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Redistribution and recognition: land reforms in Kerala and the limits of culturalism

Nissim Mannathukkaren

The most important achievements of the Communist governments in Kerala, India were the implementation of the land reforms and the legislation of the Agricultural Workers' Act. Using ethnographic and archival research based on these events and the processes through which they became a reality, this paper will question some of the fundamental assumptions of the influential Subaltern Studies project and postcolonial theory like the positing of governmentality and passive revolution as the general characteristics of 'Third World' societies' experience with modernity. It will argue that, more importantly, their culturalist framework, with its gross ignorance of class and material concerns, is hardly adequate to understand the fusing of the aspirations of recognition and redistribution or the material and cultural that characterizes the struggles by the peasantry and agrarian labor, and their synthesis by the Communist Party. Despite their professed aim of inaugurating a democratic project with the peasant as citizen, Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory, unlike the Communist movement, do not envisage any material transformation of the agrarian classes that will actualize this objective.

Keywords: land reforms; Subaltern Studies; Kerala; postcolonial theory; culturalism

Introduction

It is one of the most curious phenomena that a society like India—which after more than 60 years of independence from the colonial yoke suffers from some of the worst forms of class-based inequities and deprivations—should generate not only a politics that refuses to talk about class but also academic analyses that exclude class. The Subaltern Studies collective in India and its latter-day influential avatar of postcolonial theory have been in the forefront of the academic movement away from class. Of course, this is a part of the larger 'cultural turn' that has characterized social sciences since the 1970s. What is surprising is that despite the claims of being a radical critique, postcolonial theory 'has evinced not only a suspicion of class theory and the Marxist tradition, but an outright hostility to it' (Chibber 2006, 360).¹ But even before the 'cultural turn', Indian studies was 'informed by an Orientalist focus on the exotic nature of otherness' and consequent focus on culture. This manifested in the emphasis on caste and the overshadowing of class (which was considered as

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¹Chibber charts the intellectual lineage of the trend away from class in South Asian Studies.

too simplistic a concept to understand something as complex as the Indic society). This is really ‘puzzling’ as there is a substantial class–caste correlation in India in which the lower castes tend to also occupy the lower strata of the class hierarchy (Herring and Agarwala 2006, 334). Thus it is imperative that the obfuscation of class in favor of caste and other identities be examined. This paper contributes to the recent debate on the evanescence of class as a method of analysis in the Indian subcontinent.² By demonstrating the limitations of the culturalist analysis of agrarian relations, it will hope to counter its ahistoric and reductionist tendencies, which have deleterious consequences for the subjects that it is claiming to speak for. The aim here is to restore the political economy approach in studying agrarian change, which has as its core understanding the social relations of production and reproduction and the institution of property and the mechanisms of power generated by it (Bernstein 2010, 1).³ At the same time, it will not downplay the necessity of understanding the cultural aspects of social formation, which in any case are interlinked with the above aspects. The argument here is not to substitute cultural reductionism with material/class reductionism.

The Subaltern Studies began as a project in India in the early 1980s, which went against the received modes of history writing as seen in the colonialist and nationalist historiographies with their supposed focus on the elite. Instead, Subaltern Studies sought to write a history that focused on ‘the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is *independently of the elite* to the making and development of [Indian] nationalism’ (Guha 1982, 1–3). Marxism too was considered inadequate to understand non-class forms of resistance, which supposedly predominated subaltern life under colonialism (see Chakrabarty 1995, Mannathukkaren 2007, 1202). 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 (Prakash 1990, 395).

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 peasants’ 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. 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’ (Chakrabarty 2002, 9, 11, Mannathukkaren 2010c). The Subaltern Studies thus seeks to build ‘a democratic project meant to produce a genealogy of the peasant as citizen in contemporary political modernity’ (Chakrabarty 2002, 19). 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. Subaltern historiography’s paradigm ‘necessarily entailed a relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital, critique of the nation form, and an

²See the special issue in *Critical Asian Studies* edited by Ronald Herring and Rina Agarwala (2006).

³The four key questions of political economy are ‘Who owns what?’, ‘Who does what?’, ‘Who gets what?’, and ‘What do they do with it?’ (Bernstein 2010, 22).

interrogation of the relation between power and knowledge' (Chakrabarty 2002, 8, Mannathukkaren 2010c).

From a central focus on reinstating subaltern history, the Subaltern Studies project moved onto a cultural critique of Western Enlightenment and Eurocentrism, thus laying the foundation for postcolonial theory. The later linguistic and cultural turn in Subaltern Studies that made its historians the main voice of postcolonial theory led to the characterization of social reality in terms of 'culture', 'language', 'texts', and 'discourse'. As a corrective to empiricism and economic reductionism this was justifiable. However the problem was going to the other end of cultural reductionism. Literary works begin to stand in for all reality and questions of evidence began to be substituted by that of narrativization and representation. Material problems are converted into metaphorical ones (Dirlik 1997, 5, 79). If Gramsci sought to supplement materialist with cultural analysis in his concept of hegemony, here culture substitutes material analysis (Dirlik 1997, 20). Postcolonial theory moves to conflating 'colonial exploitation with western cultural domination. Colonial discourse analysis abstracts itself, except in the most general terms, from histories of production and social relationships' (Sumit Sarkar quoted in Bannerji 2000, 903, Mannathukkaren 2007, 1203).

In this paper I will undertake a critique of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory through the case study of the land reforms and workers' legislation in Kerala, brought about by the nearly four-decade struggle by the Communists.⁴ The specific focus will be the latter half of the struggle from the time the Communists were elected to power in 1957 to the legislation of the two landmark Acts. These are the Kerala Land Reform Amendment Act ([KLRAA] 1969) and the Kerala Agricultural Worker's Act ([KAWA] 1974). The land reform bill was initiated in 1957, and its main features 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.⁵ In effect, the Act of 1969 abolished landlordism. It also allowed the agricultural labor who were attached to the landlords known as *kudikidappukar* the right to ten cents (1 acre = 100 cents) of land including the hutments that they lived in. KAWA, on the other hand, legalized regular working hours, minimum wages, and various other welfare measures for agricultural labor.⁶

⁴The ethnographic material for this paper is drawn from a larger study based on a purposive sample of 61 in-depth interviews with Communist activists and non-Communist upper and middle classes. 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 and eight intellectuals (both Marxist and non-Marxist) were interviewed. Finally, the constituent of the non-Communist middle and upper classes consisted of 19 interviews. To overcome the problems of representativeness and validity, a triangulation methodology has been followed by comparing different kinds of data and sources to construct a possible, unified meaning. Thus colonial and post-colonial government records, Communist Party documents, newspaper reports, and statistics related to the economy have been consulted along with secondary sources. It has also been the endeavor to derive new theoretical interpretations from existing secondary sources.

⁵*The Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill 1957, L. S. Bill No. 51 of 1957* (Thiruvananthapuram: Government Central Press, 1957).

⁶It should be mentioned that KAWA was essentially a product of class compromise. The land reforms, as will be seen below, did not benefit all the classes equally: the landless agricultural

This paper will argue that the crucial aspect of the Communist intervention in society was the bridging of 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 split between the material and the cultural. 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 (Ludden 2001a, 5). 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 Communists' negotiation of the transition to 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. At the same time, the peasant movement should not be considered as a 'material' struggle alone, for it was equally about recognition. There has been a tendency to see peasant movements as fighting for economic interests only (Skocpol 1982, 364). The land reforms were not just the end result of a process merely motivated by 'land hunger', as Jeffrey Paige has argued, with regard to peasant revolts of early modernity that were 'little more than simultaneous land rushes by thousands of peasants bent on obtaining land that they may legally regard as theirs' (Skocpol 1982, 356).

The paper will specifically question the various antinomies and binaries set up by Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory. So other than the material/symbolic and class/caste binary, they go onto posit a series of related binaries like capital/community, individual/community, civil society/political society, state/community, all stemming from the fundamental binary of modernity/tradition with the privileging of the second half of the binary.⁷ The case study will reveal that the peasantry and the other social groups and classes in society have constantly crossed these binaries to appropriate and borrow different aspects of the division as they deemed fit.⁸ Thus the Marxist-inspired Communist movement cannot be seen merely as agents of modernity and as destroyers of tradition. What emerges is a more nuanced social transformation than the picture painted by postcolonial theory and subalternists, which gives us a one-sided understanding of modernity (and tradition).

The historic context

In 1951, just a few years before the Communist victory in state elections, the distribution of agrarian classes in Kerala was in this order (figures for India in

laborers who were important constituents of the struggle were the last in terms of conferment of rights over land. Therefore, KAWA was an explicit measure to mollify this significant base of the Communist parties.

⁷I have demonstrated the inadequacy of the binary using another case study (see Mannathukkaren 2010a).

⁸Peasantry, in the sense that I use it, is a highly differentiated entity, unlike the attribution of homogeneity to it by the subalternists. Bernstein argues that the terms 'peasantry' and 'peasant' are better used in an analytical sense rather than a normative one, and also only to refer to two historical conditions: pre-capitalist societies and the transition to capitalism (Bernstein 2010, 3–4). We will see below the pitfalls of using peasantry in only a normative sense.

parentheses): land owners: 35.3 percent (67.8), tenants: 23.1 percent (12.6), agricultural laborers: 39.2 percent (17.9), non-cultivating rentiers: 2.4 percent (1.8) (Herring 1983, 160). 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' (Herring 1983, 157). To simplify it, it could be characterized, following Daniel Thorner, as a 'many-tiered edifice of interests in land-janmies [land-lords], kanamadars [superior tenants], verumpattadars [tenants-at-will]—[which] rests on a mass of landless laborers known as Cherumas, Pulayas, or Poliyars [untouchable castes]' (Herring 1983, 157). The most significant aspect of the tenure system was the strong class-caste correlation that characterized it. The upper caste Namboodiri Brahmins and Nayars controlled most of the land as landlords and superior tenants. The lower castes 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 (Lieten 1982, 4–5, Namboodiripad 1968, 11–12).

The state of Kerala was formed in 1956 joining together three regions: Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin. Until the independence of India, Malabar was directly administered by the British, whereas the latter two were princely states ruled by Maharajas but under indirect colonial control. These regions were not alike, in fact they showed some marked differences in their socio-economic characteristics. Malabar was the region in which Communism took its roots and still continues to be the stronghold of Communist parties. The institutionalization of land reforms in the 1970s after decades-long strong struggle by the Communist parties should not obfuscate the fact that agrarian radicalism was not just the outcome of Communist activism, but predates it by at least a century.

The British takeover of Malabar introduced substantial changes in its social structure. The introduction of the notion of private property in land and the vesting of the rights of the land in the landlord radically altered agrarian relations. The traditional rights of the peasant tenants were eroded for the new market logic (Herring 1997, 6). Under the new conditions the peasantry 'lived and worked in conditions of extreme penury entailed by the twin exactions of lord and state' (Panikkar 1989, 48). In the words of a colonial officer, Malabar had 'the unenviable reputation of being the most rack-rented place on the face of the earth' (T. C. Varghese quoted in Herring 1997, 6). Despite contrary arguments that stress 'a picture of fragile affluence created by a cash crop economy' (Menon 1997, 2619, Menon 1994, 22), in the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, the percentage of agricultural laborers in the total agrarian population of Malabar increased from 60 in 1901 to 68 in 1931 (Kabir 1997). Kerala as a whole had the second-highest rate of proletarianization in India (after Bengal) between 1910 and 1950 (Desai 2001, 43). Given these conditions, it was not surprising that Malabar saw a series of agrarian uprisings for nearly 100 years (Radhakrishnan 1989) before the emergence of the Communists. As a substantial number of the tenants were Muslims, and the superordinates Hindu, the conflict assumed religious overtones, especially because the rebellions were expressed in Islamic idioms. Despite the explosive nature of these uprisings, 'they did not spawn continuing organization or lasting political projects, but were more in the character of *jacqueries*' (Herring 1997, 8).

In Travancore and Cochin the situation was considerably different. Compared to Malabar, Travancore and Cochin had a very quiescent peasant history due to some

distinguishing characteristics. The royalty in Travancore, 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. In Cochin too the upper layers of tenantry received protection from the royalty. The pattern of landholding shows the differences between the regions. In 1931 owner cultivators numbered only six percent in Malabar where as it was 61 percent in Travancore; tenants constituted only six 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 2001, 43). However, despite the comparative security enjoyed by the peasantry in Travancore and Cochin (but not necessarily at the lower levels of the hierarchy), the rate of proletarianization increased and also immiserization at times of crisis like the depression of the 1930s could not be prevented (Herring 1997). The less oppressive landlordism in Travancore and Cochin did not mean that they had healthy agrarian structures (Herring 1983, 160).

If the agrarian uprisings in Malabar until the 1920s were of an inchoate and spontaneous nature, an organized movement for tenancy reforms had begun with the formation of the Malabar *Kudiyan Sangham* (Malabar Tenants Union) in 1922, an organization of the rich and middle peasantry. Despite the fact that the government stood stolidly by the landlords over a century of peasant uprisings, the pressure by the educated and articulate members of the rich peasantry (mainly belonging to the upper caste Nayars) forced it to legislate the Malabar Tenancy Act in 1930 (Radhakrishnan 1989, 78–79, 87–88). It granted fixity of tenure, fixation of fair rent, a ban on arbitrary evictions, etc. for the superior tenants, but did nothing for the tenants-at-will. The attitude of the former towards the latter changed, and what the Act did was while ‘curbing the rights of traditional *janmis* [it] created a new class of *janmis*’ (Radhakrishnan 1989, 88). The inferior tenants would have to wait until the emergence of the left for their cause to be espoused.

Communism was a late entrant into Kerala, compared to other regions of India, with the formal constitution of the Communist Party only in 1940. The left emerged in the spaces created by the Gandhian united front strategy of landlords and princes with peasants and others, which prevented any radical change in the social setup (Pandey 1982, 187–188). Moreover in places like Kerala Congress, nationalism was ineffective because it did not seek any structural changes with regard to caste inequality, but merely focused on reform by emphasizing programs like temple entry and cleanliness (Menon 1994, 90).

It was an abstract and homogenous nationalism that failed to incorporate the fragments like caste, locality, class, and religion and their concerns. This disenchantment resulted in the formation of the left wing within the Indian National Congress, called the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in 1934. In Kerala, the formation of the CSP was of added significance for it was to transform into the Communist Party later. 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 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) (Andalat 1987). 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 was to later culminate in the total defiance of the institutions of feudalism (Menon 1994, 131). 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 households (Andalat 1987, 71).⁹ 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.¹⁰ Soon the peasant unions went beyond this to make more radical demands, electrified by the realization of what collective action can do. 'Organization' and 'unity' become the key words among the peasantry.¹¹ Along with moral economy simultaneously there was another language emerging—the language of defiance that would become hegemonic later. The socialist slogans like 'death to landlordism' and 'death to capitalism' also began to catch on. Future communist leaders were telling peasants that class war, between the peasant and the lord and the capitalist and the laborer, was becoming a reality. They exhorted them to a new political and economic program with the unity of peasants and laborers cutting across caste lines.¹²

With the transformation of the socialism into Communism towards the end of the 1930s, violent confrontations with the state and the landlords were becoming the order of the day,¹³ something that was to be the feature of the 1940s. Although there was a brief interlude with the Communist Party supporting the British following the international line against the Axis powers during the Second World War, there was a return to the militancy of the earlier period after the end of the war. 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 (Menon 1994, 180). There were some significant conflicts that eroded the bases of feudalism backed by the colonial state. The Communists had to suffer tremendous repression and losses even after independence, when they followed the ill-fated violent revolutionary line against the might of the Indian state. The fulcrum of the struggles was about the economic demands of the peasantry, mainly revolving around tenure reform/abolition and access to land. At the same time the success of the Communists was built on the extent of their involvement in the quotidian lives of the people and their problems. They were in the forefront of the struggles for price control and rationing, black marketing and hoarding, and disease alleviation programs (Andalat 1987, 133–134, Raghavan 1999, 159–162).

Of course, the Communists did not emphasize the class division among the peasantry. 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

⁹P. Govinda Pillai, prominent Marxist ideologue, interview, 18 April 1999.

¹⁰Resolution passed by the Chirakkal Taluk Karshaka Sangham, *Mathrubhumi*, 19 August 1938; *Prabhatham*, 2 January 1939; Peasant's Memorial, Kasargod Taluk, 8 December 1938, Court Records, S. C. 44/1941 reproduced in Kurup (1978, 88–93).

¹¹Peasant's Memorial, Kasargod Taluk; Memorandum of All Malabar Karshaka Sangham to Revenue Minister, Madras Government, reproduced in *Prabhatham*, 2 January 1939.

¹²*Mathrubhumi*, 26 May 1937.

¹³See, for example, Confidential Report from Superintendent of Police (SP), Special Branch, Central Intelligence Department (CID) to Under-Secretary, Public Department, Madras, 13 April 1941, *Public (General)*, G. O. No. 811-12 (*Confidntl.*), 24 April 1941, (KSA).

(Herring 1997, 34). As they recognized, ‘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’.¹⁴ As we will see below, it is only with the abolition of landlordism that the implication of this division completely unraveled. A noteworthy aspect of the Communist movement was that the radical demands for ‘the land to the tiller’ were ‘paralleled by a more conservative ratchet politics, in which concessions wrung from the government are expanded both to make meaningful the previous concessions granted and to extend the agitation to a broader base. Expansion of the social base and retention of those for whom the ratchet had worked necessitated expansion of issues’ (Herring 1997, 29).

The Communist ascension to electoral power in less than two decades was made possible not merely by the violent resistance against the colonial state or its economic struggles. It was not merely the structural conditions that propelled the Communists to power in 1957. It was the result of a sustained ideological struggle that forged a unity between economic, political, and cultural issues. I have argued elsewhere that the unique quality of the Communist movement was its success in building a Gramscian ‘national-popular’ will by a fusing together of national, class, caste, and regional (linguistic) concerns (Mannathukkaren 2005). Rather than restricting itself to only economic demands, the Communists sought structural changes in other spheres of society as well. Extra-economic oppression by the landlords in the form of assault on dignity is something that united the masses across caste and class differences. As we will see below, the lower castes faced severe social restrictions.¹⁵ It was the ‘reshaping of communism into a doctrine of caste equality’ (Menon 1994, 2) that entrenched Communists in society. Similarly the left activists extended their support to the struggle for responsible government in the Maharaja-ruled states of Travancore and Cochin, thus reversing the Gandhian policy of *laissez faire* or non-interference in the internal politics of princely states (Namboodiripad 1968, 176). This was to lay the foundation for the unification of the three regions into the state of Kerala. A militant approach was constantly supplemented by an approach that was based on developing a communicative rationality. For example, libraries and reading rooms became the lifeline of the Communist movement.¹⁶ Parallel to the rising consciousness of the workers and peasants was the effort to channelize the same through journals, magazines, and newspapers. In essence, in contrast to the Congress, the Communists constructed a far more inclusive nationalism.

Community versus capital?

Although the Communist movement in Kerala, like all other communist movements elsewhere, was immersed in the Enlightenment ideas of reason and progress, and belief in industrialization, science, and so on (see, for example, Namboodiripad 1999, 346), it would be a mistake to see this as the only tendency. There were also elements that went against this, thus creating an ensemble of ideas all of which were not

¹⁴Communist Party pamphlet cited in Menon (1994, 186).

¹⁵*Prabhatham*, 2 January 1939; Andalat 1987, 6. Written evidence, K. T. Kammaran Nambiyar, *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee, 1927*, vol. II (Madras, 1928), 299.

¹⁶*Madras Government Secret USS 21/49* (TNA).

complementary. Subaltern Studies had argued that the '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' (Chakrabarty 1993, 1094). This misses the significant ways in which the Communist movement adapted Marxism to local conditions. It was from the beginning under no stagist illusion that it had to construct an industrial working class and capitalism before it could think about socialism. The movement 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 the party's success was due to the support of the peasantry. It also recognized that the conditions in which it functioned resembled the Chinese situation more than the Soviet one.¹⁷ Unlike the subalternist critique of Marxist and Communist belief in the mode of production teleology, here the Communist mobilization was premised not on the 'death of the peasant'. In essence the transition to modernity was mainly helmed by the peasantry and agricultural labor than an industrial working class or the emerging bourgeoisie.

Although the Communist leadership had accepted the slogan 'land to the tiller' by the mid-1930s, it took nearly two decades for the peasants and agricultural laborers to really assert their rights. The strength of the landed classes can be gauged by the fact that even after two decades of peasant struggle from the 1930s, the agrarian structure had remained almost unaltered (Sathyamurthy 1985, 190). The landed classes consistently managed to scuttle or dilute the attempts at legislating land reform laws by various ways and means (Oommen 1975, 1574). The Malabar Landholders' Association, for example, called the legislation of the Madras government to amend the Malabar Tenancy Act (1930) in the 1950s as 'class legislation' that 'has caused widespread discontent and apprehension in the public mind'.¹⁸ Here it is interesting 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 land reforms, which included the recourse by the feudal classes to the market logic of increasing productivity.¹⁹ Subaltern Studies criticizes the unilinear trajectory of teleological theories to show the persistence and inevitability of pre-capitalist elements in modernity. However 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. The government was even warned that the proposed agrarian bill, 'instead of appeasing the communists, it will only tend to swell the number'.²⁰ The growing demand for land reforms led to the formation of a landowner's association drawing members from across communities, which indulged in violent campaign against the laborers

¹⁷*Draft Kisan Report*, Communist Party of India, Kerala State Committee (February 1943).

¹⁸Letter from the Secretary, Malabar Landholders' Association to the Prime Minister, Government of India, dated 10 August 1950, *G. O. 433 dated February 21, 1951, Revenue Department*, Government of Madras, 1951 (Kerala State Archives [KSA]).

¹⁹See 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).

²⁰Petition (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).

and trade unionists (Osella and Osella 2000, 200). Nevertheless, 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.²¹

After the legislation of the landmark Land Reforms Bill by the first Communist government in 1959, the virulent opposition was on expected lines. Even opposition by parties 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.²²

Here democracy is blamed for the Communists coming to power. In essence the argument is that the legislation of the kind that the Communists sought to pass was 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.²³

The huge counter-mobilization of the landed interests culminated in a 'counter-revolution' called the *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle) Of course, it could not be built on the premise of the threat to 'material' interests of the mainly upper classes, 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.²⁴ The 'Struggle' was a grand coalition of casteist and religious interests consisting of the Nayers, Christians, and 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. The coalition of the propertied classes of all the communities and their virulent evocation of religious symbols contradicts the Subaltern Studies' positing of community and capital as antithetical universals and binary.²⁵ This conceptualization is as historicist and evolutionist as

²¹See *Political Resolution of the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party of India* (New Delhi: New Age, 1956).

²²*Navajivan*, 18 April 1959.

²³Thus 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', Christian landowner, interview, 25 July 2004; 'Simi Plackan', professional, interview, 25 July 2004). Names in single quotes are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the interviewees.

²⁴'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, 6 May 2003). 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. Srikumar', interview, 18 May 2003).

²⁵In an account of a lower level Communist activist from an erstwhile Christian landlord family, his family's hatred towards an atheistic Communism was hardened when it lost land due to the land reforms (Saju, interview, 21 August 2004). 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, 21 July 2004).

the theories Subaltern Studies seek to criticize. It does not see the myriad forms that community has assumed in the present-day conditions.

Partha Chatterjee, prominent subalternist and postcolonial thinker, argues that for Marx, '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'. 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' (Chatterjee 1993, 236). Chatterjee does not, however, acknowledge the unity of capital and community (at a level other than the nation). Therefore, for him, community 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 contradiction between capital and community' that we can move to 'a fundamental critique of modernity from within itself' (Chatterjee 1993, 236–237). 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 (especially related to class) within it. Thus community is not always a homogenous and egalitarian entity. This was demonstrated in no uncertain terms in the liberation struggle against the Communist ministry. Here the material/symbolic and capital/community binary posited by Subaltern Studies collapses.

Political society

The fall of the Communist government did not kill the peasant movement but instead was to act as an energizer in achieving the final goal. In fact, the processes through which the movement passed had a lot of similarities with the concept of 'political society' as theorized by postcolonial theory. This usage by postcolonial theory can lead to a lot of confusion, as it differs from the existing understandings of political society, which like Gramsci's mainly equates it with the state. However, in postcolonial theory, political society is a domain 'lying between civil society and the state' (Chatterjee 1998b, 57). The main argument is that Western political theory (because of its inherent Eurocentrism) is unable to theorize about much political activity in the Third World, for it encompasses only the formal and legal aspects, thus excluding a vast domain of activity that does not conform to the rules of modern civil society.²⁶ Chatterjee argues that 'The politics of democratization [in the Third World] 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' (Chatterjee 1998a, 281). A classic example of this is the thousands of poor, illegal squatters in urban areas whose rights are guaranteed not by law but by strategic negotiations with political parties. Since civil society is restricted to only a small section of 'citizens', it is imperative that a theoretical vocabulary be found for the political

²⁶Civil society is defined as those 'characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in Western societies that are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision making, recognized rights and duties of members, and other such principles' (Chatterjee 1998b, 60).

practices for the vast majority of the people. This is a laudable venture, but in keeping with the binarizing strategy, in postcolonial theory, political society is posited against civil society and also privileged over it.²⁷ The struggles for land reforms constantly violated the standards of civil society and thus would fall under the notion of political society. But, as we will see below, they also crucially bridged the binaries outlined by postcolonial theory.

There was the relentless emphasis by the Communists on the fact that the rights can be won over only by agitations and struggle.²⁸ 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' (Oommen 1975, 1572). 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:

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. (cited in Sengupta 1972, 310)

Subaltern Studies, in its overemphasis on independent and spontaneous actions by the subalterns, did not recognize this aspect of the need to 'educate' the peasantry and the need for the channelization of the spontaneity into coherent large-scale action, which is what the struggle for land reforms did. There was unprecedented mobilization by the peasantry under the leadership of the Communist Party. For example, the peasant *jatha* (procession) led by the popular leader A. K. Gopalan traversed from one end of the state to the other, with the purpose of putting pressure on the new government (after the Communists) to pass the Kerala Agricultural Reform Bill (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 35,000 pamphlets to the people.²⁹ Until the last day, Gopalan reportedly addressed one million people in 266 public meetings (Radhakrishnan 1989, 130).

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.³⁰ The Kerala Karshaka Sangham (KKS) had organized in the early 1960s a special conference for oral tenants, that is for those without any written records of rights or the receipts of rent paid. The peasants had

²⁷For an empirical critique of the concept of political society, see Mannathukkaren (2010a).

²⁸See *Janayugam*, November 1961.

²⁹*Deshabhimani*, 23 July 1960; Gopalan (1973, 248, 252).

³⁰*Navajivan*, 4 November 1961.

already started asking for receipts for the rent paid.³¹ Similarly the KKS won a significant demand regarding the creation of record of tenancy for those tenants with disputed rights (Sathyamurthy 1985, 136). Contra Subaltern Studies, the demand for modern forms of legal systems based on contracts, 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 there was hardly any participation in public meetings in the countryside then. As a Communist leader reminisced, the activists had to speak mostly to air and trees (quoted in Kanaran 1978, 198).

It took another 10 years after the fall of the first Communist ministry for the legislation of the Kerala Land Reforms Amendment Act (KLRAA) in 1969 'as a successful attempt to restore the major provisions of the KARB of 1959' (Radhakrishnan 1989, 146).³² In the meantime the non-Communist governments passed legislation that hollowed out the core of the KARB. If the governments were lenient, landlords themselves used many innovative methods to evade the law like mortgage arrangements that concealed tenancy, partition, and transfer of tenancies (most of which were bogus), etc. (Herring 1983, 176, 178, Radhakrishnan 1989, 177). However 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. The CPM knew that unless tremendous pressure was brought upon the government from below, the Act would go unimplemented.

For example, soon after the passing of the Land Reform Act, the CPM held a peasant and agricultural labor convention. It was reported that nearly 300,000 people attended the main rally. Three campaign *jathas* converged from different parts of the state, traversing through many villages and addressing many meetings.³³ 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' (Jeffrey 1992, 177). 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 by the tenants; the *kudikidappukar* should fence off 10 cents of land around their huts, all excess land should be occupied, and all attempts by the government, police, and courts should be resisted.³⁴ 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 50,000 activists (Sengupta 1972, 278). 'Massive repression' was undertaken by the government against the struggle including the razing of huts and the raping of women laborers (Gopalan 1973, 290).

The *kudikidappukar* could be easily mobilized because they bore the brunt of the bureaucratic red-tapism (Oommen 1975, 1579). The land-grab agitation that was launched on the first day the KLRAA came into existence had the primary goal of encouraging *kudikidappukar* to fence off their land, in order to thwart this invariable cumbersomeness of bureaucracy. The landless agricultural laborers in many places put up huts on government and private lands and hoisted the Communist Party

³¹ *Deshabhimani*, 5 November 1961.

³² In the meantime, in 1964, the Communist Party had split into two on ideological and tactical issues. The new party was called the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—CPM. The land reform legislation came into effect just after the CPM-led government fell and was replaced with a CPI-led ministry. CPM became the dominant party in Kerala and in many other states.

³³ *Mathrubhumi*, 13 December 1969; see also Jeffrey (1992, 176).

³⁴ *Deshabhimani*, 16 December 1969.

flag. About 150,000 laborers are supposed to have got land in this manner (Nair 1996, 134).

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 (Oommen 1975, 1579). 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 (Herring 1983, 203). 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 (Sathyamurthy 1985, 259). 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 hoodlums hired by the landlords. Almost 200 to 300 volunteers were getting arrested every day.³⁵ 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.³⁶ The end result of the process was the identification of almost 200,000 acres of surplus land (Nair 1996, 140).

Thus the struggle for land reforms was distinctly marked by the characteristics of a political society in which there was a constant violation of the rules of civil society. Violence and force were resorted to often as demonstrated in the forcible occupation of excess lands and the fencing off of hutments. However, where postcolonial theory errs is to see political society as the domain of the marginalized and the subalterns while viewing civil society as an arena of the elites. It misses the bridging of the binary. The peasant struggles, while violating civil society norms, were also simultaneously seeking to establish a civil society that incorporated all sections of the population. They were also about moving from the temporary contextual arrangements of political society mediated by the power of political parties to the rational-legal framework of modern democracies as demonstrated by the peasants' demand for rent receipts and the abolition of oral tenancy. This will be further elaborated below.

Workers' rights

As we have seen, the land reforms primarily benefited the better off among the tenantry and only some agricultural laborers (*kudikidappukar*). The definition of 'personal cultivation' was broadened by the Land Reform Act to include 'supervision', which negatively affected the slogan, 'land to the tiller'. Thus the agricultural proletariat was not the main beneficiary of the land reforms (Sathyamurthy 1985, 287). However the agricultural labor as a class won a significant victory through the legislation of the KAWA in 1974, called 'the most progressive agrarian legislation up to date anywhere in India' (Sathyamurthy 1985, 262). With the impending actualization of land reforms, the agrarian coalition

³⁵ *Keralakaumudi*, 26 May and 27 May 1972; Sengupta (1972, 294, 306).

³⁶ *Keralakaumudi*, 5 July 1972.

mobilized against feudalism began to collapse. 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 (Heller 2000, 82). This conflict was an important event in bringing to the fore the class contradictions between the landless laborers and the other agrarian classes unlike the unified peasantry in the subalternist narrative.³⁷ The CPM increasingly realized that it had to mobilize the landless laborers and the poor peasantry on a bigger scale than before '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'.³⁸

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!³⁹ One of the important demands won by labor was the 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 (Sathyamurthy 1985, 186). 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.

KAWA was a culmination of the struggles of landless agricultural labor. In 1973, KSKTU (the agricultural labor's union) organized a massive harvest strike that mobilized 150,000 laborers; there were also violent confrontations between laborers and the farmers (Heller 2000, 83). 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'.⁴⁰ 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 (Herring 2001). Here again the continuity between tradition and modernity and also the disjuncture between the two emerges unlike the one-sided emphasis on the modernity/tradition binary in culturalist frameworks, like that of Subaltern Studies. The marginalized appropriate what they consider as 'just' regardless of their modern or traditional origins. The strengthening of labor evoked the ire of the landowners who called the KAWA 'the factory acts' (Jeffrey 1992, 184).

Despite the monumental significance of the land reforms and the workers' legislation, they were still marked by a lot of limitations. 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' (Sathyamurthy 1985, 289). But, of course, in the minds of the people who have suffered under feudalism, the impact

³⁷For a theoretical discussion of the process of class differentiation see Chapter 7 in Bernstein (2010).

³⁸Original emphasis. *People's Democracy*, 11 February 1968.

³⁹Saju, interview.

⁴⁰*Kerala Agricultural Workers' Act* (Government of Kerala, 1976), section 70.

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'.⁴¹ 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.⁴² Nevertheless, the reforms did still exclude a number of people, most significantly the indigenous people, who constitute only one percent of the Kerala population and thus ignored by the dominant groups in the struggle for societal transformation.⁴³

Despite significant limitations, the land reforms of Kerala leave behind the reforms in other states by a great distance. Although not a significant area of land, the provision of allotting 10 cents to the *kudikidappukar* 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 1963–1964 to 7.8 percent in 1983–1984 (Oommen 1993, 4–5). What this did was to end the 'threat of eviction as a source of landlord control and power' (Heller 2000, 78). Similarly the percentage of other rural labor without land was reduced from 40 percent to five percent in the same period (Jeffrey 1992, 179). 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 agricultural households (Herring 1983, 211), a very significant number by any standard.

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.⁴⁴ Although this sense of achievement might obfuscate the new forms of exploitation that have emerged and those that have persisted, it still does speak to the aspirations of redistribution and recognition that have been inadequately understood by culturalist frameworks, like that of the Subaltern Studies.

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' (quoted in Radhakrishnan 1989, 272). Their importance from a comparative perspective emerges clearly when we place them

⁴¹Santhosh, lower level Communist activist, interview, 21 August 2004.

⁴²Shantha', *dalit* Communist activist, interview, 22 July 2003.

⁴³This has given rise to the struggle for the completion of land reforms by the indigenous people in the present. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on that, it can be noted that it again demonstrates the inadequacy of the subalternist emphasis on a homogenous community.

⁴⁴P. G. Suresh Kumar, former middle rung Communist leader, interview, 27 July 2004; 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', lower level government employee, interview, 19 July 2004; 'Sunil Kumar', computer professional, interview, 19 July 2004; 'Divakaran Menon', government engineer, interview, 18 August 2004).

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 failure of agrarian reforms in the oldest liberal democracy, the United States (Herring 2003, 59, 72).

Against governmentality

The cumulative result of almost four 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' (Oommen 1993, 3). The implementation of the land reforms and workers' rights was possible only through the mobilization of classes beyond segmented and pre-existing communal identities like religion and caste, which Subaltern Studies emphasizes as almost immutable (see Chakrabarty 1988, 29). It was successful because the people 'goaded, threatened and shamed the government' (Herring 1983, 205), which, as we have seen, often crossed the limits of legality. However it cannot be assumed that democratization can be achieved by remaining only at the level of political society as postcolonial theory does. It valorizes community as the essence of political practice in the East while positing civil society as the essence of Western politics (Chatterjee 1998a). In drawing a dichotomy between East/West, political society/civil society, postcolonial theory ignores the myriad ways in which these binaries are being bridged (Mannathukkaren 2010a). As we have seen, the subaltern classes were also struggling to build civil society institutions like peasant unions and establish procedures like setting definite work times, creating records for rent paid, and so on. The power of the feudal and capitalist classes in Kerala has been resisted precisely because of the fact that gains made by the working classes and the peasantry were institutionalized and made part of the democratic order. Postcolonial theory, instead, privileges the temporary rights won through community struggles in the paralegal domain of political society. It ignores the simultaneous struggles by the marginalized for citizenship, democracy, and welfare because they are ultimately products of the ideology of Western individualism (Mannathukkaren 2010a). They merely 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 1993, 163). The individual/community dichotomy here misses the complex interaction between the compartmentalized blocks of tradition and modernity.

Similarly, Subaltern Studies draws a distinction between peasant-communal politics and, organized politics (Chatterjee 1982, 37). It is right that many resistances that arise out of popular spontaneity do not rely on elite initiatives. However as Alam argues, 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 (Alam 1983, 45–46). Even when subalternists admit the sphere of peasant-communal ideology may not be totally capable of identifying and resisting exploitation, and that it requires awareness brought in from outside, that is the sphere of organized politics, they do not see these two spheres having any commonalities. Like civil society, organized politics is characterized by the 'centrality of the individual, the collective as the aggregation of individuals, sectional interests,

alliances between sectional interests', and so on, values which are totally alien to peasant–communal ideology (Chatterjee 1982, 37). This dichotomy follows the tradition/modernity binary, and the other binaries we saw above.

The immediate result of the land-grab and excess land agitation was the accrual 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 (Gopalan 1973, 298). A variety of other demands by the Struggle Council were met, 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 (Sathyamurthy 1985, 259). 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.⁴⁵ It was through the land reforms that the Communist Parties virtually secured its hegemony over the poor peasantry.⁴⁶

The success of the institutionalization of rights can be gauged by the fact that 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 (Radhakrishnan 1989, 163). 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.

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 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' (Hindess 1996, 106). More importantly, Communist peasant activism, through land reforms, achieved a different kind of leveling by eroding pre-modern feudal modes of power, something that has been obfuscated by postcolonial theory in its one-sided 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.⁴⁷

⁴⁵*Chintha*, 13 October 1972.

⁴⁶In one activist's account, his family's faith in Communism and their allegiance to it was sealed with the land reforms (Santhosh, interview).

⁴⁷Of course, I am not ignoring the benign aspects of the moral economy of feudalism (see Scott 1976). But it has to be mentioned that more often these benign aspects have been followed in theory than in practice. So any romanticization of pre-market society is problematic (see Herring 2001, 255).

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.⁴⁸ What was being sought through land reforms was the 'reversal of the political axis of individualization' (Foucault 1977, 192), the concentration of power in one individual that 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' (Nikolas Rose quoted in Corbridge *et al.* 2005, 10) that characterize modernity. That is why the political order that was sought to be established was qualitatively different from the parliamentary democracy that Foucault describes (quite erroneously) as being, in essence, the same as the feudal system that preceded it (see Foucault 1980, 103). 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 (see Herring 2003, 60).

Postcolonial theory following Foucault had problematically excluded the analysis of relations of production in its critique of modernity and focused exclusively on power relations. 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' (Foucault 1980, 152–153). 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' (Foucault 1980, 156). 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 (Heller 2000, 43). Before the poststructuralist turn Subaltern Studies had undertaken an effective Gramscian analysis of the Indian society. Even then the lack of an adequate class analysis was visible (Byres 1998, 74), a tendency that reached its apogee with the cultural turn of Subaltern Studies. This is a major lacuna that 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 relentless daily struggle for a livelihood . . . [especially the] most basic need: securing enough to eat' (Bernstein 2010, 7), or the material dimension is obfuscated in the Foucauldian analysis.⁴⁹ Thus once again we can see that the

⁴⁸Saju, 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* [untouchable caste] 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, 28 July 2004).

⁴⁹Foucault himself, with his questioning of the notion of subjecthood, would not be able to account for recognition either.

various antinomies posited by postcolonial theory are bridged by the peasant struggles enabling to overcome governmentality to a substantial extent.

Beyond passive revolution

In postcolonial theory's account, 'passive revolution is in fact the general framework of capitalist transition in societies where bourgeois hegemony has not been accomplished in the classical way' (Chatterjee 1998c, 95). 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'. (Chatterjee 1998c, 97). Of course, this tendency of 'forced commercialization' of the peasant economy is an inevitable consequence of the development of capitalism (Bernstein 2010, 49).

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. (Chatterjee 1998c, 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 corroded the power of the pre-capitalist dominant classes and also changed the nature of the state established after independence. The Communists could be seen as completing the bourgeois democratic revolution, a task which the bourgeoisie could not undertake in any effective manner (Eashvaraiah 1993, 87). However 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' positing of passive revolution has the merit of recognizing the combination of capitalism and feudalism (and thus tradition and modernity) in the social formation. It then goes on to posit it as the 'general' framework for Third World societies. This is again falling back into historicism and evolutionism, which negates the possibility of 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, as we have seen, 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 indeed the representative character of the “modern” sector as the leading element within the nation has to be legitimized precisely through these means’ (Chatterjee 1998c, 101). This becomes a justification for the perpetuation of individualized modes of power characteristic of feudalism. The Kerala experience shows the possibility of going beyond 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 (see Herring 2001). The latter is achieved through the modern forms of legislation enacted by the democratic 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 at least some 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’ (Chatterjee 1998c, 101). 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 latter’s 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’ (Chatterjee 1998c, 100), or that of ‘combining accumulation with legitimation while avoiding the “unnecessary rigours” of social conflict’ (Chatterjee 1998c, 97). The initial promise of overcoming the dichotomy of modernity and tradition is negated by its reinstatement. Here state is associated with the modern while tribe, caste, and religious community are pre-modern. There are no fractures within the latter; they are homogenous wholes that resist the modern. This is an assertion that bears little relation to the reality of peasant and labor struggles in Kerala. These struggles question the ambiguities 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’ (Chatterjee 1993, 217). He ignores the significant instances in which 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’ [Marx 1977, 667]) has taken place.

After all, the twentieth century is marked by historic peasant movements ‘mobilized around issues of land, of rent and tax, of pauperization and of extreme oppression and social injustice’ (Bernstein 2010, 120). What the land reforms in Kerala 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, albeit in an imperfect manner in which the agricultural labor was still at the bottom. Nevertheless, the order of capitalism is now regulated by the peasantry and working classes. This is unlike passive revolution, where capitalism establishes its hegemony by incorporating dominant precapitalist classes, by making them the subordinate partners. Especially in overcoming the subalternist binary of modernity and tradition, the peasantry and the working classes demonstrate that the modern state can be appropriated and reconstituted democratically.

Redistribution and recognition

The struggle for land was not merely a ‘material’ struggle but also simultaneously a symbolic struggle against oppression. According to Nancy Fraser, redistribution and recognition are irreducibly bound together. Justice according to her ‘requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition’ (Fraser 1995, 68). 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 occupying two airtight separate spheres, economic injustice and cultural injustice are usually interimbricated so as to reinforce one another dialectically.

Once we bear this in mind it becomes easier to conceptualize that even ‘[r]edistributive remedies generally presuppose an underlying conception of recognition’ (Fraser 1995, 72, 73). The land reforms, in my view, are a good example of this mutual constitutiveness. Because of the strong class-caste correlation, the question of abolition of landlordism was not merely an economic issue, but deeply intertwined with issues of recognition.⁵⁰ Post-colonial theory obscures this interconnection by focusing on the cultural in isolation. Early accounts like that of James Scott had begun this tendency with the notion of the ‘moral economy’, which has influenced Subaltern Studies and postcolonial 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. (Scott 1976, viii)

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’ (Fraser 2000, 110–111). Even nuanced poststructuralist accounts like that of Arturo Escobar indulge 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’ (Escobar 1995, 167). As in James Scott (see Brass 1991, 179), for Subaltern Studies, the concept of class is equal to peasant. and like Escobar (1995, 168), it also believes that only capitalism is economic, while pre-capitalism is cultural (Chakrabraty and Cullenberg 2003, 159). For the notion of class is an external phenomenon, implanted in India via colonialism. Moreover the concept of class is defined in non-economic

⁵⁰Santhosh, interview. T.V. Thomas, contractor, interview by author, 17 May 2003. 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.

terms, in terms of power relations, hence the broad category of the subaltern and the elite classes (Chakrabaty and Cullenberg 2003, 106). For Subaltern Studies, 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' (Guha 1983, 8). Here there is no understanding of class as the 'performance, appropriation, distribution, and receipt of surplus labour' (Chakrabaty and Cullenberg 2003, 106).⁵¹ This narrative ignores the implications that in all agrarian class societies this surplus goes to the dominant class of non-producers (Bernstein 2010, 21).

What is most problematic in the picture of the Chayanovian 'eternal' peasant economy outside history portrayed by Subaltern Studies is that it fails to theorize about exploitation within pre-capitalism, or the possibility or the desirability of emancipation among the peasantry, and implicitly participates in the affirmation of status quoism (Chakrabaty and Cullenberg 2003, 178). Although revolutionary activity is not the main mode of peasant resistance, it is important to recognize the potentiality that exists as a part of the peasants' contradictory consciousness. The scale of the struggles launched by the peasantry in Kerala shows the possibility of going beyond Scottian 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' characterized by 'poaching, foot-dragging, pilfering, dissimulation and flight' (Scott 1990, xiii).

The push for land reforms by the lower classes can only be understood by going beyond moral economy of feudalism, 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' (Brass 1991, fn. 7, 196). 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 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'.⁵²

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' (Herring 2001, 255). As the character Kelan (an agricultural laborer) says in the Malayalam novel *Coir*: 'Now everyone one can walk anywhere wearing a shirt and a

⁵¹The agricultural laborers in Kerala were as much troubled by economic exploitation as by social oppression of landlordism, as revealed by *The Report of the 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 1983, 169).

⁵²'Basheer', interview, 21 August 2004.

head cloth, singing a song and smoking a *beedi* (Manalil 2002, 140). 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 by slavery' is definitely what the peasantry and the agricultural labor in Kerala villages would have agreed with.

Unlike postcolonial theory's emphasis on the desire to escape the modern present (Chatterjee 1997), the peasants do not yearn for the pre-market era with its guaranteed subsistence and the benevolence of the patron. 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?' (quoted in Radhakrishnan 1989, 239, 240). Most importantly, the intertwining of the material and symbolic is visible, from the fact that derogatory practices towards the lower castes could not be sustained for the lack of material basis. Practices like coercing women from tenant families into sexual relations with the landlord with the threat of eviction for unpaid rent were no longer possible.⁵³ Previously it was common for the tenants of polluting castes to deliver the crop through persons of non-polluting (upper) 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.⁵⁴ 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 (Jeffrey 1992, 180; see also Mathew 1986, 107). The status misrecognition suffered by the lower castes/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' (Lieten 1982, 128).

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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ But these narratives are forced to exist as 'hidden

⁵³Saju, interview.

⁵⁴Saju, interview.

⁵⁵Mohan Unnithan', retired professional from a prominent landed Nayar family, interview, 10 May 2003, Muvattupuzha.

⁵⁶A. K. Nair', retired school teacher, interview, 25 July 2003.

transcripts' (Scott 1990). Thus there is a feeling that the present system is one in which in which the 'forward [upper] castes have no place'.⁵⁷

The emergence of Communism 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 (Lieten 1982, 162). The struggle for recognition was now interlinked with the struggle for redistribution of material resources without displacing the latter. The land reforms broke 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.⁵⁸ Even though the religious dependence may persist in the post-reforms era, it has become a mere vestige of former practices (Radhakrishnan 1989, 252). As Filippo and 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' (Osella and Osella 2000, 185).

The greatest loss of land was suffered by the (so far hegemonic) Brahmins, mainly the landowning class and the net gainers were the Tiyyas/Ezahvas 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 coming to an end, and was substituted by the mediatory role of the peasant union and the Communist Party (see Radhakrishnan 1989, 213 ff.).

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 misrecognition suffered by them. The breakdown of patron–client relations and the caste hierarchy was the most significant outcome. The traditional patron was substituted by the state and practices of tied labor with contractual obligations; the state could now interfere in the disputes between landowners and laborers.⁵⁹ 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 (Heller 2000, 139–140). 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'.⁶⁰ The craving for recognition as an equal member and citizen of society is evident here. Even the attitude of the employers has changed: 'It has become the norm to respect the laborers'.⁶¹ Now the matter of wages is something that is beyond dispute.⁶² 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,

⁵⁷'Janamma Nair', retired government employee, interview, 26 July 2003.

⁵⁸Saju, interview.

⁵⁹Section 23, *Workers' Act*.

⁶⁰Selvan, lower level Communist activist, interview, 10 May 2003.

⁶¹Jose, interview.

⁶²Satheesan, lower level Communist activist, 6 June 2003, interview; Joykunju and Jose, interviews.

as we have seen, in privileging community in the community/individual binary, does not allow any scope for individual rights that are considered as mere bourgeois manifestations. The emphasis on love and kinship stands as dichotomous with the claims of the individual (Chatterjee 1993, 239). In contrast, the persistent theme of part of the research is the assertion of the individual along with the collectivity. The tremendous push by the subordinate classes to end pre-capitalist forms of domination, unlike the arguments that have emerged as a part of all ‘post’ discourses, has to be recognized. The Communists were merely critical catalysts of this motivation.

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’ (Sathyamurthy 1985, 274). The unprecedented mobilization of peasants and 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 that has to be made capable of producing efficiently for the market’ (Escobar 1995, 160), was largely avoided. This is seen in the Communists’ sharp understanding of the cultural dimensions of feudalism—the systematic misrecognition suffered by people across classes. The most important dimension in the phase of the struggle for land reforms and labor legislation was the fusing of the material and the symbolic, rather than seeing these dimensions in isolation. They crucially recognized that substantive democracy could not be realized without material redistribution of resources.⁶³ Thus the various binaries that are posited by Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory are again overcome here.

Keralan exceptionalism?

Kerala’s social transformation resembles that of the changes inaugurated in the classic cases of social democracy in Europe. However, as far as postcolonial societies are concerned, the biggest question that arises following the discussion so far is whether Kerala’s peasant and worker struggles are unique in the fact that they have been able to fuse together struggles for redistribution along with those for recognition. The history of postcolonial societies shows that material struggles by the working classes and peasantry have been subsumed by (often catastrophically) violent struggles for culture and identity, unlike those in European social democracies. This seems to affirm the culturalist thesis of Subaltern Studies/postcolonial theory that this paper has sought to question. However, I will argue that while the Kerala case is unique in terms of realized historical trajectory, the

⁶³Land 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, 28 July 2004). 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 8.83 (female) and Rs 12.74 (male) in 1981–1982 to Rs 101.64 (female) and Rs 148.72 (male) in 2003–2004 (Joshi 2007).

potential for the same transformation existed in many other societies but could not be realized for various historic contingencies. As Tarrow argues 'land hunger and resentment at landlord abuses were age-old'. Whether they actually would translate this into action would depend on whether 'windows of opportunity appear in the walls of their subordination' (1998, 78). James Scott's thesis of the everyday forms of peasant resistance has the merit of demonstrating the limitations of collective action based on class, and the channelization of class anger into those kinds of contestations that do not yield material benefits (Herring and Agarwala 2006, 334). The fundamental problem with Subaltern Studies/postcolonial theory is in generalizing theses like these (which have a particular historical context) as the universal framework of action for peasantry across the world. In explaining variation in social and political movements, what fail unequivocally are structural explanations that merely focus on the class and caste structure of a society, without paying attention to the ways in which agents and actors make use of these structural possibilities. Desai argues that parties 'are organizations that attempt such transformations, and the extent to which they succeed depends not simply on underlying cleavages, but on their ability to find the appropriate strategy and tactics of struggle' (Desai 2002, 651). It is not necessary that objective interests translate into a recognition of fighting for the same. They can be framed differently by various ideological formations (Herring and Agarwala 2006, 333–334). To understand this we need to move from economic sociology to political sociology, from 'class relations and dynamics to themes of class identities and consciousness' (Bernstein 2010, 116).

Thus the arguments that portray Kerala's left ascendancy to only the structural cause of a large percentage of landless agricultural labor or paddy cultivation miss many important aspects. The explanation, along with structural factors, has to incorporate political opportunity structures—features like influential allies, divisions within the elite, a state's capacity for repression (Tarrow 1998, 76), cultural imagination and construction of identity, and the 'process of social interaction in the formation and reproduction of social movements'. Thus what is needed is 'a combination of structural, cultural, and interactional factors' in the analysis of social movements (Lindberg 1995, 843).

In some crucial ways the Communist movement differed from other parts of the country. It was, for example, entering into a society that had already seen significant counter hegemonic caste reform movements. Thus the receptivity to radical ideas was of a different nature. Moreover, many Communist activists had also been activists in such anti-caste movements and they adopted the tactics and strategies of mass mobilization that had been practiced by them (Desai 2002, 641). The crucial aspect is that the Communist activists intuitively understood many of the complex antagonisms in the social formation and the need for active intervention to make them salient. As Rueschemeyer argues, '*The shared interests of a set of a people are not objective givens, existing like platonic ideas, to be realized or not. Instead ... they are defined in the very process of organization, and so is the collectivity whose interests are being pursued. The collective interests actually pursued are historically constructed*' (Rueschemeyer 1998, 14, original emphasis). This is closely tied to cultural imagination and identity formation.

The Communists elsewhere in India refused to engage with anti-caste movements, despite the fact that in regions like Maharashtra, for example, the anti-caste movement was potentially more radical than that of Kerala and even had linkages with the tenant movement (Desai 2002, 645). Another important difference in the

strategy adopted by the left in Kerala was the decision to work within the fold of the Indian National Congress in the initial period that gave it legitimacy and legality. In many other parts of the country, the Communists organized independently as a party had to work underground as the Communist Party was illegal. Thus the Communist movement in other regions failed to establish the kind of hegemony in Kerala.

Nevertheless class-based movements have not been confined to Kerala. Although they have been overcome by identity struggles in post-independent India, they were more pervasive before the end of colonialism. For example, the state of Bihar, which is amongst the poorest of the Indian states at the present, had a powerful peasant movement in the 1930s with the CSP membership standing at 250,000 in 1938. However, this dissipated because of various reasons including infighting and divisions within the party (Desai 2002, 647). Thus transformation governed mainly by the subordinated classes leading to European-type social democracies was not completely ruled out, despite the severe limitations imposed by the colonial state on social and political movements.

So instead of the Orientalist thesis of culturalism, what needs to be explained is the waxing and waning of class movements. Often it is assumed that caste is the foundation of understanding Indian politics without ever testing its validity (Herring and Agarwala 2006, 336). Even when there is evidence of class-based contention and conflict, scholarship has ignored it. Tietelbaum argues that 'that the standard view of Indian labor as fragmented, weak, and dominated by political parties and the state does not stand up to scrutiny'. Against the received understanding that labor unions have been quiescent, he shows that in some decades the level of conflict was even more than that of many European countries (Tietelbaum 2006, 414, 415). There is increasing evidence that the role of caste as a determinant in politics is on the wane. What is important is that this is happening even in states that are in relatively 'backward' human and economic development even indicators. (Krishna 2003) As Anirudh Krishna demonstrates, top-down caste and patronage-based politics are giving way to politics based on material concerns, like economic benefits and access to political participation. One of the crucial factors in bringing about these changes is the role of education (Krishna 2003, 1179). In this respect, changes that happened in Kerala decades ago are now slowly reaching other states. The argument here is not one about linear change⁶⁴ to the same outcomes everywhere, but about the inadequacy of culturalist frameworks that emphasize an immutable and unchangeable cultural essence. 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' (Ludden 2001b, 212). What is missing in the subalternist portrayals is social change, social mobility, or even the fact that subalterns can themselves turn into elites (Ludden 2001b, 212) as we saw above.

⁶⁴The success of the land reforms itself has generated many contradictions, which have tended to go against further democratization. Further, the Communist parties and the organized working classes and peasantry have undergone de-radicalization, which has generated serious fissures and ambiguities in the Communist and socialist imaginary (see Mannathukkaren 2010b).

Conclusion

This paper began by noting that the absence of class and political economy has been one of the prominent features of new academic analyses of South Asia in the last couple of decades. Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory have been the prime actors in this obfuscation. As we have seen above the fundamental problem has been the positing of a series of binaries and antinomies like material/symbolic, class/caste, capital/community, individual/ community, civil society/political society, state/community, stemming from the fundamental binary of modernity/tradition and the privileging of the latter half. The significant aspect of the peasant and labor struggles over four decades in Kerala has been the bridging of these binaries and the selective appropriation of different aspects across the divide. Thus what this case study demonstrates is the need for a more nuanced account of social transformation than that articulated by the culturalist framework. By positing social reality as two compartmentalized wholes, it obfuscates the necessity and the actuality of interaction and commonalities between the two domains. The Communists would have hardly made any inroads if a binary like peasant–communal politics and organized institutional politics had the kind of validity that subalternists implied. Instead of spontaneous, autonomous peasant resistances, 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’ (quoted in Skocpol 1982, 362).

The move away from the ‘material’ has serious consequences for the subjects that Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory claim to represent. Their critique of modernity and the reinstatement of the subaltern, based as it is on the celebration of subalternity, does 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 can be fulfilled. The basic problem stems from the fact that class is seen as an external phenomenon without any material consequentiality for ‘traditional’ societies like that of India. Without the material transformation of the condition of the marginalized classes many postcolonial Third World democracies have turned out to be formal democracies. The paradox of formal democracy is that that the right to property in practice ‘excludes *de facto* the majority of population from that property’ (Heller 1988, 138–139). Therefore the transition from feudalism to capitalism does not bring about any substantial change in the life chances of the peasantry and agrarian labor. 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 (Chatterjee 1993, 163). However, this presupposes society expressing one homogenous will, which, as we have seen, does not exist in actuality. Therefore the system of contracts which protects the interests and will of every constituent of society becomes inevitable (Heller 1988, 143).⁶⁵

⁶⁵Subaltern Studies obviously will not accept something like ‘interests’ because that is premised on bourgeois notions of the individual.

The relatively successful negotiation of the transition to capitalist modernity in Kerala through land reforms and the worker legislation shows the inadequacy of resistance mounted only on a cultural level, as theorized in the writings of Subaltern Studies. In fact, as I have emphasized throughout this paper, the success owes much to the fusing of material and cultural concerns, of redistribution and recognition. The social transformation in Kerala belies the subalternists' ahistorical depiction of peasant struggles as merely against state and modernity. Modernity is not considered as an imposition or as an assault on tradition; rather, it is engaged with and appropriated, not rejected in toto. Class conflict, the craving for equality, the struggles against feudalism and capitalism, and those to democratize and appropriate the modern state, show that governmentality and passive revolution do not have to be inevitable features of postcolonial societies. If Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory focus on cultural 'difference' as a critique of universal capital, in Kerala capital and feudal power have been resisted, not because of the operation of difference but because of the 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 relatively contested and the subjection of the peasantry and agricultural labor to feudal unfreedoms and modern proletarianization has been avoided, it has primarily to do with the qualitatively different political and social mobilization that emerged under the Communists. If Barrington Moore argued, much like Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory later, Indian independence arrived 'partly under the impetus of peasant yearning for a return to an idealized village past' (Moore 1967, 430), the cumulative effect of the Communist struggles on Kerala was such that the peasant was no longer looking to the past, but had his eyes planted in the future.

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