



ESSAY ARTICLE

Representations of Agricultural Labour in *Randidangazhi*

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Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, *Randidangazhi* (*Two Measures of Rice*).¹

Literary and artistic production in Kerala underwent a major change in the 1930s and 1940s. The main reason for this was the advent of modernist movements during this period, as well as the impact of the national movement and other social movements in Kerala. The shift was from elitist epic narratives and romanticism to realism, as literary works began to probe the lived experience of the downtrodden. Several writers and artists emerged from among the working people, and represented the life and culture of the working people and the poor most effectively. The emergence of progressive democratic movements in Kerala catalysed realism in Kerala's literature and gave rise to the progressive movement for "life-based" literature (*jeevatsahitya prasthanam*). The influence of this movement went beyond communist and socialist activists in Kerala, and a new generation of writers emerged who broke free from established traditions. *Randidangazhi* ("Two Measures of Rice"), a novel published in 1948 and written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, one of the most famous writers of this period, is a typical example of the trend that emerged (Pillai 1996 [1948]; Pillai 1967).²

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, one of the premier novelists and short story writers in the Malayalam language, was a native of Thakazhi, a village in the Kuttanad region, now mainly in the Alappuzha district in Kerala State. Kuttanad is where the story narrated in the text unfolds. Thakazhi, as he is popularly known, worked as a lawyer before he devoted his time to full-time writing and farming. He was an activist of the life-based literature movement in the 1930s and 1940s, a period in which he produced a series of novels, including *Thendivargam* (The Beggar Class), *Thottiyude Makan* (The Scavenger's Son), and *Randidangazhi*, the subject of this article. Owing to political differences, Thakazhi severed his links with the progressive cultural movement in

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¹ The edition used in this review is Pillai ([1948] 1996).

² The title of the novel refers to *idangazhi*, a volumetric measure of rice in Kerala; one *idangazhi* corresponds to about 800 grams of rough rice (or paddy).

the early 1950s, but continued writing in a realist vein. His masterpiece *Chemmeen* (Shrimp) and *Enippatikal* (The Staircase) were written in the 1960s. In the 1970s he completed his magnum opus *Kayar* (Cair), which presents a detailed fictional narrative based on the history of Kuttanad. Thakazhi's novels and stories helped make the people of Kerala people sensitive towards the travails of the working people, whom he portrayed without the romanticism and dilettantism that usually characterise such narratives.

I chose to write on *Randidangazhi* here because the novel is directly linked with the growth of the agricultural labourers' movement in Kuttanad, which had its origins in the early 1940s, during World War II. The author himself had direct links with the agricultural labourers' movement as a lawyer and as an activist. The novel was published in 1948, soon after the Punnapra–Vayalar uprising, the reverberations of which can clearly be discerned in the novel.³

LAND AND SOCIETY IN KUTTANAD

Thakazhi is a village in the southern part of Kuttanad, in Kuttanad taluk (sub-district), a region that was the centre of working class and agrarian movements in southern Kerala. Kuttanad is an estuarine agrarian belt, where agriculture is conducted in what now has been recognised by the Food and Agriculture Organisation to be a "geographically important agricultural heritage system" of below-sea-level farming (FAO 2020). Kuttanad consists of estuarine islets (*thuruthu*) that are scattered landmasses within the Vembanad Lake, which is a backwater of the Arabian Sea. Geographers maintain that these islets are remains of the landmass from the carboniferous era whose biomass is extremely fertile and rich in minerals (Mathai 1999).

The cultivation of land here is difficult, as the land is waterlogged for most of the monsoon season and, in November–December, saline inflows enter the backwater. Steps to control the annual inflow of saline water into the lake were taken only in 1955, when construction began of a bund at Thanneermukkam in northern Kuttanad. The bund was commissioned in 1974. Until then only one summer paddy crop was possible in a year, and there were times when cultivation was possible only once in two to three years.

³ The Punnapra–Vayalar struggle of October 1946 was a struggle of the working people of Travancore in the region of the villages of Punnapra and Vayalar, against the rulers of the princely state. The uprising was led by the Communist Party. It is very difficult to calculate the precise number of casualties from available sources. It is estimated that more than 1000 people were killed in these two villages alone by the armed forces of the ruler of Travancore in the fierce repression that followed the uprising. Hundreds went missing. Many activists who escaped the bloodbath were later involved in building the communist movement in different parts of Travancore and Malabar.

The enormous potential fertility of the terrain attracted early settlement in the area. The region was held by the rulers of nearby chiefdoms and by a few temple trusts (*devaswam*).^{4, 5} As the land fell into the hands of the rulers of the larger southern state of Travancore, the settlement of people in the area was encouraged with a view to increase state revenue. Many Nayar (a category of landowning matrilineal Hindu castes) and Christian families migrated to the area. To the west of Kuttanad lay the Karappuram region, along the northern edge of Vembanad Lake, where many Ezhava (a category of oppressed castes) families, and some Christian and Jewish families, cultivated coconut. The land to the east of Vembanad was also a significant agrarian region. It appears that migration into Kuttanad took place from both east and west, and the farmers of Kuttanad maintained links with surrounding places as a means to procure their needs and market their products. Waterways were the normal way to get from one islet to another or to the mainland. Ordinary people travelled in small boats (*kothumpuvallam*), while landlords used larger boats with mast and sail (*thanduvallam*). There were cargo boats (*kettuvallam*) and several other types of boats of varied construction and use. The boat type used in the famous boat races of the region, called *chundanvallam*, were war boats designed around the eighteenth century.

There are accounts of slave markets where labouring people of the *Pulayar* and *Parayar* Dalit castes were bought and sold. The slave markets began to appear from the time of the Portuguese and apparently continued until the time of Gouri Lakshmi Bayi of Travancore (1811–1815), when the Travancore Government decided to ban the slave trade (Unni 2000 [1988], pp. 781–3). The standard practice appears to have been that a labourer pledged his own life and labour and that of his family to a landlord (*oozhiyappani*), and the landlord undertook the task of maintaining and protecting them. This protection included allocating a share of the produce to maintain the lives of the labourer and his family. The arrangement assumed that all able-bodied men, women, and children would work for their master. Workers of the *Pulayar* and *Parayar* castes were settled in homesteads, but farm servants who had pledged their labour to landlords were allowed to build a hut in the allocated place called *pantha* and to use material for building the hut from the land of the master.

Farming practices in below-sea-level fields were marked by extreme drudgery. The terrain was marshy, slushy, and involved removal of water, a process that had to be repeated every year. The method was building temporary bunds around the land using biomass and mud, and then dredging and draining the built land using waterwheels. The waterwheel was operated 24 hours a day for several days, and workers took turns to operate it. Each turn lasted about seven-and-a-half hours, during which the worker turned the wheel non-stop. Tillage and plant protection

⁴ A *devaswam* is a trust that manages a Hindu temple and its assets.

⁵ Kamalasanan (1993). Much of the basic material on Kuttanad in this article is from this text.

were done by farm servants and their families. Other workers were hired only for harvesting and threshing. Threshing was another round-the-clock job, and was considered complete only when the grain was transported to granaries and the hay brought in sheaves and piled into haystacks.

The *Pulayar* and *Parayar* farm servants, called *onappanikkaar*, became bonded labourers of the landlords by means of a system of unfree labour called *velakkadam* (literally “labour-debt”), in which the landlord advanced money and grain to the workers for subsistence until work began in the field. Such advances were also made for life-cycle events such as marriage, childbirth, and death. The advances carried interest, on which the creditor did not demand immediate repayment but which accumulated until the worker was trapped in permanent indebtedness. For work done in the field, the worker was given wages in paddy (rough rice) or an equivalent amount of money. A woman was paid five *kulian* (a measure equivalent to one *idangazhi* of rice) and a man was paid eight *kulian* (equivalent to one and three-fourths *idangazhi* of rice).⁶ Workers were entitled to a certain share of the paddy produced in the fields on which they worked.⁷ On completion of the harvest, the workers were also entitled to a final sheaf of grain. Additional sheaves were given to threshing workers and to those who measured the grain on the threshing floor. There were additional traditional grain payments – to buy drink, for worship of the local deity, and as reward for sowing – that were reserved for servants favoured by the landlord. Workers who disobeyed the landlord and who mismanaged cultivation were liable to be flogged and to endure the destruction of the huts in which they dwelt. Flogging, maiming, and even killing of workers were resorted to as common forms of punishment.

Nevertheless, given the intricacies of farming practices in the Kuttanad region, landlords were dependent on the labour of workers of the *Parayar* and *Pulayar* Dalit castes. For their part, the workers were proud of their ability to cultivate and produce in the unique and difficult conditions of the Kuttanad environment. Despite the contradictions between master and slave, the conditions of cultivation in Kuttanad thus created a kind of solidarity in confronting a unique physical environment. When this solidarity was broken the contradictions sharpened, creating the socio-economic and political setting of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s novel.

⁶ It is difficult to make calculations on the basis of weights followed today as these measures are based on standard measuring vessels adopted in each region, normally wooden vessels. As will be shown later, these volumetric measures were not well standardised and could easily be manipulated to their advantage by the landlords.

⁷ This practice of payment of wages and *patham*, also called *pathampu*, existed all over Kerala. The amount distributed as *patham* among labourers was from one-sixth to one-eighth of the total produce, which, considering the number of labourers, was a pittance. If the crop was bad, the labourers would be reduced to starvation. Hence a major demand of the agricultural labourers’ movement was an increase of the *patham* to one-fourth or at least one-fifth of the total produce. For a description of this practice in Palakkad, see also Krishnan (1993).

The payment of two *idangazhi* of rice, equivalent to 10 *kulian* of paddy, as wages was a demand of the agricultural workers' movement in Kuttanad.⁸ In the novel *Randidangazhi*, Thakazhi tells the story of Koran, a *Parayar* youth, who develops the consciousness and confidence to become a part of the growing movement and join the Agricultural Workers' (*Karshaka Thozhilali*) Union in Kuttanad. The novel also tells the story of Chirutha, his wife, his close friend Chathan, and a host of other workers who are apart of Koran's everyday life.

Koran becomes a farm servant under the landlord Pushpavelil Ouseph.⁹ His friend Kunjappi, in whose house he stays, recommends Koran to Ouseph. Kunjappi and his wife Mani also work for Ouseph. Koran joins work in order to borrow money from the landlord, money that he will use to pay bride-price for marriage with Chirutha. Chirutha is a beautiful young woman with many suitors, and her father keeps raising the amount to be paid as bride-price. Koran is eventually ostracised by his community for agreeing to pay such a large bride-price and no one attends his wedding other than Chathan, who was also Chirutha's suitor but did not have the money for the bride-price.

The landlord Pushpavelil Ouseph and his family make only a few direct appearances in the novel. Ouseph's character and the differences between him and other landlords are revealed in conversations among the workers – among Samayal (Samuel), the oldest *Pulayar* worker; Kunjappi; Olompi; and others. Ouseph represents a new type of landlord, one who is contrasted with his more austere and humane predecessors.¹⁰ He does not pay the traditional extra sheaves of paddy during and after the crop season. He also does not permit any of the conventional concessions in respect of repayment of debt. He punishes errors of work severely even when the worker is an older person. Youth belonging to the new landlord families – in contrast to those from the families of old overlords – sexually harass labouring women. Koran is told by Ouseph to expect no concessions, no remuneration other than wages, a standard quantity of paddy after the harvest, and rice-gruel before being sent to work. Koran has to work with no respite until late every evening, and sometimes well into the night.

Each farm servant in the region is allotted land to till, and maintains the allotment as his own. Even small flaws in cultivation become blots on the worker's reputation and depict a failure of his commitment to the soil. The novel illustrates the pride that farm servants took in the cultivation of land allotted to them through a sub-plot

⁸ In the novel *Randidangazhi*, it is five *kulian* of paddy; see Appendix.

⁹ Pushpavelil Ouseph is a prototype of the large number of Christian farmers who came to settle in Kuttanad during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thakazhi has written about their coming to Kuttanad in another novel, *Kayar* (Cair). See also Abraham (1980).

¹⁰ This comparison, rendered through the memories of elderly labourers in *Randidangazhi*, is attested by Kamalasanan (1993).

involving a break in a dyke on Koran's field, an incident that Koran regards as calling into serious question his ability to tend his field.

Harvesting work is done by specially recruited women workers, under the supervision of the farm servant in charge of the field. Koran finds that a hired worker from another village is sluggish at her work, and he takes her to task. The woman labourer responds by saying that her work now is no different from her work in the past, and that Koran is being overenthusiastic; that he would soon learn the difference between managing a field owned by himself and one owned by someone else. Koran learns another important lesson when Chennan, an elderly agricultural worker who refuses an assigned task, is brutally flogged by the master and his hut ransacked.

All these experiences, which he has himself or which are reported to him by fellow-labourers, lead Koran to ask questions. He begins to have doubts regarding who should be the beneficiary of the labour that he does on the field. When harvesting is under way during the first year of his labour, Koran asks the landlord about the exact yield of the plot cultivated by him. He asks this question not because he thinks the produce belongs to him but in order to gauge what he as a new worker is able to produce by means of his labour. This knowledge is denied to him. Koran comes to realise that the landlord is also denying him even the pittance that his forefathers used to get from their overlords (*thampuran*). He and other workers are paid in volumetric measures smaller than the standard measure, thus receiving less rice than is their due.¹¹

With the outbreak of the Second World War, there was an increase in the market price of paddy. This is referred to in several accounts of the economic conditions of that time. Landlords hoarded paddy and transported stocks clandestinely to different markets. As the price of rice rose, landlords refused to pay workers in kind and also cheated them in the conversion of rice wages into their cash equivalents. Koran asks to be paid his wages in paddy and is told that he will be paid money wages instead. He is also told that he will be paid one-and-a-half rupees per *para* (or eight *idangazhi*). When Koran points out that the standard market price for one *para* of paddy is three rupees, he is told that he should consider himself lucky to receive one-and-a-half rupees, because if the measurement was done in *kalloorkadan para* – the smaller measure used to quantify workers' wages – he would receive only one rupee and a quarter per *para*.

Ruthless exploitation by the new landed class pushes the workers into hunger and destitution. The novel shows how the workers are aware of these forms of exploitation and of the denial of their traditional rights, but they remain silent

¹¹ As noted earlier, the use of such measures was common. The difference was normally between the official or *perumal para*, used in temples and state offices, and *kalloorkadan para*, a smaller vessel to measure paddy used by the landlords. The difference between the two measures meant that in the payment of paddy, the use of the smaller vessel would be of advantage to the landlord, although the quantity of payment would appear the same on paper.

because they are afraid of being driven to further destitution and even physical liquidation. Koran, because of his open defence of workers' rights, is treated as a rebel.

Koran gradually learns about the strategies of landlords that ensure the passivity of workers. One instance is when the labourers are persuaded to join the Kerala State Congress. Many of the landowners, or "overlords" (*thamprakkal*), had already joined the Congress and so the labourers were also expected to join. Koran finds that the Catholic Church is also involved in recruiting people to the State Congress. There is a discussion among the workers regarding the right to vote. Some of them think that voting is a genuine right of the people. Others argue that it only benefits rich farmers who are property owners. This distinction between haves and have-nots was written into the Travancore voting regulations before universal suffrage was introduced. Only the taxpayers and those owned a required minimum of land, about (five acres) were allowed to vote. The novel also mentions an electoral contest between two landlords, a contest that holds little relevance or meaning for the labourers.¹²

The intervention of the Catholic Church in favour of the State Congress and the landlords has a further significance. Samayal, the oldest among the labourers in the field where Koran works, is a *Pulayar* converted to Christianity. The novel also mentions the conversion of other workers, not for religious reasons but as a means of protection, because the Church promises them formal religious equality with the landlords. The more important reason is that if a labourer dies, there is no place to bury him other than in his homestead (*thara*), for no landlord will provide him with a piece of land. After conversion to Christianity, though, the Church will arrange for their burial. Kunjappi and Mani, in whose house Koran and Chirutha stay, convert to Christianity and become Pathrose and Maria. This provides them with a certain sense of protection. They try to persuade Koran and Chirutha also to convert, but they refuse. Koran declares that he will remain with the ancient gods. He is also not convinced, based on the experience of Samayal and others, that the differences between haves and have-nots will be eliminated by conversion. The Church will always act in favour of the rich.

The deliberate use of political and religious strategies underscores the distinction between the haves and the have-nots. Koran is portrayed as brave, headstrong, and confident, but not an individualist in his political activism. The growth of his consciousness is tempered not only by his own experience but also that of his fellow-workers. He understands not only that they are being exploited but also the ways and means by which the landlord class exploits them. Koran's developing consciousness leads him to a cathartic moment when he decides that he cannot serve under the landlord any longer. Instead, he will work for the liberation of his

¹² The actual experience appears to have been somewhat different. Kamalasanan (1993), pp. 63–4, refers to the support given by the labourers to a candidate from the Chalayil Panikkar family who was more favourably disposed to them than the opposing candidate. Labourers did make such distinctions.

fellow-workers by joining the nascent Agricultural Workers' (*Karshaka Thozhilali*) Union.

A similar evolution takes place in Chirutha. Chirutha is both beautiful and a skilled labourer. In fact, her father had been reluctant to give her away in marriage because of her skills. In the field of the landlord, she excels at her work. She catches the attention of Pushpavelil Chacko, the landlord's son, who begins to stalk her whenever she comes to the field. He tries to molest Chirutha. She manages to break free but reports the matter to Maria, who tells her that this is a common occurrence in the lives of women workers. She also advises Chirutha not to tell Koran; Chirutha adds that if Koran were to know of it, he would seek revenge. Chirutha loves Koran dearly and does not want any harm to come to him. Chirutha is also told that there is a smaller chance of her being assaulted if she has children. So she decides to have a child in order to escape sexual exploitation. She also starts thinking about organising women who are similarly exploited.

Another important moment in her life is when Koran's father comes to their house to stay with Chirutha and Koran. Once Koran becomes active in the union, Chirutha has to take care of her father-in-law on her own. When he eventually dies, there is no place to bury him. The landlord will not spare an inch of land, especially because of Koran's anti-landlord activism. Koran carries his father's body to the boat, taking a heavy stone along with him. He rows the boat deep into the backwaters, ties the body to the stone, pushes it into the water and lets it sink. The landless labourer Koran thus gives his father a decent burial – by offering his body to the backwaters that give them life and sustain them.

When Koran makes up his mind to become a union activist, Chirutha wishes to do the same. But Koran advises her to go and live with Chathan since she is pregnant. After all, Chathan had been her suitor before Koran married her. He was a gentle, loving person and would take care of her. Chirutha, however, does not accept Koran's advice. One night, when Koran returns home late, he finds Pushpavelil Chacko and another person attempting to rape Chirutha. Koran kills Chacko and goes to jail. Chirutha is forced to seek Chathan's protection.

The murder of Pushpavelil Chacko and the resultant repression let loose in the region only help intensify trade union activity among the labourers. The growth of this political activism is depicted through Chirutha, who gives birth to a boy, Velutha, and Chathan, who sympathises with the activists but chooses to look after Chirutha whom he cares for. Chirutha treats Chathan as her protector and benefactor, and responds to his loving care, but resolves to wait for Koran to come out of jail. When Koran is finally released and Chirutha and Chathan meet him at the union office, Koran asks Chirutha about their son and also questions Chathan about the children he has had with Chirutha. Chathan tells Koran that they had lived as brother and sister. The novel ends with the child Velutha raising union slogans.

The development of class consciousness in Koran and his fellow-labourers, including Chirutha and Chathan, takes place against the background of the emerging agricultural workers' movement in Kuttanad. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, who practised as a lawyer in Alappuzha from 1936 to 1957, had contact with the growing labour movement and intervened in several disputes between labourers and landlords.¹³ These direct experiences helped him to devise the plot of *Randidangazhi*.

The growth of the agricultural labourers' movement was directly related to the conditions prevailing during World War II. From the early decades of the twentieth century permission was given to aspirant farmers to convert land reclaimed from the backwaters into fields. Documents granting permission to reclaim land from the backwaters are available from 1914 until World War II.¹⁴ Several such reclaimed estuarine zones came into existence in the villages of Kainakari, Aymanam, Kumarakam, Tiruvarppu, Kunnumma, Kavalam, and Pulinkunnu.¹⁵ These reclaimed estuarine zones brought about a complete transformation of production relations in Kuttanad. The earlier relations of distribution of a share of the produce by the landlords to the workers were replaced by agrarian capitalist relations wherein the labourers received a fixed wage in both cash and grain. For tenant cultivators, traditional exactions amounted to about 20 per cent of output, and the amount to be shared with the cultivator was fixed as a share of the remainder. The amount or share of the produce paid as wages was further reduced by variations in the measures used; and by deducting payments to middlemen, lackeys of the landlords, and shrines; and by other local exactions. A part of the labour had to be rendered free: for example, threshing and carrying the grain and hay to the granaries of the landlord. There are references to all these practices in the novel *Randidangazhi*.

The agrarian relations described in *Randidangazhi* have to be linked to the changes taking place in Travancore. A proclamation of 1865 (the *Pandarapattam* Proclamation) conferred proprietary rights to all rent-paying farmers in Travancore, and later its provisions were extended to the landholdings of the Brahmana landlords as well. The small farmers who were conferred title were unable to meet the costs of paddy cultivation, particularly in the backwater zones of Kuttanad, and were forced to borrow from moneylenders. In Kuttanad, the Monkomp Brahman family were the premier moneylenders, followed by a number of Christian families including the Parayil Tharakans and the Murukkummoottil family. Indebted small farmers had to surrender their properties and a new group of rentier landlords who

¹³ There are a number of studies on the agricultural workers' movement in Kuttanad. Kamalasanan's book (1993) brings the story up to the 1960s. See also Jose (1979).

¹⁴ Kamalasanan (1993), pp. 55–8.

¹⁵ See Kamalasanan (1993), pp. 55–6. More than 18,000 acres of land were so reclaimed and brought under cultivation, mostly using *Pulayar* and *Parayar* labourers. This list of reclaimed estuarine zones is given here to indicate the extent of transformation of Kuttanad, as experienced by Koran and other labourers.

used wage labour and the bonded labour of the Dalit *Pulayar* and *Parayar* castes emerged. In the reclaimed backwater lands, clear capitalist relations using wage labour prevailed. *Randidangazhi* describes the transitional phase in which pre-capitalist bonded labour was combined with capitalist wage labour. The newly formed Agricultural Workers' Union was to contend with both forms.

With the onset of the Second World War, the miseries of the workers worsened. Wartime demands made by the government made the landlords look for additional income through a drastic reduction of wages paid to workers. This was done in two ways: first, through a reduction in the standard wages (*maryadakooli*); and secondly, by commuting paddy payments into cash, which allowed the landlord to hoard or sell most of the produce in the market and thus amass a fortune, aided by rising prices. Denial of customary paddy payments reduced the labourers to near-famine conditions. They needed both the standard wages and paddy payments to sustain themselves. This was the context in which the unionisation of agricultural labourers took place.

The initiative in the formation of agricultural labour unions was taken by Ceethankan, a *Pulayar* labourer and an activist of Ayyankali's Sadhujana Paripalana Sabha (Forum for the Protection of the Poor), and Sanku Kesavadas (SKD), also known as Konisseri Kesu, a grocery shop owner at Pallathuruthi near Alappuzha (Das 1972). Many of Alappuzha's coir factory workers lived in Pallathuruthi, and information about the growing trade union struggles in Alappuzha, and the activities of the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party, had already reached them. Kesu's grocery shop became a centre of political discussion and activism. A dispute regarding payment of wages between the labourers and a local landlord, in which a labourer was manhandled by the landlord's lackeys, provided the impetus for the first Agricultural Workers' Union in Kuttanad. The decision to form the union was taken in a meeting held at the shop, and under the leadership of the union, the workers struck work for a day.

The news of the strike at Pallathuruthi spread all over Kuttanad and the demand rose everywhere for unionisation. Activists of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam, the Sadhujana Paripalana Sabha, the Congress Socialist Party, and the incipient Communist Party took the lead.¹⁶ A meeting of these activists was held at Kainakari village, presided over by Cherukalil Janaki, the sister of an SNDP activist and a Communist Party supporter, and the Travancore Agricultural Workers' Union (*Thiruvithamkur Karshaka Thozhilali* Union) was formed. Varghese Vaidyan, a practitioner of traditional medicine and a communist, was elected president and S. K. Das, secretary.¹⁷

¹⁶ Social reform organisation formed in 1903 and named after Narayana Guru, social reformer and spiritual leader.

¹⁷ Interestingly, the entire Sadhujana Paripalana Sabha of Kuttanad became active in the KarshakaThozhilali Union and became communists.

A major union struggle took place at the Sreemangalam backwater in Kuttanad in 1943. The methods used for exploitation of labourers in the area by the landlords Thevarkattu Thomman and Chacko as well as by the Mullassery family were the same as practised by Pushpavelil Ouseph in *Randidangazhi*. Whenever a worker approached the landlord for work, the landlord would advance money and paddy, which had to be repaid with interest. At the end of every year, the landlord would pay the labourer a consolidated amount and as the labourer could not repay the original advance with interest, that amount was treated as arrears. Further, the labourer usually claimed an additional advance, particularly in years of extreme scarcity and hunger, to meet his/her livelihood needs. If the labourer did not claim this additional advance, the landlord would hold back his/her wages until the labourer repaid the original advance along with interest. Since the labourers were not paid in paddy, any paddy taken by them was also treated as advance to be repaid. Interest on the various advances accumulated within a short period, and resulted in the labourers losing all their possessions and being rendered destitute. The situation of the labourers was the same as the conditions faced by Koran and his comrades in Thakazhi's novel. The union concentrated its attention on organising the labourers and succeeded in bringing the majority of bonded labourers, consisting mainly of *Pulayar* workers, into its fold. The landlords mobilised a section of the labourers using politics and religion, and deployed them against the other labourers. The agricultural workers went on strike demanding customary paddy payments and wage arrears, similar to the demands made by Koran and his comrades against Pushpavelil in the novel. The strike continued for eight days, facing repression from the landlord's goons and the police. It ended with the landlords agreeing to pay wage arrears. The struggle was led, among others, by Varghese Vaidyan, Das, and V. S. Achuthanandan (Achuthanandan 1972).

The success of the Sreemangalam struggle inspired a large number of agricultural labourers to action. Committees of the Agricultural Workers' Union were formed in all villages, and several struggles took place. Growing union activity was met with severe police repression, and almost the entire union leadership was forced to go underground. In 1944, a conference of the union was banned and the meeting had to be held in the field in which the traditional *Pulayar* martial combat festival took place. It was the solidarity of the labouring classes, of *Pulayar* and *Parayar* workers, that sustained the union.

There are several accounts of the violent repression of labourers, which is also represented in *Randidangazhi*. Union workers and communists were identified as "blacks," and anyone who was dark-skinned was hunted down by the police and *goondas*. The repression saw no respite even after the War ended; labourers were beaten to death or incapacitated, and their women were raped. A Jewish landlord of the Karappuram region near Cherthala, Vettakkal Malikakkal Kocha, who was notorious as a womaniser, demanded that every newly married labouring woman be brought to him, to be released to her husband and family only after three

months. Just before the Punnapra–Vayalar struggle of October 1946, Nalupurakkal Raman, a manager employed by the landlord Kattiyattu Sivarama Panikkar, went to the house of a newly wedded couple accompanied by policemen. He tied the parents-in-law and the husband of the woman to a tree, and the group of men gang-raped her in front of her family. The incident enraged the workers, and a group of trade union activists entered the house of Raman and beat him to death (see CPI(M) 2019, pp. 255–76; George 1972). This led to a severe backlash and repression in the area. In the novel, Koran refers to police firing on the coir workers of Vayalar and warns that no area is free from such oppression.

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai had at least one direct experience of meeting such landlords. Near his house in the village of Thakazhi, there was a notorious landlord family called Pulimukhath Thuppayimaar, consisting of John Nerauj, Xavier Nerauj, Gregory Nerauj, Charley Nerauj, and their relatives. They underpaid their labourers and heavily punished even the mildest of protests. On one occasion, a worker named Kunjan was beaten to death by Gregory Nerauj. The union took up the matter and formed an action committee to protest. Varghese Vaidyan took Thakazhi with him to negotiate with the landlord family. Although the family was courteous in their dealings with Thakazhi, who was a local lawyer, they showed no respect to Varghese Vaidyan and refused to listen to his demands (Kamalasanan 1993, pp. 85–8). All attempts at negotiation failed and the workers went on strike. The union was finally able to ensure fair wages for the workers. Later, Gregory, who was also a toddy-shop contractor, was killed in a brawl in one of the toddy shops. This incident is likely to have had a direct impact on Thakazhi's framing of the novel *Randidangazhi*.

In periods of extreme repression and sexual exploitation, the solidarity of the labourers invariably came to the fore. There is the account of N. C. Joseph, a trade union activist, who was arrested along with his comrades in a police raid. His pregnant wife who was left alone in her house was protected by the workers. Similarly, several women labourers subjected to and in danger of sexual and other forms of exploitation were protected by other women workers. The suggestion made by Maria in *Randidangazhi* to Chirutha that mothers and pregnant women would be spared from sexual exploitation and harassment was not always true. Kamalakshi, one of the first women communists in Kuttanad and an activist of the Agricultural Workers' Union, was openly attacked by Kunjappan, the son of Murikkummoottil Joseph, one of the biggest landlords in the region. Kamalakshi, in a torn blouse, hit back using the agricultural implements she had (*ibid.*, p. 174). Labouring women needed protection, and the role of Chathan in *Randidangazhi* as Chirutha's protector is significant as an example of resistance against sexual oppression.

Relationships in times of oppression and during struggles for survival are different. There was the instance of Kunjiraman, a communist activist from Kayamkulam, who on his return from jail found his wife with a child from another person.

Kunjiraman accepted this and brought up the boy as his own.¹⁸ There were numerous instances of marriages of activists conducted by the Communist Party, where both the man and the woman had been disowned by their families. The request by Koran in the novel that Chirutha should marry Chathan is not an author's ploy but a representation of the reality of that time. Chathan is tender and considerate and Chirutha reciprocates his loving care, even inviting him into her room, but Koran remains her comrade and love, the person she will wait for and live with. Chathan tells Chirutha at the end that he has lingered too long at home, and that he too wants to do something for the union. Thus Chirutha's return to Koran also marks the emergence of Chathan as a union activist.

Another feature of the novel is that although Koran, Chirutha, and Chathan are of the *Parayar* Dalit caste, and their fellow-workers are *Pulayar*, their caste identity is not emphasised, which is probably why it has not been classified as a Dalit novel.¹⁹ Caste makes its appearance in subtle ways, in the demand for a bride-price, in the ostracism suffered by Koran in accepting the demands of Chirutha's father, and in the problems Koran faces in burying his father. Conversion to Christianity appears in the novel as a mode of gaining freedom from caste oppression, though Samayal continues to be forced to accept reduced wages by the Christian landlord even after he has converted to Christianity. Caste and untouchability are used by the landlords to exploit labouring women sexually, to flog workers at the smallest pretext, and to render them landless and homeless. Thus caste and class oppression are interwoven, with caste providing the social and ideological dimension and justification for class oppression.²⁰

THE REALISM OF RANDIDANGAZHI

Randidangazhi has long been considered a realistic novel in the genre of the Malayalam writer P. Kesavadev's *Odayil Ninnu* (From the Gutter) and *Oru Sundariyude Atmakatha* (The Autobiography of a Beautiful Woman), Thakazhi's own *Anubhavgal Palichakal* (Experiences, Defects), and the writer Cherukad's *Muthassi* (Grandmother). What makes *Randidangazhi* different is that it is a faithful depiction of the emergence and growth of class consciousness in an agricultural labourer. Koran is a labourer who goes through harrowing experiences, and tries to make sense of them and interpret them himself. He is offered different options for dealing with the circumstances of his life: nationalist politics, religion, defeatism, cynicism, and surrender – options that are offered to the working class then as now. Koran interprets the reality around him as being the oppression by the owners of property of the propertyless, and recognises class struggle as the only way to break

¹⁸ This incident inspired the writing of a play titled *Mooladhanam* (Capital) by Thoppil Bhasi. See CPI(M) (2019).

¹⁹ Compare this with *Pulayarthara*, a novel by Paul Chirakkarode, published a few years later.

²⁰ This may be easily attributed to the upper-caste sensibility of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, but other accounts of labourers' struggles in Kuttanad also do not emphasise caste as a major determinant in the struggles. It should be emphasised that all struggles by agricultural labourers involved direct resistance to caste and gender oppression, of which *Randidangazhi* is good testimony.

free. The history of the communist movement in southern Kerala, and in Kuttanad in particular, shows that the vast majority of the working people who joined the movement drew lessons from their own experiences, from the grim and stark reality that surrounded them, and drew conclusions that would have lasting historical significance. Koran, Chirutha, and Chathan of *Randidangazhi* are their fictional representations.

APPENDIX: WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

The standard measurements followed all over the State of Kerala are:

4 *nazhi* = 1 *idangazhi*

8 *idangazhi* (in some places 10 *idangazhi*) = 1 *para*

In Kuttanad,

1 *kulian* = roughly three-fourths of a *nazhi*

In the novel *Randidangazhi*, 5 *kulian* are mentioned as equal to 2 *idangazhi* (hence the title of the novel), which appears to be a departure from the standard practice in Kuttanad.

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