion that the disenchantment with the present leads to an urge to escape from it to the past does not follow. Chatterjee's definition of non-Western modernity and the present as a "site from which we feel we must escape" is a generalization that does not match the views of the peasants seen above. Such a characterization is truer of the landed classes and other elites who have lost their power under modernity. The caste and class coding of the desire to escape the present is not explored by Chatterjee. While he rightly notes the disenchantment and cynicism that have become the norm among the subordinate classes in the postcolonial

¹⁰ Chatterjee, "Introduction," 1-5.

state, he attributes them to the failed project of cultural modernization in India undertaken by the elite. The failure arises from the latter's desire to

replicate in its own society the forms as well as the substance of Western modernity. It was a desire for a new ethical life in society, one that is in conformity with the virtues of the enlightenment and of bourgeois freedom and whose known cultural forms are those of secularized Western Christianity.¹¹

Again, the present predicament of the poor and the marginalized is attributed to the ignorance of traditional social practices and the imposition of Western modernity. Despite the recognition that this may lead to “dehistoricizing and essentializing ‘tradition’”,¹² Chatterjee's position slips into tradition/modernity dichotomy and consequently modernity/democracy and political society/civil society. What is surprising is that the peasants' craving for equality, freedom, liberation from material want, good of the nation and people, and a better future are all considered as having no relation with modernity. Modernity is merely, and one-sidedly, associated with governmentality. If for the modernist traditionalists are “blind worshippers of the past, paranoid of disagreement and conflict, irrational and sunk in hierarchical social practices antithetical to individual freedom”, traditionalism faithfully replicates the dualism by seeing the modernists as “value-less anarchists who move from one ephemeral desire to another, deify instrumental rationality and are blind to the larger, deeper significance of their lived world.”¹³ State and civil society are the domains in which the elite act, whereas masses act in the sphere of political society which consist of parties, movements and non-political formations. If the form through which the former relates to the population is the function of *welfare*, the latter takes the form of *democracy*.¹⁴ These are very problematic dualisms which have little salience at least in the

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹² Ibid., 11.

¹³ Bhargava, “Alternative Modernities,” 3.

¹⁴ Chatterjee, “Introduction,” 15.

case study that we have looked at. Postcolonial theory sees the predicament of the postcolonial state in the increasing tussle “between the demands of modernity and the compulsions of democracy”¹⁵ which resolves in favor of the former through the governmentalization of society. But this attribution of the scuttling of democracy to modernity, other than being one-sided, ignores the efficacy of pre-modern history in the shaping of the present, especially the role of economic and cultural capital acquired over centuries of hegemony of the upper castes and the dominant classes. It conveniently avoids a critical examination of ‘tradition’ and the role of the feudal propertied classes in the hollowing out of democracy in India. The momentous struggles launched against feudalism in Kerala are demonstrative of the fact that postcolonial theory’s analysis of the disenchantment with the present among the marginalized classes has failed to account for the mechanisms that animate social reality.

The struggle for equality—for recognition and redistribution—has been the fundamental driving force of the social transformation that accompanied the Communist movement. Like the Ezhava caste reform organization SNDP, which in the early part of the twentieth century, based itself on pre-existing local discourses of egalitarianism while, at the same time, appealed to Western science,¹⁶ the Communist movement tried to dialectically mediate between the universal and the vernacular. “Indian modern practices based upon universalistic notions of justice, equality and individual agency are neither western imports nor ‘traditional’, but arise instead through a series of debates and engagements between local and external universalist ideals.”¹⁷ That is why modernity in Third World societies cannot be merely considered a Western project. The Communist movement in Kerala reveals that such

¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶ Osella and Osella, *Social Mobility*, 260.

¹⁷ Ibid.

societies are as much producers of modernity as they are its products. The alienness and externality of modernity is the central problematic of postcolonial theory. But this research reveals that it is a non-issue, for people select and appropriate many of the external values on the basis of their worthiness to their own lives, just as they reject others on the same criteria. In this process of encounter with Western modernity, a new layer of practices comes up which resembles neither it or the existing indigenous ones. But nevertheless, this study has not gone to the extent of calling them alternative modernity, as many have done, for the reason that the fundamental core of these practices has been the original Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity which correspond to the existing indigenous ideas of equality.

The most important discourse, which emerges from the research, is that of equality. Modernity is evaluated on this count rather than on alienness. Communism or Marxism is not considered as 'alien' for the fact that it fulfills a need to end oppression in society. The idea of equality is deemed a great one. As a result it does not matter as to where it came from. Also the idea of equality arises in every society and is a universal concept. Communism thus becomes a means of gaining equality.¹⁸ Materialist philosophies have supposedly arisen in every society. Marxism is seen as a continuation of the indigenous ideas of equality like that of Mahabali's and the social reform movements.¹⁹ In the pre-modern era, the authority of the upper castes was not unlimited and sometimes they had to 'atone' for their excesses by deifying lower castes put to death by them and worshipping them alongside upper-caste gods." It could be said that the landlords' power was not one-sided

¹⁸ Basheer, Joykunju, Kochavan, Aliyarkunju and Ibrahim, interviews.

¹⁹ Guruprakash, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, May 17, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

and they were “as much under the sway of lower caste spirits and gods”.²⁰ But we should realize that such reversals of hierarchy are not a denial of hierarchy. These temporary reversals and covert resistances do not provide a blueprint for change and also do not address central problem—the lack of equality. Moreover, such transgressions, by providing safety valves, reinforce hierarchy.²¹ The attraction towards the Communist movement was precisely because of the fact that it went beyond the cult of the minor spirits which curbed the power of the upper castes but provided only a “ritual compensation for the lower castes.”²²

Osella and Osella argue that the principle of hierarchy has been challenged and discarded only “among everyday categories of friends, lovers, the young and comrades; and in states and conditions which are highly temporary, limited and idealized. Everyday reality remains suffused with values and manifestations of hierarchy, of which caste is but one.”²³ This research has reached the opposite conclusion: the dismantling of hierarchy in variety of spheres has been the most pervasive feature since the rise of the Communist movement. It has not been restricted to extraordinary situations or public demonstrations called by the Left parties as argued by Osella and Osella. Of course, there are many areas like gender, food, housing and marriage where hierarchy is still very pronounced.²⁴ These are areas where findings from this research can be carried forward to understand the dynamics of hegemony and critique. Nevertheless, what is significant from the point of view of the problematic that we started with is that these hierarchies are not just the product of modernity as in

²⁰ Menon, *Communism in South India*, 46-7.

²¹ Osella and Osella, *Social Mobility*, 242.

²² Kathleen Gough, “Palakkara: Social and Religious Change in Central Kerala,” in *Change and Continuity in India's Villages*, ed. K. Ishwaran (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970), 139.

²³ *Social Mobility*, 221.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 250. Also, lower castes can be seen adopting upper caste customs and mores (especially pernicious ones) in arenas like marriage and sexuality (Marion den Uyl, *Invisible Barriers: Gender, Caste and Kinship in a Southern Indian Village* (Utrecht: International Books, 1995), 200, 215, 222).

postcolonial theory, but are to a large extent the vestiges of pre-capitalist era, which have of course assumed new forms in modernity.

Caste is still a barrier to class consciousness and sometimes, it hinders the unity and working of class organizations like agricultural unions.²⁵ Even among Communist activists, deprecating views about, and discrimination about untouchable castes are not absent.²⁶ The land reforms too, as we have seen, benefited the different castes with varying results. But this does not mean that, as Osella and Osella argue, “individual assertions of empowerment” by formerly untouchable castes “are generally subject to (often violent) reprisals.”²⁷ This research reveals that such acts are simply not possible because of the allegiance of the untouchable castes to the Communist parties. This allows the upper caste elites to only complain in private about the recalcitrance of, and lack of respect among the lower castes.²⁸ This becomes almost a “hidden transcript”— something that cannot be openly declared.²⁹ The collapse of caste and class hierarchies in the public sphere is the most palpable phenomenon. The greatest social change in Kerala has been the elimination of forms of personal rule that characterized the lord-serf and upper caste-untouchable relations. “An element of personal terror invariably infuses these relations— a terror that may take the form of arbitrary beatings, sexual brutality, insults, and public humiliations.”³⁰

As postcolonial theory does not provide an explanation for the attraction of modernity for the subordinate classes, Dilip Menon’s social history of Communism also

²⁵ Ibid., 212.

²⁶ ‘Dasan,’ shopkeeper, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, July 28, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; Joykunju, interview.

²⁷ *Social Mobility*, 251.

²⁸ ‘Sebastian Joseph,’ upper caste, government engineer, interview by author, August 7, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; Mannathukkaran, interview. In the latter’s view, the former (untouchable) serfs have the audacity to share public spaces like cinema theatres with the upper castes. He also feels that in disputes involving the *dalits* and upper castes, police tend to favor the former because of the fear of the Communist parties.

²⁹ Scott, *Domination*, xii.

³⁰ Ibid., xi.

does not address the crucial question as to why people in a 'traditional society' were attracted to Communism.³¹ He attempts to correct this in his later work by arguing that the upper-castes, for example, were attracted to Marxism because it provided them the necessary tool to reassert their fast eroding traditional authority.³² This is a highly inadequate and one-sided explanation which hardly captures the 'structure of feeling' of a generation which was captivated by the promise of Marxism.

The Communist leaders like Krishnapillai's attempts to declass themselves by breaking caste taboos by eating and sleeping in untouchable households won the faith of the untouchables.³³ Thoppil Bhasi, in true Gramscian fashion, had understood that no ideology or movement could penetrate the masses without going down to their consciousness and commonsense and learning not to look down upon them: "One who cannot learn cannot teach."³⁴ The sacrifices made by the Communists, the willingness to give their lives for the cause and so on were important factors that attracted many to the party.³⁵ The days of suffering of leading an underground life, trying to avoid capture by the state, were testing times for the activists; but they were all borne in the hope that a "good tomorrow" will be the result.³⁶ The reasons put forth by the peasants in Chatterjee's account find resonance in Kerala too where Communist activists were drawn to anti-imperialist struggles because they believed that colonialism was one of the main reasons for their oppression, and liberation from it would guarantee them a better future.³⁷

³¹ He himself acknowledges this drawback (see Menon, "Peasants," 2620).

³² Dilip Menon, "Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S Nambudiripad and the Pasts of Kerala," in *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, ed. Daud Ali (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 61.

³³ Manalil, *Kalathinte*, 125.

³⁴ Bhasi, *Olivile*, 44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

³⁶ Nayanar, *Olivukala*, 19. For a description of the extremity of hardships suffered in underground life, see pages 26-30.

³⁷ Anilkumar, *C*, 82.

Unlike the narratives that emphasize the localist rendering of Communism, it is imperative that its universalist underpinnings be recognized, especially the new aspirations created by the Russian Revolution.³⁸ Communists like Nayanar and others were captivated by the book *Notes from the Gallows* written by Czech Communist Julis Fucik, put to death by Nazi Germany for his role in the anti-fascist resistance and John Reed's work *Ten Days that Shook the World* on the Bolshevik Revolution.³⁹ The revolutionary heroism of Bhagat Singh and others, "the self-sacrificing spirit" of early Communist leaders acted as a motivator for Communist activists.⁴⁰ At the same time there was also the urge, in Gopalan's account, to get himself rid of middle class traits of "false pride, self-conceit and desire for power".⁴¹

The kind of universal influences that shaped the ideological formation of the Communist leaders like Namboodiripad is evident from the four tracts he wrote in jail after being incarcerated for the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930. They related to the French and Russian revolutions, Sun Yat Sen's *Three Democratic Principles*, Egyptian nationalist revolution and Trotsky's history of the Russian revolution.⁴² Similarly it was during the same time, Gopalan was also exposed to socialist ideas and the necessity of understanding India's problems by linking them to issues beyond. Leaders like N. K. Madhavan were attracted to Communism mainly because of the Soviet Revolution.⁴³

While, especially now, there are many who are attracted to the Communist parties for purposes which are purely instrumental, the following description of Communist cadres at the local level in the 1950s by anti- Communist newspaper *Mathrubhumi* tells a lot about the reasons for the Communist imbrication in society:

³⁸ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 54-84.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 125, 36.

⁴⁰ Gopalan, *Cause of the People*, 15, 118

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴² Kabir, "Peasants," 950.

⁴³ Pearson, interview.

Deep-rooted in the soil of Kerala and tended by constant care and attention of its activists is the Communist party of Kerala. In every remote village there are Communist activists who are closest to the most downtrodden of the people and who have identified these sections. It might be that he goes about like a vagabond. But in his village, he keeps contact with all individuals. And he takes the message of the party to every heart. He has an objective which keeps him inspired. And to achieve that objective he devotes his self-sacrificing endeavors. The better tomorrow may perhaps be a mirage, but to him it is the complete truth. And he means to achieve his aims he finds in the Communist party. The party is his body and soul.⁴⁴

In latter day activists too attraction to Communism stemmed from the latter's dedication to ordinary people's problems and the willingness to intercede on their behalf. Among the poor, it was the direct experience of oppression and the hope that Communism would put an end to it and that it was the only movement that helped the workers and peasants.⁴⁵

Among the students it was the struggles launched by the Communist party for democratization of education, the selflessness of leaders like Namboodiripad and Nayanar and the honesty and dedication of lower level activists.⁴⁶ Again dichotomies like tradition/modernity have little relevance when we examine accounts of *dalits*. According to a female agricultural worker:

The party [Communist party] prepared the way for a new life. When my parents were young we were young we were not allowed to walk in the streets or wear good clothes. Untouchability was everywhere. And nowadays, is there still untouchability? No, there isn't, is there? We can go everywhere. In the old days, we weren't allowed an education. We had to wear torn dirty clothes. Wasn't there untouchability then? Haven't we changed that? If only the party grows, then we can live.⁴⁷

In contrast to this is the postcolonial narrative which interprets modernity one-sidedly: "There is no promised land of modernity outside the network of power. Hence one cannot be for or against modernity; one can only devise strategies for coping with it... The same historical process that taught us the value of modernity has also made us the victims of

⁴⁴ Quoted in Sengupta, *Communism*, 182-3.

⁴⁵ M. J. Jacob, Ismail, 'Alias', Ibrahim, 'Basheer' and Kochavan., interviews.

⁴⁶ Saju and Ramachandran Nair, interviews.

⁴⁷ Quoted in den Uyl, *Invisible Barriers*, 249.

modernity.”⁴⁸ Here the citizens of the colonized world do not have any agency in producing modernity, they are mere subjects: “The bitter truth about our present is our subjection, our inability to be subjects in our own right. And yet, it is because we want to be modern that our desire to be independent and creative is transposed on to our past.”⁴⁹ As we have seen, the caste and class coding of this imagination is generalized: the longing for the past among the elite classes stands in as a general characteristic of ‘our modernity’. Here Chatterjee’s own account of peasants looking towards the future free of oppression and colonialism is ignored. “At the opposite end from ‘these days’ marked by incompleteness and lack of fulfillment, we construct a picture of ‘those days’ when there was beauty, prosperity and a healthy sociability, and which was above all, our own creation.”⁵⁰ At least the subalterns’ account of the past does not have anything to do with this description. True, they also reject many aspects that come along with modernity, but this did not translate into a romanticization and idealization of the past. The attraction to Communism is its promise of an equal society in the future.⁵¹ There is no nostalgia for feudalism, in which “most of the people were poor”. Despite the inadequacies, there is some kind of security for everyone.⁵² Education, healthcare, electricity, waterworks and modern medicines, are considered as a sign of progress by the most disadvantaged sections of society like the *dalits*.⁵³ The relation to the past is governed by one’s social location. For those who lived under slavery, the past is not one of beauty and prosperity as in Chatterjee’s account: The villages “teemed with

⁴⁸ Chatterjee, “Our Modernity,” 19.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 20. One of the troubling contradictions of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory is that it alternates between the extremes of this conception of victimhood and a full-blown voluntarism which does not take into account the material context at all.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Pearson, interview.

⁵² Kochavan. Interview.

⁵³ den Uyl, *Invisible Barriers*, 131.

healthy, happy and robust people, who spent their days mainly in sports.”⁵⁴ On the contrary, in the *Cheruma* stonecutter’s view: “The entire history has become an affair which makes us angry and rebellious. It has all got to be changed. We only have the minimum. Our health is not improving. We have no education or art of our own, no culture, no work, no money, nothing.”⁵⁵

What this thesis has dealt with is the dominant tendencies in the Communist negotiation of modernity. There are also contrary minor tendencies which can subvert the so far successful negotiation of modernity. This is another area of research which can benefit from the conclusions of this study. The decline in ideological commitment and values associated with Communism has been the most important among the contrary tendencies. The growth of CPM itself has meant a lot of members being inducted without proper training. The process of getting membership itself has become easier. Depoliticization among the youth is a global phenomenon which has had its effects in Kerala too.⁵⁶ Factionalism like in other ‘bourgeois’ parties is a creeping phenomenon. Years of following the parliamentary path has led to a premium being placed on winning elections and the resultant jockeying for governmental positions and power. Organizational wings of the party get devalued in the process. And party membership does not have the same value as before.⁵⁷ One of the greatest challenges for the Marxist project in Kerala is to meet the ideological inculcation unleashed by the culture-industry under globalization. The leadership itself, as a result of these factors, has shown signs of alienation from the cadres and the program of the parties. Much of what has been noted above also has to be read in the

⁵⁴ Motilal Ghosh (founder of *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, famous nationalist daily in Bengal) describing about the 1850s, quoted in Chatterjee, “Our Modernity,” 6.

⁵⁵ den Uyl, *Invisible Barriers*, 132.

⁵⁶ M. V. Antony, middle class professional, interview by author, August 21, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; Muralidharan, Baby, Santhosh, Ramachandran Nair and P. G. Suresh Kumar, interviews.

⁵⁷ Pearson, Selvan and Kochavan, interviews.

material and ideological context of the sheer difficulty of building socialism in a sub-national arena when completely surrounded by capitalism, both in the national and global arena.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the decline obviously leads to the kind of disenchantment documented by the peasants in Charterji's account. But the crucial difference is that this does not make the subaltern crave for a bygone past. The deviation from the ideals of Communism is subjected to a scathing criticism by the followers.⁵⁹ Here the subordinate classes are undertaking the process of making myths transparent, of exposing the discrepancies between what has been promised and what has been actualized in reality.⁶⁰ These discrepancies act as the driving force of the struggle for social change. Interviews with Communist cadres reveal a non-deferential attitude to the leadership, a by-product of decades of resistance against feudalism and its forms of personal rule. Leadership does not have any independent existence other than as a means for fulfilling the program of the party. There is relentless struggle by the cadre to see that the promise of Communism is fulfilled and to eliminate the forms of exploitation that arise in modernity. The process of demystification undertaken by the dependent classes to counter the mythmaking of the dominant classes spans across both tradition and modernity. If liberation from want and domination has to be achieved, "then demystification of domination must be simultaneous

⁵⁸ Communist leaders have always recognized this: "While striving to make a genuinely peaceful constitutional transition from the regime of exploitation to the regime of the hitherto exploited people, we cannot afford to delude ourselves, or delude the people with the idea that the exploiting classes will stand idly by and allow this peaceful constitutional process to go so far as to put an end to the exploitation of the common people" (Namboodiripad, "Marxism-Leninism," 314); Similar views have been expressed by Communist parties other than the CPM: Dipankar Bhattacharya, General Secretary, Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, interview by author, August 22, 2003, New Delhi, tape recording.

⁵⁹ One example is the CPM party Congress held in 2004 in which the top leadership was pilloried for deviation from the party program (*Mathrubhumi* (March 1, 2004). 'Manoj', driver, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, August 7, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; 'Saji', headload worker, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, August 20, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; 'Thankappan', cook, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, August 17, 2004, Muvattupuzha.

⁶⁰ Lele, *Elite Pluralism*, 42.

with the efforts of economic development and subsequent to them.”⁶¹ Despite the fact that all that the Communist project has sought to achieve has not been achieved, the cadre does not abandon the present for the myth of a golden past. Even when it seeks to escape the present it goes back to a more immediate past, the forties and fifties – the ‘glorious days’ of Communism.⁶² Of course the subalterns too have a conception of a glorious past, but unlike in the elite versions, this past was a reality once upon a time: the period before the emergence of caste and class. For the *Cherumans* in Kerala— one of the major *dalit* castes, such a period was the rule of the *Chera* kings.⁶³ In the *Cheruma* discourse:

In the old days, there were no Pulayas, Parayas [*dalit* castes], Christians, no castes... The people themselves made caste and religion. It was self-serving, they only made the castes out of self-interest. Because if you boil the rice in your pot, then you want to eat it yourself, don't you? And what if there is only one religion, just one caste, who do you give it to? Who receives your rice? So people made the castes out of self-interest.⁶⁴

The discourse of equality is all too evident here. The goal of liberation is the only thing that matters. There is no going back to the glorious past, but what was lost will be achieved in the future. Here religious and secular narratives seamlessly merge: “Sri Krishna said at the end of time there will be only one God, and only one caste and religion. So at the end of time, communism will triumph.” The unrealized aspirations of tradition are carried forward to

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² It is a common feature to point out the decline of Communist values in terms of the bourgeois tendencies of the present generation of Communist leadership compared to the ‘ascetic’ personal life styles and integrity of the leadership of the fifties and sixties (N. M. Pearson, “Garvishtamayoru Kalathinte Sayahnam” (The Evening of a Glorious Era), *Malayalam* (June 1, 2001): 23-4. Saji James, “Evar Pradhana Prathikal” (These Are the Main Culprits), *Malayalam* (May 18, 2001): 13-5. It has been a consensus opinion that the loss of the Left in the 2001 elections was caused by the masses’ ire at the dilution of Communist ideology (M. Shankar, “Idathu Munnaniye Vetti Nirathi” (The Left Front was Hacked Down), *Malayalam* (May 18, 2001): 23-4. A. Sreedharamenon, “LDF Sarkarinte Pathanam” (The Fall of the LDF Government), *Malayalam* (June 1, 2001): 18-19). The moral force of Communist ideals, especially in the earlier period, is acknowledged even by the bourgeois classes (‘Surendran’, businessman, interview by author, May 11, 2003, Muvattupuzha, tape recording).

⁶³ Scholars are of the opinion that *Cherumas* were the original owners of the land until they were forced out by later invaders (den Uyl, *Invisible Barriers*, 113).

⁶⁴ *Cheruma* woman agricultural laborer, Ibid., 111-2.

modernity: “The red colour, the red flag was the Chera’s. Now it’s our Communist flag.”⁶⁵

The flag of Communism is seen as the return of the Chera flag, it is the return of justice and equality.

The utter failure of *Hindutva* and its program of cultural nationalism to penetrate the political landscape of Kerala is an example of Communist success in demystification of all revivalist ideologies. The cadres’ equal resistance to secular mythologies sought to be constructed (even within the Marxist project) shows that the critique of domination is an ongoing phenomenon, all the more strengthened because of the new vocabulary of rights established by Marxism. As one laborer put it, the subalterns now know more about social reality than the elite. Therefore they relentlessly examine what is right and wrong.⁶⁶ This is the fundamental difference between the Indian national independence movement which failed in reconstituting popular commonsense about the new vocabulary of rights and institutions and taking them into the vernacular,⁶⁷ and the Communist movement. It has not remained only at the level of an “aesthetic redemption” or a “folklorisation” of the subaltern, but has also incorporated its ‘political redemption,’ albeit within the “instituted forms of politics”.⁶⁸ But we have seen how these instituted forms themselves have been taken to a new horizon through the People’s Plan.

What emerges is that despite some failures, the greatest asset of the Communist movement is the thousands of dedicated activists committed to the cause of socialist revolution.⁶⁹ This comes from the unrealized aspiration of equality and the rational recognition that only Communism can bring this about, even with its failures: “Something is

⁶⁵ Krishna is the main Hindu deity. *Ibid.*, 112.

⁶⁶ Joykunju, interview.

⁶⁷ Kaviraj, “On State,” 91.

⁶⁸ Dhareshwar, “Our Time,” PE-109.

⁶⁹ Damodaran, ‘Memoir,’ 58.

better than nothing”. That is why Communism will never be abandoned.⁷⁰ This realization is what makes the *dalit* woman in den Uyl’s account tell her husband: “Even if you leave me, even then I won’t give up the [Communist] party.”⁷¹

If the Enlightenment had inaugurated modernity and emancipatory human projects, the immense human suffering unleashed by the very same projects in the first half of this century had generated an atmosphere in which the values associated with modernity came under scrutiny. For the post-modernists nothing symbolized modernity more than Auschwitz and Stalin. The Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, reason, progress, justice and truth seemed increasingly unattainable (and in any case flawed from the outset), thus engendering an attitude of “incredulity towards meta-narratives”. Postmodern critique assumes that

it is sufficient to recite the disasters of the twentieth century in order to blacken the entire Enlightenment heritage...[but] this position appears to imply a denial of the meaningfulness of any counterfactual history, the belief that no epoch can contain possibilities other than those which have been actually realized ... [it does not realize that] it is only in the light of the democratic and humanitarian aspirations of the Enlightenment that fascism and Stalinism appear in their full horror.⁷²

Postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies followed the same path. But the present study has shown that the outcome of modernity is not predetermined; rather it is decided by the kind of social mobilization that is undertaken in a society. What postcolonial theory lacks is a dialectical account of social reality, between objective and subjective processes. It does not have a conception of the Marxian dialectic which affirms the “primacy of theory which is at one and the same time a recognition of the primacy of History itself.”⁷³ Following Foucault it sees modernity as an objectified process in which the metaphysics of power

⁷⁰ Joykunju, interview.

⁷¹ den Uyl, *Invisible Barriers*, 249.

⁷² Dews, *Autonomy*, 25.

⁷³ Fredric Jameson quoted in Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura*, 47.

overrides any conception of agency. Reason is destined to turn into instrumental reason. While postcolonial theory rightly points out the ill effects of bureaucratic administration of welfare and social justice, it does not recognize that “what is at stake here is not the central organizing principle of modernity, opposed to the ramshackle systems of pre-modern power, but rather a *contradictory* attempt, the expression of a class-compromise, to bring forth new and more egalitarian life-forms by legal and bureaucratic means [original emphasis].”⁷⁴ The Communist movement since its origin has been, as we have seen, undertaking such efforts along with the more direct challenges of power. The institutionalization of land reforms and worker’s rights and the People’s Plan Campaign are examples of this. The opposition to instrumental rationality does not come from within pre-existing traditional forms alone, but within modernity too. This can be found in the “inherent resistance of social domains which are communicatively structured to commodification and bureaucratization. There is a dynamic of egalitarian solidarity which although damaged and repressed, is no less central to modernity than the functional dynamic of money or power.”⁷⁵ Pre-existing forms of social cohesion are indispensable in political struggles.⁷⁶ These were demonstrated in the mobilizations on the basis of caste before and later as part of the Communist movement. But at the same time, unlike the subalternist accounts with their culturalist focus, new forms of solidarity like class are also formed in modernity. Similarly Menon’s work too ultimately misses this crucial social transformation by terming it as mere “conjunctural unity”. The Communists had realized very early that without economic freedom for the untouchables, the base of untouchability could not be eroded. The struggles launched under the Communist Party have been as much concerned about issues of individual dignity and

⁷⁴ Dews, *Logic of Disintegration*, 196.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Fredric Jameson, ‘Globalization and Political Strategy,’ *New Left Review* 4 (July-August 2000): 68.

autonomy as much as about material exploitation. These cannot be dismissed as imposition of bourgeois freedom as postcolonial theory does. Nor can it be said that peasant and subaltern politics is always characterized by the notion of collectivity and community and not individual interests.

Postcolonial theory has also erred in not identifying the unified narrative of capitalism underlying the diversity, fragmentation and differences of the new social formation. It privileges philosophical questions of difference over egalitarian society and political democracy. This draws a false wedge between the two. More importantly, it does not have anything to say about economic differences. It is one of the greatest ironies that the post-colonial and post-modern critiques of grand narratives have not dismantled the grandest narrative of all, capitalism. When capitalism has penetrated the face of the entire world, it is difficult to talk in terms of merely Southern languages as a mode of resistance. We have seen that such dualisms do not operate in reality, especially when liberation from oppression is the fundamental goal. Such valorization of indigenous languages is to lose one's self "in the absolutes of language, culture, and the saga of the past." It does not realize that such absolutes "may be interiorized only through intellectual analysis and synthesis, that is through voluntary effort—never through inward understanding and intuition."⁷⁷ In opposition to the above relativism "[t]he unity of the world, despite the polarization between centres and peripheries on which it is built, requires that the core dimension of any culture, that wishes to build a better future based on the real problems of today, be universalist."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Laroui, *Arab Intellectual*, 156-7.

⁷⁸ Samir Amin, "Social Movements at the Periphery," in *New Social Movements in the South: Empowering the People*, ed. Ponna Wignaraja (New Delhi: Vistaar, 1993), 96.

What the Communist movement has been able to overcome is the “cantonization of consciousness”.⁷⁹ Postcolonial theory by focusing on the fragmentary and the local has fostered “negative attitudes to popular national demands... [by creating] the illusion of being able to do without the state level in the transformation of reality.”⁸⁰ The Kerala experience shows that the state has not failed in its “its presumed role as liberator, equalizer, modernizer and mobilizer.”⁸¹

The Communist movement, through its simultaneous attack on a variety of exclusions, instead of following the blind universalism of Enlightenment, could be seen as following a dialectical universality which does not negate particularity. The Subaltern Studies’ project of recovering subaltern subjectivity is laudable, but merely such a focus can lead to “an amoral politics of indifference... which craves no point of contact with forms of political practice which are connected to global issues and ostensibly ‘universal’ themes.” Therefore subaltern politics cannot but engage with “moral questions – concerning rights and the question of justice – which themselves must have recourse to apparently abstract and generalized discursive claims”. And this is possible only by linking the local and the extra-local and the specific and the universal in an inter-dependent world system.⁸² The Communist movement’s success was in fostering such linkages and a consciousness associated with them. Such linkages can only be built by going beyond the approach where

⁷⁹ The development of a consciousness that is able to link the local with the national and the global has been one of the significant results of Communist activism. This is visible quite prominently at the subaltern level: ‘Rajan’, laborer, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, July 29, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; ‘Gopalan’, head load worker, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, July 26, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording; ‘Gilbert’, marginal farmer, lower level Communist activist, interview by author, July 23, 2004, Muvattupuzha, tape recording.

⁸⁰ Amin, “Social Movements,” 96.

⁸¹ Rajni Kothari, “Masses, Classes and the State,” in *New Social Movements in the South: Empowering the People*, ed. Ponna Wignaraja (New Delhi: Vistaar, 1993), 62.

⁸² Stuart Corbridge, “Post-Marxism and Post-Colonialism: The Needs and Rights of Distant Strangers,” in *Rethinking Social Development: Theory, Practice and Research*, ed. David Booth (London: Longman, 1994), 97, 92.

the actor's point of view is solely or only privileged and which is beyond critical appraisal. Instead of valorizing subaltern commonsense, the Communist movement recognized its fragmentary as well as critical nature. Uncritical traditionalism of subaltern studies and postcolonial theory regresses into relativism. Scott's assertion that "there is no social location or analytical position from which the truth value of a text or discourse may be judged"⁸³ is another example of this.

The Communist movement in Kerala is an example of the fact that resistances in the Third World cannot be simply construed as against modernity.⁸⁴ The abuse of Enlightenment values does not mean that we should therefore "dismantle the entire European critical tradition ... [which] is possible only by conflating it with its distortions entrenched under late capitalism."⁸⁵ The tradition / modernity dichotomy loses its meaning once we recognize the critical moments in both. The task of any current praxis is to recover those critical moments and thus move beyond Eurocentrism and relativism, the West and the past, at the same time carrying forward what is valuable in both. The way out of the 'postcolonial misery' seems to lie in that.

⁸³ Scott, *Domination*, x.

⁸⁴ Frans Schuurman, "Introduction: Development Theory in the 1990s," in *Beyond The Impasse: New Directions in Development Theory* (London: Zed Books, 1993), 27.

⁸⁵ Lele, "Orientalism," 62.

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Appendix

General Guide for Semi-structured Interviews

1. How do you define modernity and tradition?
2. Are there any commonalities between modernity and tradition?
3. How do you define exploitation?
4. Has exploitation increased in the present compared to the past?
5. What does Communism stand for?
6. Do you consider Communism to be an alien ideology?
7. What is Communism's greatest contribution?
8. What is your assessment of the land reforms and the Agricultural Worker's Act?
9. How important is democratic mode of governance, compare it with traditional modes?
10. Has the People's Plan for Decentralized planning helped in democratizing governance?
11. How do you define equality?
12. What is /should be the role of religion in social life in general and politics in particular?
13. What is the stand that Communism has adopted towards religion/caste?
14. Do you think there is a bias in Communism towards upper-castes?
16. Is the Communist Party increasingly being governed by the interests of the richer strata of society?
17. How do you define progress?
18. What is your opinion on class struggle?

19. How has Communism engaged with the cultural sphere?