

# Visibility and Emerging News Publics: An Inquiry into Mediations of Land Struggles.

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## Abstract

The paper initially tracks the genealogy of news culture in Kerala from late 19th century onwards to locate the major axes along which mediated visibility of various contesting publics was structured in the journalistic field. It can be suggested that one important dimension which framed the contours of cultural logic of news production in Kerala was the social ideology of caste. Attempted here is a symptomatic reading of journalistic pieces from late 19th century and early part of the 20th century to drive home this point. The focus of the second part of the paper is to map the shifting structural contours of mediated visibility and the emergence of new news publics after the proliferation of TV news channels in the first decade of twenty first century in Kerala. This problem is looked at through the prism of visual mediations of Dalit-Adivasi land struggles in this period and their dynamics with larger socio-political field and its cultural logic.

## Keywords

News Culture, Caste, Mediated Visibility, Land Struggles

Existing literature in the areas of caste and media focus on a range of issues like Dalit experiences and history, the aspect of visibility of news publics, self-writings and so on. P Sanal Mohan's book *Modernity of Slavery* (Mohan, 2015) is a documentation of ethnographic history research that tries to look into the Dalit experiences as slave castes and their encounter with European missionaries which comprehends the groundwork for equality through the strong critique in the missionary writings of caste/slave formations that flourished in pre-colonial Kerala. The slave castes' colonial encounter with Christianity was, thus, also a parallel encounter with modernity with its bid for freedom and equality.

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Another major work in the related area is *Making News in Global India* by Sahana Udupa (Udupa, 2015). This work is a close reading of the sweep of urbanization triggered by global capital and the expanding news media and its co-creating the urban culture in the context of Bangalore which emerged as the IT hub of India postmillennial Y2K era. This work proposes to observe news, both print and visual, as a social-cultural process that played a crucial role in shaping public opinion among changes fuelled by global capital and rearranged regional contexts. The framework of structured visibility is explained by Sahana Udupa as fundamental mediations of journalism to render visibility to publics while acknowledging that these publics are diverse and emerge as a result of intersection between the field of journalism and the broader field of power defined by heterogeneous cultural logics and social practices.

John B Thompson's (Thompson 2005) article "The New Visibility" which discusses the concept of mediated visibility in a system of communication and information flow with special reference to the torture and degradation in Abu Ghraib, a US-run prison in the outskirts of Baghdad is another reference text which inspired a close look at the aspects of visibility and its degrees of explicitness enabled by the visuals.

While the present study borrows the theme of Dalit experience and the aspects of structured visibility and the concept of mediated visibility from the above mentioned works it is a marked departure from all the above literature in that it brings together the caste question and the aspects of visibility as a reading of Dalit caste experience in terms of the present visual moment.

### **Methodology:**

The framework of structured visibility from Sahana Udupa is made use of for understanding the fundamental mediations of journalism to render visibility to publics while acknowledging that these publics are diverse and emerge as a result of intersection between the field of journalism and the broader field of power defined by heterogeneous cultural logics and social practices. In order to understand the nuances of the visual mediations of the struggle, discourses of television news stories of events which signify some major phases of the struggle are critically analyzed. An ethnographic study vouchsafes for an intense observation of the site of the study and hence field visits and direct interactions with the agents involved in the movement and an observation of their visual practices is a major method adopted for the study. The research problem under discussion is situated in the Bourdieuan habitus of the Dalit and Adivasi mobilizations for land in post-millennium Kerala. Examining the conceptual and theoretical foundation of the struggle novel imaginaries of citizenship articulated through these movements become productive.

## Discussion:

The genealogy of news culture in Kerala may be traced along news-making practices instantiated in newspapers and magazines which were published from these regions from mid-19th century onwards. Print public sphere began to emerge, though incrementally, in this period with the launching of missionary journals and some other publications which can be considered as early expressions of journalistic enterprise. Initially social reform movements generally evoked negative responses from extant publications but the situation gradually changed when many personalities who were in the vanguard of social movements themselves started publications.

The changes in the political economy—capitalist growth in its nascent form manifested largely through growing plantation sector and fledgling industrial enterprises' demands for a labour market at this juncture. This aspect finds mention in the fascinating book, (Mohan, 2015) *Modernity of Slavery* by Dr.P. Sanal Mohan where he pins the underlying motivation for Malayala Manorama's much-celebrated first editorial advocating *education for Pulayars* the need to keep well replenished the growing demand for skilled labour.

Insights into the cultural logic of news production and its imbrications with dominant social practices and ethos in the early part of 20th century may be had by focusing on Swadeshbhimani K Ramakrishna Pillai's journalistic oeuvre. K Ramakrishna Pillai's journalistic practices which can be accessed through his editorials, articles and political fiction exhibits a tension with respect to his avowed espousal of public in more universal vocabulary and his conservative literary habitus and social inhabitation. The notion of public reflected in K Ramakrishna Pillai's writings presuppose ritualized sovereignty of the King but takes an adversarial relation to the administrative hierarchy. Udayakumar (Udayakumar, 2016) discerns in his writings an attempt to introduce an agentive notion of the people into the realm of ritualized sovereignty. The butt of Pillai's criticism is Devan Rajagopalachari and other higher administrative personnel of Travancore such as Sankaran Thampi and Sami Pattar. In his writings in most of the occasions, King is portrayed as one who is susceptible to the machinations of his durbar.

One of the crucial ways Pillai defined the relation between people and rulers was through the notion of decorum in public domain which entailed pinning down of acceptable norms of behavior within it. The decorum holding the public domain will be destroyed during moments of scandal and possibility of political criticism lies there. This mode of address constituted and interpellated people as political subjects. Pillai conceptualized publicness not only in terms of access and transparency but also in terms of exposure and visibility. Hence public before whom actors stand exposed also suffer a sense of decorum. Moral indignation and sense of moral outrage and shame experienced

in the act of spectation is drawn by scandal journalism to work on its audience. It can also be observed that Pillai's notion of improper exposure was explicitly linked to caste and religious identities. One important dimension on which Pillai framed his notion of improper exposure was caste.(1)

Pillai's views on the demands of lower caste mobilizations were not progressive by today's standards. His much maligned editorial which criticizes Devan's decision to allow Dalits to enroll in public schools reflected his social regressiveness (2). It is interesting to compare Ramakrishna Pillai's editorial on horses and buffaloes which highlighted a difference between buddikrishi (cultivation of the intelligence) and nilam krishi (cultivation in the field) to invoke Dalit's past as agricultural labourers with Malayala Manorama's reformist editorial advocating elementary education for Pulayas. Though Manorama's editorial presupposed existing structures of dominance and was undergirded by considerations of fledgling industrial economy in Travancore it signified a more universal outlook than that of Pillai's blatantly casteist editorial. Pillai's criticism of Pandit Karuppan's work Balakalesam invoking images of boats, waves and oars which alluded to Karuppan's caste community was another instance Pillai employed caste-coloured discourse on intellectual abilities (3).

In the mean while lower caste social movements from early 20th century fought against caste inequality to foreground an alternative social imaginary which linked citizenship to claims over resources and capital(both economic and symbolic). But the overarching discourse of nationalism subsumed and delegitimized such voices from below by the mid 1920s. Gandhian maneuver of confining the caste question into its most visible manifestations like untouchability and denial of temple entry was manifested in Vaikom and Guruvayoor satyagrahas. Gandhian experiment of entrusting upper caste male agency to resolve the question of untouchability had remarkable resonance in print news media narratives of the struggle. It is interesting to note that such discourses mostly inhabited an unmistakably upper caste Hindu universe.

Kerala witnessed the formation of a left front government in 1956 which promulgated 'radical' land reforms to fulfill their promise of providing land to the tiller. Ostensibly progressive in nature, the legislation did not seriously negotiate the demands for cultivable land which had been consistently made by the representatives of lower caste communities in various legislative forums in the erstwhile princely states. If we examine the mainstream left's conception of the emerging linguistic state, its institutions and developmental trajectory, it is palpable that the question of free and equal citizenship which had been articulated by lower caste movements from the early 20th century onwards did not receive adequate space. It is pertinent here to examine E.M.S's

journalistic pieces that had been instrumental in consolidating the intellectual hegemony of electoral communism in Kerala to point out the fact that references to the radical modernist interventions of Aiyankali to challenge the symbolic order and social protocol in Travancore is conspicuous by their absence. An argument is made that uncritical privileging of universal categories like class and nation on the part of the left contributed for the silencing of caste question in public domain. The phenomenon of secularized caste which received much scholarly attention later postponed a critical appraisal of the link between position in caste hierarchy and access to resources.

### **Visual Regime and News Publics: Recontextualizing Land Struggles**

The emerging news publics in Kerala since the proliferation of the TV is marked by momentous events visually mediated and also structuring the media. In the present age of mediated visibility the making visible of actions and events is a strategically-political act employed with varying degrees of explicitness creating meanings through the mass media of the TV. This problem is looked at through the prism of visual mediations of Dalit- Adivasi land struggles and their dynamics with differential loci of power. The categories and visual practices that constitute the political imaginary of the movements which are instantiated in the site of ongoing struggle shares a complicated dynamic with the visual tropes and meanings produced through television news discourses.

A very cursory glance at the history of the post millennium land struggles in Kerala will focus the peculiar nature of the social situation obtaining which points to the fundamental but hidden truth of Kerala modernity and development; that the expanding frontiers of a modernizing Kerala state is tipped on an unprecedented dispossession of, and violence against, the nation's Adivasi/ Dalit communities.

During the Onam of 2001 Adivasis of Waynad under the leadership of Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha, built shanties in front of the secretariat and started a sit in strike; this was the turning point in their struggle for land. After six months of struggle, on January 2, 2002, the then Kerala Chief Minister A K Antony agreed to provide each family with up to five Acres of arable land. However the State government went back on its promise and, subsequently on 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2003 around a thousand Adivasi families under the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha (AGMS) entered the forest portions of Muthanga which, the state passed off as forest land. State enlisted the support of the police to protect its forestland. In the police brutalities that followed one was reported killed and several Adivasis were injured

The prime time news drama, usually, is a fight with the images in the media scramble for the field space to showcase the independence of the

communication code. From the year 2001 when Adivasi resistance catapulted the issue of high levels of social development of the 'Kerala model' and the negative economic growth of excluded sections of populace Television prime time poster picture was the face of C K Janu, the AGMS leader who was in the forefront of the struggle later on negotiating terms with the then Kerala Chief Minister A.K Antony. Two years the media discussion centered round the Antony Government's stolid refusal to comply with the agreement reached with the AGMS which, in the first place called the state's bluff on the to be emulated land reform movements of Kerala state. The endless prevarication by the government culminated in 'direct action' (4) by the one thousand odd families involved in the struggle. They entered the Muthanga forest area on January 4, 2003 and raised their shanties in the forest as a mark stiff resistance to the state and its apathetic policies.

On February 19, 2003 the police entered the Muthanga forest opened fire on the unarmed protesters. The news time spilled over with flow of images of the emaciated Adivasi bodies and helpless eyes of the half-naked children and the police atrocities on the moribund tribal people. The visual images conveyed their historical condition much more effectively than any amount of discussion of facts. This media gaze which pierced right into the heart of urban Kerala public marked the beginning of a critical rethinking into the issue of land resource and its equitable distribution. The tragic events at Muthanga in Kerala entered the public discourse as the culmination of Adivasi frustrations over the failure of successive governments in the state to restore Adivasi land despite several judicial directives and the existence of laws enacted for the purpose, such as the KSA Act of 1975. Chastened by the public anger at the police action, the government was constrained to remain immobilised in the face of a series of fresh land occupations by Adivasis in the Kerala in parts of the Western Ghats. The public debate ferreted out several politically engaging issues like peoples' groups abandoned in the wayside as the Kerala state marched towards urbanization, cultivation practices in the plantation region, and the existence of bonded labour, highly regressive practices smacking of feudal social structures. It is at this juncture that the news channel debates in Kerala focused on the possibility of government handing over the land in Muthanga to the Adivasis and making other lands available to landless Adivasi families and bring all Adivasi regions under Schedule V of Article 244 which provides for participatory self-rule and autonomy thus adding a new chapter of inclusive development to the notion of Kerala Model development.

Muthanga land movement, however, resulted in several such movements by hitherto oppressed groups whose assertion of citizenship rights brought to the fore several uncomfortable issues both material and ideological about the casteist colour of Kerala normal which combined very low levels of economic development with high levels of social development - extraordinarily

high levels of literacy and longevity, low infant and maternal mortality, falling birth rates, and a strong public health system. Muthanga also threw into relief the chinks in the state systems which had over the years thrived on ghettoization and the resultant deprivation of certain groups who were now constrained to raise their voice in a bid to merely survive.

Changara land movement in the hills of Pathanamthitta district where oppressed caste groups' mobilization for land resource as a means of subsistence was inspired by Muthanga agitation marked another phase where Kerala Model development indicators found itself in the dock. TV created new circuits of exchange across hitherto compartmentalized, hierarchical realms of politics, society and culture. In this context, new enunciative sites and rhetoric outside the political sphere proper which harbors the entrenched nexus of caste privileges and state power in Kerala emerge as news fields. With the visuals of these people gathered on the Harrison Malayalam plantation doing the rounds, bodies of the subject of the news found itself catapulted to the level of the holders of quasi monopoly over the meaning diffusion. Several of them are seen perched atop trees with noose loosely hanging round their neck threatening to hang themselves in case of forced evacuation. A woman speaks about the police operations and draws attention to the thousands of policemen who have been posted in and around the town. The camera shows this woman throwing up the question "njangalevid pokum, njangalk bhoomi tarilla adichirakkuaanengil njangal atmahooti cheyyum" (where do we go, if we are forced to evacuate we will commit suicide). This is not just the sanitized text of the depersonalized word of an event; here we have an image, a picture which is corrupted by the immediacy of meaning. There is the speaking body, her body and the bodies of the people who have gathered there their emaciated bodies causing spillover of meanings; they serve as repertoire of their experience of deprivation. This emergence sighted here of a new language of politics and the workings of television is interlinked.

An instance of the emerging news idiom is sighted in Dalits/tribal groups' resistance post Muthanga, had so totally radicalized the Kerala public sphere that the media, in tune with its corporate logic, decided to blot out these movements and the political questions posed by them. Tele vision's capacity to promote popular participation without requiring popular control cannot but be emphasized here. The 2007 "direct action" on Harrison Plantations in Chengara movement started brewing with the formation of SVSV in 2002 with 10000 odd families from across Kerala coming together under the platform to occupy Koduman plantation under the ownership of Harrison Malayalam Ltd. This issue failed to figure in the visual media for several months; this visual blotting out of the issue meant consigning to non-existence the social coordinates of this problem.

Visibility in this communication business is inevitably linked to new forms of social meanings emerging and the resultant actions and repercussions in all other connected fields. The protesters involved in the Chengara land struggle articulate the state policies of the middle-class Indian republic that routinely thwart their citizenly aspirations thus entering the discursive space of the state negotiating the meaning of citizenship from the point of people who bear a history of deprivation. Linking different temporal spaces, television narratives foregrounded the social biography of the subjects who vocalized trenchant critique of the social order that perpetuated their marginal existence. The Chengara land movement with its widely circulated media images of subjects threatening self-immolation results in the body going beyond the institution of the repressive social system in the body ensuring the participation of the viewers in the radicalizing of the news field. Multiple layers of meaning produced and circulated by these narratives deliberate the discursive fields of contemporary economic and cultural ideas and practices.

### **Visibility, Political Imaginary and State Power**

The Chengara Land Struggle which started in 2007 has been through the peak of its political high drama now. These are places of hard survival, and, surprisingly, unlike the ennui that creeps into the usual unionized strikes which when ignored and left to fester by the state dies a slow death, these people build their social-political and awareness and involve in community building. Images with their cultural rootedness and historical specificity visualizes (or render invisible) differences, hierarchy and dynamics of power in a society. Ten years down the line more than 500 families live in Ambedkar model village in Chengara now. The continuing struggle for survival and its quotidian practices takes inspiration from the philosophy and radical social agenda of Ambedkarite Buddhism and revolutionary life of Aiyankali. Ambedkar's ideas of radical equality and direct action as the central organizing principles of social reorganization and Aiyankali's modernist interventions to upset the symbolic order of modern Kerala infuse the movement. They partake in the constituting of citizenship as a site of struggle and these interactions generate codes of meaning for themselves which are socially participative. The limiting dimensions of mainstream television narratives largely determined by culturally specific conventions and practices are constantly explored by the continuing struggle of the community. Linking different temporal spaces, television narratives visual images and the media field in general may be characterized as basically a sphere of interaction since visual images mandate an engagement between several unlikely bedfellows and constitute several meanings unthinkable in a pre-visual age.

The news channels which went to town with live images of Kerala CM dancing with the Adivasi protesters and the AGMS leaders C.K Janu after



signing the document to provide each Adivasi family with up to five acres of arable land circulated a new meaning of inclusiveness in the secular praxis of the Kerala land reform policy. Subsequent police action against the Adivasi groups who resort to direct action in Muthanga forest land fuelled public outrage in the media and elicited a degree of contrition from the government which when faced with similar land struggles in Aralam, Arippa and Changara adopted a more defensive stance. The state had to resort to explanations however; they couldn't explain away the citizenship claims of these groups. The visuals circulating in the media is involved generally in a multiplicity of symbolic cues. At the center of the media images are the "corporeal scheme" dense with the bodies that at one stroke deliver a compelling message of ages of oppression and denigration immediately bringing under scanner the nature of secularism. A non-reciprocatory sort of shared responsibility was created resulting in the socio-cultural causes of the reason for landlessness figuring in the public discourse. Their social world constituted as a spectacle of their bodies a long history of oppression and deprivation is offered to the observer who becomes a participant in sharing the common responsibility. The Sadhujana Vimochana Samyuktha Vedi (SJVSV) a radical departure in people's initiative to attain land rights and the public sharing in the protest happened with a sort of mediated intimacy created with the wide circulation of the visual images of the protesters. Here the object of social knowledge, the Dalit bodies appearing in the struggle, is constructed and is more than just passively recorded. They are facing the camera and talking to the world of the others, thus socially engaging the audience in the history of their oppression visualized through their marked bodies. Thus the audience, during the process of viewing, is situated within the "system of structured structuring dispositions, *the habitus*" of the Dalit/Adivasi bodies simultaneously creating symbolic meanings. This process is also an act of solidarity of the larger public who are now as part of their social space, involuntarily constrained to monitor the progression of events. These images also deliver the goods driving home the fact that the majority of the landless in Kerala are the Dalits, and Adviasis, who were also traditionally excluded from attaining wealth, power, titles and assets. Various governments set up by different coalitions failed to address this social reality and avoided to eradicate it as priority. The government apathy gets congealed in the images on screen bringing the hypostasized experience of Dalit hood constituted outside the history of progress into the daily world of the urban news world.

These post millennium protests happen during the visual turn which is also the moment when media turns politically participatory in nature. The protesters, their backwardness and the urgency with which they raise their demands more than mere public spectacle engage the larger public into becoming a pressure group taking on state policies and its rhetoric of development. Television channels air Laha Gopalan talking about the Harrison's continued possession of land even after the land lease exhausted in 1996.

Bringing into public discussion this illegal encroaching of vast areas of state land by a corporate conglomerate nullifies the government logic of unavailability of land for distributing to the landless Dalits/Adivasis. LahaGopalan raising the question of state soft-pedaling the issue of Harrison Malayalam take-over of land is followed by footages of one of the women protestors with a small child testifying to the horrible living conditions in the ten-cent colonies they were allotted as part of the land reform of the 1970s. She is heard asking “njangalevide pokum...” These images in one stroke bring up the question of their rights and entitlements as citizens—the state as secularly constituted with an imperative of authority and its legitimacy and the aspect of dignity of the Dalit; their right to state resources as a means to further dignified living; the constitutional guarantee of institutional access to the Dalit. They, here image forth their aspects of existing socially and the relational real of their resource impoverished state contrary to the corporates who are privileged with the desirable land resource. The media flow of the images of emaciated bodies along with a narrative flow of fact reconfigure the communication codes in subverting the symbolic power of structural privilege. In the context of the recent land struggle the visual turn creates a situation where the category of the civil state is rethought from the perspective of the constitutional legal and its dissent with the contextual legality foregrounded by these ‘illegal occupants’ of land at Chengara—the site of the present study.

**Conclusion:**

The issue of visibility and the articulations of citizenship raised by Dalit land struggles at the instance of the visual media in the post millennium Kerala emerge as the most powerful appropriation of the social question to challenge the politics of caste hierarchy. The ontological insurrection foregrounded by these land struggles is directly connected to the reclaiming of radical equality as the ethical basis of their rights as citizens of the modern state. The visual media implicated in the constituting of new news publics, thus, reads the emerging of the Dalit body from an object of representation to political agents. In the context of the land struggles Dalit bodies, at the instance of the visual media representations, emerge as political subject directly engaging the state legality. The moment of emergence of Dalit, Adivasi mobilizations for land in Kerala post-millennium throws up the issue of visual representation and legality. These are the two aspects of the ‘Kerala modernity and development that were deliberated in course of this study using the method of the social field.

**Notes**

- 1 This part of the paper draws from Udaya Kumar, Ambivalences of Publicity :Transparency and Exposure in K.Ramakrishna Pillai's thought. In Divya Dwivedi and Sanil.V. Ed. *The Public Sphere from Outside the West*
- 2 For a sustained critique of K.Ramakrishna Pillai's thought, see Cherayi Ramadas, *Stutipadakarude Swadeshabhimani* (Praise-singers of Swadeshabhimani)
- 3 See Cherayi Ramadas, *Stutipadakarude Swadeshabhimani* (Praise-singers of Swadeshabhimani)
- 4 Direct action is a method Dr. B.R. Ambedkar advocated for the assertion of the civil rights of untouchables. When Ambedkar was at Columbia University he was likely exposed to the views of American feminist anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre who in 1912 wrote an essay called " Direct Action which she defined as collective action against and mass resistance to state and capitalist oppression. On his part,Ambedkar called for " open revolt in the form of direct action against the Hindu Established Order". He lists the Chavadar Tank Satyagraha in Mahad and the Kalaram temple satyagraha as instances of direct action which created a 'crisis' among Hindus.

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