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I N T E R V I E W S

Aspects of the Peasant Movement in Malabar An Interview with E. K. Nayanar

R. Ramakumar*

I interviewed E. K. Nayanar on June 4, 2003. I was then a Ph. D. student working on the socio-economic characteristics of agricultural workers in Kerala, a study that involved the study of Morazha, a village in north Malabar. Morazha was part of the erstwhile Chirakkal taluk, the region of north Malabar characterised by one of the most complex and oppressive forms of landlordism in the period prior to land reform. Chirakkal taluk was also the region from where some of the most well-known organisers of the peasant movement in Malabar — K. P. R. Gopalan, Keraleeyan, Vishnu Bharatheeyan, and E. K. Nayanar — came. The first efforts to organise agricultural labourers in northern Kerala into a separate organisation were made in Morazha in 1948. Peasant and agricultural labour movements in the Chirakkal taluk against landlordism and British rule — including the movement that culminated in the Morazha Conspiracy Case of 1940 — are well-known and widely recorded events in Kerala's modern history. On September 15, 1940, the Left wing of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee organised a rally against British rule at Keecheri, a few kilometers from Morazha village. When the local police denied the organisers permission to hold the rally, the organisers shifted the venue to Anchampeedika, a part of Morazha village but outside the jurisdiction of the police station that had denied permission to the organisers. On September 15, hundreds of peasants marched to Anchampeedika. E. K. Nayanar was among them. K. P. R. Gopalan, who was E. K. Nayanar's uncle, and famously called "Kerala's Bolshevik" by P. Krishna Pillai, led the rally. Soon after the meeting began, a police group led by Sub-Inspector K. M. Kuttikrishna Menon arrived in Anchampeedika and asked the demonstrators to disperse. Gopalan asked them not to leave. Kuttikrishna Menon ordered a lathi-charge on the crowd, and a pitched battle between peasants and police ensued. Two policemen, including Kuttikrishna Menon, were killed in the violence. Gopalan was sentenced to be hanged for the murder of the two policemen. The sentence was reduced to life imprisonment after a special intervention with the British government by Mahatma Gandhi. One of the most vivid descriptions of the Morazha struggle is in Nayanar's autobiography, *My Struggles*.

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Morazha was thus a village that was witness to — and indeed the site of — many historic events in the agrarian history of Malabar and Kerala. Nayanar was from the neighbouring Kalliasseri village. It was as a student of agrarian change in the region and in Morazha, then, that I sought an interview with E. K. Nayanar.

The text below is an edited transcript of my interview with E. K. Nayanar, conducted in his office in the A. K. G. Centre, Thiruvananthapuram. We have in this interview a first-hand account of aspects of a peasant movement that laid the foundations for land reform and different forms of public action in Kerala. Nayanar did not use notes during the interview. The unedited transcript is dotted with the question for which he was well-known: *edo*, *manassilaayo* (roughly, “have you understood?”) and the jesting that the people of Kerala knew to be inimitably part of E. K. Nayanar’s style.

THE INTERVIEW

R. Ramakumar: You joined the Communist Party of India in 1939. Was your entry into the Party influenced by the state of agrarian relations in Malabar at the time?

E. K. Nayanar: I joined the undivided Communist Party of India through the national movement. I remember that, in 1930, when I was a boy, I watched a large procession from Kozhikode to Payyannur under the leadership of K. Kelappan, a procession that passed through Kalliasseri and Morazha. The police had enforced Section 144 in Kalliasseri.¹ K. P. R. Gopalan (KPR), who was my relative, asked me if I would join him in organising a reception for the demonstrators. I agreed. We were students at that time. The speeches at the conference held in Kalliasseri to welcome the demonstrators were mainly on the freedom movement, the conditions of poverty of the Indian people under British rule, and the need to abolish feudal dominance. I was greatly influenced by these speeches. Later, I accompanied the procession to Taliparamba. This was my initiation into the national movement.

Although most of the teachers in our school were against the Indian National Congress, we would wear the Gandhi cap to school. I would proudly tell my friends that I was a Congressman. Our teachers often punished us for wearing the cap. We were asked to leave the classrooms, made to stand on the benches, and given other such punishment.

In this period, a number of leaders of the national movement in Kerala, such as KPR, A. K. Gopalan (AKG), P. Krishna Pillai, and Keraleeyan, were frequent visitors to Kalliasseri and Morazha. I remember seeing, at the head of the procession led by Kelappan, Comrade Krishna Pillai singing

¹ Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code deals with “unlawful assembly.”

“*Vazhka vazhka Bharata samudayam vazhkave, Veezhka veezhka British bharanam veezhkave...*” (Long live, long live, India’s society [civilisation], Down, down, with British rule...)”)

These were the first lines of his song [laughs]. That is all I can remember now, two lines [laughs]. Krishna Pillai, who was the singer, came regularly to Kalliasseri and Morazha. Much later, we became close comrades.

Coming to agrarian relations in that period, the Morazha–Kalliasseri region was entirely dominated by the *janmi* (landlord) system. My family and KPR’s family had a monopoly over the ownership of land in the region. The Dalits and poor peasants of Kalliasseri lived under the dominance of such landlords. Tenancy relations were characterised by rack-rents and almost all the produce had to be passed on to the landlord as rent. The national movement, under leaders like Kelappan, emerged in this kind of a society, one characterised by slavery-like agrarian relations.

The social system was very oppressive. When a Dalit or person of the oppressed castes stood in front of a landlord, he did so with his back bent forward and hands clasped in front of him, or else he would be punished severely. A Dalit was not permitted to wear a lower garment (*mundu*) that extended beyond the knee. He had no right to wear slippers or to wrap a towel-cloth around his head.

Dalits in Kalliasseri and Morazha were not allowed to attend schools. I was deeply moved by an incident that took place at that time. In 1927, two Dalit boys who had come to study in the Kalliasseri Higher Elementary School were beaten up by upper-caste people and thrown out of school. I could not understand why Dalit children were not permitted to sit with other students in the school and study with them. The incident assumed very serious proportions. Many leaders of the national movement visited Kalliasseri in the days that followed to enquire into the incident.

It was in those days that we started, under the leadership of KPR and AKG and the instructions of Mahatma Gandhi, to work for the upliftment of Dalits. Another important leader of this effort was Swami Anandatheerthan. He was a Brahman, a graduate, a disciple of Sree Narayana Guru, and later, a full-time worker of the Congress Party. The mission of his life was the upliftment of Dalits. As part of this mission, he came to Kalliasseri and established an ashram there. We Congress workers and comrades such as KPR worked in close cooperation with the ashram. I, along with other young Congress workers, was in the forefront of the ashram’s activities, which included bathing Dalit children in the village ponds, clothing them, and escorting them to school in order to protect them from attack by upper-caste people.

Under the *janmi* system in Malabar, more than 80 per cent of the tenants’ produce had to be surrendered to the *janmi* as rent. There were also a number of illegal exactions

by the *janmi* under different names, such as *nuri*, *seelakasu*, and *vechukanal*. In Morazha and Kalliasseri too, such exactions were very common.

It was during this period that the Dalits of Travancore organised a powerful agitation against untouchability under the leadership of Ayyankali. This agitation inspired the movement against untouchability in Malabar as well. The difference was that the movement in Malabar was under the leadership of the Congress, that is, the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC).

R. Ramakumar: The Socialist group within the Congress?

E. K. Nayanar: The Socialist group had not yet been formed. In those days, EMS [E. M. S. Nambudiripad], AKG, and others were Congress leaders in Kerala. In 1936, EMS was Secretary of the KPCC. In 1935, AKG was President of the KPCC — were you aware of that fact? A clear conclusion that emerges from the history of political mobilisation in Malabar is that it was through the national movement that the mobilisation and organisation of Dalits, Adivasis, and poor peasants began.

In 1934, under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan, the Congress Socialist Party was formed within the Congress Party at the national level. Almost all the Congress leaders in Malabar joined the Socialist group. It was as a consequence of the formation of the Socialist group that Gandhiji resigned from the Congress in 1935. He resigned at the Bombay Congress of 1935. After 1935 till his death, Gandhiji was only an adviser to the Congress.

In Malabar, not long after the Congress Socialist group was constituted, mass organisations such as the peasants' union (*Karshaka Sangham*), trade unions, a children's organisation (*Bala Sangham*), and a youth organisation (*Yuvajana Sangham*) were set up. A large Congress conference was organised in Bakkalam in Morazha. The Forward Bloc of Subhas Chandra Bose also participated in this conference. Mohammad Abdul Rahman Sahib was President of the KPCC then. A conference of the children's organisation was also held at the same time in Bakkalam and I was the chief organiser of that conference.

The Karshaka Sangham was growing day by day. It was the representative of the national movement and the successor of the Congress Socialist Party. In Chirakkal taluk and its surrounding regions, the Karakkattidam and Kallyatt families were the most powerful *janmi* families. The Karshaka Sangham organised strong agitations against the Karakkattidam *janmi* and Kallyatt *janmi*, in Chirakkal taluk, Irikkur, Payyavur, and the eastern hill regions. We held regular demonstrations at the houses of the *janmis*. In many places, violent clashes ensued. Through these agitations, we were able to put an end to a number of exploitative exactions from peasants, such as *vasi* and *nuri*.

It was on one of these occasions that the tenants of the Chirakkal Raja in Karivelloor village organised a protest against the forced transport of harvested paddy by the Raja to his godown. A group of peasants, led by A. V. Kunhambu, Krishnan Master, and a comrade by the name of Kannan, blocked the transport of paddy to Chirakkal. The Raja called the police. The police arrived and opened fire on the group. Kannan (an agricultural labourer) and the 16-year-old son of a peasant comrade died in the firing. The police did not stop at that. The police and the goons of the landlord let loose a reign of terror in the region against peasant families.

In 1946, there was another important agitation in Kavumbai village. This was a struggle for agricultural land and for land under *punam* cultivation, or the cultivation of fallow forest land. Because of severe food shortages after World War II, the Karshaka Sangham called for increased agricultural production and the distribution of the produce among the poor. Small peasants demanded possession of *punam* land owned by the Karakkattidam *janmi* for cultivation. The landlord called the Malabar Special Police (MSP) to suppress the agitation. The MSP opened fire on a demonstration and four peasant comrades were shot dead. That was the famous Kavumbai struggle. We organised many such struggles throughout Malabar.

The famous Morazha struggle began on September 15, 1940. The Congress had called for a peasants' conference to be held in Morazha on that day to protest against the Government's decision to participate in World War II, and to demand assistance for the rural poor affected by food shortage and drought. EMS, P. Narayanan Nair, and K. Damodaran were Secretaries of the KPCC at that time. EMS was in hiding in a house in Kalliasseri when the Morazha incident took place. The police issued orders prohibiting the organisation of the conference in Morazha. Other small conferences that were to be organised on the same day in Mattannur and Thalasseri were also prohibited. However, we went ahead with the conferences in all those places. I was one of the organisers of the conference at Morazha, along with KPR and Vishnu Bharateeyan. The police employed a brutal lathi-charge to disperse the gathering. Led by KPR, we resisted. It was in the ensuing clash that Sub-Inspector of Police Kuttikrishna Menon was killed. So...

R. Ramakumar: As was Head Constable Gopalan Nair.

E. K. Nayanar: Yes, he was with Kuttikrishna Menon. Both died. After that incident, the police unleashed terror in the region. At that very place, KPR advised me to escape to Kasargode. That was my first experience of going underground.

On the same day, in Thalasseri, two comrades were killed in police firing: Abu and Chathukutty. One was a schoolteacher and the other was a labourer. Similarly, in the police firing at Mattannur, one comrade was killed. Comrades who participated in these agitations were also beaten up cruelly.

Another incident occurred at Munayankunnu near Payyannur on May 1, 1948. There was an agitation at Munayankunnu demanding the distribution of the large quantities of paddy that were stored in the landlord-owned godowns to hungry peasants suffering as a result of severe food shortages. What was the situation? The landlords' godowns were filled with paddy while everyone else was starving. The Karshaka Sangham took out processions to the houses of the landlords and demanded distribution of paddy to the hungry peasants. They were even ready to pay a nominal price for the paddy. When the landlords rejected their demand outright, our comrades forcibly entered the godowns and took the paddy out. Agitations of this kind were organised not just in Payyannur but throughout Malabar.

So, about the Munayankunnu struggle: Munayankunnu was situated to the east of Payyannur town. On a rainy night on which a group of comrades were sleeping at a place on top of a small hill, the Malabar Special Police arrived, surrounded the hill, and opened fire. Six of our comrades, including Kunjappu Master, died in the police firing. There is still a pillar erected in their memory at Munayankunnu. Have you been there?

R. Ramakumar: Yes.

E. K. Nayanar: You have? I was there on May 1 this year.

R. Ramakumar: I went there two years ago.

E. K. Nayanar: Two years ago? You should go there on May 1. Have you been to the place where the police opened fire?

R. Ramakumar: No, only to the pillar.

E. K. Nayanar: Ah, do go. It is a bit in the interior. So, six comrades died in the police firing at Munayankunnu. The police themselves buried them. Their families were not allowed to see their bodies. Every year, our Party commemorates the day.

In the same manner, in Korom panchayat in Payyannur *firka*, a Karshaka Sangham demonstration was passing by, led by Pokkan, a Dalit comrade. The demonstration was going towards a landlord's house. The Malabar Special Police arrived and opened fire at the demonstrators. Pokkan died on the spot. The police used lathis on the demonstrators to disperse them. On the same day, seven comrades died in Korom panchayat. Four comrades were arrested and put in Salem jail.

A consequence of all these courageous struggles was that most of the peasant leaders of Malabar were arrested and interned in the Salem and Vellore jails. On May 11, 1951, warders in Salem jail, armed with guns and other weapons, brutally beat Malabar peasant leaders who were prisoners in the jail. When our comrades hit back,

the police opened fire: 22 comrades were killed. Of the 22 who died, three were from Tamil Nadu and the remaining 19 from Malabar. Many comrades who were injured in the Salem Jail firing were alive till very recently in places such as Thalasseri. Many of them had been shot in the head and chest. One of them died only last year. After the incident, the Minister for Jails in Madras State, Kozhiprathu Madhava Menon, visited Salem jail. “Ours is *Ramarajyam*,” he said in a speech to prisoners. His speech angered our comrades, who spat with contempt on the floor in front of him.

KPR was a prisoner in Salem jail when the firing took place. The court had sentenced him to death for his involvement in the Morazha incident of 1940. My brother was also with KPR in the jail. He had been sentenced to six years of imprisonment in the Morazha case.

R. Ramakumar: Your brother, E. N. Nayanar, was not in Morazha when the incident took place, although you were. I understand that it was a confusion of your initials, E. K. and E. N., that led to your brother, and not you, being accused in the Morazha case. Is that true?

E. K. Nayanar: [Laughs] Yes, yes. They confused the initials of our names and I escaped from being accused in the case. EK became EN (he was Narayanan and I, Krishnan). There was yet another story about this incident. Samuel Aaron, a prominent industrialist and owner of the Aaron Mills, had some personal enmity with my brother, and it was said he used his connections to include my brother’s name in place of mine in the list of accused persons. I am not sure which of these stories is true.

There were nationwide protests and agitation against the death sentence given to KPR. Mahatma Gandhi wrote an editorial in *Young India* against the sentence. Pandit Nehru also intervened in the matter. T. Prakasam was then Chief Minister of Madras State. As a result of these protests, the death sentence given to KPR was reduced to life imprisonment.

We were all underground throughout this period, that is, from 1940. I was in Travancore along with A. V. Kunhambu; Subramanya Shenoy was in Kochi. The police searched intensively for us across the State. We were doing Party work in Travancore; I was in Alappuzha. In June 1946, the Prakasam ministry withdrew the arrest warrants against us, and we came out of the underground and began legal Party work.

R. Ramakumar: Who were the *janmis* in the Morazha–Kalliasseri region at that time?

E. K. Nayanar: Mainly my own family — the Erumbala *taravadu*. Another *janmi* family was the Chandroth *taravadu*. Chandrothu Nambiar was, I remember, a very powerful and cruel *janmi*.

R. Ramakumar: The temple managements (*devaswam*) also owned large tracts of land.

E. K. Nayanar: Yes, but they were controlled by these very same landlords.

R. Ramakumar: Was there a distinct class of landless agricultural labourers in northern Malabar (including Morazha and Kalliasseri) at that time? Or were poor peasants the main source of labour?

E. K. Nayanar: That is an interesting question. Yes, there was a class of landless agricultural labourers. Dalits, for instance, were not allowed to own land. But they did not constitute a large share of the population and were not the major source of labour in agriculture. The Dalit population was also concentrated in specific areas. They were almost totally employed in agricultural work and were like bonded labourers. They worked from early in the morning till late at night, collected their meagre wages, and went home. They were illiterate, not aware of their rights, and severely exploited.

R. Ramakumar: Was there slavery in north Malabar?

E. K. Nayanar: Slavery in the classical sense was not practised in the early twentieth century in Morazha and Kalliasseri and nearby areas in north Malabar. But slavery was widespread in the Wayanad district of Malabar. Slaves were sold like commodities in Wayanad. Slaves were also rented out by one *janmi* to another there. Such a system did not exist outside Wayanad in the twentieth century.

R. Ramakumar: There were freer forms of labour contracts in north Malabar...

E. K. Nayanar: Yes, unlike Wayanad. In Wayanad, there was a temple called Valliyoorkkavu. The deity was a goddess (*devi*). In a particular season every year, Dalit slaves were sold in the temple, with the goddess as “witness.” For example, Vadakkeveettil Kanaran, who is a *janmi*, buys two Dalits, Chakkan and Pokkan, for 10 years from Thekkeveettil Kumaran. Chakkan and Pokkan are just commodities. After our peasant movement emerged in Wayanad, we smashed this barbarian system, we finished it off.

R. Ramakumar: Weaving was also a major occupation in Morazha and Kalliasseri at that time.

E. K. Nayanar: Yes. The weavers belonged to the Salian community. The Chirakkal Raja brought them from Thanjavur and Vellore to weave cloth for the landowning class.

R. Ramakumar: As for the conditions of life of the weavers...

E. K. Nayanar: They too were very poor, though better off than the Dalits. The situation today is dramatically different. We have organised almost all the weaving units of north Malabar into cooperative societies. This has increased employment opportunities significantly. About 25,000 to 30,000 families are now employed in this sector.

R. Ramakumar: Can it be said then that important enabling factors in the development experience of Kerala, such as the cooperative movement and the public distribution system (PDS), were actually outcomes of the struggles for land?

E. K. Nayanar: The public distribution system is more recent.

R. Ramakumar: Yes, but the early movements for distribution of food grain to the poor were closely linked to the struggle for land.

E. K. Nayanar: That is true. But there was no formal administrative structure with respect to the public distribution system in those days. We built that after 1957.

R. Ramakumar: The peasants' union would forcibly enter the godowns of *janmi* landlords and distribute food grain to the poor.

E. K. Nayanar: That is how the movement for food grain began in Malabar. I spoke of the Munayankunnu struggle, the Korom struggle. Those were the beginnings. They were not well-planned or organised programmes of struggle. The peasant movement in each of these areas was reacting spontaneously to conditions of hunger and distress. The public distribution system that emerged later was the appropriate institutional mechanism to achieve what the peasant movement did in earlier days. Left governments developed these institutions after 1957. The earlier struggles, as I said, were spontaneous.

R. Ramakumar: As was the struggle for cultivation of tapioca in Mangattuparamba.

E. K. Nayanar: The Mangattuparamba struggle for cultivation of tapioca on state-owned land was a spontaneous struggle led by our peasant movement to redress the conditions of famine in the region. The organised kisan movement began in Malabar in 1937; that is, after the formation of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP). In the years that followed, the trade union movement and the Left movement in general grew across Malabar. These movements drew strength from earlier agrarian struggles. For instance, take the strike of mill workers in Pappinisseri in 1940. The strike lasted for 100 days. An important feature of all these agitations was that there was close unity between peasants, agricultural labourers, and the industrial working class. When the mill workers of Pappinisseri were on strike, our peasant comrades brought them food every day.

R. Ramakumar: The origin of the cooperative movement in Malabar was also through these struggles. The Producers' and Consumers' Cooperatives (PCCs) that were formed to distribute food grain collected from landlord godowns were converted in many places into *Aikya Nanaya Sanghams* (community-based thrift societies run on cooperative lines).

E. K. Nayanar: Our movement mobilised all sections of the population to become members of the *Aikya Nanaya Sanghams* by taking shares. We were very active in the effort to convert producer and consumer cooperatives into *Aikya Nanaya Sanghams*.

R. Ramakumar: All these developments were thus related to one another: the peasant movement, the beginnings of the PDS, the origins of the cooperative system, and the growth of the Communist Party.

E. K. Nayanar: They were all related — that is the uniqueness of the political history of Malabar.

R. Ramakumar: With respect to the next phase, in 1957...

E. K. Nayanar: In 1957, we initiated land reform. Tenants became landowners. About 35 lakh (3,500,000) households received ownership of land after land reform. It was a revolutionary achievement, the result of a historic political struggle.

R. Ramakumar: The first Communist Government also introduced educational reforms.

E. K. Nayanar: Joseph Mundassery was our Minister for Education in 1957. He was a school-teacher. We made school education completely free till Class 12. We appointed a committee to reform the educational system as a whole. We started a number of new schools, and established hostels for Dalit and Adivasi students. We also introduced concessional tickets on buses for students. Kerala's remarkable achievements in the sphere of school education were a result of the educational reforms initiated by the 1957 Government. We also achieved 100 per cent literacy, the first State to do so.

We also said that we would not allow the police to interfere in labour disputes. We thus took away an important instrument used by the landlord class in the suppression of labour movements. The Right wing could not digest all this. They conspired to dismiss the Government in 1959.

When I was Chief Minister, we introduced, in April 1980, the first pension scheme for agricultural labourers. It was a historic decision made by our Party. I went to Delhi to request Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for financial assistance for the scheme. The Government of India did not give a paisa — they did not consider it a scheme that

promoted “efficiency.” We also started social security schemes for coir, cashew, and handloom workers.

R. Ramakumar: The implementation of land reforms in Kerala is still incomplete...

E. K. Nayanar: What do you mean by incomplete?

R. Ramakumar: The distribution of agricultural land to agricultural labourers is incomplete.

E. K. Nayanar: The responsibility to distribute land to agricultural labourers is that of the government of the day. How much surplus land is there in Kerala to distribute? Whenever we have been in power, we have made sincere efforts to distribute land wherever it has been available. The struggle for land among various sections continues today. Look at the Adivasis’ struggle, which is now a live issue. Do we not have wasteland here? Can we not distribute such land to the landless? I think we should.

R. Ramakumar: The most important struggle for land undertaken by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) after 1957 was the struggle for homestead (*kudikidappu*) rights.

E. K. Nayanar: And we won that struggle. As a result of it, 10 lakh (1 million) households received ownership rights to homestead land. Most of them were Dalit households. They received at least 10 cents (0.10 acres) of land each. They were totally landless and with no shelter before then. They were bonded to *janmis* for the right to live on their land. Our Party discussed this issue seriously. AKG was in the forefront of this struggle. We demanded that at least 10 cents of homestead land be given free of cost to agricultural labourers. C. Achutha Menon was then Chief Minister of Kerala. He was in the Right-wing camp at that time. He did not respond favourably. We organised massive movements across the State. The Government tried its best to suppress these agitations by force. But they could not defeat us. As I said, one million households received rights to homestead land after this struggle. Again, this took place only in Kerala, nowhere else.

[Sings:]²

“Pambukalkku malamundu, paravakalkkakasamundu, manushya puthranu thala chaykkan oridamilla”...vereyengum, ketto? (“Snakes have snakeholes, birds have the sky, but the son of man has no place to lay his head...no other place, do you hear?”)

² The lines that E. K. Nayanar sings here are from a Left-wing song that is based on lines from the New Testament: “And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’” (Luke 9:58)

R. Ramakumar: It has to be an irony of history that this powerful struggle for land had to be waged against a government whose Chief Minister was from the Communist movement, C. Achutha Menon.

E. K. Nayanar: There is no irony here. He was in the other camp. There is no history of an oppressed person gaining anything without struggle; a government does not give any rights to the people unless the people struggle for them. How can a government give another person's land to you? If Kanaran Nair has 25 acres of land and the government goes and tells him to give 20 acres to his agricultural workers, the landowner will go to court. When there is a massive struggle for land, however, the same Kanaran Nair will quietly come to the agricultural workers to seek a compromise. We bargain, and he finally gives 15 acres of land to the workers.

Every Government in India rules within the framework of a bourgeois Constitution. You cannot do anything significant for the people within this Constitution. That is why there was, and is, so much debate within the Communist Party on whether or not we should join the Central Government. It was an issue of debate in 1964, and it remains an issue of debate today. The Indian Constitution is a bourgeois Constitution, not a proletarian one. What are you going to do within this bourgeois Constitution? Are you going to adjust your policies to conform to it? It is a question to be discussed. We have been debating this since the Calcutta Party Congress of 1964. We decided that we could join State Governments. We will work within this Constitution and try to redress the grievances of the poor people. We cannot give comprehensive benefits under this Constitution. So, what is the solution? We have to struggle for the rights of the people.

Will the people who receive land through these struggles support us afterwards? Not necessarily. Without political education among the people, they will not support you forever: communal and other reactionary forces will carry them away.

R. Ramakumar: How do you analyse the problems of Kerala's agricultural economy after land reforms?

E. K. Nayanar: Land reform gave land to the people. But is that enough? No. Look at the costs of cultivation. Agriculture is fast becoming a loss-making enterprise. The costs of seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides are rising rapidly. Look at the rising levels of indebtedness of the peasantry. Who is going to help these peasants? If the Government provides them no relief, they will die of hunger or commit suicide, as has happened among cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. This tendency has already begun in many parts of Kerala. The market is still controlled by the multinationals and big landowners. The prices of paddy, sugarcane, cotton, and coconut are all falling. This is the age of globalisation! Instead of giving relief to farmers, this Government imports vegetables and other agricultural products of multinational corporations into India. They are importing palm oil from Malaysia.

I have been to Malaysia, where there is palm oil surplus and where they want to export palm oil to India. But the question is whether the Central Government has the political will to raise import tariffs in order to bring relief to the Kerala farmer, who will suffer if India imports palm oil. The Central Government, however, is cutting tariffs and ruining the peasantry.

The present Government in Kerala follows the same policies as the Vajpayee Government at the Centre, policies that we oppose strongly. By contrast, look at West Bengal, where the Government is providing relief to the peasantry through many means. Crisis, of course, exists. But capitalism remains the most important crisis for the people. You cannot address that crisis unless you abolish capitalism.

Okay, let us end this conversation here; we can continue another time.

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GLOSSARY

<i>aikya nanaya sangham</i>	Community thrift society run on cooperative lines.
<i>firka</i>	A sub-division of a <i>taluk</i> (a <i>taluk</i> is a sub-district unit of revenue administration).
<i>janmi, janmi system</i>	A form of landlordism in the erstwhile Malabar district.
<i>kudikidappu</i>	Homestead.
<i>mundu</i>	Lower garment.
<i>nuri</i>	A large pick of paddy kept aside as the landlord's share for every 10 <i>para</i> (a volumetric measure equivalent to about 10 kilograms) of paddy measured out as the <i>janmi</i> 's share (Radhakrishnan 1989).
<i>punam</i>	A form of dryland cultivation that was prevalent "chiefly on hills covered with jungle" (Radhakrishnan 1989) A <i>punam</i> crop was "originally raised only once 12 years, mostly by poor people" (<i>ibid.</i>).
<i>seelakasu</i>	A form of illegal exaction by the <i>janmi</i> .
<i>taravadu</i>	A joint family in Kerala. A <i>taravadu</i> was a legal entity and could own land.
<i>vasi</i>	A margin to make up the deficiency in the quantum of grains through drying. This was three volumetric measures (<i>para</i>) for every 10 (<i>para</i>) measured out as the <i>janmi</i> 's share.
<i>vechukanal</i>	A form of illegal exaction by the <i>janmi</i> .