

Research Article

**THE SAGA OF COMMONS IN KUTTANAD: REPRESENTATIONS OF MARUTHA  
PORUL IN THAKAZHI SIVASANKARA PILLAI'S RANDIDANGAZHI**

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**Abstract**

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Rantidangazhi (Two Measures of Rice) is a novel about the agricultural workers of Kuttanad, in South Kerala. Kuttanad region's past, present, and future are implied in the course of the novel. Since Rantidangazhi tells the story of the agricultural workers of Kuttanad and the setting is strictly rural, and the problems related to the conflicts between landed workers and landless labourers in the context of the rural economy, the novel can be very well connected to Maruthatinai. Expansive paddy fields and fertile landform the marutham landscape which becomes the space of prosperous and happy life of upper- and middle-class landowners of Kuttanad. This paper argues that the driving force of epochal changes in Kuttanadu was the transformations of the commons; different regimes that ruled Kuttanadu have actively engaged in the appropriation, distribution, and production of commons along with and for the dominant sections in the region.

**Keywords:** Maruthatinai; Kuttanad; landless wage labourers; Pariahs; Pulayas

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Kerala is a narrow strip of land lying between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats in the southwest corner of India, with a population of over twenty million who speak Malayalam, a language of the Dravidian stock. Very few writers in this language, which has literature nearly a thousand years old, have so far won any recognition outside India, except perhaps Vallathol Narayana Menon, the poet, and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, the novelist. Thakazhi may be called a regionalist in the best sense of the term. His major works deal with the people of a small region in Kerala. He is at his best when he writes about the people of Kuttanad. The village of Thakazhi is part of Kuttanad, the water-logged complex in the delta of the Manimalai, Pampa, and other rivers which flow into Vembanad backwaters to turn a 100-150 square mile area into what was once the rice bowl of Kerala. Kuttanad in the old days had its own geographical and socio-economic identity, which marked it off from other parts of the state. There was very little landmass; even the rice fields had been reclaimed from the backwaters in recent times. There were at least two floods every year to synchronize with the monsoon rains. All rice fields would be underwater unless the water had been pumped out for sowing and harvesting. The floods would submerge even the land where houses and temples stood. But the people would make celebrate the season

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of rains and floods by holding ceremonial boat processions or competitive boat races. Little blocks of land were linked to one another by bridges made of the trunks of coconut trees. The chief means of transportation was the boat, and there were boats of all shapes and sizes. The temple was the centre of social and cultural life, at least for the upper classes; the lower classes as well as the non-Hindus had no access to it. With the decay of the old feudal economy and the coming of English education, changes began to take place even in the sleepy villages of Kuttanad. Slowly but inevitably and irrevocably, revolutionary transformations swept over the land and the people. These changes are nowhere recorded with greater accuracy and deeper concern than in the writings of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. His early life in the village of Thakazhi had enabled him to learn from first-hand personal experience the tragedies and comedies affecting the social fabric of a whole people, so rooted in place but perpetually evolving through time. The portrayal of this kaleidoscopic panorama is Thakazhi's forte.

### **2. REVIEW OF RESEARCH**

Godwin Constantine in his paper "Nature in Ancient Tamil Poetry – Research Methodologies and Researchers" points out that Ancient Tamil literature of South India is a rich source of history and cultural heritage of ancient Tamil society. The corpus of this Sangam literature comprises of 8 anthologies and 10 idles. This literary corpus is divided into two categories depending on the content. One is Aham-which deals with matters pertaining to love between a man and a woman. The second is Puram- which deals with matters other than that are dealt in Aham. The conventions and codes followed by Sangam poets are documented in Tholkappium. Nature forms a vital part of Sangam literature. Research on the place of nature in Sangam poetry has helped us to understand the development of culture, economy, ethics and religious beliefs in the ancient Tamil society. However, the aesthetic approach used in the Sangam poetry needs further research.

A K. Ramanujan in his article "The Interior Landscape: Classical Tamil Love Poems NYRB/Poets" has studied the symbolic significance of the landscape in his work. He considers the landscape as "a repertoire of images". Ramanujan regards *ulurai* – a poetic device of Sangam poetry – where a nature scene is used to represent human action or feeling without points of comparison or use of explicit words as markers of comparison like in metaphor and similes- as a "language within language". He states that the Sangam poets used a set of five landscape imageries and formalised the world into a symbolic representation of human feeling. According to Ramanujan this symbolism had been generally agreed upon by the Sangam poets and had been uniformly used in Sangam poetry. Ramanujan discusses how the convention restricts the imagery for different speakers within the poems. He wrote "The range of imagery, not only its quality or content but also its very narrowness of width of choice, indirectly characterises the speaker and his class". Hence it is clear that in Sangam poetry the imagery is used to form the background for the human aspect and the choice of imagery is determined by the importance of the speaker.

K N Ganesh in Review of Agrarian Studies explained what are the factors makes Randidangazhi different is that it is a faithful depiction of the emergence and growth of class consciousness in an agricultural labourer. Koran is a labourer who goes through harrowing experiences, and tries to make sense of them and interpret them himself. He is offered different options for dealing with the circumstances of his life: nationalist politics, religion, defeatism, cynicism, and surrender – options that are offered to the working class then as now. Koran interprets the reality around him as being

the oppression by the owners of property of the propertyless, and recognises class struggle as the only way to break free. The history of the communist movement in southern Kerala, and in Kuttanad in particular, shows that the vast majority of the working people who joined the movement drew lessons from their own experiences, from the grim and stark reality that surrounded them, and drew conclusions that would have lasting historical significance. Koran, Chirutha, and Chathan of Rantidangazhi are their fictional representations.

### 3. RESUSCITATION OF IDENTITY

The characters that appear in his stories and other writings are culled from his encounter with people in his profession as a pleader; especially the characters in the *Two Measures of Rice*. In the lower courts particularly, the clients consisted mostly of the poor classes. Among them were agricultural labourers and fishermen from the seaside. This gave Thakazhi an enviable opportunity to come into close contact with people who were accustomed to a sort of hand-to-mouth existence, who never amassed wealth, but worked and earned their daily pittance either on land as landless wage labourers or on the sea through hard struggle against the forces of nature. His practical experience of handling tenancy disputes gave him an insight into not only the psychology of farmers and farm workers but the very materialistic economics of land tenure. He realized that there were two sides to cases of eviction from occupied land. His theoretical knowledge of Marxist economics was considerably modified by the realities of land ownership in his area. There were the so-called tenants who were better off than their landlords. The latter were often deprived of their livelihood by the former.

Rantidangazhi tells the story of the agricultural workers of Kuttanad; the setting is strictly rural, and the problems relate to the conflicts between landowners and landless labourers in the context of a rural economy. The wages are paid in kind; the barter system has not been fully replaced by the monetary system. But both the workers and their employers have to reckon with another factor—the land. Everything turns around that central fact of existence. The land here is the rice field; it is not impersonal; in fact, it does not seem to tolerate impersonality. In the course of the novel, however, both the land and the people are moving away from the old rural economy and towards greater impersonality. Meanwhile, life is still rooted in tradition; both the landowners and the labourers are part of that tradition along with the land which is the link between the two. The absence of impersonality makes the tragedy of the workers more painful.

Alleppey is on the borders of Kuttanad; the location of Rantidangazhi is the heart of Kuttanad. It is the Thakazhi country proper. Here among the water-locked rice fields and little islets of coconut gardens live the pulayas and pariahs who work there, and their masters, mostly upper-caste Hindus and latterly Christians, who virtually treat them as bonded slaves and own all the lands. These workers are among the poorest of the poor, hardly better than beggars, for the beggars have the freedom to starve, whereas these have to starve without any freedom. Victims of their delusions, the illiterate and superstitious pulayas and pariahs have for long been subjected to inhuman treatment at the hands of their masters. They are used to blaming their sufferings on themselves or their past lives rather than on their masters or the social system. They are quite acclimatized to a fatalistic attitude of resignation to whatever might happen to them.

With the achievement of Indian independence and the introduction of a responsible government in the state of Travancore, an adult franchise was introduced and the pulayas and pariahs got the right to vote. The growth of political consciousness made them aware of their power, and this made them think of their rights and privileges as citizens as well as workers. The landless agricultural workers began to form their organizations to safeguard their rights. Young

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and intelligent, and now smarting under the arbitrary treatment of his master, Koren came to be the leader of the new union which began to make demands on behalf of the workers. Naturally, the big landowners were offended and Koren became the target of their displeasure. When Koren's father died, he was not allowed to bury the dead body where he had lived; this was in retaliation for his union activities. Koren wanted to devote all his time to organizational work and began to feel that having a family was an obstacle. Although Chirutha was prepared to let Koren do whatever he liked, they were both apprehensive of the unscrupulous nature of his master's son, Chacko. One night when Koren was out on his rounds, Chacko went to their hut where Chirutha was alone. As soon as he attempted to molest her, Koren turned up all at once and caught Chacko red-handed. In the ensuing scuffle, Chacko died. Convicted for murder, Koren was sentenced to imprisonment for fifteen years. At the time of going to prison, he entrusted his friend, and former lover of his wife, with the care of Chirutha. Chathan looked after her with brotherly devotion. Chirutha gave birth to a child; it was of course the child of Koren, but Chathan helped her to bring him up. When Koren came out of the prison, he was happy to be reunited with his wife, child, and friend. His sufferings were not in vain, for the new generation of workers could now shout with conviction the new slogans: Long Live Revolution, Long Live Union, and Land to the Tillers. Velutha, his son, also joined the shouting.

As in *Thottiyude Makan*, in *Rantidangazhi* also the socio-political message is effectively communicated only where it is indirectly and unobtrusively presented. In the chapters that deal with the normal, routine life of the pulayas and pariahs, Thakazhi's realism is steady and balanced. Some of the minor characters come off very well because they are portrayed with an open mind, with no axe to grind. In both the novels, an awkward and hurried ending is conjured up by the author making some characters shout slogans, as if by an afterthought, lest some critics fail to be satisfied with their "progressivism". But this weakness is more than compensated for by the excellent rendering of the everyday life of the suffering people. They reveal Thakazhi's real insight into human nature more than these overt attempts at generalization. One of the early scenes in the novel describes Chirutha's betrothal. Her father and mother stand fully revealed in the passage, which in the Malayalam original exploits the pariah dialect of Kuttanad:

When the Neelamperoor party withdrew in disgust, Kunjeli lost her patience. Her tongue began to itch. "Damm't, what's all this fun? If you quarrel with everyone who comes and turn them out like this--- Who do you think you are? How long is the girl going to be like this?" Was he not the master of the house, Kali asked himself? He was conscious of his authority and he was determined to exercise it.

"Woman, I know what I should do", he snapped back. Kunjeli flared up.

"What the hell do you know?"

"Woman, I will never give the girl away unless I get the full amount of the bride-money, and grain. The lad who pays me what I demand is not going to be a loser either."

"I feel like saying something nasty. Do you think you can go on scrounging on your daughter for your living?" Kali Parayan was furious. He lifted a heavy log of wood to strike her. Kunjeli made a quick dive. (2)

There is something in the making of Kali Parayan that prepares us for the heroine's father in *Chemmeen*. But Kali Parayan does not grow large enough to dominate this novel as Chemban Kunju does. There is yet another anticipation of the later work here. The insistence on the observance of cleanliness and virtue is a prime condition for the well-being of those who live on

the land, even as chastity is important for the fisherman's wife to protect the lives of those who live on the sea. The honeymoon of Chirutha and Koren makes some people uneasy.

"Do you know what will be the outcome if this love-making goes on?" Maani asked.

"What?"

Making every effort to open her drooping eyes, Samayal's wife repeated:

"What- what's it?"

"It's the Thambrans who are going to suffer for it."

"Don't forget that we work in the puncha patam. Its only protection is the bund, as thin as a thread. Everything is built on truth, you know. If you are not clean and virtuous, the bunds may be breached or the crops destroyed by pests. By employing these lecherous people to work in the field it is our Thambran who is going to suffer. The fields have got to produce grain if we poor people are to get anything even by nicking. The blame is going to be on us. It was my Chinnan's father who had got them the job." (20-21)

Randidangazhi tells a triangular love story: one girl and two men. The unsuccessful lover is passive, but the one who marries the girl suffers. But Chirutha has the sobriety and worldly wisdom of the reclaimed land, and so she can argue Chathan into accepting the status of a brother. There is probably a certain degree of idealization in Chathan's character. But Karuthamma in Chemmeen breathes the passion of the sea, unreclaimed and unreclaimable enhances the mass tragedy in Chemmeen.

Parallel to the drinking parties of the scavengers in the earlier novel, one has in Ratidangazhi pulayas and pariahs discussing their role in Kuttanad. It is the poor man's version of the history of Kuttanad. Once these workers begin to interpret history for themselves and eat of the forbidden fruit of knowledge, they start thinking of changing the course of that history.

Chennen had a legitimate doubt: suppose there were no pariahs and pulayas, how could this puncha farming go on?

That was indeed a question. No one would dare to say that it could not. However, Ityathi asserted that the farming of the puncha patam could not be done by anyone but the pulayas and the pariahs of Kuttanad. Other people had tried before and failed.

"But there never was a time when there were no pariahs or pulayas", Samayal pointed out.

However tipsy and fuddled, Koren could raise a relevant question: "Even if we are there, what will happen if we don't work for them?"

"We'll be starving!" Kunjappi's drooping head found a prompt reply.

"And the Thamburans also will be starving!" Ityathi completed it.

"The whole country will be starving", Chennen added. (26)

Perhaps no sociologist or Marxist theoretician could explain the role of workers more lucidly than this. It is this self-knowledge, this dramatic discovery of their power that helped to unite the workers. Here Thakazhi the artist has not surrendered to the political ideologue but has efficiently imbibed political ideology and fused it seamlessly with the reality that he is trying to depict without compromising the demands of art. As in the best of social realism, which influenced him, Thakazhi upholds a bottoms-up vision of life.

That the exploitation of the workers was not only political or economic is made clear by the reference to the sexual adventurism of the landowning class which helped the working-class women to join forces with their men. This also gave additional emotional power to their activism.

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Chirutha gave her full support to Koren's full-time political work because she knew how helpful it would be for women like her.

While the realistic elements in the novel have won universal approbation, some critics have taken exception to the romantic and sentimental features which have crept into its structure. The role of Chacko as the rapist villain and that of Chathan as the dejected, yet ascetic, lover have been taken as elements in conflict with the basic realism of the work. A. Balakrishna Pillai, in a very perceptive review of the novel, highlighted this aspect when he said that "this novel which begins in a semi-romantic marriage scene, after passing through the later semi-romantic scenes, ends in a purely romantic reunion as in the case of Nala". Expatiating upon this point, Krishna Chaitanya says:

He grafts on to this living tissue a nearly withered bud from the romantic spring of an earlier era. The libidinous landowner is a stereotype: even if he had been as appallingly ascetic as an origin that went to the extent of emasculating himself, the injustice of the feudal system of land ownership would not have become excusable. Similarly, if Chirutha and Chathan had succumbed to the normal human weaknesses, the cause of social justice for their class would not have been impaired in the least. ...Thakazhi here resurrects an old, almost archeological, pattern with the virtuous wife, the man of heroic action (Karma- Vira in the typology of Sanskrit drama), the man of heroic sacrifice (Thyaga-Vira) and a conclusion which recalls the reunion after much travail of Nala and Damayanthi in the old romantic legend. (285-8)

The fact is that there is in Thakazhi at some depth a romantic who does not surface except when the author is not on his guard.

There is perhaps another streak of the sentimental and the romantic which operates behind this novel about Kuttanad. It has a special place among Thakazhi's longer works. The subject is closest to his life. The dedication of the novel makes this clear. It harps upon the kind of personal affection that used to exist between the master and the servant in the old days: the novel also treats the transformation that is taking place in the personal relationship between them in the new set-up, where land is cultivated not for people to have their food but to sell to outsiders for cash payment. The dedication recalls the tenderness of the romanticized attachment of the serf to his lord.

My revered father who died as a genuine farmer of Kuttanad had a worker who served him from his childhood. They lived together for over sixty years. A good part of my childhood memories is about that devoted servant of my father. When he learned that a son was born to his master, he was overcome by indescribable excitement.... And it seems, out of his desire to see his dear young master at close quarters he committed a grave error. Unseen by anyone, he walked up to the baby that was lying in the yard and playing and stood watching him; he touched him; he took him in his arms. Looking around like a thief he was.... This book is dedicated to the memory of that Maithara Kunjappan. ("Dedication" TMR)

What holds a work together, what also contributes to its emotional power, is not just the intellectual skill in organizing the plot and devising the style, but some source of inspiration that goes into the total life of a writer.

In the foreground, however, one has the triangular relationship among Chirutha, the daughter of Kaliparayan and Kunjeli, and the two young men, Koren and Chathan, who aspired for her hand. Chirutha had the reputation of being an excellent farmhand, and her father was

therefore adamant about demanding a very high amount as her bride price. Chathan could not meet that demand, but the more enterprising Koren bound himself to the service of the big landowner Pushpavelil Ouseph and got the required amount as an advance for future services and married Chirutha. He was put in charge of a hundred-acre rice field owned by Pushpavelil Ouseph. After the honeymoon which was unconventional enough to raise the eyebrows of the elderly women who predicted doom, Koren applied himself to his task with great diligence. The land responded gaily to his hard work, and the crop in his field proved to be the best in the whole locality. He was proud of being a good farm worker and expected to continue in the service of his master Ouseph as his permanent employee. But at the time of harvest, he had the biggest surprise of his life when Ouseph treated him on a par with other hired labourers and disposed of him with meagre wages. He got only a tiny fraction of what he thought was his due. But the worker was not in the habit of asking for any explanation; that was the order of the day, and he had no right to question it. The landowners were all-powerful; the entire system and institutions like the government implicitly supported them.

Thakazhi, the Chronicler of Kuttanad begins his novel by introducing the heroine and stating her efficiency as a farmer, who deserves any amount of dowry either in grain or money,

That day also a man was visiting Ettil Thara to see the girl. He was the fourth candidate of the month and a native of Neelamperoor.

The first of the suitors was ready to accept any demand of the prospective father-in-law in grain or cash.....

It was no wonder that young suitors came flocking to ask for Chirutha's hand. She was a real darling, an excellent worker --and in the pink of health.

In weeding and transplanting --in fact in any job in the paddy- field --she was unrivalled. Not only that. There wasn't a Paraya lass in the whole village who was a match for her in the art of reaping. Sickle in hand she would enter the field at daybreak and not before threshing time in the evening would she lift herself. One could then see the lovely sheaves lying in a double row on either side of her.

She was as efficient in farm work as she in housekeeping. Lucky would be the man who got her as his wife for his family would never know starvation.

As young men began to queue up to seek his daughter's hand, the father was convinced that she was worth something. He could get any price he wanted, he thought. (1)

The location of Rantidangazhi is the heart of Kuttanad. To this chronicler of Kuttanad, the village called Thakazhi becomes what is Wessex to Thomas Hardy and Manawaka to Margaret Laurence. It is the Thakazhi country proper. Here among the water-locked rice fields and little islets of coconut gardens live the pulayas and pariahs who work there and their masters, mostly upper-caste Hindus and latterly Christians, who virtually treat them as bonded slaves and own all the lands. Kuttanad, the amazingly beautiful land of luxurious green paddy fields in Alappuzha district is popularly known as 'The Rice Bowl of Kerala'. The region lies between the sea and the hills and is made up of a maze of waterways including lakes, canals, rivers, and streams. Kuttanad is a region with the lowest altitude in India, with 500 square kilometers of the region below sea level. Most of the area is covered with water throughout the year. Kuttanad is one of the few places in the world where farming is carried out below sea level.

The region nick-named as the Netherlands or Holland of Kerala, the Kuttanad area in the main backwaters region, has two distinct areas, namely lower and upper Kuttanad based on altitude or height above the sea level. It is the lower Kuttanad region that is called the 'Netherlands' because

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the arable land is below sea level. As in Holland, dykes or bunds around the rice fields keep out water when needed, thereby enabling cultivation.

The aim of Rantidangazhi was not merely to record faithfully the transformation that was taking place in this social malice at the time; it was, to be more specific, to awaken these dormant forces and to make them aware that they had the power in them to change the conditions of their living. At the time this novel was written, the landless agricultural labourers of Kuttanad were just beginning to organize themselves and clamour for a more decent wage system, for a more equitable distribution of the land, and better service conditions. The situation in Kuttanad today is very different from what it was in 1947. The yield per acre has gone up, the wages are higher, the workers are organized although, under the banners of different political parties, absentee landlordism and the remnants of feudalism have disappeared, there has been some redistribution of land, there is a ceiling on the extent of landed property a family may possess, there are even retirement benefits for the agriculture workers. Some critics believe that Rantidangazhi had something to do with these progressive developments. Of course, it is still arguable that other problems have come in the place of the old ones, partisan politics lead to a lot of violent skirmishes from time to time, the fragmentation of holdings has made farming an unprofitable vocation, and there are still tens of thousands of people below the poverty line. But those are perhaps problems for the politician and the economist, although not irrelevant in the evaluation of this novel.

#### **4. REPRESENTATION OF MARUTHAM**

Marutham lands, the lands adjacent to it, a village with agrarian fields and its surroundings form the region Thakazhi. Most of the land part is built by man. In Thakazhi's words, it is not created by God. Seven or eight decades ago, how was this place? It was an exclusively water-logged place. There were very expansive paddy fields; and on the borders of those fields, here and there were man-made raised places (the fruit of human hard work) where one could see a few huts where human beings stayed. There one could not live without a boat. During the rainy season, if it rained for five to six days continuously then there would be a flood. Water entered into the huts also. With water from the east, this place became a lake of lashing waves. During November – December months the land would wake up. The green silk of the paddy fields would cover the land. Then it was time for festivals. At nights there were Chakra songs. Some farmers could predict the weather, reading the movements of the planets. Thakazhi's strength as a storyteller comes out when he narrates the story of this Maruthanilam.

Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri in his masterpiece Narayaneeyam speaks about the philosophy of Brahma. The very first sloka, to be more precise the second line which reads "kaladesavathibyaam" explains the 'unlimited' nature of Brahmam, which is not limited by space and time. But Tinai Poetics gives primary and foremost importance to its mutalporul i.e. place and time, or 'the where and when as the name indicates. [Muthal means first or prime and porul means meaning or wealth]. The only thing that cannot be limited by time and space is 'Brahma'. All other things which come under the purview of Brahma are controlled by the axes of time and space. That is why the whole universe minus Brahma—i.e., all living and non-living things—is under the control of time and place.

The time fixed for Maruthamtinai is all six seasons and the end of the night and the beginning of a day. The very first words are "That day". The novel begins, "That day also a man was visiting Ettilthara to see the girl. He was the fourth candidate of the month and a native of Neelamperoor" (1). Words such as 'day' and 'month' denoting temporality come in the first



paragraph itself. The month of Metam is referred to many times on pages 6,7 and 8 of the novel. The Malayalam month of Metam is from the middle of April to the middle of May. The astrological calendar starts with Chaithra month. In Tamil, it is called Chithira. In Malayalam, it is known as the month of Metam when the sun will be at the peak. This month is considered to be auspicious; hence auspicious rituals like marriages are conducted during this month. Again, Metam is also the month of harvest. When Koren wants to somehow win Chirutha's hand, he is confident he can find the bride's money because it is Metam: "Koren decided not to worry whether what he is going to say will offend tradition or estrange his uncle. Mustering up courage he said, 'I will pay the bride money Achchan asks for. But please, do not promise the girl to anyone else before the end of metam'" (6). Koren's words themselves show that Metam is the month of harvest: "During the previous metam when he was in the lake area for harvest both he and she had lived in adjoining huts. Throughout the season they did their reaping in adjoining rows. In the farmyard also, their work was in adjoining positions" (7). But his confidence is assailed by doubts from time to time. "He wondered whether he could be able to save up all that money even by the end of metam" (7). Koren wonders what he would do in the lean months: "Suppose he could? What then? How would he manage in Mithunam and Karkatakam, the months of monsoon flood and stark unemployment? If all his little savings were to be squandered over the wedding, she would also have to starve" (8).

Mithunam- Karkatakam stands for the months of June-July. These months are known for their continuous rain and scarcity of jobs and food for laymen as it is given in the novel itself. Koren was in a dilemma. He sought the advice of his father. Velutha, Koren's father gave his consent on one condition that before asking anyone else for a loan Koren should get the permission of their master i.e. their Thambran. At this juncture Koren thought:

Then why not ask our Thambran for a loan? Personally, Velutha preferred that. That grand old Paraya had a store of anecdotes about the good old days. It was sixty years ago during the time of the elder Thambran that Velutha had married Koren's mother. All the expenses of the wedding were borne by the Thambran himself. And before that, Velutha's father had married his mother exactly in the same way. He described in detail the relationship that had subsisted for generations between the Araikal family and his own. He wanted that Koren too should get his wife with the grain and money granted by his Thambran. But unfortunately, the days were gone when the Araikal family could make large gifts of grain and money. At that time they owned estates and paddy fields all over the country, today they have no estates and no paddy fields. It was leasehold land that they were farming today. Nor did they need many farmlands now. Nevertheless, Velutha insisted that Koren should not seek any employment elsewhere without first asking his own Thambran. (8-9)

Thus, here it is a piece of information about the past and the glory and prosperity their masters once had. A picture of not alone the immediate past but the story of the previous generation too is given here. Immediately one is given the present position is also given. Koren got the grain and money he wanted even though the terms were very stringent. "A farmhand should put in a minimum of 180 days work in a year" (10). Though exact half of the year he had employment he found it very difficult to make both ends meet because of the terms and conditions of his employment. The festivals like Onam, Makam, or the New Moon are pointers to time; they fall in August, September, and after mid-July respectively.

The month of Metam posits a deadline or ultimatum in the lives of Koren and Chirutha. Now and then they are reminded of this point in time. Any number of instances can be quoted

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from the novel as follows: "As he sat gazing at her pretty, radiant face, Koren's dreams would begin to take wings. 'How I wish to see my girl with a tilak on her forehead, dressed in a nice loin-cloth and wearing a silk blouse! – Hmm! Let the month of Metam be over,' he would say" (14). Both of them are eagerly waiting for the month of Metam to end and they hope then only they can begin a new life. But Chirutha had her dreams. And she also resolved, "Hmm let the month of Metam be over" (14). It seemed "life could begin only after Metam" (15) to be more precise, if he wants to get his full allowances he should work every day and only after the harvest of Metam he would get it. Even for only one day, he cannot absent himself from work. "It was a cloudy day. A chill wind blew. There was intermittent rain and it was very cold. Chirutha asked Koren not to go to work that day. He had half a mind to stay away. If he didn't work that day it would mean starvation that night" (15).

Koren had a friend, Kunjappi, who had been working as an 'onapanikkaran' for a big farmer in Kainakari for fifteen years. He took Koren to his master Auseph of Pushpavelil and was employed by him. Koren was also living with Kunjappi. He shared his hut, having partitioned it with palm-frond matting (15). After a few days, Koren got consent from his master to reclaim a small plot of land from the paddy field and build a hut there. But he has no time for that. The only solution is that he should work overtime, that is, after the day's work in the paddy field, every evening he should have to bring a boat-load of earth and stones to fill it and raise the ground before starting to build the hut. This being a Herculean task "There was little possibility of their moving out before Metam" (19). The novel continues:

Koren's plot of land rose one span above the water level. Before the sowing season in Dhanu it should rise sufficiently. He worked hard on every moonlit night, laying clod upon clod.... It was the month of Thulam. On an auspicious day, the work of building the outer dike commenced with the ceremonial laying of the first clod of earth. That was an event celebrated with a feast which was attended by all the workers of the farmers. From that day the pariahs and the Pulayas who worked on the pucha patam were virtually sworn to observe strict continence. (19)

The micro-time meant for maruthamtinai is the end of the night and the beginning of the day. This is true of Thakazhi's novel, *Two measures of Rice* too. Here while describing the worth and efficiency of Chirutha one reads: "sickle in hand she would enter the field at daybreak and not before threshing time in the evening would she lift herself up." (1). Again, Maani, Kunjappi's wife, while finding fault with Chirutha's behaviour when they are all under the influence of one or two bowls of toddy mentions all the units of micro-time: "It is you who lack good sense and good manners" Maani continued, without any consideration whether it is morning or midnight all the time parading in the boat and flirting with your man, and whether it is evening or midday, indulging in...well, I must say more..."(20).

The pathos of the novel is built up in different stages of poverty, destitution, and oppression. Koren who has pledged his life to Ausepp Mapillah for the money needed for his marriage has to suffer want from the early days of his marriage itself. Even amid plenty, they experience destitution. The novel speaks about how they faced poverty during the harvest season. On the first day of harvest, "There was nothing on their hut for breakfast that day" (53). The novel expatiates on their condition: "They were passing through the pre-harvest days of scarcity and starvation. For several days had nothing to eat in his hut. He borrowed as much as he could from his friends. They too did not have anything left. Thus, the first day of harvest was a day of starvation" (54). Koren took a sheaf and kept it in his bag. Seeing this master, Ausepp Mapillah shouted at him and asked what was in his bag. "Just a couple of years. Your serf didn't have

anything to eat this morning. It's just for a drink,' Koren replied" (54). The poor serf's condition was very pathetic.

Though they toiled throughout their lives and brought a lot of gain to their masters, they had nothing to eat at least once a day. They were forced to be dishonest as in the case of Pathrose's wife: "Pathrose's wife was very clever notwithstanding the Thambran's vigilance, she managed to get away with two quarts of grain which was later shared between Pathrose and Koren. That very night it was boiled, roasted, husked, and cooked. Thus, they had their supper" (55). But these stolen moments of prosperity are short-lived for "Next morning Koren and Chirutha went to work on an empty stomach again" (55). Their misery does not dissuade the Thambran from scolding them for whatever loss they have incurred him. Koren is reprimanded by Ausepp for losing a few ears of grain. Koren notices the difference in the attitude of the master once his coffers are full:

In the afternoon Koren approached Ausepp. He could hardly stand on his feet. He intended to request him for a handful of grain for a drink. But when he looked at that greedy face, he decided to give up the idea.

What a difference in the expression on the face! What change since the sowing season! Then he used to be very pleasant to him; would show concern and sympathy for him. How gentle and sweet! But today! He hardly seemed to recognise him; he seemed to hate him. (56)

The month of Metam, the month of prosperity in Kuttanad does not help them: "But now in this rich month of Metam, we are starving" (58). The landscape presents a contrast to the condition of the protagonists: "Harvesting was at its climax. Reaping went on all day, and threshing all night. During this season Kuttanad knew no day and night. No one slept. Grain, sheaves, hay, and ears of corn lay everywhere. Work continued round the clock, but still, it did not seem to make much headway" (59). There is an instance of the irony of the situation in the novel in the following context. The author exalts "No one engaged in that tremendous enterprise ever knew fatigue, sloth, hunger or thirst further he asks 'Could there be any hunger if the pot was full with rice?'" (59). He continues: "There was not a vacant spot on Ausepp's farmyard. Sheaves of several days' harvesting were stacked in one place. There was not enough room in the yard" (59).

Though this was the situation in the place, Koren had nothing to eat; not even a sheaf for a drink was taken off. There are umpteen examples of this pathetic situation. "Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink" was the situation of Koren. He is also forced to feel that how much he had worked hard to get a plentiful production, he was not allowed to partake of its benefit. Samayal, the head Pulayan, and Pathrose, another pulayan accuse him of asking irrelevant questions. They try to teach him lessons of unbreakable convention; "Why should we know that? Samayal asked, "No one Pulayan or Parayan has ever known that" (60).

An untoward thing happens here. "It must be past midnight. It was a lovely moonlit night" (60). In all the farmyards, including Ausepp's farmyard threshing was going on. "Chirutha shot into the yard, panting and gasping. She was trembling all over and was still in the grip of fear. She turned and looked back" (61). Mariya who was engaged in threshing asked about the matter in vain. The women guessed many things such as snake, evil spirit as the causes of her fear but it was Mariya who could sense the correct reason or cause and Chirutha slowly narrated the incident in whispers:

When she had got as far as the palm grove beyond the paddy field, Chacko sprang in front of her from somewhere. Chirutha showed her chest to Mariya. It bore signs of nail scratches. The edge of her loincloth was also ripped. But she struggled herself from Chacko's grip and fled. (62)

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The economic exploitation of the poor is further aggravated by the attempted sexual assault. The body of the labourer is occupied along with her labour.

A reference to the month of Mithunam comes when Ausepp Mappliah wants to settle accounts with Koren somehow or other. Koren insists on getting it in grain while Ausepp is wishing to offer only in terms of money because it is more profitable to him. But Ausepp puts it like this "From Mithunam onwards you will get your wages in grain. This year we are short of grain. The Government has taken the whole lot away" (68). Ausepp is robbing Koren of his wages as he is ready to give only two rupees a bushel. However, "Koren had to take it reluctantly, helplessly" (68). Distributing desire over a micro-temporal paradigm becomes the oppressor's strategy for the perpetuation of exploitation: possible prosperity in Mithunam is *raison suffisante* for withstanding present starvation in Metam.

Later one gets a reference to the micro-time of the day in the words of Chirutha while she worries about the future of the pulaya and pariah communities: "How would it be possible to protect the honour of the Parayis and the Pulayis who had to sleep in insecure bamboo huts with no doors or locks, and who had got to go out and work for a living at the odd hours of the day or nights?" (70). End of the night is a micro-unit of Marutham Tinai. Here is another example for this, "That night as he went punting his boat all over Kainakari, Koren saw with his own eyes some of the big transactions that were carried out under cover of darkness....Sacks and sacks of grain from that big house were being loaded into the boats" [75]. He wished "If only he could get two quarts of grain out of that!" [75].

The place is one of the two factors of Muthal Porul (the other being 'Time') it becomes prominent again when Chirutha speaks out her mind. She says, "Chirutha was stubbornly opposed to the idea of building a hut there. She did not like to work for Pushpavelil, nor for any other family in that area. She wanted to go away from there, no matter where" (68). Chirutha wants to leave that place, not for higher education or to earn more in search of but she has some other reasons or causes of fear in her mind. The narrator says, "She was haunted by fear night and day" (68). Here Koren's stand is quite contrary, his occupation was farming. Wherever he went he would have to do the same work. Wasn't it better than to stay in an area where he had made a few friends? Besides, he had already reclaimed a plot of land for a hut. How many months had he laboured on it! He was reluctant to give it up. In any new place he might move to, he would have to struggle all over again (69).

The staple food in the Marutham Tinai is rice. Several instances can be quoted from the novel. He had a midday meal of 'Kanji' from Pushpavelil. Chirutha had not had even rice water the whole day. If he could buy a quart of rice, she could have a meal [75]. When he saw the grain being loaded into the boats under the cover of darkness, Koren realized that his master must also have been carrying on this black-market trade at night. That was why he was not paying him in grain. Koren wants to protest against this; at the same time, he knew he would be isolated by his friends. "It was past midnight when Koren returned to his hut with a pint of rice bought for six annas and tapioca worth two annas." [75]. Then the novel devotes a whole page to describe how they prepared, shared, and managed to keep a part of it for the next day, working till about three o'clock in the morning. They slept on their half-empty stomachs (77). "Next morning that pint of rice water and four pieces of tapioca caused a minor row between them. The row was not over his eating the whole lot, but over her refusal to share it" (77). These small rows arise from too much love and care for each other and not out of jealousy or enmity. Where there is love, there is complaint also. Here, in the case of love and concern for each other, Koren and Chirutha are very rich.

Tolkappiyam opines Oodal [quarrel] as the ‘uriporul [emotion] for Maruthamtinai. In Cankam poetry the heroine finds faults with the hero, in most cases for his relation to prostitutes or such ladies. But here, one finds Koren getting angry with Chirutha for the first time, and that too not for the same reason. The exact words go like this:

Chirutha refused to move into a hut that did not have even a secure screen in place of walls around it. Koren was enraged. How could he afford to build a house with secure walls and doors with locks? How many such families were living in sheds erected on the dikes of punchapatam? (71)

A considerable amount of space is devoted to the exchange of hot words between Koren and Chirutha over the problem of moving into a new hut. Fearing a fight, both Mariya and Chirutha hesitate to reveal the real risk behind shifting to an insecure hut. Koren is not able to sense the real problem. He thinks in terms of securing some treasure or money. So naturally, he cannot even think of the need for such a strong house. However hard he tries to find out the real cause of her obstinacy he is not able to find it out. At one moment he asks whether someone would carry her away. For that she answers in affirmation: yes, sometimes a crocodile might drag her away during the flood. Again, buffaloes and Neernayaas are the animals that form one of the karupporuls for maruthamtinai. In this novel also, buffaloes are used for plowing as farming is the main occupation which again is one of the karupporuls of maruthamtinai. Instead of neernayaas, a reference is made to the crocodiles which are also another kind of water animal.

The quarrel between Koren and Chirutha finds a twist in Mariya’s words who says that their custom is that women should sleep in a secure place. As having a roof of one’s own is one of the essentials of a human being he prepares himself to borrow money again from Ausepp. When Koren called on Ausepp, “As before, he made him sign for ten rupees in cash and ten rupees worth of bamboo and palm leaves which he gave him” (71), a sum of twenty rupees was needed to have the minimum security as Chirutha demanded. But while lending money Ausepp told Koren in no uncertain terms, “For these twenty rupees I will deduct twelve bushels of grain from your allowances in the month of Metam” (71). The month of Metam is mentioned twice towards the end of page 71.

On an auspicious day, Koren and Chirutha leave Pathroses house and move into their new hut. They must inform the village community of this. If at all someone called, he must be provided with some refreshment. Koren has no other way except borrowing again from Ausepp. Seeing this Pathrose asks, “What will you do at the time of setting accounts in Metam? (72), in more than one sense as a paddy field worker it can make or mar the economic position. Even Chirutha was shocked when he brought thirty rupees in three installments. He has no hesitation in borrowing money from Ausepp. One may be astonished to see his uncontrollable recklessness but he has his philosophy of life or new way of thought, i.e. it is he who works in the field.

Another karupporul feature is God, and Indra is the God of maruthamtinai. According to Hindu mythology, Indra is the rain god. Though there is no direct mentioning of the god of rain the presence or the showers of blessings of Indra is implied in the line “that year’s first monsoon flood had subsided” (74). The dichotomy of prosperity and poverty can be seen at more than one time. “Every Pulaya and Paraya of Kuttanad had spent the last grain and the last copper of their slender savings” (74). As far as Pushpavelil Ausepp is concerned the most important project of that year is to reclaim and convert an acre of paddy field into an estate. For this, each worker was given a country boat. At the end of the day’s work, each one was paid three-quarters of a rupee. “Koren’s supper that night depended on the grain he might get that day. There was not a grain of rice in his hut. He must have his wage in kind” (74). As usual, he alone is in the bad books of his

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master. All other workers left with the meager amount they got. Koren too was forced to leave the place

With the money in his bag, Koren went on punting his boat till midnight, looking for some grain to buy. He enquired at every shop and house. Rice was available everywhere. But two quarts of rice would cost a rupee and a half. How could he but it at this rupee and a half? How could he buy it at this price? Even if he were to buy, a quart of rice wouldn't suffice. (75)

Towards the end of the novel there comes a sea change to the lives of the Pariahs and Pulayas of Kuttanad which they couldn't even dream of earlier. They started to stand united and protest against injustices, ask for more wages, realise their rights, claim their privileges, and finally raise slogans like "Long live Revolution," "Long live the Union!" etc., and Velutha clenched his tiny fist and raised it, shouting "Land to the Tillers."

## 5. CONCLUSION

There is progress in the political and social life-a a progressive movement in the novel. The novel begins with their marriage proposal and its progress into marriage (union), their temporary physical separation for fifteen years during Koren's imprisonment (estrangement), and their reunion with greater strength of love and conviction. During this convoluted course of life, they become aware of their surroundings or their social milieu. Already informed of exploitation, their efforts to uplift their fellow citizens are finally rewarded and they bear fruit. An insight into the vital connection between the themes, the characters, the landscape, the plants and animals, and the features of the social life of a given region is relevant to the study of the literature produced in other parts of the world as well. Thus, this novel caters to the demands and requirements of maruthatinai.

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