

Adivasis and Land

The Story of Postcolonial Development in Kerala

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This paper attempts to frame an understanding of the land question of Adivasis to show the limitations of the dominant developmental historiography. It tries to locate the Adivasi in the developmental history of postcolonial Kerala by specifically discussing land reforms celebrated as “radical” but which exclude tribes from ownership of land. This contradiction is explained through the history of colonial rule, which converted land into private property. Categories like “tiller” and “tenant,” though they did drive the postcolonial process forward, drew from the colonial legal order. This, ironically, resulted in the exclusion of the tribes.

Postcolonial development follows from colonial history due to the continuity of natural and human-made territories and the populations that occupy them. Thus, any enquiry that tries to find breaks between them might prove to be difficult. Similarly, development policies and strategies rely on inherited institutions and knowledge, even if only to oppose and reject them. This has historically affected how people and places are categorised, and how development plans are implemented in India, though there have been attempts to challenge the domination of the colonial state and the dependence on its structure. Indian independence, at the same time, signalled various discontinuities in Indian history. Democracy signalled the legitimacy of the independent Indian state and helped link nationalist passion with the promise of development (Bose and Jalal 1997). The nationalist charge of non-representation of natives in the colonial state was met with the introduction of democratic rights in independent India. Another sign of discontinuity with the colonial state was the inclusion of fundamental rights for all Indian citizens in the Constitution. The directive principles strove to promote the welfare of all citizens, and universal adult suffrage was established. All this made the postcolonial Indian state formally just and representative, and thus discontinuous from the colonial state.

Sudipta Kaviraj conceptualises the postcolonial Indian state as an “inheritor of [the] British colonial state” and, at the same time, a successor of “Indian nationalism” (2010: 222). During British rule, “the extension of bureaucracy was mainly sanctioned by [the] rhetoric of state efficiency,” but nationalist leaders who dominated the postcolonial state replaced this discourse with “the rhetoric of development” (2010: 223). Kaviraj also states that Jawaharlal Nehru “imbued this state” with his vision of the government “as the primary instrument of development, with extensive responsibilities in the direct management of production and distribution” (2010: 223). Kaviraj also points out that radical nationalist groups attacked two proprietary controls under colonialism: “landlord property” created by colonial permanent settlement, and “direct British industrial and commercial interests” (2011: 128). According to Frankel (1978), there was massive political mobilisation against colonial land ownership after independence, so it was legally abolished quickly. Indeed, in the Indian Constitution, “a special case was made for the abolition of Zamindari,” though it “contained a pre-commitment to the preservation of unequal property.” (Kaviraj 2011: 128)

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Land reforms in Kerala, initiated by the first state government of a unified Kerala in 1957,¹ “followed the recommendations of the 1949 Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee Report as well as Central directives on land reform” (Herring 1980: 59). Though many Congress governments in other parts of India were reluctant to formulate any land reform laws, the communist government in Kerala passed a land reform act within a decade after independence—the Kerala Agrarian Relations Act, 1959. Though it was not implemented because of the dismissal of the state government² and a court ruling (Radhakrishnan 1989: 141),³ it remained a platform for major political mobilisation in Kerala. The act was finally legislated in 1969 and implemented on 1 January 1970 (Herring 1980).⁴

The Communist Party’s approach towards land reform in Kerala needs to be looked at in the context of the party’s political base. Uniting farmers and agricultural workers against the landlord was the primary motivation that drove the party’s mobilisation. Indeed, Adivasis were part of this mobilisation. Janu, an Adivasi leader of Kerala, in her life history, narrated her experience of participating in the anti-landlord struggle (Bhaskaran 2004). The question, then, is Did Adivasis get land ownership after the land reforms? Studies show that most of them did not (Mathur 1977; Kunhaman 1981; Bijoy 1999).

How did this happen? Was it a deliberate denial? Why should Adivasis be denied when the primary objective of land reforms was the redistribution of land? Moreover, we know that Adivasis participated in the political movement for land reform, which had the slogan: “land for the tillers.” One argument is that the tribes were mostly settled in government forest areas, and forests were not included in legal and political discourses on land reform (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2004).

Though this argument is valid in the context of government forest areas, it does not explain how those lands that were cultivated or possessed by Adivasis came to be owned by migrant farmers as a result of the land reforms. This study suggests that to understand this reality, we need to consider the context of the tenurial structure that the colonial state created in Kerala (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2004). Though the system itself varied across the state, certain broad similarities were evident. The system of private property was introduced during the colonial rule, including in the Malayalam-speaking region. In Malabar, through colonial state regulation, landlords got absolute ownership of land. But, in the princely state of Travancore, through tenancy legislations, *kutiyans* (tenants) got ownership of land (Varghese 1970).

This paper argues that neither the postcolonial state that implemented the land reform, nor the Communist Party that mobilised farmers and labourers against landlordism, reconceptualised colonial legal categories. They never tried to develop an alternative register to frame land relationships but simply followed the colonial legal system (Moorkoth 2012), which was based on the idea of private property. The paper argues that despite the significant role it played in the disappearance of landlords, land reform failed to understand the

complexity of the land relationship and, in turn, the specific location of Adivasis in the system.

This paper discusses this by reviewing the literature on agrarian relations and land reforms. Along with the literature review, the paper is also based on the written and oral repertoire of a tribal region, Attappady, in the Palakkad district in Kerala. Based on fieldwork (conducted in many stages from 2011 to 2014, by the researcher and assistants)⁵ and archival research, the study covers histories, memories, and cultural ideas. This study also relies on newspaper reports (especially from one newspaper, *Mathrubhumi*) for information about the responses from political and civil society. Both the ethnography and the archival examination were undertaken keeping in mind the following questions: Why did land reforms have an unintended effect on Adivasis, despite their purported objective being to distribute land to the tillers? What are the factors that influenced these unintended effects?

The next section discusses the production of land. In particular, it deals with the production of agricultural land as private property and the production of forestland as state property in colonial times. This is done to see the resulting effects of this categorisation of land on Adivasis. Thus, the larger theme concerns remaking land into property. The challenge is also in tracing the effects of this remaking into the present.

Colonial Production of Land as Property

Landlords as owners and tribes as tenants-at-will: The land policies of the British were aimed at extracting revenue flows from the land. They believed that the land use of the natives was “unproductive” because of the lack of a proper ownership system and the use of labour. In order to make the land productive and extract revenue, the state wanted to formalise land rights.⁶ The land relationship in Malabar in the precolonial period was based on customary relationships, where various levels of landholders had rights to land, such as kings (*rajas*), landlords (*janmis*), tenants (*kanamkars*), and sub-tenants (*verumpattakars*).⁷ The exchange relationship between these various actors was based on products and services and not land (Varghese 1970). The rent that the *rajas* or *janmis* got from subordinate landholders was based on the produce from the land and not the value of the land itself. Before colonial rule, an early attempt to extract revenue from land was made by the Mysore regime (1766–1792) (Rejikumar 2010). They introduced a land revenue assessment system and tried to extract land revenue directly from cultivators and exclude landlords (Innes 1908). This disrupted the customary framework and made it possible for the British to interpret the rights and interests connected with land in their own way when they conquered Malabar in 1792 AD (Varghese 1970).

Early colonial commissions and administrative procedures interpreted the prevalent customary practices according to the system that existed in Europe and thus formalised the land relationship. According to the new interpretation, landlords

possessed birthrights (*janman*) to the land, and different land tenures were interpreted as follows: *kanam* was a mortgage and *verumpattam* was mere tenancy-at-will. There was no notion of property in the precolonial period. The land relationship was based on differential rights for the janmis, kutiyans, and verumpattakars to hold land and use the products from it. No one had absolute ownership, which included the right to exchange land (Ganesh 2016).

In the new system of land relationships, janmis had ownership rights by birth over land (Rejikumar 2010). In this context, English terms like “rent” and “lease” were imposed over native practices that had a “superficial resemblance” to them (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2007: 1203). This system made it convenient for the government to establish and regulate land revenue extraction (Innes 1908). In the new system, vast areas of land like in Attappady, which had customarily been held by landlords but were cultivated and used by the Adivasis, were now individually owned by the landlord family. Adivasis who were cultivating the land almost with no external regulations became legal verumpattakars with no security of tenure (Innes 1908). Later, they had to pay annual rent and renewal fees to the landowner for allocating land to them for cultivation. While formalising land relations, the colonial state consolidated their superior status by holding onto their power as a “super landlord.” The colonial state in Malabar claimed the government’s right over the janman right of janmis. Thus, a new form of holding land, government janman, was formed (Varghese 1970). This was visible more in the context of creating and administering forests.

Adivasis as recipients of government concessions: Another important land regulation in British India was formulated by creating a space called the “forest.” It was initially created by closing off a space to the locals by officially naming it so in a memorandum issued in 1855. It was administratively formulated through the Indian Forest Act, 1865, which was later amended in 1878. Environmental historians have interpreted the act as being part of the state’s strategy to control forest areas (Guha 1983: 1941). Following the Indian Forest Act, large tracts of forest were brought under the control of the British government.

In Malabar, and specifically in Attappady, larger tracts of land were notified as “reserved forests” and were either purchased or leased from local landlords, such as Mannarkkad Moopil Nair (Iyer 1935). The first Working Plan of 1935 states: “In 1887 a detailed survey was conducted in Attappady valley, describing the flora, fauna, the nature of the forest and even the settlement of people in the forest areas” (Iyer 1935). Although the Madras government tried to get more forest area under its control, the janmis contested this move legally. Recognising their janman right to the land, the colonial court returned the ownership of some of the forestland to the landlords (Iyer 1935). So, vast areas of forest owned by landlords were designated as “private forests.” This notification of forest reserves and the transfer of ownership to landlords led to the regulation of the Adivasis’ use of the forests.

Shifting cultivation, a common practice among Adivasis, was banned by the Government of Madras in 1860; however, as the government order to that effect was unsuccessful and unpopular, it was soon withdrawn (Philip 2004: 60). The Madras Forest Act, 1882 and then the first Forest Policy, 1894 prescribed that the reserved forest would be placed under state control, and once notified, was the property of the state (Guha 1983: 1941). Thus, access to the forest and the rights of local people to its resources were determined by the concessions given by the local forest department.

In the process of formalising legal rights to land and forest, janmis and the state acquired ownership of them. In the new system, Adivasis became tenants-at-will and were subject to various regulations regarding their use of the forestland. Adivasis’ access to land was now reduced to a lease, which could be cancelled by the state. The British were interested in “managing” the forest so that its resources can be extracted and the land could be converted into a “productive asset.” They imagined both production and conservation in terms of utility—production for present consumption and the conservation for future consumption. The new system transformed the land use pattern, human relationships with the land, and relationships between human beings.

Land thus became individual property, with ownership rights that were distinct from the right to use the land. Earlier, no one had exclusive ownership of land, so others could cultivate it and use its products, even if the custodian was a janmi.⁸ Through the colonial legal system, landlords got exclusive property rights to land, that is, the right to exchange it. In the previous system, the right to exchange land was caught in a matrix of various levels of control and use. Later, the Malabar Tenancy Act, 1929 gave “fixity” tenure for *kanamkars* and reduced their threat of eviction (Menon 1992: 2705). The Matriliny Bill of 1931 (Marumakkathayam Bill of V P Narayanan Nambiar 1931), which later became a law in 1933, led to individual members claiming their share of the *tharavadu* (joint Nair family) property, as it allowed for the partitioning of the *tharavadu*. The Matrilineal Act of 1933 enhanced land transactions in Malabar (Menon 1992: 2706).

The Land Rush

Migration to the highlands of Malabar (where the Adivasis reside) started in the 1850s. It was primarily the Europeans who moved to the highlands of Wayanad to start plantations. They took leases on land by influencing the colonial government or the landlords through the colonial government (Raman 1997). There was no competition in land acquisition, as land was not exposed to the market until the first quarter of the 20th century.

In Attappady, a few farmers and traders from nearby Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu started cultivating the land by leasing it from landlords, especially Moopil Nair. Most were absentee cultivators who migrated seasonally to the Attappady valley along with labourers (Sankar and Muraleedharan 1990). The selling and buying of land started in the 1930s.⁹ These migrant farmers and traders, who later reshaped the

land use and demographic composition of the Malabar region, were mostly from the princely state of Travancore. During the first half of the 1930s, an average of two to three families per week moved to different locations in Malabar. Between 1940 and 1950, nearly 50 new settlements of Travancore migrants were established. In the following decade, there was an increase in new settlements, either as off-shoots of earlier settlements or as independent ones (Velluva 2006: 48). According to Tharakan (1976), an economic historian on migration, Travancoreans migrated between 1930 and 1960 because of the increasing population and resultant pressure on cultivable land in Travancore. Also, their familiarity with the land market and cash crops encouraged them to move and accumulate land. They moved to wherever land was cheap and available in the Malabar region.

The Travancore migrants moved to Attappady in large numbers only after the 1950s. This migration reached its peak during 1960–70. Although several families had bought land in the lowlands in the Mannarkkad region before 1950 (Velluva 2006: 52), the inaccessibility of the Attappady valley due to the absence of a cart road, and the threat of malaria, prevented them from exploring the hills and settling in the valley. The malaria eradication programme and the construction of a cart road in the 1950s opened up the path to the valley. This changed the demographic composition of Attappady; Adivasis, who had been the majority (more than 64% of the population) in 1961, became a minority (40%) in 1971 (Kunhaman 1981: 53).

There was an official system through which landlords leased out land to the needy. The *karyasthan* (or manager of property), who had previously collected rent from the Adivasis for cultivating the land, was transformed into an officer who distributed land; the *kolkaran*, who had previously measured the area to be distributed, became the functionary. A “money receipt” (MR) was given for the amount charged for the leased land (Mathrubhumi 1965). Although the *kolkaran* was supposed to measure the area distributed, neither the location nor the size of the land was specified in the MR; this led to migrants appropriating land without any limits. The size of the land area appropriated varies. A few early migrants became big farmers. However, most were small farmers and labourers who migrated and became workers on big farmers’ lands (Velluva 2006: 38). Migrants bought land from earlier migrants or encroached on forestland or the land that the Adivasis were cultivating. The farmers who migrated primarily to Attappady and other parts of the Malabar region were largely Christian. Their labourers were mainly from the Ezhava and other untouchable castes (Mathur 1977). There were also big farmers, small farmers, and labourers from the Muslim community (GoI 1981). An organisation representing the upper-caste Nairs, the Nair Service Society (NSS), also leased a 2,000-acre plot of land in Attappady (GoI 1961b; Mathrubhumi 1965).

The influx of migrants and their acquisition of land put pressure on the Adivasi practice of shifting cultivation. The ambiguity regarding the location of the land and its size in official papers issued by the landlord’s office led to migrants

encroaching on the land that the Adivasis were cultivating. On many occasions, the Adivasis moved closer towards the forest—away from the more fertile land and river basins (Kunhaman 1981: 52). The *karyasthan* preferred to give land to migrants rather than to Adivasis because the former could pay cash. Apart from this, migrants also got land directly from the Adivasis. This was a peculiar kind of dispossession due to the unequal power dynamic between Adivasis and *vanthavasis* (the local term used to refer to migrants).¹⁰

In the 1950s, most Adivasis in Attappady practised shifting cultivation by leasing land from landlords. They cultivated each area for one to three years, then they would change their location and pay rent to a new landlord. Once they shifted to a new piece of land, the previous plot would become covered in undergrowth and remained uncultivated for years. During a field visit, many elders mentioned that they did not return to the same land again. They also reported that some of them gave up the land to the *vanthavasis*. “Anyway we were not cultivating it,” and “they offered us money for it, even though it was not much” (personal interview with Kunchan, 24 August 2011, Attappady). Migrants then continued to cultivate that land. Finally, the migrant would get an MR from the *adhikari* (local revenue officer). The migrants could pay for the MR in cash, which gave them an advantage, unlike the Adivasis (Mathrubhumi 1965).

The next part of this paper deals with the exclusion of Adivasis from the land reform procedure.

A Legal and Political History

Ownership, either of land or any object, is a legal right. Innumerable administrative procedures establish this legal right. Elaborating on this point, one can argue that legal right is created through administrative procedures. For instance, land reform bills defined “landlord” and “tenant,” and on that basis, the state apparatus acquired, distributed, and gave ownership of the land. A historian of peasant struggles writes that broadening the definition of “cultivating tenant” was mainly done by expanding the category of “deemed tenants” to accommodate those “honestly believing to be tenants,” those occupying land under a lease granted by “incompetent persons” (such as minors), those who had paid for the occupation of land, and those occupying private forests or unsurveyed lands (Radhakrishnan 1989: 154).

Under this broad and loose categorisation of tenants, migrant farmers, who had got the land on lease, became tenants. Tenants had the right to absolute ownership of land, according to the land reform bills of 1960, 1963, and 1964. Thus, many migrant farmers in Attappady became the owners of the lands they were cultivating on lease. Many Adivasis also became owners of the land through the land reforms if they were legally recognised as tillers.¹¹ As Kunhaman (1981: 52) writes, some Adivasi families were assigned ownership rights to “infertile land” that they had “encroached” upon because of the pressure from migrant farmers.

Indeed, the objective of the land reform was to distribute land. But the administrative mechanisms and institutional

procedures that were prerequisites for the distribution of land enabled migrant farmers to get ownership of land. Before the land distribution, a survey was conducted by the Bureau of Economics and Statistics in 1966–67. The objective of the survey was to fix who the cultivator was, legally (Herring 1980: 60). The surveyors had to rely on any document—for instance, rent or tax receipts—that ensured a proprietary relationship with the land. In a place like Attappady, the person who held the document would have been difficult to identify because of the large-scale practice of informally mortgaging land. So, in most cases, surveyors allotted ownership to those cultivators that they found at the moment of the survey (Moithunni, 30 April 2013, Attappady, in discussion with the author).¹² In all such cases, migrant farmers had the advantage. As we have said elsewhere, many of them managed to get a MR from the landlord's office for land they leased from the Adivasis.

This survey method largely failed to account for the system that some Adivasis followed. A surveyor reported that the *moopan* (chieftain) was leasing land from the *karyasthan* and distributing it among members of the *ooru* (hamlet). Moreover, individual families would sometimes fail to recognise their own holding during the survey. “At the time, we wanted to identify the individual holder. Due to the confusion, we gave ownership of all the land in the *ooru* to the *moopan*” (Moithunni, 30 April 2013, Attappady, in discussion with the author).¹³ The surveyors also recorded multiple claims to the same land. According to Moithunni, in some cases, there was a piece of land that both an Adivasi and a migrant farmer laid claim to. He said, “Mostly, Adivasis would claim the land orally, based on their history of cultivating the land, but the migrant farmers' claims were based on receipts. Therefore, we would accept the migrant farmers claim to ownership” (Moithunni, 30 April 2013, Attappady, in discussion with the author). For the state to recognise legitimate ownership, documents were important. So those who were not habituated to the recognised documentation practices were excluded from the state's distributive benefits.

Who Is a 'Tiller'?

There was an elaborate process for claiming ownership of land.¹⁴ Scholars argue that the success of land reform in Kerala as compared with other states was due to the active participation and involvement of political and civil societies (Chasin and Franke 1991; Radhakrishnan 1989; Franke and Chasin 1989). If we accept this argument, then we must admit that the political process through which land reform in Kerala became “radicalised” excluded the Adivasis (Franke and Chasin 1989). Why did the postcolonial state, civil society, and political society, especially those with communist politics, not consider the question of Adivasi land ownership a political one? The answer to this could be found in the ideological and discursive relationship of land reform with colonialism and nationalism.

According to Judith Whitehead (2010), John Locke's concept of the wasteland—a state of nature where people enjoy the

fruits of the earth, as opposed to value-producing land, created through the application of labour—created the basis for the categorisation and administration of land in colonial India. This materialised through the working of the Permanent Settlement Act (1793), the Ryotwari Settlement of Western India Act (1830s–1840s), and the Indian Forest Act (1865). Whitehead demonstrates not only the construction of different landscapes of value, but also argues that this, in turn, creates different social subjectivities, like tribes and castes, because they inhabit these landscapes. “Hill populations were seen as outside of civil society; their uses of the land were consequently primitive, wasteful and destructive” (Whitehead 2010: 93). Colonial categories were adopted by postcolonial India as natural categories, whether related to land or the categorisation of communities as “tribes.” Prathama Banerjee (2016: 141) argues that the principle of labour value in land use influenced mainstream nationalist and communist politics, which were articulated based on the “land to the tiller” principle. Moreover, the communist agrarian imagination centred on the hardworking, productive peasant, who engaged in sedentary agriculture on large riverine plains. Banerjee (2016) claims that they did not take into account other modes of use and habitation of land. The Adivasis were thus not considered as proprietors of land and were thus excluded from the political process associated with the redistribution of landed property. Since the Adivasis did not fit into the category of “labourer,” the welfare schemes that were created for landless labourers in the post-land reform era did not impact them (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2004). Therefore, the Adivasis were excluded from the whole process of land reform.

The Power of Development: A Different History

The question, then, is how to rewrite the history of development incorporating those who have, thus far, been excluded. A better framework to write development histories should involve a more complex, and perhaps contradictory, understanding of the development process. The exclusion of Adivasis from landownership should not be seen as their alienation from development, but as an effect of the development process itself. When we study the rationale of development policies and their effects, we must link them with power structures.¹⁵ The history of Adivasi communities of Kerala in the 20th century shows how they were gradually alienated from productive resources. At the same time, they have been reduced to a governmental category associated with welfare.

The idea of “protecting tribes” because they are weak, from powerful traders and moneylenders, was one of the major concerns during the late colonial rule. The “Rules for the Treatment and Management of Hillmen,” which was a part of the Forest Regulations of Travancore, 1893, reflected this (Suresh 2009). Likewise, regulating and controlling the “alienation” of the land belonging to “tribes” was part of the strategy for managing “agency areas” (Aiyappan 1948: 22).¹⁶ Most committees in the postcolonial period suggested and recommended the “protection” of tribal land. These committees also reported cases of “land alienation” in tribal areas. The

Government of India (1961a), in the Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission,¹⁷ gives a long description of the various “methods” through which land was alienated from the tribes, and the lacunae in existing laws in a few states.

About Kerala specifically, the report said that there were no “protective” measures against “exploitation” by moneylenders (Dhebar 1961: 386). It also mentioned that large areas of tribal land were being alienated in Kerala, and there were no legal measures to control this process (Dhebar 1961: 386). The situation in Attappady figured in the all-India Dhebar Commission Report. As a measure to prevent the dispossession of tribal land, the report suggested placing tribes under state control, and giving *patta* (title deeds) to tribal people for the land they hold as “tenants,” as a mechanism to curtail the alienation of land (Dhebar 1961: 386). These details clearly indicate that the seriousness of land alienation was known to experts at the time and that the administrative technique they recommended was protection from outsiders.

A discussion in the Kerala Legislative Assembly in 1957 about land issue in Attappady reveals how it was perceived in the political world of that time. P K Chathan, the local self-government minister, said that the government had taken appropriate measures to stop the encroachment of the land of *girivarghakkars* (hill tribes) in Attappady in Palakkad. The minister was responding to the resolution proposed by a communist member of the legislative assembly (MLA), Krishna Menon. In his resolution, Menon had demanded the appointment of a committee, led by a non-official, to collect information on how to curtail the encroachment of the land that the *girivarghakkars* had been cultivating for so many years, by *puram nattukars* (outsiders). “Puram nattukar” can also mean “people who are from another country,” or “people from another place.” Congress MLA, C M Matthew, objected to the use of this phrase. He said people who were migrant settlers from Thiru-Kochi were also poor and should not be seen as outsiders since they were from the same state. Menon finally withdrew his resolution but clarified that he used “puram nattukar” to mean Tamil migrants, Thiru-Kochi migrants, and a feudal lord from Mannarkkad (*Mathrubhumi* 1957).

Adivasis too raised the issue of the scarcity of land allocated to them for cultivation. A newspaper reported that a group of *kattunivasikal* (forest dwellers) complained to two ministers from Madras, who were visiting the Attappady region, that “they were not getting enough land for the cultivation.” They subsequently requested the ministers “to allot separate forest land once in three years,” and added that “the janmis, who owned the forest, are allotting it to others” (*Mathrubhumi* 1950).

The expert committees, political society, and state apparatus had information about the specificities of the Adivasi land in question. But, unlike with other welfare measures (Suresh 2015), the government did not take any legal or administrative measures to resolve it. Postcolonial governmentality retained the colonial strategy regarding Adivasi spaces. Their inhabitation and cultivation were not qualified as value-producing.

The land reform was definitely anti-feudal, but it was also developmentalist. E M S Namboodiripad, the first chief minister of the elected communist state government, argued that “land reforms must not discourage capitalist entrepreneurs” (Herring 1980: 69). For him “capitalism in agriculture is an advance on the present situation in a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country” (Namboodiripad 1952: 61). Therefore, when agriculture was restructured through the discourse of development, those who accumulated power became dominant, and those who did not have that power were made subordinate or excluded.

Conclusions

This study tried to address how Adivasis were excluded from the developmental process of Kerala, and the connection between this exclusion and their invisibilisation in the historiography of postcolonial development. The study examined an important event that the development historians of Kerala consider a “radical” land reform. The study found that the legal and administrative procedures that aimed at redistributing landownership excluded Adivasis. Legal categories were created during the colonial regime as part of the process of governing the “primitive” locals. This process largely involved transposing local land relations into the dominant European framework. The framework reduced the diverse rights to land that existed in the precolonial era to just one category: private property. Within this dominant framework, Adivasi practices like shifting cultivation were not considered “productive” activities. Their status as tenants-at-will in colonial land relations had no legal validity, and the land that they were using and cultivating was no longer their property.

In the postcolonial history of the politics of land, the Adivasis’ specific relations with land were never addressed or articulated. So the administrative and political processes through which tenants got ownership of the land could not recognise Adivasis as tenants. Techniques such as land surveys and materials such as documents that had the power to legitimise land ownership privileged the migrant farmers over the Adivasis.

In the context of the invisibility of Adivasis in developmental historiography, this study argued that a critical historiography of development helps us understand that the exclusion of Adivasis happened due to the power of development. In postcolonial Kerala, Adivasis have been increasingly subjected to welfare programmes and their culture and traditions have remained under state “protection,” but at the same time, the state has not acted to enable them to get landownership.

This situation also gives us a glimpse into the complexity surrounding the emergence of “Adivasi politics” after the 1980s, especially when one remembers the fact that the state instituted a law related to “tribal land” in 1975 (Sreekumar and Parayil 2006; Steur 2009). But, of course, that is another story, of the interweaving of state interventions and the transgressive politics of the subaltern that uses the law and yet goes beyond it.

NOTES

- 1 The formation of a united Kerala, based on language, happened in 1956; the first government was formed by the Communist Party of India in 1957.
- 2 The first state government of Kerala was dismissed by the central government in 1959, which alleged the deterioration of law and order in Kerala.
- 3 Two judgments of the Kerala High Court in 1962 invalidated the implementation of the Kerala Agrarian Relations Act, 1959 in Malabar and Travancore.
- 4 The United Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—CPI(M)—legislated the Kerala Land Reform Bill, 1969, which came into effect on 1 January 1970 after the fall of that government. The reform was administered for a decade by a coalition led mostly by the Communist Party of India (CPI), while the CPI(M) led the opposition.
- 5 The researcher thanks the assistants, Suresh S and Rajan K, for collecting data for the ICSSR project (Suresh 2015).
- 6 Immediately after the British got control of Malabar through the Treaty of Seringapatam in 1792, the Governor of Bombay appointed a joint commission to clarify the land relationship and formalise the administrative system in Malabar (Rejikumar 2010).
- 7 Innes (1908) refers to Francis Buchanan, who travelled through Malabar in 1800–01 and reported on the complex land relationship that existed in Malabar.
- 8 This use of land is interpreted by scholars as ownership of tribes (Kunhaman 1981: 61).
- 9 In his study, Velluva (2006) has shown that in 1932, a migrant bought land near Mannarkkad.
- 10 A detailed survey of which families lost land, to whom, the details of the area, and how it was lost was conducted by the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) (GoK 1982).
- 11 In the Wayanad district, Adivasi communities like the Kurichiyars had become landowners through the land reforms (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2004).
- 12 Moithunni is a migrant from Mannarkkad who worked as a kolkaran with Moopil Nair. Later, he was appointed as a government surveyor; he was part of the survey team of 1966–67.
- 13 Moithunni said that he had personally faced the problem of other Adivasis claiming his land.
- 14 Radhakrishnan (1989) gives an elaborate description of the institutions that were working for the success of land reform and the procedures associated with establishing oneself as a cultivator.
- 15 Two studies worth mentioning here are those by Li (2007) and Ferguson (1994).
- 16 Current scheduled areas with more tribal populations were administratively described as “excluded areas” or “partially excluded areas” during colonial times. Partially excluded areas were also described under the colonial regime as “agency areas” (Aiyappan 1948: 1).
- 17 Otherwise known as the Dhebar Commission, based on the name of its chairperson, Uchharangrai Navalshankar Dhebar.

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