

# ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം

ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 33

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## **Affirming Self and Space: The Question of Caste, Land and Resilience in *Chengara Samaravum Ente Jeevithavum***

**Dimple M. Scaria  
Dr. Sheeba K**

This paper attempts to contextualise the inextricable link between caste and land in Kerala by analysing Chengara land agitation in the district of Pathanamthitta as informed by the life narrative of Seleena Prakkanam. *Chengara Samaravum Ente Jeevithavum* (*Chengara Land Struggle and My Life*) emerges as a useful socio-political document providing a clear vantage point to a particular socio-cultural situation in Kerala in specific spatio-temporal contexts. The constitutive relationship between land and caste is analysed in this study to assert how the narratorial subject has undergone structural oppression in terms of land and caste. Seleena Prakkanam's life narrative promulgates that land is a socially reproduced entity whereby socio-political power is administered and social hierarchies are maintained. It also points to a very pertinent question: why are the actual tillers deprived of the land where they work their fingers to the bone?

**Key words:** Chengara Land Struggle, life-narrative, land, caste, resilience

Kerala is portrayed on the world tourism map as one of the best places for leisure and relaxation because of its stunning landscape. The place is depicted as the ideal escape because of its lush green surroundings, healthy and pleasant atmosphere. The pristine

backwaters and numerous spotless hill stations enhance the charm of the surroundings. The expression ‘God’s Own Country’ captures the mesmerising hues of the landscape. The world is invited to this haven by the official tourism website of the state, highlighting solely the region’s chosen attractive natural features. But on the other side, the realisation that there are cracks and gaps in the measuring cup of justice is painful and it is from this torment that the land struggles like Chengara are set about. Chengara land struggle is the charge sheet submitted by the basic working class against the much-proclaimed social development of the State.

The much-touted land reforms of 1950s and 1970s in Kerala is said to have resolved the inequities of land ownerships. But, in reality, it has remained incomplete and has not helped people in the real margins. However, this kind of secular modernity could break only the traditional taboos vis-à-vis caste and land ownerships. It failed to go deeper into the other realms of stigmatisation; touching only the surface level of modern social institutions. The dimensions of caste remained untouched which totally absolved the movements by the marginalised sections. As K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu rightly point out, “... as a class initiative, the Kerala reforms were to an extent effective. Caste dimensions of the land question, however, remained unaddressed” (36). An array of new questions was raised at Chengara in 2007-09 as part of the agitation. Led by Sadhujana Vimochana Samyuktha Vedi (an organization for the liberation of the poor, landless people), thousands of landless families, mostly dalits demanded for cultivable land and refused to remain as mere hutment dwellers. These families moved to Harrisons Malayalam Plantations, the disputed rubber estate of Pathanamthitta district, and erected makeshift housings there. It was a struggle for their basic productive resource of land by refusing to be content with the ‘minimum entitlements’ offered to them by the Establishment. Their attempt to occupy the Harrisons Estate was treated as an unwarranted act of snatching the land.

The Chengara struggle gets a remarkable socio-political relevance at a time when there is an unholy nexus between the crony capitalist powers and an identifiable polity. Defending the agitation,

the Dalit activist and theoretician Sunny M. Kapikkad categorically says:

It is in the context of this struggle that landless people of other communities entered the land struggle at Chengara. How the majority of such people happen to be dalits and adivasis is something that must be examined historically. It is not enough to understand this struggle as if it were merely a struggle for land by the landless, a united fight by all those who have no land. It is those people who did not receive land in Kerala's land reforms who have come here. However much we may idealise the land reforms, it has been proved beyond doubt that they fail to make land available to some social groups in Kerala. (478)

The life narrative of Seleena Prakkanam, *Chengara Samaravum Ente Jeevithavum*, is a social testament of the land agitation in Chengara in which the history and the narrative self get merged incredibly. Far from being a self-explicating emotive tale with a hushed tone, the narrative, as told to O. K. Santhosh and M. B. Manoj, becomes an intricate platform for her bold public utterances. While sketching an eventful as well as action-packed life of Seleena Prakkanam, the female leader of the Chengara Land Struggle, three different evolutionary phases of her life need mentioning: a derelict in the caste burdened village, an uncompromising leader of the land agitation, and a nonadherent activist who could rise above the patriarchal arrogance within the community.

The much-praised rustic sanctity and artlessness get questioned throughout the book. A preposterous and ridiculous belief in casteism deep-set in rural life is exposed here from a dalit perspective. Caste, as exemplified in this life narrative, is an overt layer of scum in the mindscape of educators too. Seleena testifies her experience of caste discrimination at the college. She poignantly recalls how pathetically she failed to overcome the stigma of wretchedness in the college campus:

When I joined college I was confronted by severe criticisms and caste-based abuse from teachers. 'We have seen many like you, all are alike' - they commented publicly. When they teach, they

would never look at my side. That caused severe pain in me. I felt really abandoned and looked down upon. The one who hurt me the most was the physics teacher. She made me weep several times; I don't even want to remember her name. "People like you better not come to college; you all come just to waste our time and to tarnish the institution's reputation"- she remarked. On hearing this I cried, then she yelled at me: "the place where your tears fall will become polluted." After that whenever I think of college, a scary and ugly image comes to mind. I don't remember any smiling face of a teacher in the campus. We lack beauty, colour and so many other things. We have nothing compared to others. The very body of ours speak that we are dalits! (Prakkanam 19)

Juxtaposing caste and land ownerships, the narrative works on how the institutionalised caste becomes decisive in land ownerships. The need for a sustainable dalit mobilisation for securing tillable land is also brought to the fore. Seleena Prakkanam spearheaded the Chengara Land Movement because she had a strong and unwavering sense of her community's rights and understood the link between landlessness and social deprivation. In the narrative she elaborates on the preparatory squad work she did in the dalit colonies. The leaders had to conduct some data collection in the dalit settlements prior to organising the Chengara Land Movement. These data established the fact that caste is mirrored in Kerala even on the soil. In other words, one can infer the caste of the people who live there by looking at the sites. In her evocative account of her visit to dalit colonies, Seleena Prakkanam writes:

Buses cannot access the rugged and mountainous areas where colony residents settled. A colony will consist of about thirty to forty families. It seems like Kerala's caste system is so evident in the places themselves! Unfinished houses and cottages constructed from plastic sheets are common sights. People spend their entire lives there. But, outside of these colonies, people have quite respectable lives. Only the inhabitants of this colony lead a horrible, unhappy lives. (33)

It is an irrefutable fact that dalits are destined to pull through the subtle discrimination and social stigmatization in terms of caste. It is also undeniable that even today many of the socially ungaurded set of people are left beyond the benefits of the land reform laws of Kerala. Since the plantation estates got exempted from the purview of land ceiling clauses of the law, the excess land available for reallocation was insufficient to be distributed among the landless dalits. The vast stretch of land in Kerala possessed by those corporate giants and plantation owners was not legally taken up. The plantation estate of Harrisons Malayalam is a good case in point. Kapikkad points out, "Harrisons has not paid a pie as rent on the Chengara Estate since 1994. And so, the lease agreement is invalid now. The government, which ought to use the strong evidence against Harrisons in order to take back the estate, is accusing *us* of illegal occupation!" (482). At Chengara Estate, which was under Harrisons Malayalam Plantations control, thousands of people from all across Kerala led by Laha Gopalan and Seleena Prakkanam gathered and turned it into a site of protest. In spite of rain, illness, fear of attacks, unemployment, destitution, and police cases, the protestors remained vibrant and growing. In their struggle for land, hundreds of individuals even came dangerously close to committing suicide. Even children and women were prepared to set themselves on fire with kerosene.

In her life narrative, Seleena Prakkanam also shows the audacity to speak about the haughty and ambitious male leaders of the agitation under Sadhujana Vimochana Vedi. Since there were underlying tensions of internal conflict among the agitators, the widely accepted notion of Chengara struggle being reduced or equated to Laha Gopalan has been questioned. It is a fact that Laha Gopalan has proved to be a formidable presence throughout the history of the Chengara land struggle. He is not beyond the usual patriarchal haughtiness though. Utterly frustrated with the internal patriarchal excesses, Seleena has to quit her position as the Secretary of Sadhujana Vimochana Vedi. She asserts her impressions on Laha Gopalan:

Laha Gopalan demanded me to produce the expenditure report in the general body meeting shortly after I arrived to the agitation

site after being discharged from the hospital. He refused to give in to the request of a sick woman, despite my repeated pleading for some time to recollect and prepare the report. ‘Don’t let her go without reading the report’, he said into the megaphone. This was a strategy to make me dishonest and untrustworthy before others. (136)

It is possible to interpret Seleena Prakkanam’s life story as a declaration of disobedience against the social marginalisation that is imposed on dalits. It tends to become a cultural text that could investigate her socio-cultural position in a specific spatio-historic period. The narrative undoubtedly expresses a radical subaltern viewpoint exposing the double standards of the polity. Her struggle is not to win any additional rights or benefits; instead, it is a work to protect the basic civil rights ensured by the contemporary democratic system. The most regrettable reality, however, is that the general public and the mainstream media tend to view these actions as part of a planned campaign to forcibly take something illegal! So, Chengara is not a mere geological landscape in this narrative, instead it strikes a metaphorical locale exposing the contrived connection between land and caste in Kerala.

The narrative reveals the etched mental processes of a subject who attempts to bridge the gap between her personal as well as political selves. Throughout the narrative, an informed dalit consciousness having remarkable resilience, together with an intense political perspective get unravelled, thanks to the agentic interventions of the transcribers. Through their interventions, the transcribers (O.K. Santhosh and M.B Manoj) bring their language skills and understanding to the process of transcribing the narrative. They incorporate the nuances, cultural references, and linguistic aspects, ensuring that the author’s message is accurately conveyed. By uniting the author’s viewpoint with the expertise of the transcribers, the narratorial subject’s voice gains strength and credibility. The transcribers act as facilitators, bridging any gaps in understanding, and ensuring that the narrative remains true to the lived experiences of the less powerful voice. This collaborative effort between the author and transcribers not only strengthens the narrative but also gives it a unique vantage point. This



piece of life writing becomes authoritative and convincing when the ideological positions unite with those of the transcribers through negotiations and confirmations. Together, they work towards creating a socio- political document that resonates with the readers and provides a genuine portrayal of the specific socio-cultural situation in Kerala

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**Dimple M. Scaria**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Government College

Chittur, Palakkad

India

Pin: 678104

Mob: +91 9497816571

Email: [dimplescaria34@gmail.com](mailto:dimplescaria34@gmail.com)

ORCID:0009-0004-5120-5628

&

**Dr. Sheeba K**

Associate Professor

Research Department of English

Government Victoria College

Palakkad

India

PIN: 678001

Mob: +91 9497630626

Email: [sheeees@gmail.com](mailto:sheeees@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0000-0003-3403-5546