

Chalo Thiruvananthapuram: A Dalit-Muslim-Bahujan Mass Movement in Contemporary Kerala

Shahna K.A^{1*}, Jyothirmani Vatakkayil²

¹Ph.D. research scholar History Department, Pocker Sahib Memorial Orphanage College, Tirurangadi-Malappuram, Kerala, India – 676306

²Assistant professor & Head, Department of history, Sri Vyasa N S S College, Wadakkanchery Thrissur
[*achushahna@gmail.com](mailto:achushahna@gmail.com)

Abstract

Chalo Thiruvananthapuram, a mass movement organized in Kerala in April 2017, was the strongest Dalit-Muslim public protest staged in Kerala. Around 50 social organizations in Kerala have joined in this and have exposed the difficulties of Dalits, Adivasis, and other multi-majority communities and have put forward a demand that they should stop being marginalized. Chalo Thiruvananthapuram was a coalition that had the potential to become a political alternative in the future. Chalo Thiruvananthapuram intends to carry on the legacy of earlier land agitations in Kerala. This struggle movement, which came forward with much hope, has since been side-lined to the point of being of little importance in society.

Keywords: Dalit, Adivasi, marginalized, Keralamodel, ChengaraSamaram

INTRODUCTION

Kerala is largely praised for its social development achievements, including near-universal literacy, better life expectancy, and land reforms. Even though its per capita income has remained low, this phenomenon has become recognized as the "Kerala Model of Development." However, the exclusion of Dalits, who account for 9.8 percent of the state's total population; Adivasis, who account for 1.14 percent; and fisher people from Kerala's success narrative has gone mostly unnoticed. Scholars have recently focused on the landlessness of Dalits and Adivasis, which has rendered substantial sectors of these social groups unable to participate in the development process, as well as the land disputes that have resulted during the last decade¹.

The march of Chalo Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala began on April 1 in the northern district of Kasaragod and end on May 31 in the state capital of Thiruvananthapuram. It is being organized by the 'Bhoo-Adhikara-Samrakshana-Samithi', a group of groups representing marginalized populations. Jignesh Mewani, the 'Una-Dalit-Atyachar-Ladhai-Samiti' leader who spearheaded the mass action in Gujarat,² declared the Chalo Thiruvananthapuram stir on January 29 in Kerala's Chengara village, the site of a 2007 land agitation in which hundreds of landless peasants encroached on a rubber estate. He also took advantage of the opportunity to launch his first volley against the ruling party and the Kerala Model of Development. "CPI(M) sided with us in the Una agitation but it would be exposed in the

¹Land struggles in contemporary Kerala, the Hindu December 19, 2011 - Updated 09:08 pm IST

²Sampath, G. (5 August 2017). "Jignesh Mewani, face of Dalits in Gujarat". *The Hindu*. ISSN 0971-751X. Retrieved 3 April 2021.

Kerala agitation," he warned. "The moment has arrived to expose the Kerala development model." To achieve our goal, we must gather together all like-minded people, including Leftists."

KERALA MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

Kerala has always taken pride in its development model, which has enabled it to achieve near-total literacy (94% literacy compared to a national average of 74%), higher life expectancy, and land reforms comparable to many developed countries. However, the model has been criticized for its apparent exclusion of Dalits, Adivasis, and fisherfolk. According to Dr. Sanal Mohan, a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania's Centre for the Advanced Study of India, "the exclusion of Dalits, who constitute 9.8% of the state's total population; Adivasis, who constitute 1.1%; and fisher people from the success story of Kerala's development has gone relatively unacknowledged."

According to Sunny M Kapikkad, head of the Bhoo Adhikara Samrakshana Samithi, little has been published on the opposite side of the Kerala model. "Land reform did not result in the intended industrial expansion," he claimed. "It did not guarantee social fairness." A mafia controls the health sector. That is how the Kerala model became obsolete. "The left-wing parties, on the other hand, strongly disagree. "One should not forget that the Kerala model enhanced living indices in the state," said KT Kunhikkannan, a member of the ruling party and director of the party-run Keluettan Centre for Study and Research, which teaches a Marxism course. "It has some flaws because it was developed in a bourgeois political environment," he admits.

FORMATION OF DALIT MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY KERALA

In such circumstances, Dalit and Adivasi activists from various regions of Kerala, such as M. Geetha Nandan from Kannur, C. K. Janu from Wayanad, Sunny M. Kapikkad, and M. D. Thomas from Kottayam, led the struggle in claiming the land for the landless Adivasis in 2000. With the founding of the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha³ (the Grand Council of Adivasis), movements arose to take excess lands held by the Department of Forests and large plantations, as well as territories under government control that were to be dispersed among landless people. These mobilizations began in the late 1990s and were novel in Kerala politics because they were organized by Dalit and Adivasi activists rather than political parties⁴.

The political campaign got great civil society support in 2002, and the government was obliged to acknowledge the repressive condition that Adivasis have been subjected to in Kerala. Under the leadership of the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha, the people lay siege to the wildlife sanctuary in Muthanga in Wayanad District in 2003, and police firing on February 19, 2003, resulted in the deaths of an Adivasi activist and a police officer. The police pursued Janu and Geethanandan, the movement's leaders, in the aftermath of the tragedy. Following this mobilization, the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha had additional

³Adivasi gotra Maha Sabha for the front, the article published in times of India, June 4, 2003

⁴This is a significant divergence from other parts of India, such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, where Maoists armed Adivasis in their fight against exploitation and oppression. However, the mobilizations in Kerala were targeted at securing the rights of Adivasis to claim their alienated properties as well as allowing Dalits to acquire property.

clashes in the village of Aralam (a neighboring district of Kannur) with a substantial Paniyar Adivasi population.

LAND STRUGGLES

The Adivasi Dalit Action Council, afterward known as the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, staged a historic movement in 2001 to draw attention to the community's land and livelihood difficulties. In Thiruvananthapuram, the group set up camps in front of the state secretariat, the chief minister's office, and the district offices. The movement ended 48 days later after the government promised to allocate cultivable land to all landless people in each district. Because the government failed to honor this promise, Adivasis moved into the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary, which borders Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and set up camp. They declared independence and began cultivating the land. Instead of talking with them, the authorities evicted them using force. On February 19, that year, a protestor and a police officer were killed in police firing, according to an official version.

Governments have repeatedly ignored the Adivasi community's repeated demands for land over the years. In 2014, the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha launched another novel protest, Nilpu Samaram, or the standing protest, demanding a rehabilitation package for Muthanga agitation families, compensation for children and those arrested, and the handover of 19,600 acres of forest land allotted by the Central government. The agitation was called off 162 days later by the Sabha when the government conceded to most of its demands⁵. In 2016, ahead of the Kerala Assembly elections, the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha split, with its leader CK Janu creating the Janadhipathya Rashtriya Sabha and joining the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Front. On the other hand, Janu insists she is still the Sabha's president. Another well-known land dispute in the state occurred in 2007, with the occupation of a rubber plantation in Chengara, Pathanamthitta district. Landless people from all around the state had momentarily set siege to the estate, led by Dalit campaigner Laha Gopalan. According to Jignesh Mewani, the land distribution issues in Kerala can be easily resolved if the government follows through on the agreements reached with Adivasi-Dalit organizations. "The government must keep its promise," he stated.⁶

LAND STRUGGLES AND RESISTANCE

‘Chalo Thiruvananthapuram’ is a collective of various political agencies. We can also describe it as an amalgamation of various groups, the Dalits, the Ambedkarians, and the masses. The goal of Chalo Thiruvananthapuram, which was led by Jignesh Mewari and raised the slogan of *Bhumi Adhikaram*, was to free the Dalit Adivasi marginalization group from colonial life and bind the caste colonies. It also

⁵Soorya Chandran, Nilpu samara vijayam aadhivaasikalude aavasyangalk anghekaaram, Published: Thursday, December 18, 2014, 9:47 [IST].

⁶TA Ameerudheen(2017) Chalo Thiruvananthapuram: A Dalit-Muslim-Bahujan mass movement is in the works in Kerala, inspired by last year's Una event, a march starting April 1 will highlight the struggles of the landless poor. Scroll.on Feb 20, 2017 ·

includes the distribution to Dalits and the landless of 5 lakh acres of land illegally acquired by the government. If we examine the historical aspect of 'Chalo Thiruvananthapuram,' this struggle should have become a historical landmark as an uprising of the marginalized and oppressed sections of Kerala. In Kerala, there has been a long series of land struggles over the last 20 years. From 1990 to 2016, tribals, Dalits, and other landless people protested in hundreds of locations. At least 80,000 people have taken part, most of whom are women. Many people have been imprisoned,⁷ many have been killed in clashes, and even children have been imprisoned. A good example is the pumpkin strike⁸.

Muthanga, Chengara, and Arippa are landmarks in Kerala's land struggle history. Although these struggles (particularly the sit-in struggle in 2014) received widespread popular support, they were ultimately part of Kerala's caste system, and this land struggle was widely interpreted as a struggle against caste. However, none of the supporters of this struggle have explained that this is a political caste issue. The flames of the Gujarat movement 'Unnava' are now spreading throughout the world. Unlike its most famous slogan, Chalo, the slogan "You milk your cow and give us our land" (you can farm, harvest, and make economic profit from this land, not just take away our right to live here). may indicate that the issue, unlike Dr. Ambedkar's earlier movement, has been more politically comprehensive. Kerala has been deforested, nature has been destroyed and the ecological habitat itself has been destroyed since the agricultural land is not in the hands of the working classes or the real farmers. The coast has been lost. At the end of it all, large corporations and other monopolistic companies have gained total dominance over the planet. This generally refers to the exploitative system of the neo-colonial era. The truth is that the mafias have taken over all of the rights of marginalized groups, Dalits, and sons of the soil. Chalo had hoped for a change, citing Thiruvananthapuram as an example. This struggle was led by a diverse group of people, including marginalized Muslim Makua workers in Kerala, plantation workers, agricultural workers, traditional communities uprooted from other jobs, and supporters of left-wing democratic movements, feminist movements, and transgender movements.

DALIT-MUSLIM-BAHUJAN UNITY?

Political parties in the state are keeping a close eye on developments as the Chalo Thiruvananthapuram movement is expected to build a grand Dalit-Muslim-Bahujan alliance. A key leader of the Indian Union Muslim League, the state's largest Muslim political party, informed Scroll. that his organization had already held talks with the Bhoo Adhikara Samrakshana Samithi. "The IUML wants to see a Dalit-minority consolidation in the state," said IUML vice-president Kutty Ahammed Kutty, who was present during the talks.⁹ "We will do everything we can to make Chalo Thiruvananthapuram a huge success." According to Sunny M Kapikkad of The Samithi, Muslims face obstacles. "We believe it is the obligation of all those who work for equality to safeguard Muslims," he stated. "The Dalit-Muslim-Bahujan alliance will be founded on the principle of equal justice." However, Kunhikkannan of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) stated that fighting fundamentalism without the backing of secular organizations is impossible. "We believe identity politics will not be enough to fight the Hindutva

⁷ 132 tribals remanded". *The Hindu*. 22 February 2003. Archived from the original on 4 October 2013. Retrieved 20 April 2012.

⁸ Two killed as tribals, police clash". *The Hindu*. 20 February 2003. Archived from the original on 29 December 2004. Retrieved 20 April 2012

⁹ Adnan Farooqui, Political representation of a minority: Muslim representation in contemporary India, *INDIA REVIEW*

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2020.1744996>

agenda,” he said. "It can only be defeated by anti-caste and secular movements." That is why we are finding it tough to join the Chalo Thiruvananthapuram movement."

STATUS OF DALIT COLONIES IN KERALA

It is claimed that there is half a lakh Dalit colony in Kerala. Most of them live in outlying areas and encroached on lands. When we study and understand the problem of Dalits in Kerala, the most important issue is that the Dalit people of Kerala are still living in 26000 Dalit settlements. It cannot be hidden that this settlement area became available to them as a result of the land reforms in Kerala, however, the class that existed as subjugated or landless peasants before land reform were depicted as agricultural laborers and these Dalits who were supposed to be the real sharers of the land in Kerala were marginalized at that time. If we want to eliminate the caste colonies in Kerala, we must first change the label of Dalits to agricultural laborers. This is the duty of every democrat. Dalits are landless peasants and not agricultural laborers. 26000 Dalits living in colonies are taking the first step towards development or gaining democratic rights by considering their land issue. Chalo Thiruvananthapuram was a struggle that was expected to be more helpful. Where is the solution? There is a way to solve the problem of Dalit land in Kerala itself. Studies show that one-third of the land in Kerala is reserved for horticulture and its ownership is held by big land mafias, big corporates, and companies. Lands that have been leased and are owned by the government bank are here. If all these lands are given proportionately to the Dalits and their agriculture, this will be an end to their problems. If such a situation arises, the basic resources of the Dalits can be provided. Only in this way can we achieve the liberation of this section. The government itself needs to directly intervene to initiate such activities. Because these are purely democratic rights. The time for Dalits to rise to achieve this has passed. At the time when the Chalo Thiruvananthapuram movement ignited, the hope that the problem of Dalits would be solved was very high. The government should have done something to bring about a major change in land ownership in Kerala when the Dalits were raising major agitations for land in the states of Gujarat UP Rajasthan. This problem can only be solved if we scientifically divide the land from the hands of big corporates and mafias without including the land of today's middle class, the common man of Kerala, or the land owners.

CONCLUSION

Chalo Thiruvananthapuram is not only a continuation of the land struggle of the past 25 years, but this movement should also be an end to the caste colony of the Dalit tribal groups. This struggle is not only a tool for the caste system or caste destruction. It was the liberation of society's marginalized groups without equal liberty for centuries. What has happened today to this struggle that started in 2017 is a question that deserves attention. Had things progressed as hoped by the leaders of this struggle, the problems of the marginalized and Dalits of Kerala would have been solved. This struggle, which has rushed forward with such strength, the fight never ends without success. The only issue today is that we are a bit out of the mainstream of society by getting caught up in socio-political manipulations. This movement will come back with full force to address all kinds of Dalit issues. It can be undoubtedly said that the Thiruvananthapuram land struggle was a movement to democratize and modernize the political system of Kerala society.

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