

Public Action for Socioeconomic Security: A Note on the Case of Dalit Households in a Village in Kerala, India

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When people's livelihoods are deeply compromised,...human security contracts. People eat less and some starve (Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 73).

INTRODUCTION

The concept of human security, which initially encompassed aspects of physical security alone, has over time evolved into a much broader concept. Following Amartya Sen, it has been argued that "human security at its core requires a set of vital freedoms for everyone" (CHS, 2003, p, 73). The analysis of the CHS on what these freedoms mean is illuminating: "besides basic income and resources, the freedoms to enjoy basic health, basic education, shelter, physical safety, and access to clean water and clean air are vitally important" (*ibid.*)

Historical experience shows that the expansion of freedoms of discriminated and dispossessed people has required significant public action. By definition, public action refers not only to the activities of the state, but also the "social actions taken by members of the public", which are both "collaborative", through "civic co-operation", and "adversarial", through "political opposition and social criticism" (Dreze and Sen 1989, vii). In the framework of the Dreze and Sen definition, public action includes actions from above (actions of the state) and below (actions of class and mass organizations, political parties, individuals and non-governmental groups).

The overall development experience of the State of Kerala in India is widely documented in the literature (Centre for Development Studies, 1975; Ramachandran, 1996). The key feature of the development experience of Kerala is the achievement of high levels of social indicators even while per capita incomes were low.² The most important lesson that development economists have drawn from Kerala's development experience is that the attainment of high levels of social indicators need not wait till an economy generates adequate resources through economic growth to finance programmes for social development (Sen 1990). Kerala's development achievements were mainly the result of public action over many years (Ramachandran 1996).

In this note, I intend to explore the relationship between public action and the transformation of socioeconomic security of one of the most oppressed sections of Indian society – the Dalits – in Kerala. Specifically, the note analyses changes in land ownership,

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² Kerala's life expectancy at birth is 70.4 years for women, infant mortality rate is 14 per 1000 live births and literacy rate among women above the age of seven is 88 per cent (GoK 2004). Respectively, the corresponding figures for India as a whole are 61 years, 66 per 1000 live births and 52 per cent (GoI 2004). The median number of years of schooling of rural men and women in Kerala was 7.8 and 7.4 respectively in 1999, while the corresponding figures for India were 4.6 and 0 (Chandrasekhar, Ramachandran and Ramakumar 2001).

levels of education, access to credit, access to social security schemes and food distribution systems and income poverty of Dalit households participating in agricultural wage work. The note is based as a case study of Morazha village in the Malabar region of Kerala, which had one of the most oppressive agrarian systems in India in the colonial period.

Dalit households in Malabar: The Historical Context

A contemporary study of the standard of living of Dalit agricultural workers in Malabar is of special significance and interest. When the princely States of Travancore and Cochin and the British Indian district of Malabar (which was part of the Madras Presidency) were brought together to form the State of Kerala in 1956, there were distinct differences in the state of agrarian relations in the three regions. Capitalist forms of agriculture had advanced more in the princely states (particularly Travancore) than in Malabar. Malabar was where a most backward form of landlordism persisted, and where the agrarian structure was characterised by, among other things, complex forms of sub-infeudation of holdings and rack-renting. Parts of Malabar, remarked a British observer, had “the unenviable reputation of being the most rack-rented country on the face of the earth” (Varghese 1970, 78).

Agricultural workers, most of them Dalits, occupied a special place within this agrarian regime in Malabar. Under the economic domination of landlords, agricultural workers were subjected to different types of social (particularly caste-based) and economic exploitation. The most backward forms of unfreedom marked their lives; they were treated as chattel, and were subjected to onerous forms of bondage. As Ronald Herring noted, “landlordism...was inextricably tied to a social system that imposed disabilities and indignities on the lowest orders which were extreme, severe and rigid even by Indian standards” (Herring 1983, 158). In his notes, Abbe J. Dubois has vivid descriptions of bondages that Dalits were subjected to; he noted that the conditions of Parayas (a sub-group within Dalits) were,

at its worst...All children born to Parayas were serfs by birth, just as [their] parents were... If one of these Parayas escapes and takes services under another, the master can recover him as his own property... It is by no means uncommon to see a debtor who is unable to pay his debts in...cash satisfy his creditors by handing over to them a number of Paraya slaves.

The practice of untouchability against backward castes was a characteristic feature of social life in Malabar in the 19th century. Untouchability in Malabar was, in practice, a detailed system of distance pollution. Mayer (1952, p. 26) describes the different gradations of distance pollution prescribed for different caste groups in Malabar. A Nair could not touch a Namboodiri (Brahman), a Tiyya had to keep at least 32 feet from him, and a Cheruman or Pulaya had to keep at least 64 feet. Further, a Cheruman or Pulaya had to keep 32 feet away from a Tiyya.³

³ According to Varthema, a traveller who passed through Malabar in 1505, slave castes could not use the main roads in the village, but had to “slink along through marshy [fields] and bush, shouting to warn caste-people of their presence... Should they not be crying out and any Nayar be going that way and see their fruits [children] or meet any of them, these Nayars may kill them without punishment” (cited in R. Nair, 1986, p. 13).

The socio-economic status of Dalit agricultural workers in Morazha desam in the 1950s reflected the general backwardness of standard of living in Malabar. In fact, Thomas Shea wrote in his study of Morazha in 1955 that “economic conditions in Morazha are unusually bad even for Malabar, which is economically one of the worst-off districts in India” (Shea 1955b, 1033). Food policy during World War II had led to an acute shortage of food in Malabar district.⁴ A cholera epidemic of 1943 also took a substantial toll on lives. Morazha itself was badly affected by food shortages and the cholera epidemic (see Sivaswamy 1946). When Shea conducted his study, the shortage of food was continuing. Shea wrote that the worst affected sections of Morazha’s population were the agricultural workers, whose lives were characterised by extreme poverty and deprivation. Malnutrition had reduced drastically the length of the working day of an agricultural labourer. Shea noted that before the War workers used to work from 7 AM to 5.30 PM; after the War, physical weakening due to malnutrition had reduced it to 8 AM to 12.30 PM (Shea 1955b, 1031). Shea described living conditions of Morazha’s agricultural workers in 1955 as “wretched in the extreme” (*ibid.*).

In the 19th century and early 20th century, there was strong organised resistance from landlords of Malabar against allowing members of Dalit households to attend schools. Access to schools was mainly limited to members of caste Hindu households. While there were efforts by the state and Christian missionary groups to improve access to school education for oppressed castes in Malabar, landlords effectively undermined most of these efforts (Edona, 1940). Dalit students who came to enrol at primary schools were beaten up on a large scale and thrown out of the school compound by the henchmen of landlords (Nayanar, 1982).

In sum, lack of freedom to own land, lack of freedom to choose their employer, the brand of “untouchables” and illiteracy, among other forms of unfreedom, marked the life of Dalit agricultural workers under the agrarian system of Malabar in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

Public Action and Kerala’s Development Experience

While the world-famous social sector achievements of Kerala in the second half of the 20th century had roots in the State’s history, they were also, “in an important sense, results of public action in post-1957 Kerala” (Ramachandran 1996). The most important element of public action after 1956-57 was the implementation of land reforms across all regions of Kerala, initiated by the Communist Party of India-led government. Land reforms in the State, which have been described as being “the most comprehensive and far-reaching reforms of their kind in contemporary India” (Herring 1980, A-59), represented a historic agrarian transition and a radical shift in the balance of rural power. The impact of land reforms on agrarian relations and the personal freedom and self-dignity of agricultural workers may be said to have been most dramatic in Malabar, where the erstwhile agrarian system was most backward and oppressive. This impact went beyond changes in land tenure; land reforms also became the “centrepiece of the programme for social and

⁴ Some scholars have called the food crisis in Malabar in the 1940s a “famine” situation; at least one per cent of the population of Malabar died due to food shortage (Ramachandran 1996, 245).

economic progress” (Centre for Development Studies 1975, 59) for which Kerala is justly famous.⁵

Land reforms in Kerala had three basic components. First, security of tenure was to be provided to tenants. All evictions undertaken after the formation of the State were held illegal. The government took ownership of all tenanted land and the payment of rent on that land was stopped. Secondly, ceilings were set on ownership holdings of land. Ceiling-surplus land was to be taken over by the state and redistributed. Thirdly, landless agricultural workers were to be given ownership rights over homestead plots.

There is general consensus among scholars that land reform in Kerala was successful with respect to tenancy abolition and the distribution of homestead lands. Between 1957 and 1993, about 2.8 million tenants were conferred ownership rights (or had their rights protected) and about 0.6 million hectares of land accrued to them (Appu 1996). A significant number of landless agricultural workers received ownership rights over the plots of homesteads. Between 1957 and 1996, about 528,000 households were issued homestead ownership certificates (SPB 1997). However, there is also a consensus that Kerala’s land reform was not successful with respect to acquiring and distributing ceiling-surplus land to the landless. Only 1.47 per cent of the total operated area had been redistributed between 1957 and 1993 (Appu 1996). As a result, the component of land reform that directly benefited landless agricultural workers was the distribution of homestead land.

The failure in successfully distributing ceiling-surplus land to the landless was mainly due to the significant opposition that the Communist ministries faced from the Union government, from the judiciary and from landlord-supported political parties in the State. In 1959, the first Communist ministry was dismissed by the Union government before the President of India signed the State’s historic land reform bill. Non-Communist ministries that followed, with the support of landlord classes, successfully diluted every radical ceiling provision in the land reform legislation. With years passing without any serious implementation, landowners resorted to massive land transfers through changes in ownership and possession. According to one author, the losers were “thousands of landless labourers, especially the *Harijans* [Dalits] and persons from other socially and economically backward sections of the society”, who could have been provided with agricultural land (Radhakrishnan, 1989, p. 185)

The provision to distribute homestead land to agricultural workers was added on later to land reform laws once it had become clear that the extent of ceiling-surplus land available would be smaller than expected. This addition was made by the second Communist ministry that came to power in 1967. This ministry, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), drafted the State’s most comprehensive land reform law – The Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1970. This Act gave landless agricultural workers the option of purchasing 10 cents of land, for which they were required to pay only 25 per cent of the

⁵ As has been noted in the literature, land reforms in Kerala were the result of many years of struggle by peasants and agricultural workers. As Richard Franke (1993, 123) noted, “Kerala’s land reform law was the outcome of more than a century of spontaneous rebellion, organising, petition signing, marching, meetings, strikes, battles with police and landlord goon squads, election campaigns, and parliamentary debates.”

market value in normal cases and 12.5 per cent of the market value if the landowner possessed land above the ceiling. Fifty per cent of the amount finally payable was subsidised by the state with the remaining 50 per cent to be paid in 12 annual instalments (which was never paid). Thus, even when some components of land reform were not successfully implemented, most Dalit agricultural worker households in the State received plots of homestead land free of cost.

A major result of land reform was that various forms of caste discrimination, such as untouchability, ceased to be the dominant features of Kerala society. Village studies in post-land reform Kerala are abound with conclusions in this regard: Kathleen Gough (1970), in her study of Palakkara village between 1949 and 1964, noted the greater freedom that Dalits enjoyed in their social life. She wrote that there was “greater social equality for [Dalits], who in 1964 walked freely in the streets, ate in the tea shops, and no longer observed distance-pollution in relation to the higher castes” (Gough, 1970, p. 145). Among agricultural workers in Palakkad and Kuttanad regions, Joan Mencher (1980, p. 1801) noted that “there is certainly a sense of freedom and human dignity that almost all our sample households talked about.”

Apart from land reforms, the state in Kerala also initiated a number of welfare measures for the benefit of the rural poor after 1956-57. A series of laws and public programmes sought to bring agricultural workers within the ambit of systems of universal school education, health delivery and social security assistance. Kerala was the first, and the only, State in India to attempt to bring agricultural workers out of the informal sector by actually legislating with respect to the conditions of employment of different sections of rural workers. The Kerala Agricultural Workers’ Act (KAWA) of 1974 was India’s first comprehensive legislation for agricultural workers. It sought to give statutory sanction to minimum wages, to regulate working hours and working conditions and to establish tripartite mechanisms to settle labour disputes. In 1980, the Act was amended to include a scheme to pay pensions to retired agricultural labourers over the age of 60 years. Kerala has the most efficient food distribution system among all Indian States that provides basic food grains at subsidized prices. Kerala has also the most widespread network of co-operative credit societies in India.

The aim of this note is to examine the role of land reform and the host of public policies discussed above in raising the standard of living of Dalit agricultural workers in Morazha village.

THE STUDY AREA AND DATABASE

This study is based on data collected from one *desam* (part of a census village) in Malabar. The *desam* is Morazha, situated in the Taliparamba taluk of the Kannur district of Kerala. This field study is part of a larger study that I have undertaken of the socio-economic characteristics of agricultural workers in Morazha.

The data used in this note are from a detailed census-type survey that covered all households in the *desam* that had two characteristics. The first characteristic was the presence of at least one worker in the household who had worked for wages in agriculture in 2000-01 and the second was that a major share of the income of the household came

from rural manual labour. In other words, the database for this note covers all households in the desam that earned at least a part of their incomes from agricultural wage work *and* a major part of their incomes from some form of manual labour. There were 162 such households in the village, and out of them 25 per cent were Dalit households; I refer to these households in this note as “manual labour households involved in agricultural wage work”.⁶ The survey was conducted in July-August 2001, and the reference period for the survey was the agricultural year of 2000-01.

RESULTS FROM MORAZHA

Land reforms and changes in household ownership of land

Studies on social security in developing countries have emphasised that land reforms constitute the most important and effective social security strategy for the rural poor (see Guhan 1994; Osmani 1991; Ahmad and Hussain 1991). Osmani (1991) notes that in developing economies, control over land and its produce is crucial in ensuring security of livelihood for the poor. Ahmad and Hussain (1991, 298-299), who studied the social security system in China, argued that greater access to land after land reforms was an important factor that gave the Chinese population ‘a degree of economic security which is rare in developing countries’. In a review of homestead land distribution policies across countries, Hanstad, Brown and Prosterman (2002) noted that homesteads provided multiple benefits to the beneficiary households ‘in terms of food, income, status and economic security’. According to them, ownership of homestead plots also raised the creditworthiness of households.

Two major assessments regarding the distribution of landholdings in Morazha before land reforms emerge from available secondary data and Shea’s study of Morazha in 1955.

First, the distribution of ownership landholdings was very unequal in Morazha. My analysis of the village settlement survey of 1936 showed that about 3 per cent of the landowners (who paid more than Rs 50 as assessment) owned about 52 per cent of the land in the desam (Table 1). The Kadamberi *devaswam* (a temple management), situated just outside the limits of Morazha revenue village, was the biggest landowner in the village. The *devaswam* was thus a powerful *janmi* (landlord) in Morazha, but the landlord families of the village *de facto* controlled all the land under the *devaswam*’s ownership.

⁶ There were 1,345 households in the desam. In order to identify the households consisting of agricultural workers, I conducted two rounds of houselisting surveys covering Morazha desam. In the first and second houselisting surveys, conducted in March and April-May 2001, I collected information on household members with respect to religion, caste, land ownership, worker status, primary and secondary occupations, place of work, share of irrigated land in the total land owned by the household, and the modes of irrigation. From these two houselisting surveys, I prepared a complete list of workers who worked for wages in agriculture in the desam. In a third round of survey in July 2001, I conducted a detailed census-type survey on the working and living conditions of all households (199) to which these workers belonged. From these 199 households, I took all households that earned a major share of income from some form of manual labour. Out of the 199 surveyed households, 162 households earned a major part of their income from manual labour. These are the “manual labour households involved in agricultural wage work” represented in this paper.

Table 1 *Land assessment details, Morazha desam, 1936*

Holdings assessed to	Number (total)	Extent (acres)	Assessment (Rs. anas)
Rs 1 and less	67	29.1	37.6
Rs 1 – 10	150	191.9	530.5
Rs 10 – 30	32	182.9	546.1
Rs 30 – 50	9	101.7	337.5
Rs 50 – 100	5	134.3	364.0
Rs 100 – 250	3	254.8	505.0
Rs 50 – 500	1	163.4	352.1
Total	267	1058.11	2673.10

Source: Settlement survey of Morazha desam, 1936.

In his analysis of the settlement report for Morazha desam of 1936, Thomas Shea found that 'eight *devaswoms*, or temples, hold the *janmam*, or proprietary right to half of the land in the village. They pay more than 25 per cent of the land revenue, and hold 1/3 of the wet lands. Four of these *devaswoms* are managed by two of the five largest landholders in the village...The five largest *janmies* hold 47.5 per cent of wet lands, 49 per cent of all lands, and pay more than 40 per cent of the total land revenue' (Shea 1955a, 998).

Secondly, there was a strong correlation between the caste status of individuals and their land ownership. Either the temple (whose lands were controlled by caste Hindus) or the upper caste cultivators owned most of the land in the desam. Data for the constituent parts of Andhur panchayat (which included Morazha desam) from the settlement survey of 1936 showed that temples, Brahmans and Nairs (the upper castes) together owned about 85 per cent of land (see Table 2). Tiyyas (the intermediate caste) were mainly tenants and owned very little land, while Dalits owned almost no land.

Table 2 *Distribution of land ownership, Andhur panchayat, by caste of landowners, 1936*

Landowners, by caste	Area owned (in acres)	Share of area owned (%)
Temple managements	1214.7	28.8
Brahmans	971.3	23.0
Nairs	1392.7	33.0
Tiyyas (Ezhavas)	176.6	4.2
Muslims	356.6	8.4
Others	112.6	2.6
Total	4224.5	100.0

Source: Andhur Panchayat (1996), Table 1.

Land reform in Morazha after 1956-57 put an end to both big landlordism and upper caste domination in land ownership. My houselisting survey of *all* households in Morazha desam

in 2001 showed major changes in the distribution of household ownership of land compared to 1955. First, the extreme concentration of landholdings that Thomas Shea had noted for 1955 had disappeared. On the contrary, there was a predominance of small-sized holdings in Morazha in 2001. About 83 per cent of the households owned less than 1 acre of land, and their holdings accounted for about 43 per cent of the total area (Table 3). There were only two households that owned more than 10 acres of land; their holdings accounted for just 3 per cent of the total area.

Table 3 *Distribution of number and area of household ownership holdings, by size-classes, Morazha, 2001*

Land size class (acres)	Number of households	Share of number (%)	Area under holdings (acres)	Share in total area (%)
< 0.10	138	10.3	8.5	1.0
0.10 - 0.24	426	31.7	65.9	7.9
0.25 - 0.49	289	21.5	100.1	12.0
0.50 – 0.99	269	20.0	187.0	22.3
1.00 – 1.49	98	7.3	118.2	14.1
1.50 – 1.99	42	3.1	72.9	8.7
2.0 – 3.99	64	4.8	108.8	13.0
4.0 – 9.99	17	1.3	150.6	18.0
> 9.99	2	0.1	25.1	3.0
All size classes	1345	100.0	837.1	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2001.

Note: Data on number and area of holdings in this table include homesteads.

The second important result that emerges is a major shift in the pattern of ownership of land across caste groups. By 2001, the monopoly of landholdings by Brahmins and Nairs (and temples controlled by them) had been considerably weakened (Table 4). Caste Hindus owned only about 39 per cent (as opposed to 85 per cent in 1936) of the total area of land owned by the *desam* residents in 2001. It shows that large areas of land were transferred from Brahmans and Nairs to Tiyyas, Pulayas and other oppressed caste groups through land reform. The important point here is that the end of feudal landlordism through land reform in Morazha also meant a *break up of the traditional material basis of upper caste domination* in its everyday social life.

Table 4 *Distribution of landownership across residents of Morazha desam, by caste groups, 2001, in acres*

Caste group	Share in population (%)	Area owned (in acres)	Share in total area (%)
Brahmans	0.5	12.2	1.6
Nairs	25.2	286.5	37.6
Tiyyas	34.5	301.5	39.6
Muslims	6.0	24.1	3.2
Pulayas	6.5	24.1	3.2
Others	27.3	113.4	14.9
All castes	100.0	761.8	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2001.

Among *Dalit agricultural workers* in Morazha, the shift in the pattern of land ownership came along primarily due to the policy of distributing homestead land as part of land reform. The average size of homesteads owned by manual labour households involved in agricultural wage work was 21.7 cents, or a little less than quarter of an acre (Table 5).

Table 5 *Distribution of number and area of homesteads among Dalit households, by land size-classes, Morazha, 2001*

Land size class (acres)	No of Dalit HHs	Share of Dalit HHs (%)	Area owned by Dalits (acres)	Share of Dalit's area (%)
<0.5	5	4.4	0.2	0.8
0.5 - 0.09	24	21.2	1.5	6.2
0.10 - 0.24	56	49.6	8.2	33.4
0.25 - 0.49	15	13.3	5.2	21.2
0.50 – 0.99	12	10.6	8.0	32.6
> 1.00	1	0.9	1.5	5.9
All size classes	113	100.0	24.6	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2001.

Net revenue from production in homestead plots

Given the importance of homestead land ownership among Dalit agricultural workers, it is necessary to quantify the benefits from homestead cultivation for these households. I tried to estimate the imputed net income (after deducting the total paid-out costs of cultivation and accounting for opportunity costs of family labour) from homestead cultivation for the surveyed Dalit households in Morazha. The average imputed net income from homestead plots of Dalits was Rs 798. This average net income from homesteads supplemented the incomes of manual labour households involved in agricultural wage work considerably. As Table 6 shows, on an average, the net income from homesteads constituted about 4 per cent of the poverty line for Dalit households, while the corresponding share for all castes together was only slightly higher at 5 per cent.

My above estimate of the net income from homesteads is an underestimate as 2000-01 was a year when there was a sharp fall in prices of agricultural commodities. For instance, the average price of coconut (the most important crop in homesteads) at the market nearest to

Morazha in 2001 was about 41 per cent lower than the average price in 1999. The same was true for crops like pepper and arecanut as well. As a result, the average value of production from homestead plots estimated in my study for 2001 was lower than what it would have been for years other than 2000 and 2001. When I replaced the 2001 prices with *the average prices between 1999 and 2003*, the average share of net income from homesteads in the official poverty line registered a significant increase: from 4 per cent to about 6 per cent (Table 6).

Table 6 *Distribution of households by the shares of imputed net income from homesteads in the income-poverty line, at 2001 prices, Dalit manual labour households involved in agricultural wage work, Morazha, 2001*

Caste category	Net annual revenue per HH (Rs) from cultivation in		Net revenue from homesteads as share of poverty line (%)
	All types of land	Homestead plots	
Non-Dalit, non-OBC	988.5	733.1	3.9
OBC	1583.1	1297.7	6.0
Dalit	933.9	797.9	3.9*
All castes	1324.1	1079.8	5.0

Source: Survey data, 2001.

Note: * - share of poverty line at average prices between 1999 and 2003.

My estimates of net income from homesteads, the first for Kerala in my knowledge, show that homestead plots brought in more than marginal monetary benefits to Dalit households. Tharakan (2002) has noted that there are “many scholars who failed to understand the significance of the allotment of homestead land to the poor” in Kerala as part of land reform (p. 358). Importantly, Tharakan also notes the instrumental benefit of homestead land gain for Dalit households:

This provision guaranteed a residential plot to landless agricultural labour households who mainly belonged to the scheduled castes (Dalits) and had been systematically denied access to land by the rules of the caste system. With this gain, however, even landless agricultural labourers were able to bargain better for wages, for a better public distribution system, and better school education and health care. As a result of this provision, the lowest in the caste and agrarian hierarchies gained access to rudimentary social progress, just as the middle-level communities had through the social and ritual reform movements (*ibid.*).

A contrast of the Kerala results to the observations in a recent national level report on the status of human security of Indian Dalits is revealing. In the report, titled *Hidden Apartheid*, the continued discrimination of Dalits in India on social and economic grounds is vividly highlighted. The report says,

The right to own property is systematically denied to Dalits. Landlessness—encompassing a lack of access to land, inability to own land, and forced evictions—constitutes a crucial element in the subordination of Dalits. When Dalits do acquire land, elements of the right to own property—including the right to access and enjoy it—are routinely infringed. Land

reform legislation is neither implemented nor properly enforced. Dalits' efforts to secure land have been met with state violence or retaliation by private actors in the form of violence or economic sanctions (Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2007).

Public Action, Land Reform and Advances in Education

Basic schooling can be central to human security for several distinct reasons. First, as already discussed, illiteracy and innumeracy are forms of insecurity in themselves... Second, basic education can be very important in helping people to get jobs and gainful employment... Third, when people are illiterate, their ability to understand and invoke their legal rights can be very limited... Fourth, illiteracy can also muffle the political voice of the underdog and thus contribute directly to their insecurity (Sen, 2002).⁷

The instrumental importance of land reforms becomes evident from the advances made by Dalits in the field of education. Historically in Malabar, educational achievements were determined by the person's caste status, which was closely associated with one's status in the agrarian economy. While members of Brahmin and upper caste households were the most educated, Dalits were the least educated among all. In contemporary Kerala society, the correlation between achievements in education and one's position in the agrarian economy has been considerably weakened by land reforms and the spread of public schools – a result of massive public investment by the state after 1957.

In the absence of land reforms, it would have been impossible to imagine the universal spread of literacy and mass schooling in Malabar. As Table 7 shows, in 1951, the literacy rate in Malabar was only 31 per cent, while among women, it was only 22 per cent. Available data show that among Dalit women in Kerala as a whole (data for Malabar alone are not available for Dalits), the literacy rate was only 17 per cent in 1961. It was after the implementation of land reform and public investments in school education that literacy rates expanded among Dalits, especially Dalit women.

Table 7 Literacy rates, Malabar, Kerala and Morazha, caste-wise, in per cent

Item	Year	Literacy rate (%)		
		All persons	Male	Female
Malabar, all castes, Census of India	1911	11.1	19.0	3.5
	1951	31.3	41.3	21.7
	1991	74.2	77.8	70.8
Kerala, Dalits, Census of India	1961	-	31.6	17.4
	1991	-	85.2	74.3
Morazha, all	2001	84.1	90.1	79.2
Morazha, Dalits,	2001	84.3	90.4	78.3

Source: Census of India, various issues; Ramachandran (1996); Field survey, 2001.

⁷ A background paper for the workshop on "Basic Education and Human Security," jointly organized by the Commission on Human Security, UNICEF, the Pratichi (India) Trust, and Harvard University, in Kolkata, 2-4 January 2002.

In Morazha, among the Dalit households I surveyed, more than 50 per cent of household members had entered the high school stage of school education (Table 8). Only about 8 per cent of members of Dalit households had never attended school, and almost all of them belonged to the age group of 60 years and above. Importantly, educational advancements among Dalit households involved in agricultural wage work were comparable with those of non-Dalit households involved in agricultural wage work (see Table 8). Even in the category of households members educated above Class 12, the achievements of Dalit households were comparable to those of non-Dalit households.

Table 8 *Levels of education among members of MLHIA WW, Morazha, 2001*, in number and per cent

Educational level	All households		Dalits	
	Number of members	Share of members (%)	Number of members	Share of members (%)
Never attended school	81	7.8	16	7.6
Up to Class 4	182	17.5	41	19.5
Class 5 to Class 7	229	22.0	40	19.0
Class 8 to Class 10	398	38.2	75	35.7
Class 11 to Class 12	114	11.0	31	14.8
Above Class 12	37	3.6	7	3.3
All	1041	100.0	210	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2001.

Public Social Security Systems and Dalit households

Many countries, including developed countries, in parallel with implementing social protection are actively incorporating social protection policies into the core business of the state. In that way, these policies anchor a human security approach of safeguarding people who are vulnerable...(Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 87).

In a survey of social security schemes in India, Mahendra Dev (2002, 228) noted that Kerala “has the most wide-ranging set of schemes for the benefit of the unorganised sector” workers. According to the estimates of Duvvury and George (1997), about 51 per cent of Kerala’s income-poor population aged 60 and above were recipients of some social security assistance. RBI data for 2001-02 show that the share of revenue expenditure on “social security and welfare” in total revenue expenditure was 1.7 per cent in Kerala, which was higher than the corresponding share of 0.5 per cent for the central government (RBI 2003).

Duvvury and George (1997) note that the policies of social security for unorganised workers in Kerala after 1956-57 were significantly influenced by the different experiments undertaken by the State’s working class movement before 1957. Citing from Isaac (1984) and Isaac, Franke and Raghavan (1997), they point out that historically, “the working class movement in Kerala had experimented to integrate the struggle against capitalists and the

colonial state with their initiatives for welfare and mutual benefit activities” (Duvvury and George 1997, 14). These experiments included institutional arrangements like labour associations and co-operatives. The lessons learnt from these arrangements influenced the demands of the labour movement for social security as well as the formulation of labour welfare policies of the state after 1956-57. The establishment of Welfare Funds was one important policy intervention in this period.

Welfare Funds are the institutions constituted by the state for the distribution of social security assistance for rural unorganised workers. The benefits from Welfare Funds to workers could be divided into three types (*ibid.*). First, some Funds provide provident fund benefits to members upon super-annuation, a monthly pension and a gratuity payment. Monthly pensions were provided by 8 of the 19 Funds in 2001. Secondly, some Funds provided social insurance benefits to members, such as a payment for medical treatment or physical disability. Thirdly, some Funds provided different types of welfare assistance to members, such as assistance for children’s education, marriage of daughters and construction of houses.⁸ About 19 Welfare Funds for different sections of unorganised workers were established in Kerala after 1956-57 (Duvvury and George 1997). In 1995, Welfare Funds covered at least 50 per cent of all the unorganised workers in the State, accounting for about 2.6 million workers. In general, the funds for these institutions were generated through contributions from workers, employers and the government over a period of time.

The allowances provided through the major schemes of which members of my surveyed households in Morazha were beneficiaries in 2001 are as follows.

- The agricultural worker pension was Rs 110 per month (or Rs 1320 per year);
- The allowance for physically handicapped persons was Rs 110 per month (or Rs 1320 per year);
- The pension for widows was Rs 100 per month (or Rs 1200 per year);
- The pension for old aged persons was Rs 100 per month (or Rs 1200 per year);
- The pension for traditional artists was Rs 400 per month (Rs 4800 per year);
- The pension for construction workers was Rs 150 per month (or Rs 1800 per year).

In Morazha, the share of households that received any social security benefit was highest for the Dalits among all caste groups. About 28 per cent of all Dalit manual labour households involved in agricultural wage work received social security benefits in 2001, while for all manual labour households involved in agricultural wage work the share was 22 per cent. The average income from social security schemes was also the highest for Dalit households among all households – Rs 1,018 per year (Table 9). For Dalit households, the income from social security schemes constituted 6 per cent of the poverty line, while for all castes together, the share was 5.3 per cent. It is notable that the capture of social security benefits by elites is not a feature of Morazha, as it is in many other Indian States, which was primarily owing to the shift in the balance of power in the countryside after land reform.

⁸ In this context, see also Kannan (2002).

Table 9 *Average income from direct social security schemes, caste-wise, MLHIA WW, Morazha, 2001, Rs per household, per year*

Caste group	Share of HHs receiving benefit (%)	Average income from SS schemes (Rs per HH per annum)	Average income as share of poverty line (%)
General	25.0	787.1	4.2
OBC	18.9	976.7	4.5
SC	28.2	1017.6	6.0
All	22.2	1146.9	5.3

Source: Survey data, 2001.

The estimation of social security income as a share of total income, however, does not fully capture the benefits to the beneficiaries. A scheme to pay retired agricultural workers a monthly pension is not a programme of poverty alleviation, but a protective social security cover aimed at reducing economic vulnerability and deprivation among the poor. In Morazha, for beneficiaries who were old aged and economically dependent on their children due to poor health, the government pension was a matter of great joy and pride; it gave them a feeling that they were also earners and raised their levels of economic security and self-esteem significantly.

The Public Distribution System

Kerala has the best functioning Public Distribution System (PDS) of food among all States in India. The ration shop network that forms the PDS in Kerala has its origins in the struggle by the Left-led peasant movement to establish 'Producers and Consumers Co-operatives' (PCCs) for the public provisioning of food grains that began in 1942 in Malabar, and continued in different forms through the 1950s and 1960s. Till 1997, the PDS in Kerala covered almost the whole of the population of Kerala through a deep running network of ration shops. Ration shops in Kerala supply mainly four commodities: rice, wheat, sugar and kerosene. Four ration shops operated for Morazha's population in 2001.

Though the PDS in Kerala was universal for a long period of time, it had ceased to be so by 2001. Under the neo-liberal regime at the centre, universal PDS was scrapped and a Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) was introduced in 1997. Under the TPDS, the population had to be classified into Above Poverty Line (APL) and Below Poverty Line (BPL) categories.⁹ In 2001, subsidised food was to be made available to only the BPL households, and the APL households had to pay a price equivalent to the full economic cost of purchasing and handling the food grains.

A widespread complaint from other parts of rural India after the introduction of TPDS has been the existence of a major mismatch between households classified as BPL by the government and their actual standard of living (Swaminathan 2000; Swaminathan and

⁹ For detailed information on targeted PDS, see Swaminathan (2000). Through out this paper, the terms APL and BPL refer to the households classified as Above Poverty Line and Below Poverty Line by the government.

Misra 2002; GoI 2002). In many Indian villages, Dalits have been systematically excluded from the PDS under the TPDS, as the local political regimes have been unsympathetic. A high-level committee appointed by the government in 2002 concluded that ‘the narrow targeting of the PDS based on absolute income-poverty is likely to have excluded a large part of the nutritionally vulnerable population from the PDS’ (GOI 2002).

In my survey of Morazha, I tried to match the income status of households with their status regarding access to PDS – whether they were APL or BPL as per their PDS card. My data show that, unlike in other States, there was no systematic exclusion of Dalits from the PDS (Table 10). On the other hand, a large number of Dalit households who were not below the poverty line as per their income status, held BPL status in their PDS cards. About 42 per cent of the Dalit households were not income poor in my survey; yet, they had BPL cards. Only 16 per cent of Dalit households were found to hold APL cards even when they were income-poor in my survey. This conclusion from Morazha is quite the opposite of the findings from States like Maharashtra reported by Swaminathan and Misra (2002). In a Maharashtra village, they found that 43 per cent of households were given APL cards while they were actually income poor.

Table 10 *Distribution of number of households by income-poverty classification and type of ration card, MLHIAWW, Morazha, 2001*

Type of poverty by income	Type poverty by colour of ration card	Number of households	
		All	Dalits
Above poverty line	Above poverty line	55	7
Above poverty line	Below poverty line	43	16
Below poverty line	Above poverty line	36	6
Below poverty line	Below poverty line	22	8
All households	All households	156	37

Source: Survey data, 2001.

The low rates of exclusion of income-poor households and high rates of inclusion of non-income-poor households in Morazha were a result of the efforts of the State government and the Left-political parties to bring in a larger proportion of households under the ambit of the PDS than the proportion stipulated by the Central government. From the time of initiation of the PDS in the 1960s, the system was universal in its coverage in Kerala (Koshy 1989; Swaminathan 2000; Mooij 1999; Suryanarayana 2001); all households had the same terms of access. At the time of introduction of the TPDS in 1997, the Central government wanted the State government to restrict the supply of subsidised provision of food grains to only the income-poor, or 26 per cent of the State’s population. This figure was arrived at based on the NSS survey on Consumer Expenditure in 1993-94. As such, the quantity of food grains that the Central government provided to the State from 1997 onwards at subsidised prices was calculated according to the requirements of only 26 per cent of the population. This effort to convert the universal PDS to a targeted PDS led to public protests and agitations, and there was intense pressure from Left-political movements to restore the universal character of the PDS.

The Left government in Kerala argued that the HCR of 26 per cent cited by the Central government did not conform to the actual state of poverty in the State, and wanted the benefits of the PDS extended to 42 per cent of the population. The Central government did not agree with this view, but the State government went ahead on its own and extended the benefits of food subsidy to 42 per cent of its population. According to Suryanarayana (2001), the additional burden on the State government in extending this benefit was Rs 480 million in 1997. The better coverage of income-poor households under PDS in Morazha, as compared to other States, was due to this decision of the State's Left-government to extend food subsidies to an additional section of the population.

In terms of actual purchase of food from the PDS also, the difference between the Dalit households and non-Dalit households was small (see Table 11). This point reaffirms the lack of any form of discrimination that Dalit households face in accessing the PDS and purchasing necessities.

Table 11 *Extent of per capita purchases of commodities from PDS, by caste, MLHIAWW classified as BPL, Morazha, 2001, in kg/litres per year*

Caste category	Kerosene	Rice	Sugar	Wheat
General	10.7	66.1	4.5	13.3
OBC	8.3	64.8	5.1	16.6
Dalit	8.1	65.0	5.2	15.3

Source: Survey data, 2001.

Access to credit

Provision of credit at affordable costs to the poor is an important component of any social security strategy. In their work on social security for the poor, Dreze and Sen (1991) note that

the time pattern of earnings [of poor households] may not at all match with the time pattern of needs. Indeed, sometimes the needs are maximal precisely when incomes tend to be minimal...This inter-temporal mismatch would not matter greatly if capital markets were 'perfect', allowing adjustment of expenditure to needs even without altering the pattern of earnings...But capital markets...are frequently non-existent or feeble (especially in developing countries). Social security has a special role in these circumstances.¹⁰

A historical survey of the nature of rural credit market in Malabar till the 1950s shows that these markets were characterised by heavy indebtedness among the peasantry, presence of landlords and traders as major lenders, and the incidence of usury as a major form of surplus extraction.¹¹

In 1956-57, according to the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry, nearly 95 per cent of the attached agricultural workers in Malabar, who were almost wholly Dalits, were in debt. This burden of debt forced labourers and small tenants to enter into oppressive and bonded forms of labour and land relations. In 1951-52, 83 per cent of the principal borrowed by rural households in Malabar was from landlords and traders, as per the All

¹⁰ On the importance of credit institutions in social security policies, see also Burgess and Stern (1991).

¹¹ A detailed historical survey of the nature of rural credit markets in Malabar is in Ramakumar (2005).

India Rural Credit Survey (AIRCS). Loans from landlords and traders also came at very high interest rates. According to Sreenivasaraghavaiyengar (1893, 254), Malabar was the region in Madras Presidency where moneylending appeared in its most oppressive form – one that he described as being of a ‘genuine usurious type’. My calculations from the case studies presented in Sreenivasaraghavaiyengar (1893) suggest that interest rates ranged from 40 per cent to 150 per cent per year.

Data collected by me from Morazha in 2001 indicate a revolutionary change in the character of the credit market faced by Dalits since the 1940s. The data show a remarkable expansion in the provision of credit to the poor from the formal sector. Further, credit was provided at terms that were generally favourable to poor households.

In Table 12, I have provided the basic details of borrowing of households surveyed, by caste groups. Three conclusions from the table are worth highlighting. First, the share of Dalit households indebted (69 per cent) was higher than the share of non-Dalit households indebted (63.5 per cent). Secondly, the average principal borrowed by a dalit household was more or less comparable to the average principal borrowed by a non-Dalit household. Thirdly, the debt-asset ratio for a Dalit household was on an average lower than the debt-asset ratio for all households surveyed.

Table 12 *Details of borrowings of MLHIAWW, by caste, Morazha, 2001, in Rs and per cent*

Caste category	Share of HHs indebted (%)	Average principal (Rs)	Average debt outstanding (Rs)	Debt-asset ratio (%)
General	59.3	19019 (9140)	19440 (8444)	8.7 (3.5)
OBC	62.8	11965	11127	6.0
Dalits	69.2	9586	8773	5.1
All households	63.5	12575 (10919)	11997 (10117)	6.3 (6.0)

Source: Survey data, 2001.

Note: Figures in brackets denote averages after deleting two extreme cases of borrowal.

Between the 1950s and 2001, there was something of a reversal of the roles of the formal and informal sectors of credit in the credit portfolio of rural manual workers in Morazha. In 2001, 98 per cent of the principal borrowed by Dalit manual labour households came from the formal sector (Table 13). In other words, landlords, traders and other moneylenders were effectively eliminated as sources of credit. Within the formal sector, co-operative credit societies accounted for 97 per cent of the credit advanced. About 95 per cent of all loans taken by the Dalit households were from the co-operative sector.

Table 13 *Distribution of households by different sources of borrowing MLHIA WW, Morazha, 2001, in per cent*

Source of borrowing	Share of number of loans (%)		Share of amount of loan (%)	
	All HHs	Dalit HHs	All HHs	Dalit HHs
Co-operatives	97.4	95.7	97.3	95.4
Government	1.1	2.1	0.9	3
Formal sector	98.4	97.8	98.2	98.4
Moneylenders	0.5	0	0.2	0
Friends and relatives	0.5	0	1.2	0
Chit finance	0.5	2.1	0.3	1.6
Informal sector	1.6	0	1.8	0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2001.

One of the most significant outcomes of the ownership of homestead land by Dalit households in the post-land reform period is their improvement in creditworthiness. These households were able to approach the bank and take loans by keeping the homestead plot papers as collateral. Data in Table 14 shows that 17 per cent of the loans borrowed by Dalit households were by keeping an immovable property (land) as collateral.

Table 14 *Distribution of borrowings by type of collateral offered, by caste, MLHIA WW, Morazha, 2001, in per cent*

Type of collateral	Share of number of loans (%)		Share of amount of loan (%)	
	All HHs	Dalit HHs	All HHs	Dalit HHs
Third person security	53.4	38.3	43.8	24.7
Immovable property	11.6	17.0	40.8	55.6
Gold	33.3	42.6	13.3	18.1
Others	1.1	0.0	0.8	0.0
No collateral	0.5	2.1	1.2	1.6
All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2001.

The spread of the co-operative movement in Morazha had a direct link with the political movement for land reform in Malabar led by the Left peasant unions. During the Second World War, at a time when Malabar was experiencing an acute food shortage, the peasant movement launched an agitation to prevent the hoarding of food grains by landlords and traders. This movement aimed at forcibly collecting food grains from the granaries of landlords and traders and selling them to the general public through Producers and Consumers Co-operatives or PCCs (Ramachandran 1996). After the War, most of the PCCs were converted into credit societies that began to advance credit to cultivators at low interest rates. These societies were called *Aikya Nanaya Sanghams* (Co-operative Money

Societies). These *Aikya Nanaya Sanghams* were later converted into service co-operative banks, the form in which they operate today. Thus, public action developed a banking institution that helped to eliminate these exploitative features of the credit market, and expanded the access to affordable credit of manual labour households.

Changes in the levels of income poverty in Kerala State, results from official data

The above changes in the standard of living of people of Morazha reflect a larger process of advancement of human security in Kerala State as a whole, driven by public action. I shall briefly touch up on the changes in the levels of income poverty among Dalit households in Kerala that public action from above and below have brought about.

In Table 15, I have provided data on the changes in income poverty among Dalit households in the major States of India between 1983 and 1999-00. In 1983, the head count ratio of income poverty for Dalit households in Kerala was *higher* than that in India as a whole. In the 1980s and 1990s, this ratio has declined at a rapid rate and in 1999-00, the head count ratio in Kerala was one of the lowest for all States in India. The linkage that these changes in income poverty have the outcomes of public action that we discussed in this note is undoubted.

Table 15 *Head count ratios of income poverty among Dalits, NSS, State-wise, 1983 to 1990-00, in per cent*

State	1983	1993-94	1999-00
Andhra Pradesh	37.2	26.0	16.5
Assam	43.1	45.3	44.0
Bihar	80.9	70.9	59.8
Gujarat	39.2	32.2	17.8
Haryana	36.1	46.5	19.0
Karnataka	52.7	46.6	26.2
Kerala	62.3	36.3	14.6
Madhya Pradesh	58.4	46.0	41.3
Maharashtra	59.3	51.7	33.3
Orissa	75.8	49.1	51.8
Punjab	25.8	21.8	12.4
Rajasthan	40.8	38.3	19.6
Tamil Nadu	67.5	44.1	32.6
Tripura	-	26.7	15.1
Uttar Pradesh	57.2	59.3	43.7
West Bengal	72.0	45.3	35.1
India	58.1	48.1	36.2

Source: Thorat and Mahamallik (2006).

CONCLUDING NOTES

We began this note by quoting the Commission on Human Security report, which said, “when people’s livelihoods are deeply compromised,...human security contracts”. We further noted that expansion of human security requires the expansion of a set of vital freedoms for people in the process of development. As Amartya Sen has noted, there are strong links between human security and human development. According to him, while human development focuses on equity during economic growth, human security is concerned with *protection against downside risks*. In other words, policies of social protection hold centre stage in any discussion on human security. Sen’s own research in this sphere, along with Jean Dreze, has shown that historically successful experiences in advancing social protection have involved significant public action, from above and below. In India, the best known example in this regard is the small State of Kerala.

In this note, I tried to describe and analyse at the level of one village – Morazha – how public action helped to advance the socioeconomic security of Dalit agricultural workers in Kerala. Specifically, the note looked at changes in land ownership, levels of education, access to credit, access to social security schemes and food distribution systems and income poverty of Dalit households participating in agricultural wage work. In 1955, another economist had studied Morazha village; this study was conducted before one of the most important interventions through public action – land reform – took place in Malabar. The 1955 study had characterized the conditions of life of agricultural workers as ‘wretched in the extreme’; the worst forms of human insecurity marked their life. The effort in this note was to trace the changes in the living conditions of Dalit agricultural labour households in Morazha over time, and relate these changes to the processes of public action that have marked the history of socio-political life in Kerala.

The results of this note have shown that while the achievements remain modest, the concomitant changes in the quality of life of Morazha’s Dalit agricultural workers after 1955 have been significant. It was land reform that prepared ground and set the pace for every socio-economic advance made in Malabar after 1956-57. It is significant to note here that the long struggle for land reform in Kerala was an integrated one: a struggle where there was a convergence of resistance against different forms of class-, caste- and gender-based discriminations.

Land reforms changed the conditions in which labour power was sold; it freed workers to sell their labour power to the employers of their choice. *It hit at the very basis of caste-based atrocities by undermining not only feudal landlordism, but also the traditional economic base of upper caste domination.* Land reforms also provided worker households with homestead land free of cost. The income from homesteads supplemented household incomes and helped raise food intake and nutrition. Legislation by the state provided for an innovative pension scheme for unorganised workers. The public distribution system of the state served effectively to improve nutrition. The political movement for land reform played an important role in eliminating older forms of usury-based exploitation, and to establish co-operative credit institutions.

To conclude the note, the conditions of life of Dalits in Morazha in 2000-01 were very different from what Thomas Shea had noted in 1955. Shea had characterised the

conditions of life of Dalit agricultural workers as 'wretched in the extreme' (Shea 1955b, 1031). Changes in the quality of life of Dalit people in Morazha after 1955 were through a weakening of the factors that lead to 'wretched' conditions of life. Public action was the driving force behind this transformation, and the break up of traditional agrarian power by the state through land reform was the most critical step.

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