

BATTLES IN THE BARNYARD



INFAM's Crusade for Kerala's Farmers

Dr Shaji John

Dr Navitha Elizabeth Jose



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**LORE & ED
KOTTAYAM, KERALA - 686560**



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Foreword

As I put pen to paper to write a foreword for a book on agrarian struggles, I am inclined to quote none other than Ramachandra Guha.

From an ecological perspective, peasant movements ... are not merely a defence of the little community and its values, but also an affirmation of a way of life more harmoniously adjusted with natural processes. At one level they are defensive, seeking to escape the tentacle of the commercial economy and the centralizing state; at yet another level they are assertive, actively challenging the ruling – class vision of a homogenizing urban – industrial culture. It is this fusion of the private (peasant movement) and public (ecological movement) profiles that has lent it ... a distinctive quality and strength. Far from being the dying wail of a class about to drop down the trapdoor of history, the call ... represents one of the most innovative responses to the ecological and cultural crises of modern society. It is a message we may neglect only at our own peril.

Peasants are a socially and economically marginalized, culturally subjugated and politically disempowered social group who are attached to land to eke out a subsistence living. Agrarian crusades transform, institutionalize and forge new collective identities as well as articulate strategies to ensure peasant survival in contemporary India. The post economic reform period in the country saw a number of peasant protests and movements against

acquisition of cultivable fertile land for industrial units and developmental projects. Movements at Singrur and Nandigram in West Bengal (2006), Mann in Maharashtra (2005) and Sompeta in Andhra Pradesh (2010) are classic examples. One cannot forget the days when the winter of discontent descended on Delhi in late November a few years ago. Braving water cannons, abuses, taunts, trolls and even the outright condescension of a patronizing government, they marched on until they were stopped at the gates of the national capital. Needless to say, the victory of peasantry over anti – peasant laws was a major setback to the unregulated growth of imperialism that sought to control the production and distribution system of food and land use in third world countries.

The heart and soul of this book is the Indian Farmers' Movement, popularly known as INFAM. I have no more words to describe their social activism than the following poem inspired by the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

आपने कहा देश की समृद्धि की लिए
मेरा गाँव डुबाया गया
मेरे दूधे खेतों के आधार पर
बजिली का उत्पादन किया गया
पर जनिहे वोह बजिली माली
उन्होंने उसके लिए क्या खोया?

आपके वादे के बलबूते पर
आप कहे हम जमीन छोड़ दें
पर तब हम क्या करें
जब आप अपना वादा तोड़ दें?

जसि देश की वक़ास की आप बात करते हैं
उस देश का अटूट हसिसा हूँ मैं
बसिरे लोगों और टूटे वादों का
अनकहा कसिसा हूँ मैं.

For the prosperity of the nation
My village was flooded
My flooded fields provided the basis
For you to generate electricity
But the people using that electricity
What did they lose?

Based on your promises
You say we should give up the land
But what do we do then
when you break your promise?

The country whose development you talk
about
I am an integral part of it
The forgotten people and the broken
promises
I am their untold story.

In an era wherein the natural habitat of the poor is again and again targeted by the international resource economy and

where from kiwi fruits to king prawns farming systems are put in place to cover the tables of distant consumers, the book has ushered in a wakeup call. Let this work spark the much-needed discourse, action and solidarity that our agrarian communities so urgently deserve.

Jai Hind.

Dr. Raju Narayana Swamy IAS

Principal Secretary to Government of Kerala

Thiruvananthapuram

16th March 2025.



Message

The land and its cultivators have always held a sacred place in the divine plan. From the first garden of Eden to the fields that feed the multitudes, agriculture is not merely an economic activity but a spiritual vocation, entrusted to humanity as an act of stewardship and service. In a world where the toil of farmers often goes unnoticed, initiatives that seek to restore dignity, justice, and sustainability to agriculture are truly divinely inspired.

It is with great joy that I extend my blessings and heartfelt appreciation for this remarkable work, INFAM and the Farmers' Struggle: Reimagining Agrarian Activism in Kerala, authored by Rev. Fr. Shaji John. This book is more than an academic study—it is a testament to faith in action, a call to recognize the tireless sacrifices of farmers, and a roadmap for agrarian renewal rooted in justice, solidarity, and sustainability.

The Institute of Natural Farming and Agriculture Management (INFAM) is a visionary initiative of the Catholic Church of Kerala, reflecting our commitment to uplifting farmers, promoting ethical agricultural practices, and advocating for policies that protect the rural poor. Through this initiative, we are reminded of our Gospel mission: *"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me"* (Matthew 25:40). The Church has always stood with the vulnerable, and the farming community—often burdened by economic hardship, policy neglect, and market exploitation—deserves our prayers, advocacy, and unwavering support.

Fr. Shaji John, through this book, has rendered an invaluable service to this mission. His meticulous research, deep understanding, and pastoral heart have given voice to a movement that embodies faith, perseverance, and hope. His work reminds us that true development must be holistic, ensuring that spiritual, social, and economic justice walk hand in hand.

I wholeheartedly encourage clergy, scholars, policymakers, and the faithful to read this book—not just as a scholarly contribution but as a spiritual call to action. By supporting this book, we support our farmers, our Diocese, and our commitment to a just and sustainable future. Let this work ignite a renewed passion for serving our agrarian communities, guided by faith and inspired by Christ's love.

May God bless Fr. Shaji John and all those who labour tirelessly in the fields, ensuring that no one goes hungry and that our land remains fruitful for generations to come.

With my prayers and blessings,



+ Jos Kallarangattu
Mar Joseph Kallarangattu
Bishop of Palai.

Preface

Agriculture is not just an economic pursuit—it is a profound connection between humanity and the land, a legacy passed down through generations. In Kerala, where tradition and modernity often converge, farming has long been more than a livelihood; it is a way of life, woven into the fabric of cultural identity and social movements. Yet, despite its foundational role, the farming community has faced deep economic distress, systemic neglect, and the mounting pressures of globalization. The struggles of these communities are not merely economic—they are battles for dignity, survival, and justice.

This book is a tribute to Kerala's farmers and a scholarly exploration of their enduring resilience. It delves into the historical and contemporary agrarian landscape, illuminating the social, economic, and political forces that have shaped it. Central to this study is INFAM (Indian Farmers' Movement), an organization that has emerged as a pioneering force advocating for sustainable, independent, and farmer-driven activism. Unlike many agrarian organizations entangled in political affiliations, INFAM has upheld the cause of cultivators, championing self-reliance, traditional knowledge, and policy reforms that safeguard farmers' rights.

My journey as both an educator and a priest has instilled in me a deep reverence for the sacred bond between people and the land. Agriculture is more than the act of growing food; it is a responsibility, a stewardship of the earth, and a commitment to

future generations. This book, therefore, is not just an academic endeavour—it is a call to action, urging policymakers, scholars, and the public to recognize the invaluable contributions of our farmers and the urgency of preserving and revitalizing traditional agricultural practices.

As Kerala stands at the crossroads of development and sustainability, the lessons embedded in its agricultural activism extend beyond its borders, offering invaluable insights for global discussions on food security, environmental conservation, and social justice. It is my hope that this work will inspire critical dialogue, empower advocacy, and spark meaningful action in the pursuit of a just and sustainable future for agriculture.

With deep gratitude to all those who have contributed to this endeavour, I invite you to embark on this transformative exploration of Kerala's agrarian struggles and the enduring legacy of INFAM. May this book serve as a catalyst for a renewed commitment to agricultural justice, sustainability, and the collective wisdom of those who cultivate the land.

With faith in the cause and hope for the future,

Dr Shaji John
Principal
Alphonsa College, Pala

About the Authors

Dr. Shaji John graduated with a Master of Arts in Political Science with first rank from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, with his academic tenure at St. Thomas College, Pala. Embarking on an academic career, he joined Alphonsa College, Pala, as an Assistant Professor in 2005. In 2013, he was conferred with a Ph.D. in Political Science from Mahatma Gandhi University. Currently, he holds the prestigious position of Principal at Alphonsa College, Pala, where he continues to influence the academic and administrative realms with his expertise and leadership.

Dr. Navitha Elizabeth Jose is a visionary academic and trailblazer in English literature, film studies, and feminist cultural analysis. As an Assistant Professor at St. Stephen's College Uzhavoor since 2013, she has been mentoring students and fostering creative learning. A PhD holder in feminist film theory, her groundbreaking research on gender, gaze, and media politics has earned accolades like the MLA Excellence Award and features in global conferences. Renowned as an innovative leader, Dr. Navitha spearheads transformative programs, including Campus Radio and Women Empowerment initiatives, while designing pioneering MOOCs to democratize education. Her expertise blends intellectual rigor with interdisciplinary storytelling, dissecting cinematic traditions and empowering students to transcend academic boundaries.

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From Famine to Movement: The Story Begins

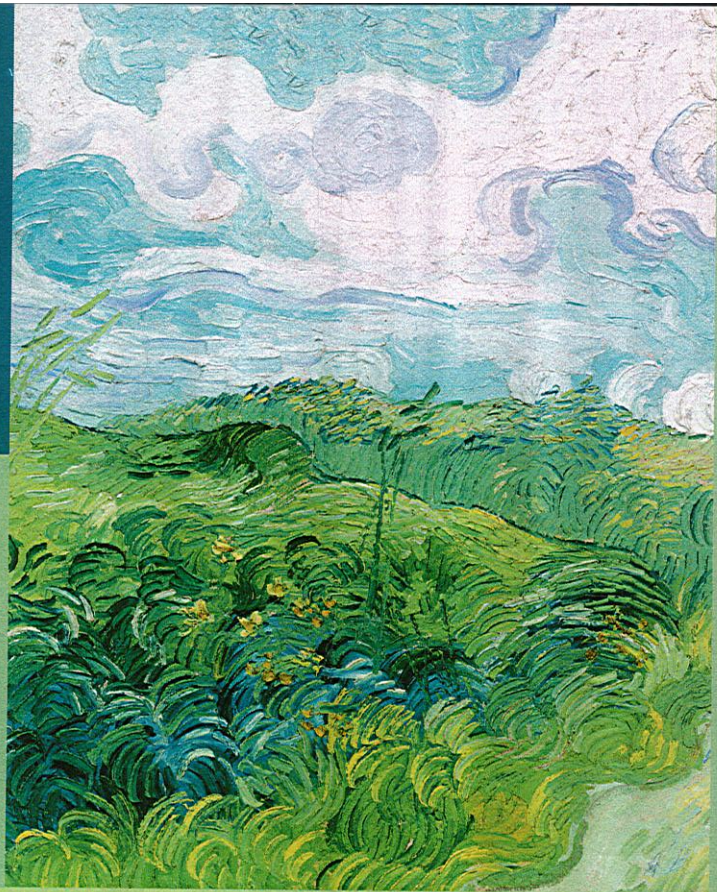
Agriculture has consistently served as the foundation of human civilization. No society can afford to ignore its immense importance. In the Indian context, this reality has been emphasized repeatedly throughout history. The nation's path to independence was overshadowed by the horrific Bengal Famine of 1942–43, during which close to three million men, women, and children succumbed to starvation. Famines in India have historically symbolized more than just a lack of food—they have mirrored a deep-seated lack of employment opportunities and social protection.

Following India's independence in 1947, the country's planners and political leadership quickly realized the pressing need for substantial investment in agriculture. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, famously stated, "Everything else can wait, but not agriculture." This declaration captured the essence of the nation's renewed emphasis on farming and food security in the post-independence era.

Within this expansive agricultural framework, the significance of the small farmer becomes particularly evident. Smallholders are the cornerstone of rural India, playing a vital role in sustaining both the social structure and the economic strength of the country. Despite significant breakthroughs like the Green Revolution—achieved through the relentless dedication of agricultural scientists and hardworking farmers—a considerable number of Indian farmers continue to grapple with ongoing

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This scholarly tribute explores Kerala's agricultural landscape through the lens of INFAM (Indian Farmers' Movement), documenting the struggles, resilience, and activism of farmers battling economic distress and globalization while advocating for sustainable farming practices. Uniquely positioned outside political entanglements, INFAM champions farmer self-reliance, traditional knowledge, and policy reforms in a region where agriculture transcends mere livelihood to become cultural identity. The author, drawing from dual perspectives as educator and priest, presents not just academic analysis but a passionate call to action for policymakers and the public to recognize farmers' contributions and preserve traditional agricultural practices. Beyond Kerala's borders, this work offers vital insights for global discussions on food security, environmental conservation, and agricultural justice while inspiring critical dialogue toward a more sustainable future.



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