



Illustration by:- Nipin Narayanan

A Women-Dalit- Agricultural Labourer Without Formal Education; Story of a Veteran Communist Warrior, **KS Ammukkutty**

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On January 24 th , 1970, a group of goondas of congress party and the then right-wing government of Kerala attacked K S Ammukkutty- a 36-year-old leader of Kerala agricultural workers union. She was on her way, along with a few other women comrades, to the place where communist leaders had come for a discussion with the landlord during a militant land struggle. The goons lurking in the forest grabbed her by the hair and trampled. Beaten up all over the body, she was left uncon-

scious. Many thought she would not survive. It took almost one year of intense care and treatment for Ammukkutty to return to the normal life. "I was lying unconscious for many days. I could not move from bed for months. It pained throughout the body and it took six months for me to eat even a bun" the 86-year-old Ammukkutty remembers those days. The injuries it caused lasted long, may be for a life time.

It was on the 24 th day of surplus land struggle called by the Communist party of India Marxist (CPI-M) with the peasant fronts- Karshaka Sangham (Kisan Sabha) and Kerala Karshaka Thozhilali Union (Agricultural Workers Union)- that Ammukkutty was attacked. One month ago, on Dec. 13 and 14 of 1969, she had participated in a conference called by the agrarian movements at Alappuzha to declare the massive struggle to grab surplus land and distribute among the landless peasants and agricultural labourers. Prior to this conference, the procession of peasants and agricultural workers from three parts of Kerala had reached Alappuzha. The second EMS ministry (1967-69) passed a bill which guaranteed land to all the landless peasants in the state. Following this, the government had stepped down from power losing the majority in the assembly and the bill was pending on the table of the president of India to get approval. In the Alappuzha convention, the leaders of the agricultural workers union and the peasant union declared that 'approved or not, the bill will be in force from January 1 st of 1970'. This is known as 'The Alappuzha declaration'.

Ammukkutty, who returned from Alappuzha to her region, Alakkode- a hilly forest area, began the preparations for the struggle with her comrades. Across Kerala, the activists of the Agricultural Workers Union entered in the large amount of land held by the landlords. Planting the red flags they kept with them on the surplus land they entered, the activists declared that the land belong to the poor peasants and agricultural labourers. Ammukkutty and her comrades grabbed 56 acres of land which was under the authority of Alakkod raja, the landlord. The leaders of the surplus land movement were brutally attacked across Kerala. At some places they could resist with stronger organisational capacity. There were places like Alakkod where the communist party was in its nascent stage. KS Ammukkutty is one of the early workers of the communist party from that area. She was, in fact a threat to the right wing. But Ammukkutty was not someone who

bowed down in front of physical attacks. She emerged stronger and rose up in organising the agricultural workers across the state.

KS Ammukkutty is at 86 now. She is being called as Ammukkuttiyechi, adding a 'chechi' (elder sister) to her name by everyone. Saddened with the way world has been turned into due to the pandemic, Ammukkuttiyechi is at her departed sister's house. Amidst a life among medicines and routine health check-ups, Ammukkuttiyechi loves to talk for long to whoever visits her about the old days when the oppressed was awakened. 'Awakening of the Man' was the title of the book by Godavari Parulekar- a stalwart communist leader who led the heroic warli struggle in the Adivasi region of Maharashtra.

Ammukkutty was 13 when her family migrated to Karthikapuram of Alakkod (in the then Malabar district) from Kottayam (Southern Kerala) around late 1947. The Dalit family reached the hilly forest area after the Alakkod Raja (king) offered them some amount of land to settle down. Theirs was one of the early families that migrated to the region. There were around 5 migrant families settled there at that time. It was an area of predominantly Adivasi (tribal) settlement. Ammukkutty's family lived in a bamboo shed, by cutting off some area of the Karthikapuram forest. Though they were offered land to cultivate, they were not given complete ownership over the land. It was on the condition that a share goes to the landlord from whatever they produce; and the count of this share will be decided by the landlord, not the peasant. In short, the poor migrant families like Ammukkutty's remained almost as agricultural labourers, not the peasants who owns the land and cultivate sufficient to survive.

Ammukkutty studied only till class 5, when her family was staying at Kottayam. She did not go school after coming to Malabar. Also, there was no school in that hilly region. Amidst extreme poverty and hunger, Ammukkutty also went along with her parents to work for the landlord. The work of one person would have added a little more to their earnings.

"I went for work due to starvation. We all had to earn in order to live. If there is no salt, we had to go to Chapparappadavu, which is kilometres away. Isn't this a forest where elephants and other animals wander

during the day time? We lived here, cutting off some forest area. Hunger is important, right? And we used to earn a meagre amount of money from working. So, we thought that, if one another person is also able to work, it would add to our earnings.”

Going for work was also a very difficult and risky task that time. The labourers were forced to work continuously for 12 hours in a day. When Amuukkutty recalls those days, we wonder how did a 13 year old girl survived all those hardships!

“Have to go for work at seven in the morning. There is no work in case you reach one minute after that. It lasted till evening seven o clock. It will be night by then. In order to reach home, we had to walk through the forest. There was no torch. We used to walk holding the dress of the people walked in front of us holding the flambeau. Once we got trapped in front of an elephant. Luckily we got escaped”

Communist leaders used to come to those hill areas from other parts of the district to organise the Adivasis. Once the migration had begun slowly, they also reached out to the migrated peasants and attempted to mobilise them against landlordism. Not all migrated families joined with them. Many of them were given land by the landlords by evicting the Adivasis. Adivasis had no right over the land or what they cultivate; being subjected to extreme oppression. Pachcheni KunhIRaman and AV Kunhambu were among the leaders who would

come and call the peasants and agricultural workers to in front of some Adivasi hut for meetings. Since there was no transport facility, the leaders walked many kilometres to reach the area by foot. The leaders would stay at one Adivasi hut after the meetings as there was no option to travel back at night. In the meetings, the leaders would explain, in their own languages and usages, the truth behind their hardships and reasons for why they are being exploited.

Some migrant families bought the land by paying to the landlord and settled down. But the purpose behind giving land to poor immigrants was to exploit their labour. Ammukkutty’s family belonged to this section. Being at the bottom of the caste ladder, they also stood in line with the status of the Adivasis in social status. And the extremely rigid landlordism ensure there will be no obvious difference between the poor peasants and agricultural labourers. Ammukkutty started go-



ing to work for the landlord at the age of 13 and being one of them she began to understand the exploitation faced by the poor peasants and workers. During that time, when the leaders of the Kisan Sabha (Karshaka Sangham) came to that area, she eagerly went to listen to them. She began to contemplate on what they were saying with what she saw and experienced every day and realised that whatever they were saying was true.

“I didn’t study political philosophies. It’s my experience. Do you know how the conviction about the truth of that life came? the peasants who worked under the landlords and the exploitation they had to face; we also experienced a part of it. When our Pacheni, A V and Pariyaram (leaders) came to the hill and explained, to the majority of Adivasis and handful of migrants while leaning against the pillars of the huts, the need to form and organise a group of farmers, I used to think that this is also my own direct experience. Since then, I have kept in my heart the belief that only my party can raise voice against those injustices. That belief will be there till my death.”

Though none of her family members had any political background, Ammukkutty gradually became a communist, a warrior whose life was submitted to the liberation of the oppressed.

The peasants were met with enormous exploitation by the landlord. There were oppressive taxes imposed on them. The landlord could grab anything from what a tenant cultivated. There was no need of any permission and the peasant was not even informed. At many times the tenants were left with absolutely nothing after they pay the rent, that is the landlord's share. The faulty measurement by the agents of the landlord made the situation awful. The farmers were subjected to huge debt which further made them more subordinate to the landlord. The plight of the agricultural workers was not any better; it could only get worse. They were forced to work from sun rise to sun set. The wage was very minimal with which they could only ensure their physical existence. Most of them were Adivasis who were denied even the status of human being. Poor peasants who could not survive with what they get after paying the lease amount to the landlord from their cultivation had to also send their family members to work. The workers were paid paddy once in a week and chaama (millet) in the rest of the days. The males were given $\frac{3}{4}$ seer (about 0.92 kg) and females received half seer (about 0.62 kg). However, if Friday or Tuesday turned to be the days when the paddy had to be given as coolie, the workers received nothing. There was a reason. It was believed that paddy should not be taken from Paththayam (the large bin in which paddy was stored) in those particular days. Moreover, it was also believed that, doing so would diminish the fortune of Paththayam. Therefore, during those days the workers returned without receiving any payment.

“Didn't we the ones who fill the Paththayam and bring fortunes? We did not know it then. Such a consciousness was not developed in those days” Ammukkutty says. The first attempt was to bring them to a different consciousness that would not have to serve the interests of the oppressor. It was not easy to organise the peasants. There was already a consciousness among them that they were inferior to the land 'lord'. Therefore, the attempt was to break this notion and seed class consciousness in them through small meetings in which the leaders spoke for long explaining the oppression they were subjected to. The theory of class struggle was being inculcated to its warriors in their own

language and connecting it to their own lives- may be the universal applicability of the class struggle.

“Gradually the Karshaka Sangham activists were winning all their demands one by one. The time had changed from a period when they had to drink porridge served in the pit beneath the courtyard of the landlord to that of getting the porridge at the yard itself. The next demand was to receive better food in the varandah of the house itself. And, we achieved that too.” Ammukutty recalls how the organised agricultural workers started procuring all their demands from having a slave like life.

Another major demand was to increase the wages. For the first time the agricultural workers began demanding for better wages according to the work they were doing. The financial liability was a major component which forced them to remain silent and obedient to the landlords. It struck all movements and any chance of upward mobility.

“What all struggles we had carried out demanding the wage increase! A period of struggles were we didn’t even have time to sit or stand anywhere. What all sorts of struggles! People’s march, vehicle processions, the dharna in front of offices etc. Each right is acquired step by step.

”The tenants also protested against the oppressive taxes and kallappara- a fraudulent measurement system using which the landlords or their agents collected paddies more than the actual amount from the tenants. They also began questioning different restrictions and threats put on them. Ammukkutti, the agricultural worker since the age of 13, emerged as the leader of her class; beloved comrade of the Adivasis and agricultural workers.

Both Kerala Mahila Federation (Kerala Woman’s Federation) and Kerala Karshaka Thozhilali Union (Kerala Agricultural Workers Union) were formed in 1967. Ammukkutti was part of both. She also participated in the formation conference of All India Democratic Womens Association which was held in Chennai in 1980. She was the district leader of the women’s movement.

One of the major campaigns of Mahila federation was for public distribution. Food was the central concern. It took up other issues also. Entering of a woman in the public life was a difficult task. A lot of

impediments waited her in every step. A dalit women, who was an agricultural labourer, might have faced challenges in multiple folds.

“The pressure and abuses of all social inequalities await women. What is the most difficult thing for women is that people always like to talk about and make fun of her chastity. This is seen as the easiest way to subdue her both in family relationship and in politics. She would survive anything else. But this way of talking makes her exhausted. Our women comrades felt extremely bad seeing and hearing such things. But they survive such difficult times through reading, public meeting, class, camaraderie and the like. Isn’t experience our teacher!”

“I had to travel day and night. I had to sleep some days in party offices and sometimes at houses of different comrades all across Malabar. My movement stood with me, always”, says Ammukkuttiyechi. It was under the leadership of Ammukkutty that a women’s march was organised, for the first time in Kerala, to the police station. The march was in protest of the police raping women in the Nehru Trophy ward in Alappuzha. Ammukkutty was then the secretary of the Alakkod pan-chayat committee of the Mahila Federation.

Ammukkutti learned more than what years of formal education could teach one. *“Experiences from the struggles for our rights, mobilising the downtrodden, and the senior party leaders- I gained my knowledge and consciousness with all these”* She says. Ammukkutty speaks of class struggle and class consciousness with an extreme clarity and vigour. She gained a rich knowledge through night study classes, party committee meetings, reading Marxist literatures available in Malayalam, etc. *“I am physically weak now, and troubled by illnesses. Still I cannot start my day without reading ‘Deshabhimani’ (Communist party newspaper) in the early morning.”*

The most significant struggle in the life of Ammukkutty is the one mentioned at the beginning of this article, the surplus land struggle. The second communist ministry of Kerala passed a land reform amendment bill which ensured land to all agricultural labourers and tillers in the state. The bill abolished both tenancy and landlordism. It gave right to the homestead tenant to purchase his homestead from the landowner on easy terms. It also conferred the ownership of the tenanted lands on the cultivating tenant. The bill gave the right to the government to possess the surplus land and distribute among the ten-

ants and landless agricultural labourers. The left government was toppled by a united front stitched together by the congress party with an organised plan to prevent the implementation of the bill. The bill was in front of the president of the country to get approval. It was in this context the communist party called for a two-day convention in Alappuzha following which a massive rally and public gathering of peasants and agricultural workers took place. Ammukkutty was a delegate to the convention. Important leaders of the communist movement in the country, including P Sundarayya, EMS, AKG, Harekrishna Konar and other participated in the convention. In the public meeting, which was witnessed by around half a million people, AKG declared that *“whether the president gives his approval or not, we will claim our rights for the land.”* Thus, the movement began on January 1 st , 1970.

“The party suggested that if any of those people who threw stones at this struggle, who became false witnesses and also who filed false cases do not own a piece of land, they should be given at least half an acre land from the surplus land we grab.” Ammukkutty remembers the call from the party leadership. The struggle lasted for few years and most of the time Ammukkutty was bedridden following the brutal attack she was subjected to in the initial month itself. But, with an unyielding spirit, she remained as an inspiration to the movement throughout. *“It was this struggle and the right to the land provided courage to the lakhs of agricultural labourers, who faced both social and economic oppression, to stand up”*, She marks it.

No one from her family, including the parents and siblings visited Ammukkutty when she was bedridden. Father told, pain and anger, “she was beaten up because she went by listening the words of the scoundrels (the communists). I have never beaten her. Now she is getting beaten up by others”.

“It was my comrades who treated me. Boys will stay at night to give me medicine and the women comrades will stay with me during day time. I could not even digest a bun in the first 6 months. They did it consciously, targeting me.” Five decades passed, Ammukkutty remembers those days as it just happened yesterday.

As soon as she gained her health Ammukkutty started moving around with her comrades to build the movement further. She had

also been in underground, for two months, following the political witch hunt of the right wing and ruling class. Nothing could stop her, she emerged stronger and stronger after every challenge she was met with. Ammukkutty became a district level leader and began going to different corners of Kannur district. Agricultural workers were mostly former 'untouchables' and in some areas many of them belonged to former slave castes. This explains the lethal pairing of social and economic oppression.

Ammukkutty was elected as the vice president of Kerala Agricultural Workers Union. The organisation had grown to 1.2 million members by then. In 1996, she was elected to the working committee of the All India Agricultural Worker's Union (AIAWU) in the fourth all India conference held at Khammam; to the leadership of 2 million agricultural workers enrolled in the union. She remained in the supreme committee of the largest organisation of the agricultural labourers in the country for more than a decade before stepping down due to severe health issues which paralysed her movements. Currently Ammukkutty's organisation has a membership of more than 7 million agricultural workers in the country.

Ammukkutty tells an interesting story about a member of the royal-landlord family she went to work at an younger age.

"There was a lord. On the third day of work, the lord said that the child is not in a position to work and therefore no need of her to come for work. Still I did not stop going for work. Gradually I became as efficient a worker as my elders were"

Captain Kerala Varma was the person who suspected that the child, Ammukkutty could not work. He was the member of Cochin royal family. He got married to the sister of Aalikkodu Raja. He was not interested to live in royal comforts. He was the first one to join the military service from the Cochin royal family. He was dismissed in 1949 after seven years of service for alleged links to the INA and the communists. He must have come to Aalakkodu in between.



“Let me proudly say one more thing. After many years, I think in the 90s, a special convention of the agricultural workers union was being held at the Ernakulam town hall. EMS had come for it. The next day, when his photo appeared in the newspaper, I was sitting next to him. After seeing this, the lord came to the convention venue. He and his family were living in that district. He came to take me to their home. Due to the organisational engagements I couldn’t go. It never happened. He died years ago”

A few days after she was elected to the working committee of the organisation, Ammukkutty received a letter. It was from captain Kerala Varma. *“Comrade, I am proud more than anyone else for electing you to the all India leadership of thirteen and half crore downtrodden people. I have the right for that”*

She travelled across Kerala while she was the state leader of the movement. She was in charge of building organisation in Wayanad district, a predominantly Adivasi settlement area of Kerala, for nine years. *“I was asked, from the state committee to supervise the union’s works in four districts- Kasargod, Kannur, Wayanad and Kozhikode”* She recalls. At a time when there was no transport facility in most of the areas, she travelled from one place to another and from one district to another to invigorate the movement.

People used to ask, partially as a joke and partially as a fact that whether there is any house left in the district where Ammukuttiyechi has not slept. It was a continuous journey, during the initial decades of the organisation, from one place to another to mobilise and organise agricultural labourers. There were no chances of getting back to home during those times. Ammukkutti would stay at some of her comrade's house after the meeting and then moved to the next meeting place on the coming day. "It was a period when our movement was in the initial stage. We had no time either to rest or even go home. We also lacked money to conduct the activities, for travel, stay and all. There was a time when two people shared one curry and ate rice", She tells. "She fought different battles together. I remember working with her in district committee of agricultural workers union. A comrade who loved everyone, lived with simplicity and extreme commitment to the cause. She was there in organisational meetings to guide the movement, and also in public meetings, with her simple way of speech to convince the people to rally together",

remembers MK Kunhappan, an 88 year old communist who was a comrade of Ammukkutti in the movement of agricultural workers.

Ammukkutti was the candidate of communist party in the Panchayat elections of 1980. She contested to the Udayagiri panchayat, in the first elections held after the formation of that Panchayat. The beloved comrade Ammukkutti won with a stunning margin. This repeated in the next election too. The communist party also put her at the top of administrative bodies of co-operative institutions. She was director of Alakkod co-operative bank; and also at the leading role of Karthikapuram women's co-operative society.

Ammukkuttiyechi always reminds the new generation about the sacrifices of the communist martyrs who laid down their lives fighting the odds in the society and for the betterment of the future generations. *"We should also keep in our mind that how did we become what we are now. People who sacrificed their lives in roads, forests, fields and factories thought that they next generation should not go through such inhumane treatments"* She sounds more strong.

"We used to talk politics, about our struggles and slogans, and injustices in the society in work places, bus waiting shelter, tea shop.. wherever at

least four people gather. We must bring that habit back.” Ammukkuttiye-chi tells to the youngsters; and she underlines to the communists of today,

“The former generation was fighting the odds of that time. They made this place liveable for all. Keeping those in mind, we have to identify the challenges of our time, prepare slogans and launch struggles to overcome those” Comrade KS Ammukkutty is as contemporary as her vibrant past.