

## **Dissent, Protest and Resistances in Idukki: A Retrospect**

**Dr. Suneesh K.K.**

Assistant Professor on Contract, Dept. of History, Pavanatma College, Murickassery  
*suneesh427@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

The agrarian question has been one of the focal and abiding concerns of political theorists and policy makers that remain at the focal point of economic and political discourse. The land related issues in Kerala ought to be comprehended in the context of the historical and political process that determined land ownership in the State. A critical understanding of the land relations in Kerala demands a revisit to the feudal social order that prevailed in the region till land reform laws were implemented in the 1970s. The increase in population in the state and a shift from joint family system to nuclear family also demanded more physical space for expansion. Consequently the peasants were in search of arable land within the native state of Travancore and elsewhere that finally strengthened the migration. When the democratic regime was dawned, following the transfer of power and formation of the modern state of Kerala, 'Grow More Food Campaign' was formally inaugurated and forest lands were given for cultivation. Besides this a settlement scheme was also started for the purpose of giving land to the landless peasants. Under these two schemes land was allotted and people cleared forests, leading to extensive cultivation. Later on government started to impose restrictions on tenurial rights and implemented harsh policies of eviction on the poor peasants even though government supported migration at different occasions. Naturally, the peasants were forced to organize dissent, protest and resistances against the policies of the government. At a time in which the 'environmentalists, had not 'born' the government decided to evict 1800 families forcibly from Ayyappankovil in the name of Idukki Hydel Project, violating all norms of eviction. Alarmed at this, there arose demands for legislation in favor of tenurial rights, but of no use. It led to dissent, protest and resistance of the marginalized peasants at Amaravathy. Further, another eviction took place at Churuli-Keerithodu in 1964. The article is an attempt to look in to the close quarters of the peasant resistances during 1961-72. Also made an attempt to analyze how the peasantry organized grass root level struggle against the evictions and how it became the revolt of the marginalised. The lack of the policy on displacement package either by the Central/ State Government also became the matter of discussion.

**Key Words:** Amaravathy, Churuli-Keerithodu, Development and Displacement, Tenurial Rights.

### **Introduction**

The peasant resistances in Idukki began right after the formation of the State in 1956 and reached a climax in 1961 and 1964. The first major protests against displacement as well as against the land relations in Kerala were in the mid-1961, primarily in areas of Ayyappancoil arising out of an immediate perceived threat to their livelihood and lifestyle.<sup>i</sup> Inspired by the activists, including political leaders like A.K.Gopalan, Fr. Joseph Vadakkan, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, John Manjooran and B. Wellington initiated collective resistance (at least seeking better resettlement) grew in several parts of the district as well as in the State.<sup>ii</sup> During 1960-1972, communities facing displacement were mobilising and revolts were

visible. Thus a social movement was an organised attempt on the part of a section of society to bring about either partial or total change in the society through collective mobilisation based on an ideology or for the betterment of their living conditions. In the present study the movement had a collective nature. The class consciousness paved the way for mobilising the victims of evictions in different parts of the study area.

Forced eviction adversely affects a large number of people as they deny them of their livelihood, economic and social framework, and push them poverty.<sup>iii</sup> Some project affected persons have challenged against eviction while others have acknowledged evictions but have protested against insufficient rehabilitation programs. Peasants' reactions against eviction and rehabilitation in the post independent period have become one of the most conspicuous phenomena on the socio-cultural and political picture. The anti-eviction movement, involving the displaced or mostly the marginalised peasants has got a boost by an active support from the diverse group which created an atmosphere which is more receptive to the issues like displacement and environmental impact.<sup>iv</sup> The resistance against land acquisition in the post-independence period has been more organised, sustained and has had a profound influence on the entire discourse of displacement and rehabilitation. There was peasants' resistance against the inhuman policies of evictions initiated by the then government led to a mass struggles in different parts of the district.

Leading newspapers started writing editorials on Amaravathy issue.<sup>v</sup> The issue was discussed in the Kerala Assembly where the Opposition staged a walk-out in protest against the Government's high-handed attitude. There was a steady flow of telegrams and letters to Prime Minister Nehru and the Kerala Chief Minister asking for an immediate solution to the Amaravathi problem. The statement jointly made by the reporters of Mathrubhoomi, Statesman, Mail and I.P.A. after the visit to Amaravathy states that "It is obvious that the ministers, despite their humanitarian considerations, had not been given a correct appreciation of the bad conditions prevailing there." E.M.S. Namboodiripad the then leader of opposition got a telegram stating: "For Fatigue, Hunger, Fever and Dysentery Followed Occupying Shed No. 2 Three Little Children Left."<sup>vi</sup> The Ministers for not having visited Amaravathi strongly pleaded for an early solution to the problem.<sup>vii</sup> Picketing of Collectorates, Jathasto Trivandrum along the coast, through the mid region and the hilly areas, protest demonstrations and torch-light processions throughout the length and breadth of Kerala and thousands of telegrams and letters to the Prime Minister and the Kerala Chief Minister etc were some of the methods of agitation that the people adopted. Unlike the liberation struggle, there was no violence or anti-constitutional move of any kind in this agitation. Nearly 50 women picketed the Kottayam Collectorate. Most of them were refugees from Amaravathi.<sup>viii</sup> As stated above, the mobilization of the marginalised succeeded in raising revolt against the then government incorporating all sections of society irrespective of the differences in their political ideologies.

Karshaka Thozhilali Party declared that the Keerithodu issue is not only regional, but an issue that threatened the entire peasant community. Hence, it considered the issue of the peasants as a whole. The party decided to organize state wide protest against the Government. A procession was initiated by Karshaka Thozhilali Party from Trissur and was headed by B. Wellington.<sup>ix</sup> The procession reached close to Keerithodu and the prominent leaders were arrested by the police. They were sent to Devikulam Jail. Later on, B. Wellington, K.S.Bhaskaran, Sakkariah Punnappa and C.C. Antony were reported to the court and convicted. This group was the first to undergo punishment in relation to the Keerithodu

issue. Even reporters were not allowed to go to Keerithodu. What was happening there was kept a secret from outsiders. Another procession under the leadership of K.T.P. and the Malanad Karshaka Union had set out to Keerithode, again led by the peasant leader Wellington.<sup>x</sup>

After a mass meeting, two of the prominent members of the Malanadu Karshaka Union started fasting at Vazhathoppu, demanding to settle the issues on the eviction and resettlement at Keerithodu. Kattappana Panchayat unanimously passed a resolution demanding the government to stop eviction from Keerithodu and to declare a judicial enquiry on the topic.<sup>xi</sup> Malanadu Karshaka Union president went on fasting, demanding to stop eviction from the district. Devasya Vellaplackal, Chathu Vellikavumkal, K.V. Mathew and Luke John also participated in the fasting.

Praja Socialist Party Aluvamandalam committee passed a resolution in favor of the peasants at Keerithodu.<sup>xii</sup> To protest against the unprecedented attacks on the peasants of Keerithodu there was a mass meeting at Thodupuzha on 07.03.1964. Hameedu Kannu Rawthar, presided over the function. M.A. John, N.J. Mathew, C. Devasia Kappan, K.J. Joseph, N.M. Mani (president, Udumpannor Panchayath) and the like addressed the public. Paambadumpara Panjayath passed a resolution in order to stop eviction from Keerithodu.<sup>xiii</sup> Protesting against the anti-humanist attitude of the police and the government towards the peasants at Keerithodu, the committee passed resolution and demanded judicial enquiry on the Keerithodu eviction.<sup>xiv</sup> Congress Mandalam Committee passed resolution demanding judicial enquiry and protested against the ban on the reporters and representatives to the Keerithodu region.<sup>xv</sup>

The government decided to allot one acre plot each to the evictees of Ayyappancoil, who were on fasting in front of Kottayam Collectorate, protesting against the decision to resettle them at Vamanapuramin Trivandrum district. The decision was taken over in the meeting presided over by the forest minister M.P. Govindan Nair, along with the representatives of the peasants. It was decided that the representatives of peasant evictees will check the concerned plots to determine whether the plot is suitable for cultivation. It was decided that the financial expense of resettlement will be sanctioned by the government.<sup>xvi</sup>

Malanad Karshaka Union severely criticized the eviction policies of the government and pinpointed the support of the political parties and other institutions during the course of migration. Instead of settling the poor migrants at their respective places, their leaders and authorities implemented harsh policy of eviction. They also highlighted the fact that Churuli-Keerithodu didn't come under any project or any catchment. The opposition protested against the alleged backtracking of the state government in the Ayyapancoil and Churuli Keerithodu eviction drive to protect the interests of the marginalized poor peasants of the district. Raising the issue, leader of the opposition E.M.S. Namboodiripad said that the government had done a somersault and succumbed to pressures from within the Congress coalition.<sup>xvii</sup> During the discussion hour K.T. Thomman, the then Minister for Food and Safety explained the conditions prevailed in Amaravathy. He had explained the adequate steps taken by the Government with regard to the necessary facilities allotted to the evictees of Amaravathi. He argued that the settlers were mere encroachers and it is the duty of the Government to protect the forest land of the State.<sup>xviii</sup>

As a response to the Minister, K.T. Ramakrishnan M.L.A. pinpointed the failure of the Government policies on the facilities allotted to the evictees at Amaravathy. Another member K. Balakrishna Menon addressed the assembly as follows:

Sir, I would like to remind the Government that by virtue of the commitment made by them in connection with the eviction of settlers from the forest area in the taluks of Udumbanchola and Peerumedu, they are, as it were, bound to expand same concession to such persons evicted from Government lands elsewhere. In other places also similar evictions have taken place. It is not that I am pleading .... It may be relevant at this juncture for me to state that the so called encroachments which are treated as encroachments by the Government now are, in many cases, no encroachment at all. There was a time, Sir, when Government had been encouraging people to go to the forest and clear areas and cultivate them as a part of the solution of the problem of food, and for that purpose they were also granting the people loans and other monetary inducements. Such cases are not rare. In such cases the persons have made heavy commitments by selling even the ornaments of their wives and children and by resort to borrowing.

They have invested all this money in cultivating the forest areas and in several areas you find fruit-bearing trees of 10 or 15 years of age standing as a result of their labour. While evicting such people nothing tangible is seen done in the matter of re-settling them. I would... the government to re-orientate their policy in regard to this eviction. In case where the parties have entered forest lands for cultivation on account of inducements from government and where they have made great commitments and sacrifices, what sort of treatment should be meted out to them by government should be thought of. In cases... in the matter of eviction of encroachers, I am not in favour of the practice of necking them out... for the improvements made by the parties in the property, if Government is to get it, they should be given suitable compensation. Where Government have not spent even a pie on improving the land and all the improvements belong to the persons who had put their labor and made heavy sacrifices to make those improvements in the property, I submit, Sir, that in equity, Government have absolutely no sort of justification in calling up on the persons to get out of the without at any rate paying them adequate compensation.<sup>xix</sup>

The members of the council demanded judicial enquiry on Keerithodu issue. But the minister was not willing to conduct a judicial enquiry. Members such as C.A. Mathew, Kusumam Joseph and K.M George walked out of the legislature to register their disagreement towards the opinion of the minister. The opposition protested against the alleged backtracking of the state government in the Ayyappancoil and Churuli Keerithodu eviction drive just to protect the interests of the marginalised poor peasants of the district. Raising the issue, leader of the opposition E.M.S. Namboodiripad said, "The people of Kerala supported you to become Chief Minister and now it is crystal clear that your primary interest is protection of your party and party interests and not the common man".<sup>xx</sup> Thus Amaravathi and Keerithodu struggles became the most sensitive peasant resistance in the post-independent Kerala. The struggle succeeded in getting the privileges of the displaced people of the district as stated elsewhere in the study. The struggle made conspicuous of the lack of resettlement and rehabilitation policies of the government.

The foregoing discussion clearly reveals that the displacement of people due to large development projects is a nationwide problem. The policy makers emphasize in subsequent policy documents that the irrigation, power and industrial power initiated after independence has led to economic development.<sup>xxi</sup> Since independence, a number of development projects such as Dams and power projects like Sardar Sarovar Projects, Nagarjuna Sagar Dam and Idukki Hydel Project have been initiated. These development projects have been viewed as

bringing transformation in the socio-economic and livelihood condition of millions of people.

The development projects in the country undoubtedly helped to emerge as one of the influential economic and political power in the world.<sup>xxii</sup> Right from the colonial period onwards several strategies and policies were implemented as part of development. The reflections in this regards can also be traced from Kerala as well as Idukki. Though the colonialists had capitalist motives in development programs, they initiated several development programs in the district. By conducting extensive surveys in this regard the capitalists identified the resource potential of the region. Later on, they invested capital as regards to the establishment of their factories.<sup>xxiii</sup>

For the smooth functioning of the factories they maintained, further they introduced networks of roads and fixing of tramways and mono rail in the region. The capitalist installed Mattupetty Dam to generate electricity for their factories. In such a way the capital investment results further development schemes and programs. Thus the development project in the district starts along with the colonial penetration to the region.

Post independent period in Kerala witnessed the establishment of several development projects in different parts of the State. The period also witnessed the installation of several Hydro Electric Projects like Mattupetty, Neriamangalam, Idukki, Lower Periyar etc. as stated elsewhere in the study. Each Hydel Project is always associated and supported with large dams in the region. The construction of dams and other infrastructure played an important role in migration of peasants to this region.

The construction of dams envisages huge capital investments as well as labor requirements. Further it transformed the region of Idukki into a seismically vulnerable region in the State. An ecological and environmental aftereffect of damming has to be studied separately. Economic and industrial development of a State involves large scale deployment of resources.<sup>xxiv</sup> As the research points out the construction of Idukki Dam resulted in the relocation of the poor tillers of the Ayyappancoil region. The major policy objectives of development projects in Kerala are pronounced to bring effective changes in the socio-economic and political life of the poor and the marginalised people in the region. The projects are considered to be the agents of change in economy; however, in practice the projects have not brought radical changes as planned. Rather the projects have brought about an adverse impact on the life style of the peasants.

Development projects have been anticipated at the advantage for the public and the economy of the State. At whatever level the development projects are undertaken, the people living in the project area whose lands are acquired were forced to bear an additional cost in the form of land. There is an endeavor to legitimize it as a cost of development and the project as an opportunity to improve the living conditions of the migrant people.

However, the state government's support for various development ventures has made imbalances, social distress and instability in the society. In a democratic context, the organised dispossession of the migrant peasants' rights by the formally appointed power holders is absolutely undemocratic and unsatisfactory.<sup>xxv</sup> The State is obliged to guarantee equal treatment to all its citizens as regards the implementation of development under the directive principles of the constitution. The use of power or oppression against economically marginalised people in Amaravathy and Churuli-Keerithodu could have been avoided. The development encouraged displacement ought to be minimized and if possible avoided. If at all there is a displacement, the displaced people should have been given an intensive

resettlement and restoration with an aim to upgrade their socio-economic condition rather than simply attempting to restore their pre-displaced status.<sup>xxvi</sup> The provision of compensation in the form of land and building according to the market value should be replaced by a facility to establish them at least in the periphery of the project. Besides these, to determine impartial compensation, the future returns of acquired land at least for a period of five years need to be calculated. Resettlement and restoration measures ought to be a participatory one so that all peasants are involved in the process of resettlement. This process of resettlement and rehabilitation should be finished within a short time span, keeping in mind to prevent their sufferings of economic and social degradation.

Ample approaches and laws direct the State's development initiatives. Economic reforms in the nation activated development initiatives through different projects, in such manner, must be valued. Its efforts to build the country are admirable but failed to preserve the long cultivated assets of people. Efforts to build nation exhausted the bounding and associating capital of the nation. The insufficient economic compensation never became a substitute for the loss of the land which they depended on for their survival for a long period of time. Economic remuneration can never replace the value systems, traditions, culture, and relationship of the people of the land. Land acquisition for development projects cut-off these space from the people.

### **Conclusion**

The displacement of people due to the establishment of development projects is a nationwide issue. A few development projects in various parts of the country are in the process of execution, and a few more projects are kept aside to be started in near future. The absence of a comprehensive resettlement strategy towards the beginning of the projects affects the resettlement and rehabilitation of the displaced persons. Therefore, the time has come to shape a national resettlement and rehabilitation policy for complete socio-economic rehabilitation of the displaced persons. Displacement policy, practice and research need to focus not simply on the dangers and effect of displacement, but also should develop institutional mechanisms that will ensure and reinforce the rights of displaced people. The policy should also spell out the guidelines for rehabilitation covering various categories of the affected people. Relocation is not exceptional in the development process, but rather it is extending their size and adverse impacts that are currently a reason for genuine concern. The present development paradigms promoted by globalization, liberalization and privatization is one of the fundamental reasons for continuous violation of human rights. Given the current form of development plans, displacement issue will continue to be a dominant one in the public discourse in the coming years. In the absence of a uniform Rehabilitation Policy at the national level and with the existing complexity and diversity issues involved across different types of projects that cause involuntary resettlement, reconstruction measures have not been paid due consideration. Only project wise policy guidelines prepared at the state level are used as a basis for following certain approaches and strategies for resettlement and rehabilitation.

Therefore, development projects in the nation call for precise execution, giving more significance to people as focus of development. We are challenged to prefer in between national development priorities and great extent of displaced people from their own land. In the choice between people and development, we are challenged to say 'it is people first and after that development'. It doesn't mean to stop development projects, rather direct projects to aim sustainable development of all sections of the society. The execution of development

projects made conceivable with peoples participation by drafting a culturally and economically appropriate design will eradicate lop sided development where social scientists and professional bodies (NGOs) have significant role to play to build the nation and thus become a Welfare State.

## Notes and References

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- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid., p. 1469.
- <sup>v</sup> The News papers include *The Hindu*, *Mathrubhoomi*, *MalayalaManorama*, *Deepika*, *Desabhimani*, *Kerala Kaumudi* and *MalayalaRajyam*.
- <sup>vi</sup> Proceedings of the Kerala Legislature, 12.05.1961, p. 186.
- <sup>vii</sup> Proceedings of the Kerala Legislature, 12.05.1961, p. 186. Leaders of the Ruling Party like KunjiramanNambiar and MoitheenKuttyHaaji advocated for good re settlement package at Amaravathy in the Discussion Hour in the Assembly.
- <sup>viii</sup> *MalayalaManorama Daily*, June 12, 1961.
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- <sup>x</sup> Idem.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Deepika Daily*, 06.03.1961.
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- <sup>xiii</sup> Memoranda Submitted by the peasants to the Kottayam District Collector on 08.03.1964. (Archival Document )
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