The Forgotten Voices: Children in the Chengara Land Struggle

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Abstract

In recent years, the Chengara Land Rights Protest has gained widespread attention. The voice of most vulnerable over 200 children living amid the struggle has largely gone unheard. This study brings their lived experiences, shedding light on the violations of their fundamental rights. Through the field report, this research uncovers the harsh realities these children face: substandard housing, unsafe living conditions, lack of access to health care, distracted education, and constant physiological stress. Given the simple joy of playing is stripped away, it confines them indoors. This study indicates how the focus to land right often sidelines urgent concerns of child welfare. By centering children's viewpoints the study advocates for policy measures that align with child welfare and social justice.

Keywords: Chengara Land Struggle, Children's Rights, Child Welfare, Social Justice, Education, Health Inequality, Living Conditions

The Chengara land protest in Pathanamthitta district stands as one of Kerala's most prolonged land rights movements, marked by the continued occupation of a private rubber plantation by landless Dalit and Adivasi families for more than eighteen years as they seek secure housing and sustainable livelihoods (Sreerekha, 2012).

Although there are many discussions related to the Chengara Protest, we rarely hear about the lives of the children in this land replete with struggle, their childhood is not filled with children's laughter or other living facilities, but with constant social neglect and poor living conditions. These children lead lives that question the meaning of justice and equality in this modern age. They are the forgotten voices.

Roots of the Struggle

To understand Chengara, it is necessary to look at the history of land and caste in Kerala. While the state is celebrated for its literacy and development, these achievements have not reached everyone equally. Many Dalit and tribal communities still remain without land even today.

In 2007, under the leadership of Dalit activist Laha Gopalan, Sadhu Jana Vimochana Samyukta Vedi (SJVSV) encroached a part of Harrison's plantation in Chengara and started living with around 600 families demanding five acres of land for each family (Sreerekha, 2012). They named the occupied land *Samarabhoomi* and they built huts and started living there. This protest exposed the face of inequality that exists even today.

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The Children of Chengara

Around two hundred children are living in Chengara without electricity, drinking water or other basic facilities. They study in the dim light of kerosene lamps and the moke from these lamps often causes breathing problems in children. The nearest school is three km away. During the rainy season, the roads in Chengara are muddy and difficult. Many children stopped going to school due to long distance and lack of transport facilities.

Children in Chengara don't even get the basic right to play outdoors. As this area is close to the Sabarimala forest, wild elephants and wild boars frequently come to the area. Fearing such wild animal attacks, parents are afraid to let their children out of the house. Childhood, which ought to be a period of play and growth, is instead being confined within the boundaries of enclosed spaces.

These conditions violate the basic rights that every child deserves. The Kerala Child Rights Commission has pointed out the violation of children's fundamental rights, malnutrition, lack of safe shelter and lack of access to education. Education, which is one of the achievements of Kerala, is still a dream for the children of Chengara. Most families cannot afford the cost. When education went digital during the covid era, the lack of these facilities in Chengara became very visible. Online learning was impossible for children without electricity and unavailability of smart phones. Arya Rajesh, a girl from Chengara says, "It is very difficult to spend time in my house. The stench of kerosene lamps lingers throughout the day" (Sudhi & Unnikrishnan, 2025). The child is a symbol of the growing generation who are eager to learn but whose rights are being violated. Some children are continuing their studies through scholarships with the help of Non-governemntal organisations. However, most of the children are dropouts.

Poor health status and nutrition are major problems in Chengara. They depend on shallow wells for water. These become polluted during monsoons. Most of the houses do not have toilet facilities. The nearest health center is far away. People have to take their sick children through the forest paths because of the difficulty of transportation. Smoke from kerosene lamps causes eye and lungs issues in children. Lack of access to nutritious food causes health problems in children, especially in girls. As the families do not have ration cards and other documents, the government's health and nutrition schemes do not reach Chengara (RIGHTS, n.d.).

Children growing up in conditions marked by poverty and persistent insecurity often face significant psychological distress. In Chengara, children remain largely isolated from the outside world, and many recount experiences of stigma, with classmates from nearby villages referring to them as "those from the forest." Everyday life is shaped by uncertainty, as children go to sleep fearing eviction as well as threats from wild animals. Yet, within these harsh conditions, children also learn to navigate adversity through cooperation and mutual support. Shared moments of joy and collective care become crucial sources of resilience, enabling them to endure the hardships of their environment. Mothers in Chengara play a central role in sustaining everyday life. They shoulder the responsibility of caring for their children under extremely precarious conditions, with several women having given birth without access to medical assistance. Such circumstances reflect a broader pattern of neglect that continues to shape their struggle. Despite systemic failures, mothers work tirelessly to ensure the survival and well-being of their children, embodying forms of care that sustain the community in the face of exclusion.

The Role of the Government

The government's approach to Chengara is still unclear. Although the government favors the rights of the landless, those people who are still living there are not get-

ting basic facilities. Article 21 of the Constitution of India guarantees the right to life and dignity to all human beings. However, children and people in Chengara are being denied this fundamental right. Civil society in Kerala has consistently demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility towards the public. When governments falter, people's organisations often step forward to defend principles of justice and accountability. In many instances, the protests and interventions of social organisations have come to embody constitutional values, even when not explicitly framed in those terms.

During the initial and early years of this incident, student communities, Dalit groups, feminist groups, human rights activists, and many others from different parts of the state came together in Chengara. They provided food, medicine, books, and various forms of support to the residents. However, migration came to be viewed as a natural phenomenon, and as a result the support system gradually became vulnerable. Even today, the remnants of the events and the experiences of that period remain audible in the voices of the people of Chengara. Keywords such as rights, dignity, and freedom are used in their everyday conversations, and even children use these terms without fully realizing that they echo the language of the Constitution. "Justice is not to be requested, it should be claimed" stands as one of the enduring contributions of civil society. At the same time, solidarity has its limits. Many voluntary groups operate by following the directions of funding agencies, and when funds are exhausted, interactions and activities often come to a halt. This reveals a deeper structural problem. In India, developmental activities are often measured through indicators such as the number of wells constructed or the number of children enrolled in school. However, factors such as hope, confidence, and mutual understanding cannot be quantified and are therefore frequently overlooked. Such metrics are inadequate in contexts like Chengara, where legal complexities challenge conventional criteria. As a result, interventions tend to become intermittent assistance rather than sustained engagement. What the people of Chengara seek is not sympathy but a long-term partnership that recognizes them as collaborators. Dalit human rights movements and Dalit feminist collectives frequently conduct workshops on rights and education. Through these programmes, teenagers are trained to file complaints, prepare petitions, and interact with local officials. During one such workshop, a girl asked, "If the land is illegal, then are we illegal too?" This simple yet profound question exposes the moral limitations of bureaucratic language. The role of the state can be understood through the idea of the right to the city. Lasting reform cannot depend solely on activism; it requires institutional rethinking. Moving beyond rigid distinctions of legality and illegality, policymakers must embrace the principle that all residents, regardless of land ownership, should have access to basic amenities. This includes ensuring electricity, water, sanitation, education, and healthcare even in disputed settlements while legal processes continue. Grounded in judicial interpretations and Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, such an approach could enable Kerala to transform Chengara from a symbol of failure into an example of compassionate governance.

Conclusion

The Chengara movement is often described as a Dalit-Adivasi land struggle, yet many children there do not define themselves primarily through caste; instead, a shared experience of marginalisation shapes their consciousness. This shift encourages an understanding of social justice that extends beyond the framework of reservations. If the government invests meaningfully in their education, this young generation has the potential to transform Kerala into a more equal society. More importantly, it is essential to restore to children their lost time, not merely provide facilities, because delaying justice is akin to taking away years that can never be returned.

Chengara functions as a living civic classroom that continually raises political questions. Children who light candles before Ambedkar's statue learn that freedom rests on both moral conviction and material conditions. The Chengara struggle is therefore not only about land but also about the gap between statistical achievements and lived realities of exclusion. The true measure of any society lies in how it treats its children. The voices from Chengara remind us that rights are not granted through generosity but must be upheld through collective responsibility, urging us to choose participation over sympathy and meaningful reform over mere rhetoric.

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