

My Life as a Comrade



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The Story of an Extraordinary Politician and
the World That Shaped Her

K.K. Shailaja

with

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*This book is dedicated to those young social and political workers
whose work will carry the future of our country.*

– K.K. SHAILAJA

*To my family – those who remain and those that are lost.
We learn and form in one another's company. Always.*

– MANJU SARA RAJAN



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A Kerala Timeline

- 1766–92:** King Hyder Ali invades Kerala's Malabar region. The Mysorean occupation continues till his son, Tipu Sultan, hands over his territories to the British after losing the Third Anglo–Mysore War.
- 1792:** Malabar becomes part of the Madras Presidency.
- 1793:** There is mass resistance in the form of a farmers' movement led by Pazhassi Raja against British occupation of the region.
- 1805:** Pazhassi Raja is killed by the British in the Wayanad region of Malabar. He remains a symbol of revolution and of Malabar's perseverance.
- 1820:** The governor of Madras Presidency, Thomas Munroe introduces the ryotwari system to the Malabar region.
- 1879:** One of the earliest attempts at tea planting in the state, the North Travancore Land Planting and Agricultural Society Limited is formed under J.D. Munro and A.W. Turner.
- 1920s–1930s:** A phenomenon called kudiyettam takes place – there is large-scale migration from central and southern parts of Kerala to the Malabar region.

- 1939:** The Communist Party of India (CPI) in Kerala is formed at the Pinarayi Conference on 31 December. Members include E.M.S. Namboodiripad (EMS) and A.K. Gopalan (AKG).
- 1941:** Known as the Kayyur incident, on 28 March, a farmers' protest turns violent and results in the death of a policeman. Many are put on trial and four people are given death sentences.
- 1950:** Twenty-two Party workers imprisoned at the Salem jail who protested the ill-treatment of prisoners are killed by police firing in the Salem jail massacre.
- 1952:** Along with sixteen other CPI members, AKG is elected to the first-ever Lok Sabha held in India.
- 1956:** Kerala becomes a state.
- 1957:** The CPI wins the first assembly election of Kerala. The new government passes the Kerala Stay of Eviction Proceedings Act within twenty days of coming to power. EMS becomes the first chief minister of Kerala.
- 1957:** Kerala's first education minister, Joseph Mundassery introduces the Kerala Education Bill, which guarantees free education for all, making public education the responsibility of the government rather than of private institutions and individuals.
- 1958–59:** A series of protests called the Liberation Struggle takes place against the Communist government of the state.
- 1959:** The CPI government is dismissed by the Centre and EMS steps down as chief minister. President's Rule is imposed in the state.
- 1964:** The CPI splits into two factions: the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]).

- 10 September 1964–6 March 1967:** President's Rule is imposed in the state due to indecisive election outcome.
- 1967:** CPI(M) comes to power for the first time in the form of a seven-party alliance called the United Front. EMS becomes chief minister for the second time and his term lasts till 1969.
- 1970:** The Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act comes into force.
- 4 August 1970–3 October 1970:** President's Rule is imposed due to no party obtaining majority in the elections.
- 1975:** Indira Gandhi declares a nationwide state of emergency and many senior CPI(M) leaders are jailed, including AKG and Pinarayi Vijayan.
- 5 December 1979–25 January 1980:** President's Rule is imposed in the state due to loss of majority.
- 1980:** The KPCC joins hands with Congress-I to form an alternative government in an effort to prevent the CPI(M) from coming to power.
- 1980:** Leader of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) alliance E.K. Nayanar is sworn in as chief minister for the first time.
- 1982:** In Kerala Assembly's general elections, the United Democratic Front (UDF) led by the Congress assumes office with K. Karunakaran as chief minister.
- 1991:** Kerala High Court upholds the Sabarimala temple ban – women in their reproductive years are legally forbidden to enter the temple's premises.
- 1996:** The LDF government launches the People's Plan Campaign as an effort at decentralization of power and to give more control and autonomy to local governments.

- 1997:** Kerala's State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) establishes Kudumbashree, a poverty eradication and women empowerment programme, with a special focus on economic empowerment of women.
- 2007:** The Kerala Medical Services Corporation Ltd (KMSCL) is set up to provide essential drugs and equipment needed by public health institutions.
- 2008:** The Kerala Social Security Mission is created to formulate and implement social security programmes/schemes in the state.
- 2016:** Pinarayi Vijayan of the CPI(M) becomes the chief minister of the state.
- 2016:** The Kerala government launches the Nava Kerala Mission to address issues in health, education, agriculture and housing.
- 2017:** The Hridyam Mission is launched as a website to focus on the management and care of children with congenital heart disease (CHD).
- 2017:** The Aardram Mission is launched to focus on the primary, secondary and tertiary systems of Kerala's public healthcare.
- 2017:** Cyclone Ockhi strikes Kerala.
- 2017:** The Anuyatra campaign is launched to empower disabled people and make Kerala a more disabled-friendly state.
- 2018:** Kerala formulates a cancer control strategic action plan.
- 2018:** Kerala becomes the first Indian state to issue separate identity cards to transgender people so that they can avail government facilities and welfare schemes.
- 2018:** Heavy floods hit the state. There are nearly 500 deaths and the total economic losses are estimated to be around Rs 40,000 crore.

- 2018:** The state's health department launches Arogya Jagratha – a campaign to educate the public about communicable diseases.
- 2018:** Nipah virus outbreak is first reported in Kerala on 19 May. Within forty days of the outbreak, the health ministry is able to control the spread of the disease in the state.
- 2018:** The Supreme Court declares the prohibition of women at the Sabarimala temple as unconstitutional, although violent protests soon follow and the issue remains a contentious one.
- 2019:** The Institute of Advanced Virology is inaugurated in Kerala following the Nipah virus outbreak.
- 2019:** Varnapakittu, the first-ever State Transgender Art and Cultural Festival, is organized by the state's Social Justice Department.
- 2019:** Under the 'Sadharyam munnottu' (Be brave, go ahead) campaign, the Kerala Women and Child Development Department launches one of its first major event – a series of Night Walks to help women reclaim public spaces, especially the ones that remain inaccessible to them.
- 2019:** The Kerala government announces plans for introducing Smart Anganwadis in the state to enhance physical, mental and social development in children.
- 2020:** The first case of COVID-19 in Kerala is reported on 30 January. By the end of the first lockdown in May 2020, the mortality rate is below 0.4 per cent in the state.
- 2020:** Kerala's health ministry becomes one of seven in the world to be awarded for 'outstanding contribution' towards the non-communicable diseases-related sustainable development goal (SDGs) by the UN.

- 2021:** The State Health Agency (SHA) decides to bring all government-sponsored healthcare schemes under one roof to bring down the cost of healthcare in the state and provide more equitable coverage to all.
- 2022:** The State Health Application for Intensified Lifestyle Intervention (SHAILI) app is launched to diagnose and combat lifestyle diseases such as hypertension and diabetes.

Preface

Writing this book has given me a chance to take a bird's eye view of my life thus far. But it has also been an opportunity to look at much more. As someone who is part of the political world, I can only look at my own life in the context of the stories of those around me. When you're working for societal change, the present is a milestone to judge how far you've come from the past, and how much you must strive to advance further in the future. As the story of a humble social worker, my tale is also one of social change in the society that I am part of. The history of my place and its people will, I hope, offer an explanation for why Kerala itself is the way it is today.

We all know that when a person is subjected to unusual circumstances, they evolve so they can deal with such situations. The ordinary and extraordinary things that happened to my family and those around me have indelibly influenced my life. I will talk about some key incidents that took place before I was born and during my early life, connecting those threads together to show how they impact the present.

I was born in a small, lush village on the sidelines of the great Western Ghats in Kerala, on the western edge of peninsular India. That noble mountain range, stretching 1,600 kilometres through

Karnataka, Kerala, Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, influences the lives of everything that lives in its nooks and shadows. The way small mountain springs spread throughout the Ghats, then come together to form large rivers before flowing into the Arabian Sea is a metaphor for our lives. The veins of water that snake through the region created opportunities for livelihood, birthing and moulding our societies in what is really one of the most beautiful parts of our country. For aeons the dense tropical forest cover formed a sort of blanket over these parts, cocooning people in their own little worlds. Till, at one point, the tremors outside erupted into the lives of our communities in the Malabar region of Kerala.

When the Thalassery–Coorg road was cut through the Ghats during the British colonial period, to ease the transportation of goods, people watched with amazement as places outside their realm opened up. Giant bridges came up above the rivers, offering a completely new way of interacting with nature and living in this region. The Iritty bridge, a feat of engineering crafted out of steel back in the 1930s to connect parts of Kannur district, still stands today over the Bavali river. Iritty – many historians believe it is a shortened form of the name Irattakadavu – stands at the confluence of two rivers, Bavali and Bara puzha (puzha means river in Malayalam). Just about 2 kilometres away from Iritty, in a place that must look like a tiny full stop from the sky, by the banks of Bara puzha, sits Madathil, my village. A string of such hamlets come together to form the larger administrative unit of Payam panchayat.

When my family first settled here in the 1930s there were barely any people around; it was mostly just forest. And even though many things had changed by the time I was born, our history still influenced our circumstances. It formed our beliefs and our affiliations. A combination of that geography and the socio-political structures

that evolved through the millennia in that environment has shaped me and my life, both as a human being and as a politician. Writing down my story has been an opportunity to look back at those influences. Of course, all the incidents filed away in my memory can't be printed here. After all, everything, including a book, has its parameters. Which is why many historical incidents have only been hinted upon. Having said that, I hope readers find it interesting and useful to learn about the simple circumstances in which I was born and raised, and the incidents and inclinations of the people that influenced me. I would be very happy if this book helps its readers to better understand human nature and what drives us.

I recollect the words of the great Russian revolutionary and author Alexandra Kollontai. At the start of her book *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* (1926), she posed this thought that I can relate to: 'Nothing is more difficult than writing an autobiography. What should be emphasized? Just what is of general interest? ... it is a matter of forgetting that one is writing about oneself, of making an effort to abjure one's ego so as to give an account, as objectively as possible, of one's life in the making and of one's accomplishments.'¹ And that shall be my effort here.



1

An Intertwined History

I come from a family in politics but not a family of politicians. Everyone who enters the political arena is a political worker but not all will become politicians. There are thousands of people out there who will work their entire lives without aspiring for personal gain. The heart and soul of our system is composed of such faceless individuals. They go out on the streets to fight for privileges they may never enjoy, they become prisoners to protest injustice meted out to others. It is not easy to understand what drives such people. Their stories get subsumed by brighter ones, more successful ones.

My life story is built on the history of many such people, including my grandmother and my uncles. I stand on their legacy. It is they who taught me about politics – what it means, why it's important.

I come from a small place; as a child, the village I grew up in was my whole world. Once you gain political awareness, when you realize that small changes can make a big difference, your horizons spread outwards. You stop thinking of yourself and think of the larger group, of us instead of I. To me this is what being in politics means. To use my position to leave a lasting impact. Once you are able to do something

to make a situation better, the satisfaction can fuel you through many disappointments and lows. I find it addictive: in public life you are never out of a job, something always needs fixing. When I was a Party worker in a village, there was a limited sphere within which I could make a difference; when that village Party worker became a district-level then a state-level Party worker, and later an elected representative, the sphere of influence and change became larger.

For a communist, parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities are just two aspects of public work. Every effort must lead to one thing: social change for the better. What that means for a communist is engaging in the class struggle to eradicate existing feudal–capitalistic structures that support class inequalities.

Today for some people success means popularity and popularity means power. For me, my political career has never been about power. I started as a simple Party worker who became a member of the Party's Central Committee, was given the opportunity to contest an election, and eventually got a job as the minister for Health and Family Welfare, Women and Child Development, and Social Justice. As each task or responsibility falls on me, I carry it out to the best of my ability. And onward I go ... I am always conscious of the expectations that come with any role I'm given. I saw my berth at the cabinet as an opportunity with an expiry date, so the fixing of problems when I had the chance always felt that much more urgent. Do my best. Leave it better than I found it. Move on.

My journey into politics was made possible because of the socio-political milieu I was part of. I come from a family of people who get involved in problems, in struggles, who believe in working for change. But we had no clout, no connections, except for those forged on public battlefields. However, the structure of the communist Party, which has been our mainstay for generations, was egalitarian

enough to nurture the rise of a dedicated Party worker, one rank at a time. Along the way, opportunities and encouragement from others, coupled with my tenacity and a belief that we can make a difference, have pushed me forward. This is my story. But it is also the story of the Malabar, and the growth of communism in Kerala.

When you travel from the southern tip of our state, where the capital Thiruvananthapuram is located in the erstwhile Travancore region, move to the business capital of Kochi, and then to the northernmost areas of the Malabar, while the landscape generally remains bountifully green and lush, you're traversing fairly different subcultures. In the fourteen districts that make up Kerala, every other place has a distinctive variety or twang of Malayalam, particular economic interests, and predominant religion and agricultural focus; the taste of the food changes, and so does the personality of the people.

North Kerala's Malabar is distinctive for the influence of some of the most diverse tribal groups in the country, alongside a varied population that's embraced Islamic, Hindu and Christian traditions throughout its history. The terrain varies as much as our people, going from the Arabian Sea on one side to the Western Ghats on the other, harbouring rubber, coffee and tea estates, as well as magical wild areas like the Coorg forest, Silent Valley, Attapadi and the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

My family is from Kannur, one of the six districts that make up the Malabar region. We've been here since the time of my great-grandfather Madavalapil Raman Mestri, who worked on a British tea plantation in what became post-Independence Karnataka. The Malabar districts like Kannur, Kozhikode and Wayanad – boasting plenty of high-altitude areas with perfect temperate conditions – were prime locations for the English plantation experiments. Various crops, from tea and coffee to different spices, were tried and tested in

parts of these districts. And because of the heavy capital investment needed to set up an estate, only the English could do it.

Raman Mestri's family was from a place called Kalyasseri in Kannur. In Kerala's caste structure, our family identify as Ezhava, which in today's parlance is an Other Backward Caste (OBC). By caste, my great-grandfather would have had few prospects other than agriculture. So Raman Mestri was, by the sounds of it, an unusual man. The suffix 'mestri' in local parlance signifies a supervisor. It was the early 1900s, when a job was a rare thing, a time when land and agriculture were the main markers of wealth. Because of a single circumstance – that he got a job in an English tea estate in Makkootam, on the Kerala–Karnataka border – our family story unfolded in a particular and somewhat unusual way for those times. Raman Mestri's job gave him some resources, and it gave his kids the basic dignity that was denied to so many people around them.

According to family lore, Raman Mestri fell in love and eloped to marry his first wife, my great-grandmother Devaki, who they say was brave and beautiful. They had five children, the freedom fighter M.K. Ravunni, M.K. Kalyani – Ammamma, my grandmother – M.K. Damodaran and twins, M.K. Krishnan and M.K. Raman. Kalyani was born in 1917 – the same year as the October Revolution in Russia. It was also the year of the birth of the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. I am reminded of the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's thoughts about the year 1917 in his book, *Glimpses of World History*. Writing to his daughter Indira on her thirteenth birthday, he said:

The year you were born in – 1917 – was one of the memorable years of history when a great leader, with a heart full of love and sympathy for the poor and suffering, made his people write a noble and never-

to-be-forgotten chapter of history. In the very month in which you were born, Lenin started the great Revolution, which has changed the face of Russia and Siberia.¹

Kalyani and her brothers were just teenagers when their mother Devaki died. Sometime after, the widower Raman Mestri married a woman called Parvati (Paru). As it happened, she was a widow with a son, Karunakaran. When these parents came together, they created a new family that till today remains an integral part of our extended relations. My grandmother always referred to her stepmother affectionately as Matte Amma, which means 'other mother' in Malayalam. In those times in Kerala, at least anecdotally, remarriage was a practical option among most communities, and families were made and unmade without all the social stigma this carried in other parts of the country. If a partner died young, it just made practical sense for a widow or widower with children to remarry. Sometimes they married siblings of their late spouses, or different families just came together, fathers and mothers fitting into the roles of missing partners. For my family, for generations, broken marriages, triggered by death or betrayal, became a pattern.

Raman Mestri was independent and foresighted, so after his remarriage and with the future of his burgeoning family in mind, he decided to build a new home for the children from his first marriage. Our family history would unfold along the 55 kilometre stretch of the Thalassery–Coorg road once he decided to build a new family home in Madathil in Payam panchayat. Raman Mestri had built a good relationship with the local landlord or jenmi, the head of the Kalliatt Nambiar family, which owned everything as far as the eye could see. They could gift land to anyone they wished to. Once you had their permission, you could just mark a plot with stone posts, get

it approved and call it yours. There was no paperwork; the landlord's word was gospel. But, of course, that sort of largesse-based ownership wasn't really ownership. A family could be thrown out of their home if the landlord got cross with them for any reason.

Anyway, the Kalliatt yajamanan – people used the honorific yajamanan, which translates to 'master', for the head of the jenmi household – gifted perhaps 50 acres of land in Madathil to my great-grandfather. It was a heavily forested area without any agriculture. The plot was large enough that Raman Mestri could build a home and still had plenty of land left around it. In those parts at the time, most people lived in huts with straw roofs, not just because they couldn't afford pucca housing but also in deference to caste requirements, which dictated what kind of dwelling people could build for themselves; only a thatched-roof house was allowed for most. But Raman Mestri excavated laterite from the same property and built a house of stone; it must have seemed like a palace for this family and an extraordinary concession by the landlord back then. The house came up beside a little canal, on the flat side of a slight hill. There was no road to get there, other than a path cleared of overhang and shrubbery. To cross the canal a large hardwood tree was cut and laid across as a makeshift bridge, and every few years a new one would replace the old.

I do not know how my maternal great-grandfather came into his job but it ensured that our family history is entirely embedded in the Malabar region, and later Kannur district in particular. If we hadn't been part of Kannur, perhaps we'd have been very different people making very different choices. Kannur's small and big places along the Thalassery–Coorg highway – like Iritty, Payam, Madathil, where I was born, Mattanur, which I represent now as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), and Pazhassi, where I live – have defined the people we've become. Many of our areas border parts of

Karnataka so there is a constant movement of people back and forth, crossing state lines for education, work and the everyday living of life. If I could put a colour to my childhood it would be the green of our neighbourhood, teeming with trees and foliage, brooks and canals. The hillsides rang with mysterious sounds and calls you couldn't identify. Mythology, superstition and beliefs swirled over everything. If everyone believed something, that something could well be fact.

The Malabar region is also imbued by a rebellious and egalitarian sensibility, which played a major role in its embrace of communism – the philosophy by which I was anointed even before I was born. One of the greatest examples of that vitality is the legendary eighteenth-century ruler Veera Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja, the Malabar's most illustrious warrior and a man who hasn't got his due in our national conversation. He was a prince in the erstwhile Kottayam kingdom, or Cotiote, that ruled parts of the Malabar till 1792. (This Kottayam has no connection to the district of Kottayam in central Kerala.) He was known by the name of his dominion Pazhassi, my current home town. The vast majority of his life was spent fighting against foreign rule over his ancestral region.

It began with Hyder Ali, the king of Mysore, who began incursions into the Malabar in the 1760s and occupied the region till 1792, when Hyder's son Tipu Sultan was defeated by the East India Company and its allies. When the Mysoreans attacked this region, most of the rulers of the area, including the Kottayam king, fled south. But Veera Kerala Varma, a nephew of the ruler, stayed, coming of age as the head of his small kingdom in 1774 in this era of battles. The Mysore occupation was also a major obstacle for the East India Company, preventing them from gaining full access to this verdant region, which was an important centre for the black pepper trade. At the beginning, Pazhassi Raja fought the Mysorean incursion with the help of the

British. When it became clear that the East India Company was looking to effect its own invasion over his home territory and seeing the tax burden they put on his people, Pazhassi Raja turned against them. In 1792, the British defeated Tipu Sultan in the Third Anglo-Mysore War, and he was forced to accept and sign the Treaty of Srirangapatnam. All of Tipu's territories in the Malabar were written over to the British, which brought the Malabar region directly under colonial administration in the Madras Presidency.

The change in authority over the region brought significant long-term changes to this agrarian society. Till the British took over, the Malabar's social structure, while being caste based and tremendously unfair, was at least symbiotic, each caste having a societal role that coexisted with another. The high-caste jenmi, which means 'by birth', were the Brahmin and Kshatriya groups who did not engage in agricultural activity, so the right to work the land went to other castes. Only the upper castes had the right to acquire knowledge, but since they couldn't grow food, the system of land tenure was based on sharing of the produce among all groups in this non-monetary society. The farmers, including those of the Ezhava caste, leased land from the upper castes, did agriculture and kept up to half the produce for themselves. And like that, every caste had what we call a kulathozhil, or inherited occupation.

When the English took over administration of the Malabar, they changed the land tenure system and fundamentally changed the region as it had existed for millennia. I am not exaggerating when I say that English rule of the Malabar set our region back by generations. The way the colonial administration drew up new land laws was based on a misreading of local customs. Ours was not a culture that wrote down its perceptions and systems, there were no prescriptions and tablets that a foreigner could simply read and absorb to learn about

the place. In fact, the first comprehensive study of the Malabar region was written and published only in 1887 by William Logan, who was appointed as Collector here under the English administration. It was called *Malabar Manual*, and it surveyed the entire region, describing its geographical, social, cultural and economic structures in great detail. Logan took the help of local administrators and whatever documentation was available to create a storyline of the region from its earliest mentions till his time. It was compiled over many years; how much of it Logan wrote directly, how much was edited later, how much is simply written from hearsay – all this is difficult to tell now.

The British administration, applying a literal Western mindset, looked at a society that functioned on very nuanced rules, and drew up a list of self-serving legislation. Till then, farmers could not simply be dislodged from the land they worked on because of customs prevailing in the area; everyone was in some way dependent on the labour or protection of one another. Was it fair and egalitarian? No, it wasn't. But there was no formalized legal 'ownership' of land. Instead, tradition and customs offered a subtle understanding of rights and responsibilities. The rules of society were based on shared mythologies and beliefs, on the inherent acceptance that society functioned with the hands of many.

The English were interested in the Malabar for its natural providence, but knew it was far too complex in character and terrain for them to conduct the everyday affairs of administration themselves. Under the new land laws, the English declared the upper-caste jenmi the 'owners' of the landholdings, giving legal sanction to a hitherto customary societal role and turning much of the land in these areas into private property. In effect the English co-opted the upper castes, turning them into agents and administrators who could mop up revenue for the colonial administration from those lower down

the chain. The symbiotic relationship between people who worked the land and the ones who were permitted by caste and tradition to function as landlords was shattered. What was a social construct now became legal authority. And so was born a new being, the capitalist, earning passive income on the backs of farmers who, bogged under taxes and levies, became akin to indentured labour.

In response, Pazhassi Raja led a decade-long farmers' revolt against the British. When the administration destroyed his palace, flattening it symbolically to build the Thalassery–Coorg road, the king and his band of loyalists melted into the thick forests around north Malabar's Wayanad region. From within its jungles they fought the East India Company for more than ten years in a series of battles now called the Cotiote Wars. It was the longest military campaign the colonial administration waged in India. You could say Pazhassi Raja was an early Independence fighter, waging a precursor to the First War of Independence of 1857. Known among his people as the Kerala Simham, or the lion of Kerala, Pazhassi Raja was murdered by the British in Wayanad on 30 November 1805. But the legendary king remains an important emblem of revolution in our parts, a symbol of the Malabar's obstinacy in the face of aggression.

With the death of Pazhassi Raja, the Malabar region was fully within the control of the British. The administration devised ever more intricate ways of ensuring regular revenue from here. In 1820, Thomas Munroe, governor of the Madras Presidency, introduced to the Malabar the ryotwari system – the land revenue collection structure similar to the zamindari system. Every person in any kind of activity now had to pay some sort of tax that would become a revenue source for the higher administration. Moreover, the English and the jenmis together nominated adhikaris, or administrators, to govern rural areas on their behalf. This was essential because many

of the jenmis had no idea of the extent or scale of their properties; much of them were far-flung, and in those days, it was impossible to keep track of tenants and produce without some help. These administrators functioned like the present-day village officers. Today a village officer's position is a public posting, but back then the heads of important local families were chosen to be the administrators. They were responsible for measuring the jenmi's share of produce, collecting taxes and presiding over the area as judge and adjudicator on behalf of the landlord. Essentially, these administrators were sort of a local stand-in oppressor over farmers and labourers. They were often corrupt, using weighted measures and tricks to reduce the already minuscule share the farmer was owed.

There were three forms of leases. The first was the *kanakudian*, under which farmers gave jenmis remuneration to use the land permanently, or rather bought it from the landlord for a large sum of money. The second, more temporary, arrangement was the *kuzhikanam*, in which the farmer could pay the landlord a certain sum for using the land for fifteen years. The money was kept in a *sheela* or cloth, and called *sheelakaashu*, or cloth money. But that wasn't all. Much of the land wasn't completely arable when the farmer got permission to use it. To make farming feasible he'd have to clear it of shrubbery, undergrowth and tree coverage. For everything he cut or plucked off the land, even though it was useless rubbish, the farmer had to pay *kuttikanam*, a compensation. After fifteen years, the farmer would have to renew the relationship by paying for another fifteen-year term. But it was common for a jenmi to conjure up grievances about his lessee and change the terms of the agreement before the fifteen years were up, even though the farmer had paid upfront. When such situations came up, a farmer had no recourse other than to accept whatever the jenmi said.