

Colonial cousin

A Dutch scientist has made several in-depth studies on the ecological concerns of Kerala.

V. KALADHARAN
profiles the distinguished anthropologist

TWO decades ago, a westerner in a remote village of Kerala was a lingering excitement to its inhabitants. Unlike today, he/she was not an object of suspicion and fear for the rustic community. Karikatoor colony situated beside the Manimala river in Kottayam district was everything for poor households who were long deprived of their rights on land. It was in 1978 that Peter Van Der Werff, a Dutch anthropologist, stepped into the village to study the life-cycle of the landless peasants in the colony. The euphoria that followed the much-talked-about land reforms had not vanished completely. Peter stayed close to the colony. His penetrating eyes zoomed into the unsaid agonies of the



families. During conversations with casual labourers and rubber-tappers, Peter read between the lines and made a profound study of their psyche and socio-economic behaviour. The result of his two-year research is 'Modern Poverty,' an authentic reflection of our deceptively dignified society.

"People in this society are incredibly sociable and sensitive. Their problems are deep-rooted and ever changing. This intriguing nature of Kerala society compels me to return to it regularly." Peter attributes subjective relationships between employers and casual labourers being the main handicap for organised bargaining in the rural sector. "There are subtle links between them which

sometimes defy the norms of social morality." He holds in high esteem the entrepreneurial skills of Keralites, but deplors their attitude to long-term investments fearing risk. This, he feels, comes in the way of increased economic circulation and employment opportunities in Kerala in spite of its high literacy rate and access to diverse sources of development.

In recent years, this anthropologist has extended his study to ecology and environment. Again, he decided to concentrate on Kerala where environmental concerns are still a far cry. The holistic perspective of Peter to development deals with the mechanistic world view of the west and the symbiotic and non-mechanistic experience of the Asian tribal and agricultural societies.

"The triangular relationship of ecological equilibrium, bio-physical limits and human needs, is a complex concern in the inter-cultural ecoscope of Kerala. With immense patience and determination, pro-environmentalists have to remove from the minds of innocent masses the misunderstanding that the eco-activists are enemies of progress." Peter participated in

the Dutch Water Appraisal Missions and in a project on pollution in Kerala, sponsored by the Institute for Environmental Studies, Free University of Amsterdam.

He was surprised by the awareness of inhabitants around the highly polluted Chitrapuzha river near Kochi about the health hazards and the devastation of the flora and fauna. "They know pretty well that these are the prices they have paid for the factories that came up in that area."

Constant interactions with the Malayalis have helped Peter learn the language a little. "Malayalam is a difficult language. You cannot learn its subtle shades. The winding character of its alphabets is perhaps a symbolic representation of the often winding thoughts and actions of the Malayalis." Years back, Peter and our legendary writer, Thakazhi, met in the latter's hamlet. They exchanged pleasantries. Afterwards, Thakazhi turned to me and said, "He is too shrewd a sahib. Don't teach him more Malayalam." A streak of smile passed across the face of the 'great son of Kuttanad.' Peter instantly picked up its meaning and went into laughter.