



A ballad of Kochi

written by Parvati Dhananjayan
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Come oh villagers, come to the port

Carry your sickles and scythes, sticks and rocks

Come to the port, our city has fallen!!

Our little city by the sea has been tainted.



Do you remember our lost glory?

Our blood, our toil and sweat?

The fields we worked in day after day and night after night,

The crops we so carefully tended, while our children slept hungry.

Load the ships! Load them all! They said,

So we did! One after another, crops after crops.

There goes our pepper, our cardamoms and our cinnamons,

to lands far off, people who knew not of us but of our *Janmis* [\[i\]](#).

We imagine the Greeks, the Romans and the Arabs

of lands beyond our sea, grinding, sprinkling pepper

their fishes and meat smells of us, the sweat and tears

of the black haired, dark skinned who worked the fields.

Chinna heard, *Chella* say, *Karutha* heard from our little master,

men of lands where our spices rest, Write stories.

We shall be remembered in history! Exotic land and Exotic people.

History is for the rich. The poor! We live in the present.



Carrying gold and silver coins, one day the ships returned
Flocked like a litter of puppies waiting for their mother's milk, we waited.
Neither gold nor silver this time, not even bronze or copper
More of our crops they asked for, next time! They promised.

Two ships came the next day, three the day after, five in a week's time.
Like the crisp blue sky after the rain the south west wind brings, men of
shirts and pants as white as the milk, our *janmi* drinks, They came.
long pointy sticks slung on their backs, young, old and bald men.

Guns! They were called, those long pointy sticks. Unloading iron boxes,
they looked not at us, Our curious eyes were invisible to them. The sound,
of loud trumpets and soldiers, the Raja had arrived, glistening with pride,
blessed be his land by the sight of the mighty white traders.

Years passed, more of them came, more of their ships left but not
our silver and gold. The young *Parangis* [\[ii\]](#) walked our streets, ate
our fruits, raped our girls and yet fathered none of their children,



loads and loads of our pepper and coir went, all these years, no silver, no gold.

The Parangis left. News came from Calicut, they had lost a war. Then came the Dutch, they too packed their bags in no time, one day, our village woke up; men clothed in red and white, they talked of their kings and queens in London, We have neither kings nor queens now, just *janmis* who lick their boots.

It didn't matter what the color of their uniforms were, they all looked the same; white and indifferent. They did not see us, but we did.

Chella heard, *Chinna* say, *Karutha* heard from our little master; Different they were; the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British.

Not paddy, more spice! Pepper, cardamoms, cinnamon and coir, They told us over and over again, so we did. More spices.

Lands of our fathers were taken from us to feed armies and build empires, the dark skins were left curled into a coma without only our labor.

'We want liberation, we demand freedom'; cried the young and the old. Tales of many a Bhagat Singhs, Nehrus and Gandhis in cold prisons;



for freedom, for Swaraj floated through our little cochin.

We still worked the same fields, day in and day out.

What good is freedom to us without our lands?

What will we do with an independent country if no roof protects
the wrath of the monsoon and the anger of the sun, our tiny huts?

How free are we? Farmers with no land, Fishers with no sea.

An independent nation of the same old upper caste government,
lands for the ones who wield power and the ones who own wealth.
who are we, if not broken promises inherited from our forefathers
one day, for sure! But today; landless, homeless and jobless.

The city grew, the ports expanded yet Mother Sea quenched not our thirst.

Many a generation of *Moopans* [\[iii\]](#) came; their stiff shirts and ironed *Mundus* [\[iv\]](#)

“The port needs workers, yet not everyone can work”, blood and sweat again,

The survival of the strongest; Get the coin and the work is yours.

Sleep remained stranger to this night as our men fought;



Fathers over sons and brothers over brothers; A coin.

“Grant us a *Chappa* [\[v\]](#) O! Benevolent *Moopa*, let not our children go hungry.”

A monopoly of violence reigned this night, men like hungry hounds fought.

Sickles, hammers and red flags were flung; were to be taken back
our ancestors land and the sea that wailed in the clutches of money.

One, two, three! The shots were fired; there biting the dust
in a graveyard of buried hopes, lay our sons and men.

Amma heard, *neeli* say, *Moidu* heard from our little master,
engulfing our homes from the hinterland, one after another
the monster of a harbour, in the dictatorship of speed
Traders, businessmen and landowners; Building a city.

The struggles of years gone by keep us alive,
a dream of a better home, a brighter kitchen and better jobs
remains unattended, while by leaps and bounds, the world
around us grows; of foreign capital and private funders.



The Dalit lot of us, the lower castes and working class
starved out of our little patches of land, sold to men
in their Monday suits who came with tractors and cranes,
and at a breakneck pace, shattered everything we once called home.

Queen of the Arabian Sea, they called it
But queens had a tradition; cries of the poor will be unheard.
Amma heard, *neeli* say, *Moidu* heard from our little master;
'Kochi was growing, but it had no place for us'.

Generations of dark skinned, untouchable outcastes,
left with nothing more than *Poramboke Lands* [\[vi\]](#),
not a weed would grow, no toil or sweat would make it bloom.
No pages yellowed by age would remember us, left to fend for ourselves.

Buildings and high-rises sprung up along the coast,
Apartments, companies and shopping centers
on our wastelands we stand and watch; a city
on the boneyard of our paddy fields and huts.



They let more of us go to the swamps each day,
lands for the airport, lands for the metro
'Corruption' bellowed the middle class,
care not of corruption do we, but of our survival.

Money flowed left and right, but none came to us
nickels and dimes in the name of compensation
to the hinterland, diurnally the city materialized
Fort Kochi and Mattancherry have become old cities now.

Malu heard, *Maina* say, *Achu* heard from our little master,
Kochi and its backwaters are in need of us now.
To clean their malls, wash their cars, drive their autos,
load their ships and mint more money; so we went.

Companies from far away America hoisted their flags,
computers, machines, clothes and food chains;
Our *Kanji* and *Kappa* [\[vii\]](#) was replaced by Pizza and burgers



People of our little Kochi now preferred American food.

Mattocks and spades were rested, from our wastelands
we went, soldiers of a lost battle in their colored uniforms,
the glistening pride of Kerala sang out to us
The blues cleaned, the khakis rode and the reds waited tables.

On and on we went, bearing the burden
from outskirts, from across the backwaters, from drenches
by bus, by ferries and on foot; a *thorthu* [\[viii\]](#) on our foreheads,
a city we built; roads, bridges and metros.

A marvelous wonder, the breathtaking beauty
we hatched in her arms; the old and the new,
one stone a day, piece by piece we machined;
Kochi is not the old Kochi anymore.

An empire for software companies and info-parks
assembled on our weary spines



Malu heard, Maina say, Achu heard from our little master,
Still, we have no right to this city.

No feet of land to call our own, neither boats nor buildings
would crumble these ivory towers, when we cease
tales of all sturdy cities that grew, while our streets shrank
Yet, we toiled for a city that will never call us its own.

Our city has not fallen, not yet
I carry it, like my mother did, like her mother did
The city needed us and so do we,
but still, we have no claims in it.

Explanatory Appendix

My poem is inspired by David Harvey's 2003 essay titled 'The Right to the city' (*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, volume 27, issue 4, pp. 939-941). Harvey, through his essay, traces the transformation of cities as a socio-political phenomenon and the importance of granting human beings the right to make and remake their cities. This poem is a take on urban transformation of the city of Kochi in Kerala, India, through the lens of the working-class population majorly consisting of people from the Dalit castes and other minorities, that draws on a variety of historical sources including Justin Mathew's essay "Badge of Labour: Marginal Lives of the Labouring Poor of Cochin" (Kerala Council for



Histoical Research, <http://kchr.ac.in/articles/199>, n.d.), and K. A. Babu's unpublished dissertation, *Diciphering Belongingness in Kochi City; Cinematic Representations of the Urban* (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2021).

The poem is written in the form of narrative poetry that typically traces a story. Popular examples of narrative poetry are *The Iliad* by Homer or *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer. This poem is divided into three parts; The First section talks about the colonial times when the city of Kochi; then centred around the port of *Muziris* fell under the imperial powers of first the Portuguese, then the Dutch and finally the British. The first section describes how the peasants were kept in the dark by not providing them with adequate compensation for their labour. The second section deals with post-independence era, where these Dalit laborers continue to make their ends meet with the Kochi harbour as their centre of activities. This section highlights the *Chappa Sarmam* (Chappa Revolt) of 1953, first urban uprising in south India against the oppressive labour recruitment practice in Mattancherry (Now a part of Old Fort Kochi). The contractors called *Moopans* recruited labourers from colonies by throwing *Chappas* (small sealed coins) on the ground. Whoever picked the *Chappa* would get the job for the day. The second section also describes the shift brought by the liberalisation reforms of late 1990's when thousands of Dalit families were forced to sell their lands to private contractors and were displaced off to wastelands in the outskirts of the proposed city. The third and final section deals with present times where members of these families who live in *Poramboke Lands* come to the city on a daily basis to work in malls, software companies and other establishments as unskilled workers.

The poem repeatedly mentions 'Our little master', whose identity is not specified. The little master is a symbolic representation of the different sources from which the people learn about the changes happening around them. The identity of 'the little master' remains unknown to both the reader as well these communities. It also depicts how the news travelled; from oral exchanges and overheard conversations. The poem tries to trace how the present generation, like their ancestors, were denied claims to the city they helped build and the intricate



relation between their dependence on the city and city's dependence on them.

Footnotes

[i] Aristocracy of Kerala who owned lands. Otherwise called Landlords.

[ii] Local name for the Portuguese.

[iii] Local name for labor contractors.

[iv] A type of garment worn by men around their waist. Traditionally white in color.

[v] Coins with sealed emblems used for labour recruitment.

[vi] Wastelands/ Lands that doesn't come under revenue generating lands.

[vii] Rice porridge and Tapioca; a traditional food combination of Kerala, especially the working class.

[viii] A thin towel, typically used in households of Kerala.

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This post is part of our second Academic Fiction thread – see [Dennis Rodger's introductory post](#).