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AGRARIAN RELATIONS AND THE LEFT MOVEMENT
IN KERALA

A Note on Recent Trends

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Tenancy was abolished in Kerala through the Kerala Land Reforms Amendment Act (1969). In other States similar Acts, concerned more with the regulation of tenancy than its total abolition, passed during recent times, have meant their existence merely on statute books but in reality led to diverse forms of concealed arrangements between landlords and tenants, usually enforced by the former to protect their own interests which were threatened by the law. In Kerala, however, the abolition of tenancy is widely believed to be an accomplished fact. Effective implementation of the law was possible largely due to the organised strength of the left movement and the related fact that land reforms were implemented by left-oriented Governments, unlike in most other States where the reforms were sought to be introduced from 'above' before the peasant masses were politically organised to fight for their rights. An important aspect of the Kerala scene in this context is the conferment of ownership rights on hutment dwellers, which also was the outcome of intense political struggle and effective legislation. (The movement which developed since the abolition of tenancy has three main components: a successful struggle for higher wages (for agricultural labourers); an espousal of the demand for 'fair' prices for farm products which does not require struggle (the peasant interest in this respect being sought to be protected by all political parties); and the struggle for land which has not been very successful.)

This note is an attempt to understand these recent trends in the left movement in the light of long term changes that have taken place in the agrarian relations. Section I deals with some aspects of the class structure and Section II with the strategies of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the strongest representative of the Left, on agrarian issues.

I. ASPECTS OF THE CHANGING CLASS STRUCTURE

Agricultural Labourers

The most striking feature of agrarian change in recent times in Kerala, as in other parts of the country, is the continuous growth of rural wage labour in its working population. A significant proportion of the labourers in rural Kerala are engaged, unlike in other regions of India, in sectors other than agriculture, especially in the primary processing of agricultural products such as coir spinning and manufactures. However, even within the agricultural sector, the ratio of cultivators to agricultural labourers has tended to decrease continuously at least from 1921. Trends in the composition of the working population show a fall in the proportion of cultivators and a rise in that of agricultural labourers.^{1/}

This is no doubt due, in part, to the dispossession of the poor and middle sections of the peasantry at different points of time in the history of the regions comprising Kerala. But to what precise extent it is associated with the development of capitalist agriculture is hard to judge on the basis of available data. [In the

most recent period, i.e., after land reforms (the nature of which will be discussed below) have been implemented two counteracting forces have been at work. On the one hand, rights to ownership of land have been conferred not only on the Kudikidappukars (hutment dwellers) but also, as a result of tenancy legislation, on poor peasants, who used to cultivate landlords' land under various forms of tenancy arrangements. On the other, the poor peasants have not in general been able to raise the productivity of their lands and their living standards for obvious reasons. The question relating to the extent of proletarianization resulting from the direct alienation of land from the poor peasants cannot thus be easily settled. We have data, however, which show that 'landlessness' among agricultural labourers has decreased during the period 1956 to 1971.^{2/} To understand the significance of the underlying statistics we need to consider the fact that hutment dwellers, who are now "owners" of land, usually put their little bits of lands to agricultural use (coconut and tapioca being the common crops) and hence qualify, for statistical purposes, as 'landed' agricultural labourers. This cannot, however, wholly explain the decline in landlessness for there is a distinct possibility of growth in numbers of poor peasants, cultivating bits of land but depending on wages, within agriculture and other sectors of the rural economy, for the major part of their subsistence needs. Indeed, there is quite convincing evidence that pauperisation of the peasants has taken place on a wide scale and that the process has been continuous during this century. It is to this process that we now turn.

Growth in Numbers of Poor Peasants

It is well known that Kerala has the highest man-land ratio among the States of India and that it is one of most densely populated regions in the whole world. But what is perhaps not so well known is the fact that it has ^{been} so at least from the beginning of this century. The growth in arable land has not kept pace with the rapid increases in the population; consequently the man-land ratio has increased continuously from 1901 and at a rate more rapid than in other parts of the country.^{3/}

Data available for the Travancore region show that even as early as 1931 the average size of holding was only 2.6 acres per cultivating household, which declined further to less than 2 acres by 1966-67. With the persistence of gross inequalities in the distribution of land during this entire period, the proportion of households cultivating no more than an acre grew from 38 to 61 per cent.^{4/} For Kerala as a whole comparable data do not exist for such a long period; estimates available for 1961-62 and 1971-72 show, however, that household operational holdings of less than an acre in size increased from about 60 per cent of the total to 68 per cent during the intervening decade. The proportion of households cultivating less than half an acre in 1971-72 is estimated to be roughly 52 per cent.^{5/} These data reveal to us a source of growth of agricultural labour as well as an important aspect of its nature: a vast mass of pauperised peasants, not totally dispossessed of land, constitute a significant part of the labouring poor in agriculture.

How is the growth of small farms explained and what are its implications for the changing agrarian relations? To answer this question we need to consider, firstly, the magnitude of the transfer of land from the poor to the rich (which is relevant also to the question of dispossession); secondly, the impact of land reforms on the transfer of land from the rich to the poor (including the landless) through the distribution of surplus land (above legally stipulated ceilings) as well as conferment of ownership rights on small tenants following the abolition of tenancy; and finally, the partitioning of land among family members, which, even in the absence of vigorous market transactions in land, would result in the growth of small farmers over a long period. All these market and non-market forces are likely to have contributed to the growth of small farms. It is difficult to judge their relative importance to the process for want of the required data. What follows, therefore, is somewhat speculative but based on whatever information is available.

Land Reforms and Land Transfers

Data on the transfer of ownership of land show that during the decade 1957-66 about 146 thousand acres were transferred through direct sale and that about 47 per cent of the area involved in these sales related to ^{those induced} ~~by~~ 'monetary needs'.^{6/} This may uncritically be interpreted to mean that dispossession of the poor and middle sections of the peasantry had taken place to a significant extent - it would indeed be so if it could be established that it was mainly the poor who sold the land to the rich. However, since the peak sales

took place in 1960 and 1963, the years of "critical importance to the agrarian relations in the State" (to be explained later), there is good reason to believe that a great number of these transactions were made by the rich peasants and landlords to evade in advance the proposed ceiling and tenancy laws which were sure to be enacted by 'communist' ministries appearing on the horizon. Viewed in this light, the reason cited in the survey for the sales, viz., monetary needs, must be regarded as spurious, at least in the majority of cases. 7/

To assess the overall impact of land reforms on the redistribution of land (and agrarian relations in general) we need to consider three aspects of the reform: provisions relating to (1) hutment dwellers, (2) tenancy, and (3) land ceilings. Kerala is frequently cited as an example where land reforms have been successfully implemented. The success refers more to the first two of the above mentioned aspects of the reform than to the third. At any rate, the effectiveness of land reforms in Kerala has been studied by many scholars and we need only to present the consensus in broad outline. 8/

The Kerala Land Reforms Act, 1963 (as amended in 1969 and 1972) gave to Kudikidappukars (hutment dwellers, who were essentially landless agricultural labourers living in huts on pieces of landlord's land) rights to their dwelling houses and a few cents of adjacent land. Most kudikidappukars have obtained de facto rights of ownership to such lands although in a number of cases de jure rights may still have to be secured. It is the strength of the

leftist political forces, rather than the law, which has brought about this change in the status of agricultural labourers in the State. (The rights to land, secured and protected by the left movement, in turn, strengthen the latter and give it a special character for a wage labourer with some land is a better fighter than one without any. We may conclude that, although quantitatively the gains to the agricultural labourers in terms of redistribution of land might not have been very impressive, qualitatively the left has emerged as a stronger force in the countryside, especially in the struggle for better working conditions for the labourers.

A series of legislative measures in the State culminated with the total abolition of tenancy in 1969 through an amendment to the Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1963. The resulting gains to the leftist forces are of a mixed nature. To an unknown but possibly limited extent, the law was made ineffective through evasive transfers (of possession) of land resorted to by the landlords. The latter anticipated what was coming and had time to make these transfers, for, in the political environment of the late fifties and sixties, in which the Communist Party was emerging as a strong force, the struggle for land was the most prominent aspect of politics in the State. When the first Communist ministry was formed in Kerala in 1957, "big landlords rightly apprehended that their feudal interests on land would be at stake. This fear paved the way for large-scale land transfers in the State even before the Agrarian Relations Act of 1960 was adumbrated." The last mentioned Act and the Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1963 prompted some hectic sales and transfers around those

years. Over 40 per cent of the disposals of leased out land during the decade 1957-66 took place in 1963 alone.^{9/} This need not, however, contradict our tentative assessment that the impact of evasive transfers on the effective abolition of tenancy was limited, for the total land involved in transfers of possession over the whole decade was only about 188 thousand acres (out of a total of roughly 1.9 million acres of leased in land.)^{10/}

A second aspect of the abolition of tenancy relates to the compensation legally stipulated to be paid by the tenants. While such compensation has been collected in some cases by the Government, there do exist former tenants who enjoy rights to land without fear of eviction although they have not yet paid compensation in full. This is a reflection, as in the case of Kudikidappukars, of the organised strength of the peasants.

However, some former tenants cultivated fairly big holdings and have now acquired ownership rights to these lands. The reforms thus paved the way for the emergence of a new class of capitalist farmers especially in the northern region of the State, i.e., Malabar, where not only the incidence of tenancy was high but also tenants cultivating (before the reform) land leased in from Jennies in big holdings existed in large numbers. In other regions of Kerala, i.e., Travancore and Cochin, where the jenni system disappeared long ago and small tenants were preponderant, the conferment of ownership rights on tenants is unlikely to have contributed to the emergence of capitalist farmers from the class of former tenants on the same scale as in Malabar. Apart from big tenants, new recruits to the

class of capitalist farmers have come also from the ranks of the old landed gentry who now employ wage labour on lands (hitherto given out on lease) which they have 'resumed' for self cultivation.

A notable aspect of these changes, crucial to the developing agrarian relations, is the unity among landless agricultural workers, poor peasants and big tenants which the communists could bring about in the struggle against "land-lordism" in the Malabar region. New class divisions — and contradictions depending on them — emerging after the abolition of tenancy have weakened the objective forces for such a unity.^{11/} We shall deal with this subject later.

Let us now turn to the third aspect of land reforms, viz. ceilings. Unlike the provisions relating to hutment dwellers and tenancy abolition, those concerned with land ceilings have not yielded substantial gains to the Left. Evasion of land ceilings formed an essential part of the bogus transfers which we have already discussed. Moreover, in spite of many legislative exercises to 'plug the loopholes' in the law, sufficient scope was left for evasion through means other than direct transfer of land. The final result was that not much surplus land was available for redistribution. Statistics present a truly revealing picture of this phenomenon. As on March 31, 1978, the area (of surplus land above legally stipulated ceilings) ordered for surrender was only about 133 thousand acres, out of which about 67 thousand acres have been 'taken over' and only 39 thousand acres distributed (to about 62 thousand beneficiaries including 27 thousand belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.)^{12/} No precise estimates of how much of the

4.5 million acres of cultivated land would be available as surplus, should the ceiling law be implemented effectively, are available.

Partitioning of Land

Before we examine the implications of the changes discussed thus far to agrarian relations let us reconsider the phenomenon of the growth of small farms from a different point of view. (Partitioning of land among members of a household creates newly formed households cultivating smaller pieces of lands, and in periods characterized by a high rate of partitioning, a very significant growth in small holdings can result. In Travancore, the decade preceding 1931 is important from this standpoint. During this period, following the passing of regulations for the partition of tarawad (i.e., joint family) properties of certain communities, over 400 thousand acres of land owned by these communities alone was partitioned. In respect of the Nayar community (which accounted for 83 per cent of the land partitioned), over 70 per cent of the partition deeds created shares of less than an acre each.^{13/} A subdivision of this magnitude must have contributed significantly to the emergence of small peasants as the most numerous category in the countryside.

As we have seen, the disproportionately large growth of small farms has continued during recent times. Apart from the process of pauperization, it is likely that the partitioning of land has also contributed to this trend. Moreover, the rates of partitioning appear to be higher in the small holdings than in the bigger holdings: this is partly reflected in data which show that as land size increases not only the family size but also the

proportion of joint families tends to increase.^{14/}

Partitioning of land can thus be seen to have reinforced the trend towards the growth in numbers of poor peasants. At any rate the forces altering the shape of the distribution of land have brought about, by the beginning of the seventies a vast mass of landless agricultural workers and pauperized peasants.

To discuss the nature of relations between them and the other agrarian classes, it is necessary to examine the pattern of utilization of land and its changes over time.

Cropping Pattern and Family Farming

In other regions of India, commercial crops are grown for sale on the market mainly by the big farmers. But in Kerala, such crops are grown even in the very small holdings. Coconut is the most important of these crops which include rubber and different kinds of spices. The cropping pattern in Kerala is thus distinctly different from that of India as a whole: Foodgrains (including tapioca, an inferior cereal substitute) account for roughly 40 per cent of the cultivated area in Kerala but over 75 per cent in the country as a whole.

The cultivation of commercial crops has a long history in Kerala and has grown further in importance in recent times. The main change which has come about in the cropping pattern is the rise in the relative importance of coconut and rubber cultivation. This is partly due to topographical reasons. Paddy (the only cereal grown in Kerala) can be cropped only in the valley land while a

variety of commercial crops can be grown on the slopy land. Additional land suitable for paddy cultivation has become unavailable for a long time. Thus extensions to the area under cultivation has favoured the growth of commercial farming.^{15/}

But what is more significant for our purposes here is the high incidence of commercial cropping in very small holdings. Both poor and middle peasants are involved to a great extent in the cultivation of coconut, pepper and other commercial crops. About 55 per cent of the area under coconut, and 40 per cent of the area under pepper, is in holdings held by households cultivating in all no more than 2.5 acres each.^{16/} Rubber is generally cultivated in large estates but it is believed that in recent times middle peasants have taken to rubber cultivation on a significant scale. The poor and middle peasants in Kerala are thus involved in the market as sellers of their farm products to a great extent; this is in sharp contrast to the other parts of the country where such involvement is minimal. This poses some problems to the left, as we shall see.

Commercial farming is not, however, coterminous with capitalist farming. In the holdings of the poor and middle peasants work is done largely (but not necessarily wholly) by family members. It is only in the very large holdings, of over 10 acres (roughly 4 hectares), that employment of wage labour is the predominant mode. However, as we shall see later, capitalist farming exists on a significant scale (though not constituting the predominant mode) even in holdings of 5 acres (roughly 2 hectares) and below in size.^{17/} Thus

commercial cropping, notwithstanding its long history, has not led to a sharp polarisation of the rural population into the classes of capitalist farmers on the one hand and wage labourers with "nothing but their labour power to sell" on the other. This is not to deny that a process of differentiation is at work: indeed, the poor and middle peasants do not enjoy the advantages of the richer peasants in the markets either as sellers of farm products or borrowers of credit. But the point is that the sale of farm products by the middle peasants gives them a greater "staying power", especially in an era of rising farm prices, and slows down the process of polarisation.

II. STRATEGIES OF THE CPI (M)

The All-India Context

To understand the strategy of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) - CPI (M) - in Kerala it is necessary to begin with the stand of the Party on agrarian issues in an all-India context. A very clear statement of the policies of the Party, formulated on a countrywide rather than a regional basis, appears in a Central Committee (CC) resolution adopted at its meeting in March 1973 at Muzaffarpur. This resolution is the result of an assessment of the experience of the Party with reference to the programme of work set out in an earlier resolution passed in 1966 and takes into account the differences which have cropped up within the party in the intervening period. There is an explanatory note by P. Sundarayya added to the resolution.^{13/}

The resolution says that the central slogan of the agrarian movement must be: "abolish landlordism, both feudal and capitalist, without compensation and distribution of land of landlords to the agricultural labourers and the poor peasants free." ^{19/} Commenting on the legislative measures of the Congress Governments, the resolution says that while the party should extract the "maximum possible concessions from the ruling classes, in the concrete reality of the legislative strength of the democratic Opposition as well as the mass movements outside," "no legislation, however limited, under the present ruling classes and corrupt bureaucratic set-ups, gets implemented unless powerful mass movements are developed." ^{20/}

The concrete programme for struggle, laid down in this context, is based on a five-fold classification of the agrarian population: landless agricultural labourers; poor, middle and rich peasants; and landlords (both capitalist and feudal). The distinction between a rich peasant and capitalist landlord is that the former (or members of his family) participates in agricultural operations through manual labour while the latter relies wholly on wage labour. Landlords in general combine in themselves features of capitalism and feudalism and ^{are} defined in terms of an upper ceiling to the size of land, which can vary from region to region depending on fertility and other agro-climatic conditions. Notwithstanding Sundarayya's replies to certain criticisms of this formulation, the definitions and what they imply are debatable from a Marxist perspective. But what is more important is that landlords, so defined, constitute the "target of attack" for carrying out the struggle for land. The

CC Resolution accordingly translates the slogan for abolishing landlordism into a programme of action by redefining land ceilings (for purposes of legislation) so as to ensure that all landlords (capitalist and feudal) are caught in the net. Sundarayya explains: "..... for fixing up land ceilings, the only point with which we are concerned is what is the demarcating line between a landlord and a rich peasant."^{21/} Ceilings defined in terms of the resolution may thus adversely affect individual rich peasants (holding land above the limit defining landlords) but not rich peasants as a class. Thus rich peasants are outside the target of attack so far as the struggle for land is concerned.

On the whole there is some equivocation in the stand of the Party on rich and middle peasants. In the case of the middle peasantry it is best illustrated by the following sentence in the 1966 resolution: "Working class hegemony over the Kisan movement can be ensured only if the proletarian party ... places its principal reliance on the rural labourers and poor peasants who constitute 70 per cent of the peasantry, while of course not forgetting for a moment, neglecting or ignoring the middle and rich peasants but drawing them into the struggle for agrarian revolution."

The political task of drawing middle and rich peasants into the struggle, without sabotaging its proletarian character, is, of course, not an easy one; indeed, the party recognises that revisionism within the Party springs from the underlying difficulty. The 1966 CC resolution goes on to say: "The struggle against revisionism

inside the Indian Communist movement will neither be fruitful nor effective unless alien class orientation and work among the peasantry are completely discarded. No doubt this is not an easy task, since it is deep-rooted and long-accumulated and also because the bulk of our leading Kisan activists come from rich and middle peasant origin rather than from agricultural labourers and poor peasants. Their class origin, social links and the long training given to them give a reformist ideological political orientation which is alien to the proletarian class point and prevent them from actively working among agricultural labourers, poor and middle peasants with the zeal and crusading spirit demanded of Communists" (emphasis ours.)^{23/}

How such a crusading spirit will emerge and how, in the long run, the composition of activists and leaders is to be changed in favour of those with proletarian origin, are questions relating to the organisation of the Party and need not detain us here. The concrete programme in relation to rich and middle peasants, which interests us more, appears to be dictated, however, more by the necessity of not alienating them than by fears of what compromises with them will entail. The rich peasants were not to be touched by land ceilings and while land "will be distributed to the landless agricultural labour and the ^{poor} peasants", at the same time, "for developing the united struggle for land it may be necessary to give a small portion of the land to the middle peasantry."^{24/}

The struggle for wages and the demand for fair prices likewise entail contradictions which cannot be easily resolved. It is not only "capitalist landlords" who employ wage labourers. Rich and middle peasants also do so, the former to a significant and the latter to a limited extent. Sundarayya notes that "partial struggles for wages can be successful only if the movement can mobilise the support of the poor and middle peasants and other democratic forces to back them."^{25/} Here, the underlying unity of classes is obviously to be secured through other means since in wage struggle rich and middle peasants will be on the other side of the fence. As already noted, a factor which offsets this contradiction and works in favour of unity, is the assurance that rich peasants' lands below the ceilings would be left untouched during the course of the struggle for land; the recognition of the necessity to distribute a portion of the surplus land to the middle peasants also works in the same way.

However, a stronger binding force is the struggle for "fair prices" for the farm produce of the poor and middle peasants. On how fair prices are to be determined Sundarayya quotes the CC resolution: "fair prices should be fixed ... taking into account the interest of the mass of the peasantry and they be such as to assure a decent living for them " Sundarayya emphasises the fact that fair prices are thus defined in terms of a "decent living" for the masses and "not just some reasonable return, or some profit."^{26/} It is true that the demand for such prices will bring together all sections of the peasantry for united action, but the benefits from "fair prices" accrue mainly to the capitalist farmers

and make them economically and politically stronger. Sundarayya solves the problem in the following way: "When we demand fair prices that would assure decent livelihood for a middle peasant ... it does not mean that these minimum prices should be assured even to ... landlords. We can certainly raise the demand that the whole of the the produce of these landlords be compulsorily procured by the Government for meeting the needs of the people...."^{27/} The story of support prices - and the role they have played in the Indian Economy after the advent of the Green Revolution - is too well known to be retold here. It will suffice to note that in the present political and economic situation of the country there do not exist any means - political or otherwise - for curbing the ability of the big landowners to secure for their produce high prices independently of market forces; nor do means exist for effectively taxing the rich farmers for ensuring that the benefits of fair prices accrue only to the poorer sections of the peasantry. The pursuit of the goal of 'unity' through the demand for fair prices thus works against the interests of the toiling poor.

CPI (M) in Kerala

As already explained, it was the strength and militancy of the left movement which was responsible for the successful implementation of the provisions of land reforms relating to the conferment of ownership rights to land on hutment dwellers and tenants. In contrast, the movement had not been able to prevent big landowners from successfully evading the ceiling laws. The Party is aware of this, and in accordance with its stand on the issue in the all-India

context, has in recent times made these evaders the primary target for attack in the struggle for land. The implicit understanding of the Party is that if the ceiling of 10 standard acres (fixed by the 1969 Amendment) is successfully implemented, then all landlords - mainly capitalist, since feudal types have practically ceased to exist after tenancy abolition - will be virtually eliminated.

Accordingly, the 'land grab' movement of 1972, which was launched by the CPI (M) in the wake of the fierce hutment dwellers' struggle in 1970, was concerned more with unearthing surplus land (above the ceiling) and bringing it to the notice of the Government than its occupation, although in a number of cases agitators 'entered' such land. The struggle lasted 80 days and about 175 thousand acres 'came to light' in the process. It did not, however, yield any land to the agitators. E.M.S. Namboodiripad (EMS) denies that the movement was a failure. "Not that agitators must get land, but that the Government must take it over to distribute it among the deserving, was the slogan of the struggle," he says. EMS regards the unearthing of so much surplus land as no mean achievement. But to him, what was a greater achievement was the fact that "... two lakh volunteers participated in the struggle People donated lakhs of rupees to cover the expenses of the struggle. Masses of all parts and organisations gave moral support to the struggle." To those who asked how many cents of land were secured through the movement he replies: "... let me remind them of another question, which the loyal adherents of the British asked Gandhi and Congress soon after the salt Satyagraha 'How many tons of salt did you get' ? Indian people

went ahead ignoring these questions. The British had to leave India."^{28/}

The gains would of course have been more substantial if there were means for ensuring that surplus land brought to the notice of the Government could be established as such and distributed. Many legal obstacles stand in the way, and, as we noted earlier, only a small part of it has been actually distributed. One can only speculate what would have happened if a CPI (M) led ministry was formed later. Not much has happened, however, on the land-struggle front after the 1972 movement until very recently (January, 1979) when a second 'land-grab' movement was launched by the CPI (M). It is too early to assess the results but newspaper reports make it appear to be a satyagraha rather than a militant movement: these reports describe how hundreds of workers 'court' arrest every day in different parts of the State.

The Party can thus be seen to have avoided violent confrontations during the course of the struggle for land in recent times. But what stands out more clearly is the failure of the CPI (M) to evolve a satisfactory formula for determining the ceiling in Kerala in conformity with the party line. This failure arises partly from the confusion present in the CC resolution, but partly also, as we shall argue, from political expediency. As already noted, the CC resolution lays down the principle that the Party should agitate for a land ceiling which would ensure that all land belonging

to the landlords would be confiscated when the ceilings are enforced; it further gives detailed guide lines for fixing such ceilings taking into account regional variations. It is doubtful if a ceiling of 10 standard acres would satisfy this criterion in the case of Kerala. It is well known, in any case, that land size is a poor criterion for judging the class-status of the owner. This is especially true in the case of Kerala. There are some data which show that in Kerala even among households operating areas between 1 to 2 hectares (roughly 2.5 to 5 acres) about 39 per cent rely on the wage labour. Even more striking is the datum for the size class immediately below which refers to households operating between 0.5 to 1 hectares (1.25 to 2.5 acres): in about 30 per cent of these households work is done largely by wage labour.^{29/} Any work done by the members of the family of the owner in these cases must be more supervisory than manual in nature. Logically, therefore, the Kerala Party should agitate for lowering the ceiling but it is not easy to determine the ceiling in accordance with the principles laid down by the CC: "If, say, 90 percent of the holders of a particular size of holding, say, ten to twelve and half acres wet, or 20-25 acres of dry land do not physically cultivate their lands, it can be assumed that holders over ten acres wet or 20 acres dry land are broadly, for land ceiling legislations, landlords."^{30/} The data required for determining the ceiling in the above manner, viz., the distribution of land in standard acres do not exist and hence some arbitrariness is unavoidable. But the point is that the existence of capitalist farmers operating land below the current ceiling size cannot be denied.



It may be argued in this context that the CPI (M) in Kerala is reluctant to attack "small holders." The CC defines this attitude in two clauses: (1) "Lands of small holders owning less than half the ceiling, but eking out their livelihood in factories, small shops, schools, small government jobs or as ordinary soldiers and junior army officers, or in any other profession, even if they are not cultivating their lands, shall not be taken" and (2) "land holders, who are owning on the day of legislation less than the proposed ceiling but more than half the ceiling, but who are not cultivating their lands by their physical labour but getting them cultivated by agricultural labour, if they have other professions or means of income, they will be allowed to retain only that amount of land that would be enough to make their total income equal that derived from the land ceiling." (emphasis ours).^{31/} It is not known whether any struggle for land has taken place in accordance with the second clause mentioned above. But what is more relevant to the character of the movement is the first clause which lets out of the net numerous non-cultivating owners of highly remunerative pieces of land below half the ceiling (say, two to three acres of garden land) who derive the major portion of their income from sources other than agriculture. It is interesting to note that the West Bengal Land Reforms Act (Amendment Bill 1977) brought into being by the CPI (M) led Left Front Government has a clause which ensures that such absentee owners forfeit their rights to land.^{32/}

In spite of the lack of conclusive data (apart from those referred to earlier which show a high percentage of small farms cultivated

wholly by wage labour) it is generally believed that there are numerous 'small holders' who derive a major part of their incomes from not only salaried employment but also trade, transport and other remunerative activities. They are, moreover, organically linked to members of the urban middle classes. It is a two-way link, for in Kerala, the extent of interest in land which members of the bureaucracy - and salary earners in general - have is probably far greater than what it is anywhere else in the country. The CPI (M) is either unwilling to recognise the existence of this class or not yet prepared to fight it. The attitude of the Party in this respect is partly due to its middle class orientation springing from the class-origin of the activists and partly arises out of its concern for preserving its electoral base.^{33/}

It is not our purpose here to analyse the electoral fortunes of the CPI (M) in Kerala but only to attempt to understand how they are related to the character of the emerging left movement. Let us look at the struggle for wages and the demand for fair prices from this point of view. In wage struggle there are no apparent elements of compromise but viewed in combination with the nature of the land struggle, which we have discussed at length, not only do we see such elements clearly but it is also easy to understand why in the CPI(M) view unity of the peasant classes is a necessary condition for successful wage struggle. There is a trade-off here between high wage rates and the assurance of the Party that certain classes of the peasantry would be left untouched in the struggle for land. Even so,

some observers attribute the recent electoral reverses suffered by the CPI (M) to the alienation of the middle and rich peasants resulting from fights relating to wages. None of this, however, belittles the achievements of the CPI (M) in raising the level of political consciousness of agricultural labourers and poor peasants.

But, as we have argued earlier, the demand for fair prices is a stronger force for securing peasant unity. The CPI (M) treads a cautious course in this respect however. It is other parties - with a clearly dominant 'landlord' interest - which clamour for high prices and the CPI (M), on occasion, accords support. The most recent example of this is in relation to the Central Government's decision to import rubber. The move, which threatened the interests of rubber growers, was opposed through a resolution passed unanimously in the Kerala Assembly. Other examples, concerning coconut prices, of occasions when the CPI(M) stood alongside the other parties for protecting the peasant interest in general can be given. Here the CPI (M) is caught in the horns of a dilemma with little prospect for escape: Coconuts are cropped on a wide scale by poor farmers. It is possible that rubber is also cultivated by some poor and middle peasants. How can the party protect their interests and prevent the 'landlords' from reaping profits. A solution of this problem would require a greater confrontation of class forces than what the CPI(M) is prepared to face today.

The primacy which the Party accords to the unity of the peasant classes pays dividends but it also stultifies the movement. The dividends, apart from those already discussed, also lie in the ease

with which alliances can be struck and electoral adjustments made between political parties in Kerala. The CPI (M) has a large and fairly stable electoral following in the state. Given the fact that electoral victories in Kerala depend more on who is with whom (among the parties) than on the proportion of total votes that individual parties can poll (this was sharply brought to home in the last general election in 1977), the CPI (M) cannot ignore electoral calculations in formulating its strategies. To do so and lift the movement to a higher stage, what is required is a radical re-orientation in the overall strategy of the Party.

Objective forces for promoting such a re-orientation are present in the changing agrarian structure, described earlier, the main feature of which is the continuous process of pauperisation. / Wage labourers and poor peasants constitute the vast majority of the rural population and the movement can acquire a more pronounced proletarian character if its focus shifts more sharply in their favour. / But the difficulties also arise from the forces which shape the distribution of land and the pattern of its utilisation. How to protect poor peasants without enabling the rich to reap the profits, is a question for which no ready-made answers can be given. But above all, it is the attitude of the Party towards rich peasants and those small landowners who derive a major part of their substantial total incomes from sources other than agriculture, which obstructs the growth of the left movement and if unchanged can make the movement progressively less and less proletarian in character.

NOTES

- 1/ Lack of comparability of data over the long period makes precise estimation of the underlying figures difficult. The conclusion holds broadly, however. For a discussion see, P.G.K.Panikar, T.N.Krichnan and N.Krishnaji, Population Growth and Agricultural Development - A Case Study of Kerala, Food and Agricultural Organisation, Rome, 1978, Chapter IV.
- 2/ The Agricultural Labour Enquiries show that while the total number of agricultural labour households increased from 500000 to 710000 during 1956-57 to 1964-65, those without land decreased from 240,000 to 210,000; comparable data for 1971-72 show a further decline in the latter category to 100,000. See P.G.K.Panikar et.al., op.cit. p.54.
- 3/ Ibid, Chapter I.
- 4/ The 1931 data are based on Census of India, 1931, Vol. XXVIII, Travancore, Part I - Report, and those for 1966-67 on Land Reforms Survey in Kerala, 1966-67, Report, Bureau of Economics and Statistics, Trivandrum, 1968.
- 5/ These are based on the National Sample Survey, Reports Nos.144 and 215. For a discussion see, P.G.K.Panikar, et.al., op.cit., pp. 39-41.
- 6/ Land Reforms Survey, op.cit. Table 10.3, p.98.
- 7/ The Land Reforms Survey comes to similar conclusions; see Chapter X of the Report.
- 8/ For a recent survey see, Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policy, A Case Study of Selected Issues with Reference to Kerala, United Nations, 1975, Chapter V.
- 9/ The figures are from the Land Reforms Survey. For a discussion see Chapter X of the Report.
- 10/ ibid., p.70 and p.100.

- 11/ The Malabar movement is well documented. Among the recent studies relevant for our purpose here are: Joan P. Mencher, Agrarian Relations in Two Rice Regions of Kerala, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XIII, Annual Number 1978, pp.349-366, and A.V.Jose, Origin of Trade Unionism among Agricultural Labourers in Kerala, Social Scientist, July 1977. In this context, see also, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, (a) A New Approach Needed in the Agrarian Front, Chinta, September 17, 1971 and (b) Strengthen the Agricultural Workers Movement Through United Struggles, Kerala Karshaka Sangham, January 1974 (both in Malayalam). In the reference last cited, EMS says: "... the antifeudal slogan of the organised peasant movement attracted the agricultural workers also although the movement included rich peasants. The rights of the landlords to evict the tenants, increase the rent and make other exactions and the accompanying social repression disturbed the agricultural workers as well as the peasants. In short, the slogan of 'End Feudalism and the distribute the land to the peasant,' created a common target for agricultural workers as well as the peasantry." (Translated from Malayalam). In practice the struggle for land to the tenant was combined with the struggle for hutment land.
- 12/ The data are from the Report of the Task Force on Land Reforms, VI Five Year Plan, Government of Kerala, 1978, p.7.
- 13/ Census of India, 1931, op.cit.
- 14/ Seo, P.G.K.Panikar, et. al. op.cit. chapter IV.
- 15/ ibid, Chapters II, III and IV
- 16/ ibid, p.51.
- 17/ The data are reproduced below.

Percentage Distribution of Holdings Within Each Size-Class
According to the Nature of Labour Employed: Kerala, 1970-71

Size of operational holding (hectares)	Work done by household members	Largely by members of household but also by others	Largely by wage-labour	Total
0.04 - 0.25	70.30	15.47	14.23	100.00
0.25 - 0.50	51.39	26.55	22.06	100.00
0.50-- 1.00	37.97	32.09	29.94	100.00
1.00 - 2.00	28.09	33.18	38.73	100.00
2.00 - 4.00	19.36	33.49	47.15	100.00
4.00 and above	9.01	23.33	67.66	100.00

Source: The Third Decennial World Agricultural Census, 1970-71, Report for the Kerala State, Bureau of Economics and Statistics, Kerala.

18/ Central Committee Resolution on Certain Agrarian Issues and An Explanatory Note by P. Sundarayya, Communist Party of India (Marxist). The publication is undated but the resolution refers to that passed in 1973.

19/ ibid, p.3 of the CC Resolution.

20/ ibid, p.4.

21/ ibid, p.15, of Sundarayya's Note. Replying to the criticism that Lenin did not define landlords in terms of the size of landholding, Sundarayya add. : "Comrade Lenin, in studying the agrarian structure of various countries, analysed the bourgeois statistics and especially, the landholdings of various sizes as given in the statistics of the bourgeois Government and applying his broad criteria based on production relations, has drawn certain relevant conclusions for practical activities. For a broad understanding and broad propaganda and legislative slogans, we have to follow the same procedure."

22/ ibid, p.2 of Sundarayya's note.

- 23/ Ibid, p.3
- 24/ ibid, Paragraph 19 of the CC Resolution of 1973, p.7.
- 25/ ibid, Sundarayya's note, p.39.
- 26/ ibid, pp.43 and 44.
- 27/ ibid.
- 28/ The data and the quotations are from E.M.S.Namboodiripad, Replies to Questions, Chinta, October 13, 1972 (translated from Malayalam).
- 29/ See the data reproduced in the table in footnote 17 above.
- 30/ Central Committee Resolution, op.cit. paragraph 12, p.5
- 31/ ibid, paragraphs 20 and 21, p.7.
- 32/ For a discussion see, N.K.Chandra, Major Move against Semi-Feudal Tenancy, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XII, No.48, November 26 1977.
- 33/ For similar observations see, J.M., The Left in Kerala, Frontier, Vol.II, Nos.9-11, September 30, 1978. J.M.says: "It is the strong impression of this author that one of the major reasons why the Marxists are in trouble in Kerala is that many of the local-level leaders are now landowners. And there is a real contradiction here. Those who are leaders of the labourers are also employers of labour. A few of the former leaders and some former workers have also deserted the party, now that they have their own land ... The leaders come from a high social stratum, the agricultural labourers from the lowest stratum. Today there is practically no leadership from the bottom." As we have already noted the CC resolution of 1973 implicitly recognises these facts.

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