

WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT IN TRAVANCORE (1922 — 1949)

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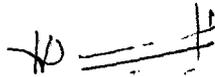
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PREFACE

The present thesis represents an earnest endeavour to study the history of Working Class Movement in Travancore, the southern part of present day Kerala, from 1922 to 1949. With a mind to select a socio-economic topic for my research work, I have been going through the published materials on Kerala History for a quite long time. And naturally a brewing struggle between the labourers and the capitalists in contemporary Travancore and Malabar areas fell into my attention. It was a good time for me to collect a plethora of information for an intensive study of the labour problems and administrative responses. It was originally intended to select an area common to the entire Kerala, but as Travancore formed a separate political entity under a princely order it was found essential to concentrate exclusively on that State.

Since the growth of a movement among the workers under a political leadership could not escape external influence, it was found essential to treat the subject in the perspective of similar developments in the neighbouring states. Moreover in their struggle to set up a democratic government in the State, the Travancore factory workers had always united with the agricultural labourers. Thus under the purview of the title Working Class I had to join both the factory and field workers into a single power. A timely discussion with my research supervisor led me to restrict the period of study between 1922 and 1949,

for 1922 and 1949 synchronised with important landmarks in the working class movement.

The Working Class in Travancore, through their organised trade unions, responded to every phase of social reforms in the State. Thus a study of the organised labour force in Travancore is a new trend at work in historical writing. Restricted by ideology and leadership, the consolidated force of the labourers as a class had undergone different overtones. And, infact, the improperly catalogued records in the Government Secretariat at Trivandrum furnished neither complete nor succinct information on the subject. But to my excitement, the normally ignored papers, the Cochin and Madras Files and the Revenue Section Books in the English Records Section in the same Secretariat came to my help. Interestingly in the course of my research I could find a growing trend in the leftist movement in Travancore. The Travancore Police Reports and Bulletins, Government Publications and Private Papers shed light on the different facets of the Movement. In the discussion I have made a sincere effort to explain the various factors that influenced the organisation of the industrial as well as the agricultural workers. The condition of labour, idea of organisation, drift to political parties and finally the workers' pursuit for the establishment of a workers' government in the State are dealt with their historical setting.

I am greatly indebted to my Guiding Teacher Dr.K.M. Mathew, M.A., Ph.D., Reader, Academic Staff College, Goa University. With sincere and heartfelt thanks I remember the days I spent with my professor whose patient guidance, constant encouragement and ready help made me to complete the thesis in time. A historian with balanced approach and critical analysis, he extended to me his support and helped me with suggestions in the course of my research work.

In my attempt to interview personally the labour leaders directly connected with the Movement, I approached a large number of people. Among them I could get the benefit of the counsel of late Mr.M.N.Gowindan Nair. A popular trade union leader of Kerala, he recollected for me, the predicament of workers before the formation of unions and the influence of political parties on the labour movement in Travancore. My thanks are due to the Government of Kerala for giving access to the English Records, Home Department, Government Secretariat, Trivandrum. The personnel of English Records Section assisted me in the consultation of records even uncatalogued, I convey my sincere thanks to them. The Staff of the State Archives, the Kerala University Library and the Legislative Library all at Trivandrum and the T.P.M.Library at Madurai Kamaraj University permitted me to refer the rare books and newspaper bundles relevant to my topic. I owe my indebtedness to them. Finally I convey my sincere thanks to Mr.E.Mothilal,M.A., for doing an excellent job in typing the present thesis so neatly as it is.

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INTRODUCTION

The State: Its Land and People

The name Travancore is the anglicised form of Thiruvithamcode of Srivalumkode, the abode of prosperity. The fact was that Thiruvithamcode, now a village situated thirty miles south-east of Trivandrum, was the royal residence. The State of Travancore was known by several other names each of which emphasised a particular fact of history. The name Venad, is a corruption of Vanavanad, the land of celestials.¹ The other names such as Vanchidesom, Dharmarajyam and Tiruadidesam indicated one or other aspect of its great antiquity.

Situated between 8° 4' and 10° 21' north latitude and between 76° 13' and 77° 38' east longitude, Travancore was the most southern of the Indian States. Washed by the waters of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean in the West and South, Travancore State was bounded on the North by the state of Cochin and the district of Coimbatore and on the

1. Velupillai, T.K., The Travancore State Manual, Vol.I, Travancore, 1940, p.1.

East by Western Ghats and the districts of Madurai, Ramnad and Tinnevely. The State had a long coastline of 180 miles and was the largest maritime State in British India.² There are some good ports like Alleppy, Quilon, Trivandrum and Colachel. Parallel to the sea runs a bewitching continuity of lakes, backwaters and canals.

The area of the state was 7625 square miles, of which more than 2500 were covered with forest and backwater. The extreme length of the State from north to south was 174 miles and the greatest breadth from east to west, seventy five miles.³ Thus, in area, Travancore occupied the nineteenth place among the Indian States. The mountains which separate Travancore on the east from the adjoining British districts and which at some points rise to an elevation of 8000 feet above the sea are clothed with forests. The westcoast has the dampest and the most uniform climate, in India. The seasons in Travancore are controlled by two periods of rainfall, the South-West Monsoon between June and August and the North-West Monsoon between October and December. The rainfall was generally heavy, the average being eighty nine inches per annum.

2. Padmanabha Iyer, A., Modern Travancore, Part I, Trivandrum, 1941, p.1.

3. Velupillai, T.K., op.cit., Vol.I, p.49.

Protected by British imperialism and supported by a ruling clique and dedicating themselves to Lord Padmanabha, the rulers systematically exploited the people, partly for their own extravagance and partly in competition with fellow Princes for gaining the favour of the British. What the common people experienced in their day to day life were the evils arising out of oppressive taxation, forced labour, social degradation, exclusion from temples, streets and services, starvation and torture.⁴ Among many states of British India, no other political unit presented a picture of such continuous history and cultural traditions as in Travancore.

Travancore presented the diversity of races and religions. While the caste Hindus lived in amity and mutual confidence, the Tamil Brahmins occupied a position of influence. The enterprising Ezhavas and the industrious Nadars had a prominent position. The Christians of all denominations represented about one-third and the Muhammedans nearly one-fourteenth of the total population. In fact Travancore occupied an advanced position in education.⁵

4. Rajayyan, K., Foreword Note in Daniel, D., Struggle for Responsible Government in Travancore, Madurai, 1985, p.vii.

5. Travancore Directory for 1937, Trivandrum, 1938, p.110.

As compared with the other States in British India, women occupied high positions in public services and activities.⁶ Female literacy in Travancore had attained a high standard. Its total population according to the Census Report for 1931 was 50,95,973. The fact was that Travancore occupied the third place in population as compared with the adjoining British districts. Being the religion of the ruling house, Hinduism was the most predominant in the State. The Hindus, divided into various castes, constituted nearly two-third of the entire population.

Economy and Occupation

The economic condition of the people of Travancore was better than that of the average Indians. According to the Census Report for 1881, the total number of labourers was 3,10,229 or nearly thirteen per cent of the whole population.⁷ By 1891 the total number of people engaged in work connected with land was 10,56,600. Of these 5,49,956 were males and 5,06,644 were females.⁸ However, the Census

6. Jawaharlal Nehru, M., The Discovery of India, New Delhi, 1981, p.307.

7. Nagam Aiya, V., Report of the Census of Travancore 1881, Trivandrum, 1884, p.253.

8. Ibid., 1891, Madras, 1894, p.588.

Report of 1911 gives the number of persons who have returned to agriculture as their primary occupation as 5,60,357. Of these 35,508 have also started some other occupations.⁹

In Travancore caste and occupations were often closely related. Significantly the main occupations were distributed among the several castes and races. If each religion is viewed separately, it is found that the employment which attracted the Muhammedans mostly was agriculture. They also took largely to textile industries, trade in textiles and in foodstuffs. The Christians, in addition to agriculture, largely resorted to work in wood and also engaged themselves in food industries. The Hindus engaged themselves mostly in agriculture, food industries, textiles and public administration.¹⁰ The most prominent fact brought out by the return was the marked extent to which traditional occupations were being gradually departed from by all classes.

By 1940 nearly fifty four per cent of the average population, workers and non-workers taken together, was supported by agriculture. 39,000 persons were engaged in

9. Census of India, 1911, Travancore, Vol.XXIII, Part I, p.282.

10. Ibid., pp.293-294.

fishing, more than 8,000 in cashewnut industry, over 1,06,000 in coir yarn industry and over 18,000 in rice husking. Of the total industrial population, ninety three per cent were engaged in cottage industries, the remaining seven per cent being factory workers.¹¹ In fact judged from the proportion of non-working dependants to the total population, there was more unemployment in Travancore than in any other State or Province in India except Bengal.¹² The illiterate labourers in the State, however, had the least unemployment problem.

Caste and Class Structure

The Hindu society in Travancore was based on the caste system. The castes were heading hereditary occupations. And so the agrarian relations in Travancore were also based on caste.¹³ People polluted not merely on touch but on sight! The society was divided, more than any other region of India, into many compartments. The Malayali Brahmins, the Kshatriyas

11. Velupillai, T.K., op.cit., Vol.I, p.403.

12. Ibid.

13. Oomen, M.A., Land Reforms in Kerala, Trivandrum, 1971, p.11.

and the Nairs enjoyed the privilege of high caste and ruled over the vast majority of low caste people like the Ezhavas or Tiyyas, the Pulayas, the Parayas and the Shanars. The Ezhavas were basically a cultivating class, traditionally associated with the growing of coconut and with the tapping of trees. The community as a whole was in a state of social and economic depression.¹⁴ The other low castes constituted the main body of agricultural labour. By the twelfth century A.D. the Namboodiri landlords and caste hierarchy became powerful factors in Travancore society. The lowest sections of the society like Ezhavas and Shanars were taxed in the name of their castes.¹⁵ The result was that there was a series of inequitious taxes and cesses which imposed a heavy burden on the underprivileged working people of the society. Even the wages were determined by the caste of the labourers.¹⁶ Native Hindu rulers in general thought it their sacred duty

14. Panicker, Sarder K.M., A History of Kerala 1498-1801, Annamalai, 1959, p.12.

15. Usha Muraleedharan, SNDP Yogam and Kerala Politics, Ph.D.Thesis in Politics, University of Kerala, 1979, p.10. In Travancore house-tax was imposed on Ezhavas, Shanars, Parayas and Pallars. Grass cutting, a special tax, was paid by Parayas only in Nanjinad. (Samuel Mateer, Native Life in Travancore, London, 1883, p.292.)

16. Velupillai, T.K., op.cit., Vol.III, pp.60-61.

to protect the rights and privileges of the Savarnas and any attempt on the part of the Avarnas to question the sanctity of the Varna System was looked upon as treason and put down with heavy hand. The principle of pollution was very rigid that the Nair was obliged to kill those who violated the rule of untouchability.¹⁷

The land tenure in Travancore just before the twentieth century was very complex and unique when compared with those in other parts of India. The tenure system in the state explained the extent to which private property was recognised in Travancore. The growth of jenmi system within the framework of a feudal polity was also a historical development rendered inevitable by the very logic of things.¹⁸ Public activities in Travancore proceeded to rest on a conglomeration of confused ideas and concluded that all lands in the state belonged originally to Brahmin jenmis. From Brahmin jenmis the land came to be handed over to sub-castes like naduvazhis or chieftains, Nairs and others, creating various tenure rights. Thus the land tenure system in its final setting had three distinct phases; the holders

17. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, Jenmi Sambradayam Keralattil, (Malayalam), Kottayam, 1966, pp.57-58.

18. Sreedhara Menon, A., Cultural Heritage of Kerala: An Introduction, Cochin, 1978, p.196.

of Devaswom lands, the holders of Jenmom lands and the holders of Sircar lands. These land tenure system developed a new form of feudal land relationship in Travancore. The actual cultivation was done by the lower caste slaves. The Namboodiri Brahmins represented the highest strata as jenmi or landlord, the Nairs represented the second strata as the kanamdars or holders of a higher level tenancy right and mainly the Ezhavas represented the lowest layer as holders of verumpattom or simple lease. In the areas of Kuttanad, Syrian Christians often were both kanamdars and verumpattom tenants.¹⁹

The peasant proprietorship is the result of recent developments in the character of the tenurial system in Travancore. In theory the Government was the largest landowner. The position of Government as the chief jenmi was further enhanced by Col. Munro the Resident cum Dewan of Travancore, in acquiring the properties of 378 important and wealthy temples for the state in 1912.²⁰ The jenmis were mostly absentee landlords, getting their dues through

19. Jose George, Politicisation of Agricultural Workers in Kerala, Calcutta, 1984, p.23.

20. Varghese, T.C., Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences: Land Tenures in Kerala 1850-1960, Calcutta, 1970, pp.30-31.



their Karyasthans and having all their business transacted by their agents. The kudiyans or tenants had to obey the behests of jenmis, reasonable or unreasonable.²¹ Even amidst all feudal and complex nature, the land tenure system in Travancore throughout the nineteenth century was much lighter than in Malabar and Cochin which had to pay a much higher subsidy to the British in relation to its income. A notable feature in the development of tenurial system in Travancore was that by the beginning of the twentieth century the tenants had become independent and powerful. The Patton proclamation of 2 June 1865, hailed as the Magna Carta of Travancore ryots, assured full ownership rights to the tenant-cultivators of Sircar lands. The Jenmi Proclamation of 1867 positively banned the landlords from evicting tenants as long as they paid the stipulated rent and other customary dues. Encouraged by the favourable factors, tenants in Travancore continued to have hold over the lands leased to them even after the termination of the lease.²² Thus in the second half of the nineteenth century, Travancore forged ahead in creating a

21. The Jenmi Kudiyan Regulation II of 1896.
D.Dis.89/1914/Judicial.

22. Madhava Rao, Dewan of Travancore, No.63, 7 January 1868, Letter to N.Neurill, Resident, Section Book of Revenue letters, 1867-1868, Government Secretariat, Trivandrum, p.2.

broad base of peasant proprietorship. Under the variety of tenurial rights the condition of agricultural labourers remained unchanged and out of this feudal society an aggrieved slave class began to emerge in Travancore.

Extremely poor and backward in education, the agricultural workers were more or less treated as slaves. Many of them had servile status and the Malayalam term adima, verbally translated as slaves, is frequently found in the literature.²³ The hill tribes of Travancore were particularly the bad case. In the earlier times the murder of slaves was scarcely considered a crime.²⁴ In fact the Government of Travancore themselves owned slaves mainly as a result of the confiscation of estates and the resumption of temple lands. In about 1850 the price of a slave was on the average between six and ten rupees.²⁵ There were well established rules for assigning the wives and children of these slaves. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Travancore Government had no public works department but exacted free labour from the low castes of Ezhavas, Nadars, Parayas and Pulayas. Even as late as in 1812, Col.Munro,

23. Dharmakumar(ed.), The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol2, Delhi, 1982, p.213.

24. Thurston, E., Ethnographic Notes on Southern India, Madras, 1906, p.449.

25. Velupillai, T.K., op.cit., Vol.III, p.55.

British Resident in Travancore and Cochin, discovered a number of half-starved and naked natives in iron chains as slaves at the Dutch Settlement of Changanassery.²⁶ Temples were also entitled to free labour namely uliyam or forced labour, rendering the lot of the backward communities more unenviable. Thus in Travancore slavery existed in all its hideous forms.

In 1812, on the advice of Col. Munro, Maharani Lakshmi Bai (1810-1815)^{of} Travancore issued a proclamation prohibiting the purchase and sale of slaves.²⁷ However, as slavery continued to exist, the Christian missionaries in Travancore presented a petition to Maharajah Swati Tirunal (1829-1847) on 19 March 1847 pleading for the entire and immediate emancipation of all slaves.²⁸ In response to this petition and under pressure from the Madras Government, Maharajah Utram Tirunal (1847-1860) issued a royal proclamation on 24 June 1855 abolishing slavery altogether in Travancore.²⁹ As part of liberalising the slave castes of Travancore, uliyam or forced labour demanded by the Government was also stopped in 1865.³⁰ Though slavery was abolished by law in Travancore, the slaves continued to work as dependent labourers.

26. Ibid., p.55.

27. Nagam Aiya, V., The Travancore State Manual, Vol.I, Trivandrum, 1906, p.465.

28. Memorandum of the Missionaries, 19 March 1847, cited in Daniel, D., op.cit., p.22.

29. Kusuman, K.K., Slavery in Travancore, Trivandrum, 1973, p.53.

30. Balakrishnan, V., and Leelavathi, R., Mannathu Padmanabhan and the Revival of Nairs in Kerala, Delhi, 1982, p.13.

Another notable feature of the Travancore society was the peculiar family system. The caste Hindus of the State had practised and benefitted from a matrilineal system of family and inheritance called the Marumakkattayam. The Namboodiri Brahmins were instrumental in introducing the Marumakkattayam system in the Royal House of Travancore. This system of inheritance or the pattern of succession was unknown to Travancore prior to the twelfth century A.D.³¹ The traditional theory of the origin of Marumakkattayam, the Brahminical theory, attributes it to a mandate of Parasurama, the legendary founder of Kerala. But this theory is not a rational explanation of the origin of Marumakkattayam. The Namboodiris, in order to ensure continuous support of the Nairs, contrived to control the destiny of the latter by linking both the social groups by the institution of Sambandam. The strict Namboodiri rule enjoined that only the eldest son in the family should marry formally from his caste. The junior members were condemned to life-long bachelorhood. Thus they directed their attention, in large numbers, towards the women of the Nair families which settled around their illoms. Moreover, the Namboodiris interpreted the law and banned all valid marriages among the Nairs. The more lovers a Nair women had, the greater was her honour.³² Indeed none of the members

31. Pillai, K.K., "The Traditions and History of the Nanchinad Vellalas", Proceedings of the First Annual Conference, South Indian History Congress, Madurai, 1980, p.94.

32. Ibrahim Kunju, A.P., Medieval Kerala History, Ibid., pp.139-140.

of the Nair families dared to question this peculiar family system.

The basic intention behind the introduction of matrilineal system was to keep the property of the Nair tarawads intact. Under a system of valid marriages and patrilineal inheritance, the family properties faced the threat of partition and destruction. Thus the people who introduced the matrilineal family system declared family as impartible. The old Nair had no existence separate from his tarawad.³³ Mainly the Hindu communities like the Kshatriyas, the Ambalavasis and the Nairs practised the Marumakkattayam system. The Ezhavas, the Pulayas and other castes had no uniform system of family.³⁴ In the matriarchal family every member had the right to maintain the property, but none was entitled to partition. The consent of all the members of the tarawad was essential for effecting partition.³⁵ This peculiar family system gradually strengthened a feudal society in Travancore.

Study of the Sources

The Government records preserved in the English Records Section of Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum are the most important

33. Extract from the Proceedings of the Legislative Section, 14 September 1917, D.Dis.30/1915/Legislative.

34. Sreedhara Menon, A., op.cit., pp.202-203.

35. The Travancore Partition Bill, 24 April 1930, D.Dis.121/1930/Legislative.

source materials for constructing the history of the Working Class Movement in Travancore. Varied in character, these records reveal the primary informations dealing with the development of a class conscious workers' movement in the princely state of Travancore. Eventhough not properly catalogued, the Cochin and Madras files in the Trivandrum Secretariat narrate the outside political influence on and leadership of the working class in Travancore. The reports of the Enquiry Committees appointed by the Travancore Government from time to time also reveal the different stages in the growth of a militant unionism among the workers. The administrative reports, the Travancore Legislative Proceedings, and the Census Reports come next in importance. The dissertations, articles, personal interviews, journals, newspapers and the government and private publications provide a plethora of information on the topic.

The files preserved in the Government Secretariat, Trivandrum are varied in nature and theme. The records dealing with the history of Working Class Movement in Travancore come under the Confidential Section and Judicial, Development, Industries and Control Departments. These files contain mostly correspondence between the police and the administration, telegrams from labour leaders and memorandums submitted by the labour associations. The resolutions passed by the labour associations periodically disclose the growth of unionism and the rise of radicalism among the workers. While the weekly and daily bulletins of the Police and the magisterial reports speak of the policy of

the Government on the labour force, the petitions from labour unions and speeches of labour leaders detail the reactions. The Report of the Board of Conciliation or the George Committee Report, as it was generally called, gives a detailed account of the sufferings of the working class and the spread of unionism among coir workers. Interestingly, all these records throw light on the emergence of the leftist movement in Travancore and their ascendancy on the labour. The Press Notes and Communiqués dictate the efforts of the Government to face the growing labour power. Simultaneously, the pamphlets and leaflets circulated by the labour leaders show the determination of the Working Class.

The official reports contain a large volume of information relating to the emergence and spread of trade unionism among the industrial and agricultural workers. The Kuttanad Enquiry Commission Report of 1972 deal with the condition of agricultural labour in the State. The Travancore Administrative Reports form the next major document. The administrative reports of Police, Development, Judicial and Industries departments contain much information on labour conditions in Travancore. The proceedings of the Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly and Sri Chitra Council are useful to gauge the discussions on labour conditions in the State at various levels. Significantly, these proceedings furnish information on the speeches of many members of the State Legislature who cautioned the administration about

the brewing struggle between the workers and the administration of Travancore.

A number of dissertations and articles on labour movements and industrial relations in Kerala have been useful for the study of the Worker's Movement in Travancore. The personal interviews with the prominent labour leaders, though mixed with biased conceptions, disclose some rare turns in the political leadership of the workers. The journals in English like the Commercial Review, Commerce, Capital and Economic and Political Weekly contributed largely on the labour situations in the State. From 1940, The Travancore Information and Listener had published the labour policy of the Government. This provided lot of information. Meanwhile, the Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, published in 1972 from Alleppy, furnish a wide range of informations on the experiences of the labour force in their attempts to achieve class solidarity. Newspapers, mainly in Malayalam like Thozhilali, Karshakan, Malayali, Prakasam, Kerala Bhusanam, Poura Prabha and Powradhwani give many references to the condition of workers and often cautioned the administration in their labour policy. The Indian Labour Year Book for 1947-1948 confirms the chronology for most of the labour legislations in the State. An unbiased and patient perusal of these sources bring to light the growing power of workers, as a class, in Travancore. The comprehensive study of all these data give a detailed history of Working Class Movement in the erstwhile state of Travancore.

CHAPTER I

TRAVANCORE LABOUR ASSOCIATION

The Travancore Labour Association formed in 1922 was the pioneer of all other workers' organisations in the native states of India. Many streams of social and economic changes merged in the Labour Association. The Coir industry in Travancore provided the basis for the development of the Working Class Movement in the modern sense. Changing class relations, broken hierarchy of the Hindu society, industrial revolution and the continuous misery of the working people led to a movement for economic equality. Indeed the Travancore Labour Association represented all these developments.

Changing Class Relations

By the end of the nineteenth century Travancore presented a dismal picture of social and religious life. A silent social revolution set in motion a progressive outlook. In Travancore the movement for social change came from the lowest sections of the society.¹ By 1900 particularly the Ezhavas were prospering from the new economic opportunities unleashed on cash crop growing areas of India in the late Victorian period. Educated and wealthy, they struggled to

1. Ravindran, T.K., Asan and Social Revolution in Kerala, Trivandrum, 1972, p.xxxii.

escape from the disabilities forced upon their caste and to have a respectable status acknowledged by the Travancore Government.²

In Travancore social abuses like sati and infant marriage were mostly absent. But the social evil in the State was caste. Therefore the social reform movement in Travancore was a movement of low and untouchable communities, fighting the inequities of a rigid caste system. There was large scale conversion to Christianity among the depressed classes to escape the rigorous of caste oppression. The Christian missions were active in Travancore and thousands of depressed class men joined the fold of Christianity, because the humanitarian activities of the missionaries assured them a modicum of rights and privileges enjoyed by the caste Hindus.³ In South Travancore a large number of Shanars were converted to Christianity and thus received protection from caste havoc. In fact Travancore became the worst example of caste division and domination.

The 'Upper Cloth Revolt' in South Travancore in the nineteenth century give the best example of feudal customs

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2. Robin Jeffrey, "Destroy Capitalism: Growing Solidarity of Alleppy's Coir Workers 1930-1940", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XIX, No.29, 21 July 1984, p.1160.
 3. Meckenzie, G.T., Christianity in Travancore, Trivandrum, 1901, p.54.

existing in the society.⁴ In fighting the barbarious customs of not permitting the women of the lower castes to cover their bosoms, the Shanars with the active assistance of the Christian missionaries, carried the struggle to a successful end. The Government Circular of May 1914, allowed the Shanars to wear jackets, although they were not permitted to use the breast cloth in the way the upper castes did.⁵ This slow but steady socio-economic developments in Travancore made the people of many suppressed castes conscious of their rights.

On 11 January 1891 the leading communities in the State jointly submitted a memorial to Sri Mulam Tirunal, the Maharajah of Travancore. The 'Malayali Memorial' or the 'Travancore Memorial', as it was named, was signed by more than ten thousand citizens. The Memorialists questioned the very basis of the enjoyment of special rights in Travancore. This was the first visible sign of political discontent in the State. The press in Travancore and outside too kept up active propaganda in support of the Memorialists.⁶ In a counter move to the

4. The Shanars of South Travancore under the shadow of London Mission Society led the Upper Cloth Revolt, from 1827 to 1859. The disturbances started off with a few instances of the Nairs attacking Christian women in public places and on roads. (Augur, C.M., Church History of Travancore, Madras, 1903, p.779.)

5. Rao, M.S.A., Social Movements and Social Transformation, Madras, 1979, p.29.

6. The Subhasini, 10 December 1925, Press Cuttings, D.Dis./1945/C.S.

Malayali Memorial, the Brahmins and their supporters submitted another memorial in 1891 itself refuting the arguments and allegations of their antagonists. The Government of Travancore won over the Nairs by giving some concessions. Disappointed at this turn of events, the Ezhavas under the guidance of Dr.Palpu submitted a separate memorial called 'the Ezhava Memorial' to the Maharajah of Travancore with 13,176 signatures on 3 September 1896.⁷ All these memorials gave expression to the political awakening of the people of Travancore. It was out of this awakening that the first form of the modern democratic movement took its origin in Kerala.⁸

In the beginning of the twentieth century the land tenure system in Travancore also underwent a notable change. Land reforms intended to redress the grievances of the tenants were introduced from the nineteenth century onwards. Since then, social and economic mobility were particularly marked in Travancore. The fear of starvation drove the working people to seek a master. Members of the former low castes who were nominally free felt handicapped that they have no protector or lord. The Travancore Government also followed a more liberal

7. Dr.Palpu was the first Ezhava to secure a medical degree, but denied a job in Travancore for being a low caste man. He was one of the organisers of the Malayali Memorial.

8. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., Kerala-Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, Calcutta, 1968, p.124.

loan policy. Many of the low caste Ezhavas or taddy tappers were profited by the growth of exports towards the end of the nineteenth century and became prosperous. Land was transferred from the once prosperous Nair families to Christians and low caste men.⁹

In the 1920's a social change was going on in the society that even the Ezhavas and the fisherfolk renounced their traditional profession and entered into the priestly profession.¹⁰ The tenants of Travancore gained the legal support. When a dispute between the landlord and the tenant was referred to a civil court, the magistracy often protected the tenant against forcible eviction by the landlords, for the existing regulations directed to maintain the party in actual possession of the land.¹¹ The Pulayas, the Parayas and the other low castes began to obtain employment and reasonable pay. Even their children earned wages for weeding, picking and other light works, to which they were better suited than adults. The Ezhavas and the Shanars, working with them in the mountainous areas far from the observation of the caste neighbours,

9. Dharmakumar, (ed.), The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol.2, Delhi, 1982, p.240.

10. Sanoo, M.K., Sahodaran K.Ayyappan, Kottayam, 1980, pp.110-111.

11. Madhava Rao, Dewan of Travancore, Letter No.63/R 21, 7 January 1868, Section Book of Revenue Letters, 1867-1868.

saw little need to maintain the troublesome restrictions on caste by which they were bound in the plains. The traditional landowners complained of the planters taking away their labourers. But this competition and demand for labour largely ameliorated the condition of the poor workers. On the whole, the agrarian situation in Travancore was far better than in neighbouring Malabar and it was further improved by progressive state action throughout the latter half of the century.¹²

By the 1920's the Marumakkattayam system of family and inheritance was collapsing more than any other social system in India. An ideological and institutional void resulted.¹³ The collapse of the old society resulted in the economic degeneration of the state. Though the group system was dominant in the organisation of the society, leading to caste, there has always been an individualistic tendency. A conflict between the two approaches was often in evidence. It effected no alternative social structure to caste, and so caste continued then and later. At the dawn of the present century, joint family system was rapidly breaking up and individualistic attitudes were developing, leading not only to far-reaching changes in the economic background of life but also to new problems of behaviour.¹⁴ The broken hierarchy in Travancore very much favoured the class consciousness of the working people.

12. Varghese, T.C., op.cit., p.48.

13. Robin Jeffrey, op.cit., p.1160.

14. Jawaharlal Nehru, op.cit., p.255.

The works of Sree Narayana Guru(1856-1928) and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam resulted in a silent but radical change in the existing ideology and institution of the society.¹⁵ This intellectual excitement among the lower castes, particularly the Ezhavas, came at a time when the matrilineal system of the Nairs and the other caste Hindus was in its death throes. On 15 May 1903 the SNDP Yogam was started at Aruvipuram.¹⁶ This organisation became the pioneer of social reforms in Kerala for all castes and creeds. All the suppressed sections of the society began to emerge equal to the caste Hindus in Travancore. By his inspiring message of brotherhood-one caste, one religion, one God for the mankind - the Guru asked the lower caste people to organise themselves for achieving their rights. Since caste was associated with traditional occupations, the Guru advised the Ezhavas to give up their toddy tapping and encouraged them to take to industry, trade and commerce. He had opened a weaving workshop in Sivagiri Ashram meant to train poor Pulaya and Ezhava boys so that they had some means of livelihood.¹⁷ The service and teachings of the Guru attracted many people of Nair caste also.

15. General Secretary, S.N.D.P.Yogam, 26 July 1954, Resolutions to the Chief Minister, Travancore-Cochin, D.Dis.6353/1952/Devpt.

16. The S.N.D.P.Yogam was started originally in 1897, but established on a proper basis and registered as a Joint Stock Company in 1903. (File 46/1920/Political, Government Secretariat, Trivandrum).

17. Rao, M.S.A., op.cit., p.38.

The Sahodaran samajam of K.Ayyappan (1889-1968)¹⁸ founded at Cherai in 1917, deserves special mention here. Being an Ezhava, Ayyappan worked for the uplift of the Pulayas also, who were the most downtrodden of the society. Thus he was nick-named by the caste Hindus and by his own caste men as 'Pulayan Ayyappan'. The Sahodaran publication had spread the ideas of socialism and revolution among the people of Travancore for the first time. Ayyappan organised the workers of Alleppy and spoke to them the importance of Russian Revolution and the need for unity.¹⁹

Following the track of Ezhavas, many other caste organisations also began to emerge. Ayyankali (1861-1941) a noted social reformer of Pulaya caste organised the Pulayas to achieve equal rights. In 1907 he founded the Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam on the model of S.N.D.P.Yogam. The Yogakshema Sabha of the Namboodiris, founded in 1908, stood up against the joint family system. It agitated for the marriage of the junior Namboodiri males within the caste and the partition of the tarawad.²⁰ Thus the Travancore society began to have a silent

18. K.Ayyappan was a graduate from a middle class Ezhava family. He organised the Sahodara Prasthanam or Brotherhood Association to change the attitude of his orthodox castemen. In 1919 Sahodaran Ayyappan, as he is called, started the publication of a weekly Sahodaran. (Vivekodayam, Sahodaran Supplement, Vol.2, March-April 1968, p.66.)

19. Gopalakrishnan, P.K., Keralattile Samskarika Charitram, (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1974, p.514.

20. Ibid., p.514.

change, leaving a vast majority of land from the caste Hindus to the lower caste people. By this time the Nair Youth of Travancore had awakened to revolutionise the family system. Through his novel Induleka(1889) O.Chandu Menon condemned the social doctrines and introduced an ideological revolution.²¹ The Nair Samajam had accepted the principle of partition of tarawads and asked for a law. Thus the courts of justice had systematically proposed partition as the only remedy for the troubles of overgrown tarawads.²² On 31 October 1914 Mannathu Padmanabhan and a group of Nairs founded the Nair Service Society (N.S.S.) at Perunna in Changanacherry. The N.S.S. had contributed much to change the Marumakkattayam system into Makkattayam or patrilineal system. With the introduction of the Nair and the Ezhava Regulations of 1935 A.D., the law of partition had assumed considerable importance in the state.²³ The joint family properties were deteriorating among the sharing of the same house by absolutely strangers. Partition became a matter of common occurrence in Travancore. The economic pressures, changing values and rigorous legal system, which were the concomitant of the new resources, seriously weakened

21. Prakasam, R., Keralattile Trade Union Prasthanethinte Charitram, (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1979, p.20.

22. Extracts from Proceedings of the meetings of the Legislative Section, 14 September 1917, File 30/1915/Legislative.

23. The Travancore Partition Bill, 24 April 1940, D.Dis.121/1940/Legislative.

the Nair matrilineal joint family and hastened its disintegration. As the bonds of the matrilineal family loosened, so did the hold of Nairs on the land. Thus by the beginning of the twentieth century, society and economy of Travancore were experiencing a radical change.

Landlordism and Agricultural Labour

In Travancore agricultural labour was in a bad predicament. The working people of the state were slowly recovering from the chain of slavery. Still there was considerable distress among the labouring population.²⁴ The category of agricultural labourers consisted of Ezhavas, Cherumars, Pulayas, Parayas and Panas. There was thus a mutuality between the caste and class hierarchy, and one reinforced the other. An agricultural labourer possessed no land of his own, nor did he cultivate any within his resources. The agricultural labour was purely seasonal. Only when the work was unusually difficult or pressing did they take solid refreshment at noon. The compulsory Labour Regulation of 1887 of the Government of Travancore was instrumental to the landlords to dictate their whims over the labourers.²⁵

24. Journal of the Native Indian Association, No.143, London, November 1882, p.618.

25. According to the Regulation, an agricultural labourer was liable to work in his master's land whether he would himself like to do it or not. Any dereliction of this obligation was liable to be punished.

The caste feeling was gradually wearing away among the workers by the beginning of the twentieth century, although no appreciable change is observed on their mode of life. There was some improvement in the social status of the agricultural labourers as a part of the real, but slow, rise of the depressed castes. Thus caste or communal considerations could not stand in the way of the peasants against the landlords and the other sections of the working people for their own demands all of them against the autocratic rule in the princely states.²⁶ Customs and traditions held such an unshakable sway over the scheme of things that a disloyal worker could not hope to get employment anywhere. This customary social relations developed the attached labour system in agriculture. The growth of this system was related to the system of cultivation in Kuttanad.²⁷ Even within Kuttanad, the pattern of working hours was different from region to region.²⁸ This system ensured the services of an adequate number of workers and the round-the-clock presence of them in

26. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., 'Once again on Caste and Classes', Social Scientist, Vol.9, No.12, December 1981, p.15.

27. The attached labour system was semi-feudal in nature. By this system the whole family of the agricultural worker undertook a contract to work for the landlord by receiving wages in advance. Since they could not pay back the money they had received, they were practically forced to work for the landlord permanently. They got a lesser wage compared to other workers, but they got a fixed amount of paddy after the harvest.

28. Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, Government of Kerala, Trivandrum, 1972, p.22.

the field. Again the cultivator could keep away from physically participating in the cultivation. For carrying on the work of cultivation in unhealthy and unhygienic conditions, the workers were drawn from the lowest stratum of society. In return for the plot of land to live on and cultivate, the worker was obliged to pay the landlord certain festival gifts from his farm produce. The landlord was generous enough to extend some loans to a worker in times of difficulty, eventhough by this loan the landlord indirectly assured a further indebtedness of the workers.²⁹

In many parts of Travancore, agricultural labourers received their wages in kind. Even in the beginning of the twentieth century the wages of the erstwhile agricultural workers were very low. For measuring wages, where paddy was given, there was the cooly para.³⁰ This peculiar measurement practised in the native state of Travancore is the very example of exploitation of the agricultural labour. Yet employers were reluctant to pay even these meagre wages regularly. The development of agriculture in Travancore influenced the social and economic changes also. Even in 1859, cooly labour in retired parts of the state where money wages prevailed, was attainable for an

29. Kondoor Krishna Pillai, Travancore and Its Ruler, Changanacherry, 1941, p.124.

30. Fifty paras of paddy in the cooly para was equal to thirty five paras of paddy in the standard para. (Report of the Economic Depression Enquiry Committee, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1931, p.10.)

anna per day.³¹ The labour of the previously enslaved castes, which had hitherto been almost valueless, was remunerated only by a few measures of rice daily, the lowest possible rate consistent with keeping life.

In a state of chronic indebtedness, small cultivators could not command the capital required for putting their lands to the best use. Thus the moneylenders played a big role in the control of landowning peasants. The Unemployment Enquiry Committee of 1928 in Travancore noted the peasant proprietors degraded to the land of a lease holder.³² The peasant proprietors carried a heavy burden of indebtedness. The land was passing rapidly from the hands of the agriculturists to the landlords and the landholdings got divided and fragmented. The agriculturist was so dangerously indebted that the taxation of land was deemed too high to be economically viable. The poor peasants were placed under the mercy of the moneylenders. The foul play of the moneylenders and middlemen was more evident in the interest charged at a heavy rate on the middle class peasants who grew cashcrops. The cultivator often borrowed the money required for raising the crop from the moneylenders at high rates of interest. Thereafter he was not free to sell his

31. Sixteen annas was equal to one rupee. It is to be noted that paddy was usually sold at twelve chackrams per day. (Samuel Mateer, op.cit., p.235.)

32. Report of the Unemployment Enquiry Committee, Government of Travancore, 1928, p.25.

product in the market because he was unable to repay the debt otherwise.³³ He was forced to sell the produce to the moneylender or middlemen who took advantage of the weakness of the cultivator. This practice of exploitation has hampered a satisfactory system of marketing also.

As a result of the introduction of capitalist form of cultivation in Travancore, a section of agricultural wage labourers began to emerge. Earlier, the workers, especially attached workers, were entitled to wages mainly in kind. Now they were entitled to wages in cash. In Travancore the capitalist form of agriculture penetrated at the earliest because the Travancore Government controlled the major parts of land which the tenants got at their disposal. Travancore had the highest percentage of area under cashcrops in 1920-1921.³⁴ Thus a large number of agricultural workers migrated from the adjoining areas towards the newly cultivated areas. This was in addition to the seasonal flow of workers during the time of agricultural operations. However the socio-economic changes, the improvement in agriculture and the increase of production did not benefit the workers. There was no fixed hours of work

33. Jeyadevadas, D., "Genesis of Trade Union Movement in Travancore", Journal of Kerala Studies, Vol.VII, March-December 1980, pp.108-109.

34. Varghese, T.C., op.cit., p.110.

and the works involved was of an arduous nature.³⁵ The workers had to work eleven to thirteen hours a day even after long hours of journey to reach the working spot. Starvation was the only alternative on days without work. After tolerating all these social discriminations and economic degradations, the workers had to address the landowners with titles of honour like thampuran or Lord.

By 1920 the number of persons engaged in cultivation decreased while the extent of area under cultivation increased.³⁶ There was a slackness in the demand for labour in many parts of the state. Wage cuts became rampant. The Economic Depression Enquiry Committee of 1932 appointed by Government of Travancore had noted that in nearly every place the agricultural labourers were asking wages to be paid in money or for an increase in the quantity of paddy they usually received as wages.³⁷ Reduction in the existing wage rates was possible because when the alternative was between unemployment and lower wages, the unorganised agricultural labour was prepared to accept the latter. The labour population in search of an alternative life turned towards the plantations. The plantation work was also very much similar to the agricultural labour. Nearly five

35. Report of Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, op.cit., p.22.

36. Census of India, 1921, Travancore, Vol.XXV, Part I, pp.156-157.

37. Report of the Economic Depression Enquiry Committee, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1932, p.28.

sixth of the total plantations in the state was under the control of the British planters. Caste was nothing in the eyes of the European planters that all the low caste people began to obtain work in the plantations.

The plantation industry owes its origin to European enterprise in the later half of the nineteenth century. In Travancore mainly tea and coffee plantations accommodated a large section of agricultural labourers. With the expansion of plantations, the labour requirement remained high. In the tea and rubber estates of Travancore employment was permanent in nature. But these estates recruited Tamil labourers chiefly from the neighbouring British districts of Tinnevely, Coimbatore and Madurai.³⁸ For off seasonal works in the plains, the agricultural labourers from villages adjoining the place of work were recruited. Most of the estate labourers were drawn from the landless agricultural worker families.³⁹ Recruitment in the plantations was made mainly by the kanganies or agents to employers. By this system an estate got in touch with an individual who was prepared to bring with him a group of labourers to work in the estate. The estate enabled with finance the kangany to cover pre-employment expenses. The kanganies advanced money to the labour recruited for work, to meet their immediate needs. However, the kangany derived a commission from the estate based on the

38. Census of India, 1921, Travancore, Vol.XXV, Part I, p.156.

39. Mayne, W.W., Secretary, United Planters Association of South India, Coonoor, 29 January 1945, letter to Chairman, Labour Investigation Committee, Simla, D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.

gross earnings of the workers of his gang, as long as the labourers continued to work.⁴⁰ In addition, the contractor collected commission from his gang-workers also. Thus the relation between the workers and the kanganies was that of a debtor and a creditor. Indeed there was a constant movement of workers from the fields of ordinary agriculture to plantations and vice versa.⁴¹

Life of labourers in the plantations was somewhat satisfactory in the beginning. The maximum working in the plantation was nearly nine hours. Women were employed for light works in the plantations. The reputation of the women was satisfactory on the whole. The plantation labourers worked in situation similar to those of their traditional occupations. Moreover the plantation labour received their wages in cash.⁴² This payment in cash attracted the workers who came from distant areas in search of work. On account of the rise in price of foodstuffs, the wages have also increased. But the rise in wages had benefited only skilled labourers and kanganies. Most of the unskilled workers were of lower classes of the society. Since Tamil labour was cheaply available in these areas, the

40. Report on the Memorandum of the All Travancore Estate Factory Workers Union, 27 July 1945, D.Dis.2197/1945/Devpt.

41. Mayne, W.W., op.cit., D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.

42. Ibid.

agricultural population of Travancore did not benefit much from them. The workers were in a chronic state of indebtedness. The kanganies benefited by the rise in wages, invested their savings in purchasing lands.⁴³ The labourers, during their stay in the estates, paid off the debts to kanganies and returned home with little or no savings only to be recruited again under similar conditions. Meanwhile plantations stopped to recruit agricultural labourers and started retrenching the existing labourers.⁴⁴ Disgustingly low wages, unjust mode of payment and deplorable working conditions made the labour now to try their lot in industries.

Growth of Industries

The number of industries and their significance rose during the early years of 1920's. The First World War produced a boom in the manufacturing industry and this played a great part in shaping the politics of Travancore. Kerala's somewhat hesitant industrial revolution began in 1850's.⁴⁵ Since the formation of a Joint Stock Company to set up a paper mill at Punalur, the necessity for legalising the trading companies

43. Census of India, 1921, Travancore, op.cit., pp.156-157.

44. Memorandum by Nedumangad Taluk Estate Workers' Union, 17 May 1951, D.Dis.L.D.4413/1951/Devpt.

45. George Woodcock, Kerala - A Portrait of the Malabar Coast, London, 1967, p.222.

arose. And the Government of Travancore passed Regulation I of 1888 A.D. to enable the promotion of Joint Stock enterprises. Since the passing of the Regulation the number of Corporations had steadily increased. Immediately after the First World War, a number of companies and individual enterprises sprang up, without adequate capital, proper organisation, knowledge of business and management. The number of Joint Stock Companies rose from 84 in 1918 to 221 in 1922.⁴⁶ Many of these companies and enterprises naturally disappeared with whatever they had acquired as soon as recession started. There has been a gradual decline in the new registration of companies. While there were 101 new registration during 1919-1920, the fresh registration for 1923-1924 was as low as eighty only.⁴⁷ This depression and the reduction in the number of working companies was not permanent.

From the later half of 1920's, there was substantial increase in the number as well as the capital of the companies. The growth of Joint Stock Companies in Travancore was facilitated by the phenomenal increase both in the number and in the capital of Banking and Chit enterprises. These moneylenders continued

46. Note on Joint Stock Companies, 15 October 1924, R.Dis.1987/1924/Devpt.

47. Report on the working of the Companies Regulation I of 1917 for the year ending 15 August 1920, G.O.266/1908/Judicial.

to exercise great influence in financing agriculture. They carried on their money transactions mostly in the agricultural centres of Nanjinad and Kuttanad. In fact seventy five per cent financing of agriculture in Kuttanad was in the hands of the Brahmin moneylenders of Mankompu.⁴⁸ In addition the Hundi merchants⁴⁹ issued loans for agriculture, internal trade and for small industrial concerns. Yet the Joint Stock Companies, in the time of economic depression in Travancore, could not respond to the increasing pressure upon their resources. Nevertheless, emergence of the Joint Stock Companies denotes the development of capitalist economy in Travancore. By Joint ventures the individual capitalists accumulated wealth. The Travancore Government also legalised it. As a result the condition of ordinary people with a low income was without any other source or living.⁵⁰

The post war industrial boom in Travancore developed an independent class of capitalists. It is significant that out of the 390 companies registered during the period of economic depression, only fifteen were manufacturing industries.⁵¹ The

48. Report of Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, op.cit., p.12.

49. The Hundi merchants were originally Tinneveli Brahmins who claimed to be intermediaries in the trade relations of Travancore. (Velupillai, T.K., op.cit., Vol.III, p.651.)

50. Report of Banking Enquiry Committee, 1930, Vol.I, 1931, p.16.

51. Report on the Working of the Companies Regulation I of 1917, op.cit.

British colonialists hindered the development of productive forces in the state by investing more in plantation industries. The Planning Directory for 1925 records seventy five planting companies of which only fourteen were Indian.⁵² In fact plantations provided only seasonal work to the agricultural labourers. Moreover the Travancore Factories Regulation V of 1914, for its labour welfare provisions, did not include the plantations under the list of 'Factories'.⁵³ Factory industries in Travancore were only gradually coming into prominence. The proportion of the population supported by industries was higher in Travancore than in the whole of India. The industrial population was steadily increasing during the beginning of the century. In 1911 the number of persons employed in the various industries was only 2,88,947. In 1921 the number increased to 3,28,092.⁵⁴ During the same period the processing of cashewnuts in the state also emerged as an industry organised on a factory basis. In the early years Harijan women constituted about ninety per cent of the workers in cashew factories.

The more important of the factory industries was the coir industry. James Darragh, an Irish American Catholic, began a small factory for coir mats at Alleppy in 1859.⁵⁵ The entire production was by manual labour. There was a large supply of experienced labour

52. Mayne, W.W., op.cit., D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.

53. Travancore Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol.XV, Trivandrum, 1930, p.557.

54. Velupillai, T.K., op.cit., p.505.

55. Coir, The Coir Board, Vol.V, No.3, Ernakulam, April 1952, p.15.

in Alleppy and its environments. The factories in Alleppy had quicker and cheaper facilities for the transport of finished goods and they have closer contact with the banks and commercial organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce. Thus Alleppy became the centre of coir industry.⁵⁶ The Ezhavas and the Latin Catholics constituted a major part of the coir workers in Alleppy. Coir fibre began to be exported from Travancore on a large scale in the 1860's. Until Darragh opened his factory at Alleppy, coir was a cottage industry mainly producing ropes and nets for mariners. However, the coir industry received the attention of many countries and the coir export had a rapid growth.⁵⁷

During the First World War, the loss of markets in Europe as well as the shortage of shipping resulted in a drop in the value of yarn exports to an average of nearly fifty lakhs of rupees annually. Thus the boom created by the World War did not benefit Travancore.⁵⁸ But this decline in coir export acted as an incentive to increased manufacture of coir goods in Travancore. By 1918-1919 there was coir export for rupees 18.12 lakhs which was seventeen per cent higher than in the best pre-war year of 1911-1912.⁵⁹ Until the close of the

56. Travancore Almanack, 1899, p.134.

57. In 1920 the Director of Industries of Java visited Travancore to study the condition under which the coir industry was being carried on in this country. (Confidential Memorandum on Customs Statistics, No.179, 1 July 1938, D.Dis.66/1938/CS).

58. Administrative Report, 1941, Industries Department, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.1209/1942/Devpt.

59. George Committee Report, Trivandrum, 1953, p.72.

war, the industry was mainly centered in Alleppy. The most striking feature in **its** development in subsequent years was the establishment of a large number of factories outside Alleppy all along the coastal strip of the backwaters area, from Arur in the north to Kadakkavoor in the south. The end of the war and the reopening of European market produced a spectacular growth in the industry.

Meanwhile the seasonal nature of labour in plantations and growing debt made the life of labourers in the plantations uncertain. Besides, by 1931 there was a heavy fall in prices of agricultural produce and agricultural wages reduced drastically. All these resulted the migration of labour spontaneously to the centres of employment. The sway of money over the economy of Travancore made the ordinary people to feel the importance and necessity of money. Attracted by money wages in the industries, the labour population began to migrate for industrial employment. Money was more important than tradition. Consequently the agricultural labour began to demand payment of wages in cash. As a matter of fact, the coir industry accommodated a vast majority of the agricultural population in Travancore.⁶⁰

For five or six years after the war, the industry experienced a shortage of labour. The moopans or contractors had to go about and canvass workmen to whom the management paid

60. Ibid., p.277.

advances. In the Alleppy port, the port officers had to provide early tea and bidis from their private purse to the workers in order to induce them to carry on and complete the work in time.⁶¹ This brief prosperity for the workers produced a cruel irony in the late 1920's. Once employed, the workers realised the security of regular employment and regular wage payments and developed loyalty to their employers. Thus the agricultural labourers, tempted by industrial labour, moved to Alleppy and the nearby factories. Outside the gates of factories, one could see large number of workmen waiting every morning, with the hope of being taken in atleast as substitutes or for part-time work. In fact, the supply of labour was far in excess.⁶² The effects of world economic depression had reduced the price for coir goods. Still the demand for coir goods at a lower price continued to remain. In fact, so long as the price of coir goods remained low, the demand remained high. Moreover both the quantity and value of mats and matting increased during the time of depression. To meet the increase in production, the number of workers in the industry also increased. Many of the factories started to give rotation of work so as to ensure that as many workers as possible could obtain atleast part-time work.⁶³ However, the number of people employed in factories rose even during the depression.

61. The People's Weekly, Vol.I, No.15, Trivandrum, 14 October 1911, p.187.

62. Report of the Board of Conciliation appointed by the Government of Travancore, R.Dis.478/1940/Devpt., p.277.

63. Ibid.

The vast supply of labour became detrimental to their own welfare. During the depression, workers who had known the pre-depression wage-rates felt that they now received less money for the same work. There was considerable reduction in the money wages for workers. When the market for cheap coir products remained good, small coir factories and the number of jobs increased. Labour was available at the village side at cheap cost. This led to the production of low-cost products in some local factories than the English factories in Alleppy. Workers with experience in European factories got immediate appointment in these local factories. They were provided with advance money which was not deducted from the wages.⁶⁴ But in European factories the advance money was strictly recollected. The small coir factories were located in the countryside within the radius of about thirty miles of Alleppy. With the spread of the small factories, they exposed large numbers of people to factory conditions with the offer of seasonal work. There was, at all times, a floating labour population in the Alleppy Municipal area.⁶⁵ The proximity to Alleppy town which had become the centre of industrial activity was a stimulus to the peasants of Kuttanad. Many kith and kin of Kuttanad agricultural workers, who were involved in trade union activities in Alleppy and nearby areas, conveyed the favourable results of their experi-

64. Govindan, K.C., "Trade Union Prasthanam", Kerala Charitram(Malayalam), Vol.II, Ernakulam, 1974, p.187.

65. George Committee Report, op.cit., p.82.

ments to them. Thus the country factories not only imparted the skills of the industry but introduced workers to the realities and grievances of factory labour.

Working Conditions of Factory Labour

The coir factories in Travancore provided employment to maximum people as well as introduced manifold industries. In the period beginning from 1920, there was large influx of labour from agriculture to coir industry. Most of the workers and attached labourers came to the factories hoping a better wage and security of employment.⁶⁶ But the coir factories in the state shared day-to-day exploitation at the work place.

There were two methods of recruitment prevailing in the coir industry, the direct employment by the management and the contract system. In the case of direct employment, the management directly contracted with the workers. The work of supervision was done either by a full time salaried agency or by Moopans who were remunerated on a common basis. Women supervisors or Moopathies were also employed in the coir factories. Both the Moopans and Moopathies were monthly-paid employees of the factories.⁶⁷ The rate of wage for the Moopans was fixed mostly by a fixed weekly payment by each worker. By this system the Moopan was directly/^{interested}

66. Govindan, K.C., "Labour Assciayeshante Charitram", Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union - Golden Jubilee Souvenir, (Malayalam), Alleppy, 1972, p.179.

67. Govindan, K.C., "Trade Union Prasthanam", op.cit., p.187.

in the output on which depended his commission. Besides, the management had the advantage that they were not bound to pay him any wage. Thus every time a portion was deducted from the wages of the workers.⁶⁸ The contract system implied the employment of labour through a contractor. Agents of factory owners canvassed labour from the interior of the town to work in coir factories. The contractors fixed wages and made payments. They received a lumpsum from the factory owner periodically for payment of wages. Thus the factory owners had no direct contact with the kind of recruitment. The George Enquiry Committee appointed by the Government of Travancore in 1938 had observed that there was no type of labour which was so exploited and low paid as contract labour in the coir factories.⁶⁹

Landlords who later came to establish coir factories forced the hutment dwellers and agricultural labour under them to work in the factories under terms and conditions fixed by themselves.⁷⁰ The Compulsory Labour Regulation of 1887 was practised in factories. Originally the Regulation was in relation to agricultural workers. But the factory owners who were the genry of Alleppy-Sherthalai areas made use of the

68. Report of the Board of Conciliation, *op.cit.*, p.287.

69. *Ibid.*, p.293.

70. Prakasam, R., *op.cit.*, pp.7-8.

Regulation to impose compulsory labour in factories. However, the workers had no alternative but to work in factories under these conditions. On the other hand skilled workers were given advances for their work in the factories.

Wages varied from factory to factory. In the contract labour system, the management had no supervision or control. The management paid lumpsum to the contractors who disbursed it to workers after retaining a handsome amount as commission. Sometimes the contractors disbursed wages even outside the factory premises. The George Enquiry Committee had recorded its doubt whether the workers actually received any wage at all.⁷¹ Throughout the mats and matting industry, wages were paid on a piece-work basis. Many times the factory owners reduced the wages with a threat of reduction in the number of workers. There was considerable reduction in labour in the tile factories in Quilon with a wage-cut. When the alternative was between closing down of factories and wage-reductions, the workers in Alleppy agreed to accept lower wages.⁷² The labour memorandum submitted to the George Committee had also stated that wage-rates were reduced by fifty to seventy five per cent during the period from 1915 to 1939.⁷³ The novel

71. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., p.289.

72. Report of the Economic Depression Enquiry Committee, op.cit., p.29.

73. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., p.361.

feature of the coir industry was that even during the days of depression and reduction of wages, the number of workers and production increased.

Many factories in the countryside of Alleppy-Sherthalai area practised the truck system, the system of wages in kind. The practice was to make payment of either part or whole of the wages of the workers in kind from shops kept by the factory owner or his relatives in the factory premises.⁷⁴ The factory owner issued chits to the shops. By giving these chits, the workers could buy goods. The shop-keeper maintained an account and settled it with the factory. The workers were seldom informed about the balance and the accounts continued unsettled. Chits were issued to barber shops also and the barber could get rice and provisions from the factory owner's shops to the extent of the chits in hand. The wage of workers were never settled in full and some of the factories did not maintain proper wage books and accounts. Sometimes the labourers were compelled to take their wages in the shape of provisions though they did not want them. Only very few factories in Travancore made regular wage payments.⁷⁵

74. Interview with M.N.Govindan Nair, Pattom, Trivandrum, 21 August 1984. He explained the fate of workers being severely punished by the hotel and shop owners for very little dues because of the local inefficiency of workers.

75. George Committee Report, op.cit., p.101.

Life in the factories was inhuman and the Moopan was the dictator among factory workers. These Moopans by and large maintained petty retail shops also. They demanded and received bribes from the workers for employment when there was an increase in the supply of labour. The position of Moopans was one of unique opportunity. In the name of taking commission, the Moopan kasu or Moopu kasu has exploited the labour. The prevalence of the practice of deducting Moopu kasu from the wages of the labourers was admitted by a number of employers. The rate of Moopu kasu was not uniform and it ranged from one chackram to two chackrams.⁷⁶ The Moopu kasu was recovered at the time of payment. This compulsory exaction of Moopu kasu was over and above the traditional deductions from wages in order to remunerate the Moopan.

Dharmavu was another item of compulsory deductions from the wages of the workers by the employers. This deduction from wages was practised by some of the native factory owners. They claimed that the purpose of the recovery of Dharmavu was to set apart a fund for charity payments. This was merely an excuse. The Dharmavu recovered was rarely credited to a separate fund. On the contrary, it invariably constituted an income of the factory owner.⁷⁷

76. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., p.345. Sixteen kasu valued one chackram and 28.5 chackrams was equal to one rupee.

77. Ibid., p.353.

Loaded with these illegal and inhuman exactions, the workers were asked to work for the Moopan in the factory and at home. Personal service to the Moopans became almost part of factory work. For a slight fault in work, the Moopans collected even one week salary of the workers as fines. Neat and decent dress was an unnecessary decoration for a worker. It was a very common practice that the Moopans claimed contributions from the workers on special occasions such as his daughter's marriage and charged the labour for religious ceremonies in churches and in temples nearby.⁷⁸ In the case of drama or boxing shows in the nearby areas, the Moopans imposed tickets and collected money from workers. Above all when the amount of wages was calculated and counted as rupee, chackram and kasu, the Moopan's little son used to come and take away some cash. In fact no good looking woman could safeguard her chastity from the Moopan, Yard Superintendent and Pillais. The factory owner selected the more beautiful one.⁷⁹

The Moopans had sufficient power to victimise workers who dared to question their authority. The workers had no chance to complain to the management. The lot of the workers who incurred the ill-will of the Moopan could hardly be

78. Kunjan, K.K., "Coir Factory Thozhilalikalude Vipalva Trade Union", Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union Golden Jubilee Souvenir, p.38.

79. Govindan, K.C., "Labour Assosyeshante Charitram", op.cit., p.179. Yard Superintendent was in charge of each section. The Pillai assisted the Yard Superintendent.

pleasant.⁸⁰ Often the Moopans were the trusted servants of the employer and complaints against them were viewed in favour of the Moopans. Thus the workers submitted to the exactions of the Moopans without complaint.⁸¹ With steady work hard to find, reduced money wages and inhuman practices in factory premises, the workers had reason for dissatisfaction. When the very existence of the working people became extremely difficult, they began to organise.

Awakening Among the Workers

In Travancore the factory workers constituted a powerful section of the labour class. Workers' organisations built up by nationalists as well as philanthropists elsewhere in India influenced the coir workers. The All India Trade Union Congress, formed in February 1920, was an inspiration for the workers in Travancore. In the political field new ideas were in the air. After the political convention at Manjeri in 1920 where a resolution demanding tenancy reform was passed against the strong opposition of landlords, most of the landlords left the organisation. Thus the leadership of the Indian National Congress fell into the hands of the peasants and the middle class. Local Committees of the Congress were also

80. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.3.

81. George Committee Report, op.cit., p.65.

organised in Travancore after the Ottapalam conference of 1921. A number of workers in the Alleppy area took four anna membership in the Congress.⁸² The situation in the country was most serious in 1921 when no fewer than 396 stoppages of work occurred involving over six lakhs of workers.⁸³ The unrest, as indicated by the countryside strikes, attracted leaders and organisers from the intelligentsia into the labour movement.

During this period, the attitude of British Government in respect of labour problems was one of non-interference. They stepped in only to keep law and order. Travancore, from the point of view of popular education, was far in advance of British India. It is interesting to note that popular education in Travancore began to be organised in 1801.⁸⁴ Owing to the spread of education people came to understand international developments. The news of the developments abroad reached the people in no time. Moreover the word 'socialism' began to gain currency among the workers.⁸⁵ All these international developments influenced the elite of Alleppy area. In the commercial town of Alleppy, the working people have now begun to appear as

82. Jeyadevadas, D., op.cit., p.132.

83. Giri, V.V., Labour Problems in Indian Industry, Bombay, 1968, p.10.

84. Jawaharlal Nehru, op.cit., p.307.

85. Kerala Kaumudi, 6 June 1937, Press Cutting, D.Dis.1500/1937/CS.

an active and independent factor in gathering mass revolts.⁸⁶ There was always a strong feeling of hatred and indignation which found expression here and there in individual attacks on the employers and spontaneous oppositions and protests.

The working population of Travancore successfully sublimated the deep caste and religious antagonisms. The original cause of the growth of class consciousness among the coir workers can be traced to the oppressive caste system. Significantly Sree Narayana Guru advised his disciples the principle, 'educate that you may be free and organise that you may be strong'. E.M.S. Namboodiripad contends that "Sree Narayana Guru, the saintly leader of the Ezhavas, must be considered the first inspirer and organiser of the mass democratic movement of the cultivators and landless peasant masses of Kerala. The communal organisations of lower castes are, thus, the first form in which the peasantry got itself organised and started its struggle for democracy".⁸⁷ N.Kumaran Asan⁸⁸ has represented the cause of the workers in the State Assembly whenever occasion arose. Besides, the Women's Committee or Vanitha Samajam of the S.N.D.P. Yogam had a far-reaching impact on the women who became active in the coir workers' movement.⁸⁹

86. Proceedings of the Travancore Sri Chitra State Council, 1935, Vol.I, No.3, p.113.

87. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., op.cit., p.127.

88. A well known lyric poet and an Ezhava member of the Travancore Sri Mulam Popular Assembly.

89. Meera, V., "Women Worker and Class Struggles in Alleppy", Social Scientist, Vol.II, No.12, December 1933, p.50.

Within the S.N.D.P. movement, K.Ayyappan initiated a movement against the exploitation of workers by factory owners. He started a tri-weekly paper Velakkaran (Worker) and propagated the ideas of Marx and Lenin and the success of the Russian Revolution. Through his editorial notes in Sahodaran, Ayyappan awakened the readers to help the workers of Alleppy.⁹⁰ K.Ayyappan rejected the relation between caste and occupation. Meanwhile the Travancore Mahajana Sabha, established in June 1918 with its headquarters at Trivandrum, aimed to promote the welfare of the people of Travancore without distinction of caste or creed.⁹¹ Without giving any consideration for caste or religion, equal rights and economic freedom became the common slogan of the working people. So it is no wonder that the active Christian missionaries had succeeded in dragging to their fold several thousands of the depressed classes.

The social reforms in Travancore became the source of inspiration for the activists of the labour movement during the period of its inception. A class conscious **labour** movement began to rise among the coir workers. Seasonal and part-time labour in factories necessitated the workers to move back and forth between their villages and the factories. By carrying

90. Vivekodayam, op.cit., p.66.

91. File No.46/1920/Political, Government of Travancore, Secretariat, Trivandrum.

their new experiences of exploitation into the countryside, the floating population of workers created around themselves a sympathetic rural buffer as a source of support. Since ideas of class consciousness did not have to be learned completely in the factories, more people could learn them.⁹² As a result of this class consciousness of the working people, some sporadic ideas of union began to materialise in different parts of the state. The agricultural labourers began to make representations to the higher authorities more efficiently than previously. On 9 March 1914 the inhabitants of Munanbam sent a petition to the Dewan of Travancore forecasting that the agricultural labour remained under great disadvantage in respect of the land tenure since 1870 A.D.⁹³ The first labour strike occurred in Quilon when a labour union for the workers in various factories there, the Quilon Thozhilali Sangam, was formed in 1915 with Karunakara Menon as President and T.K. Narayanan as the General Secretary. The real object of the labour association at Quilon was to organise the labourers and to improve the condition of the labourers.⁹⁴ At its inception, the union contented with petitions. The emergence of labour

92. Robin Jeffrey, op.cit., p.1160.

93. Address to the Dewan of Travancore with the replies of Dewan, March-May 1914, Trivandrum, 1914, pp.11-13.

94. Political report to the Dewan of Travancore, No.26, 24 June 1933, D.Dis.746/1933/CS.

unions had received such attention of the factory owners that the Alleppy Chamber of Commerce commented these organisations as 'strike unions'.⁹⁵

However the first organised protest of labour force occurred in the Darah Smail Company in Alleppy. The working schedule in this factory was about twelve hours a day. Thus a section of workers in the factory had represented their grievances to the management, with great fear. But the response of the European management was very rude and these workers were driven away from the factory premises. The fact that even in the absence of a proper union or leadership, the coir workers of Darah Smail Company held a successful strike in 1917.⁹⁶ In consequence, the management yielded to talk to the workers and agreed to reduce the working schedule from twelve hours to ten and a half hours a day.⁹⁷ The workers of Alleppy thus felt the immediate necessity of a union. The Travancore Labour Association merging all these institutional and ideological changes, did forecast the emergence of an organised working class movement in the state.

The Labour Association

The coir industry had the first organisation of workers in Travancore. The Travancore Labour Association was

95. The Commercial Review, The Alleppy Chamber of Commerce, Vol.IV, No.11, February 1939, p.66.

96. Prakasam, R., op.cit., pp.35-36.

97. Ibid., p.36.

the first and strongest of workers unions in Native States.⁹⁸ A section of manufacturers actively supported the formation of a labour association in the coir industry, perceiving in it a possible instrument to decrease labour turnover and to instil a sense of discipline among workers. On the other hand the workers were deeply involved in the anti-savarna caste movement. The organising leader of the Labour Association, Vadappuram P.K.Bhava, was an Ezhava from Alleppy.⁹⁹ Although he came from the poorest of backgrounds, Bhava was literate in Malayalam like majority of coir workers. Converted briefly to Islam and then back to Hinduism, he was an ordinary worker in a coir factory. He became the Head Cooly in the Empire Coir Works in Alleppy and by the early 1920's had advanced to Yard Superintendent and Moopan on a salary of rupees 125 a month and with power over 300 employees. K.M.Chcrian, Managing Director of the South Indian Coir Factory Limited, who had gained the knowledge of developments abroad, encouraged Bhava to form a labour organisation. And Bhava had obtained the permission of Abu Salt or Khatar Kinji, owner of the Alleppy Empire Coir Works, to form a labour organisation in his factory.¹⁰⁰

98. Secret Police Bulletin, Government of Travancore, 14 July 1945, D.Dis.862/1944/C.S

99. Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, No.132, 13 June 1934, Confidential letter to Lt.Col.D.M.Field, Agent to the Governor General of Madras States, D.Dis.975/1934/CS.

100. Govindan, K.C., 'Labour Associayeshante Charitram,' op.cit., p.180.

Bhava with a few Moopan friends and a number of workers assembled at Alleppy on 31 March 1922 and formed an organisation named 'Thozhilali Union' or Labour Union.¹⁰¹ The above meeting elected Bhava as Secretary, M.K.Antony, a local medical doctor as President, Pappu Asan as Treasurer and seven members of the Managing Committee.¹⁰² K.M.Churian of South India Coir Factory spoke about the virtues of labour organisations in other countries. Nearly four hundred workers were said to have attended the first meeting held under P.S.Muhammed, a lawyer and social worker of Alleppy.¹⁰³

The Managing Committee of the Labour Union held in April 1922, constituted a sub-committee consisting of M.K.Antony, P.S.Muhammed and V.Pappu Vaidyar to prepare a constitution for the Labour Union. The third general meeting of the Union met at Alleppy on 24 July 1922 and discussed the draft of the constitution prepared by the Sub-Committee. Since the draft of the constitution was deemed inadequate, the meeting entrusted T.C.Kesavan Vaidyan with the task of making suitable modifications. A new executive committee was also formed under the presidentship of T.C.Kesavan Vaidyan.¹⁰⁴ In a committee meeting,

101. First Annual Report, The Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, Alleppy, September 1939, D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

102. Govindan, K.C., 'Trade Union Prasthanam', op.cit., pp.186-190.

103. Robin Jeffrey, op.cit., p.1161.

104. Usha Muraleedharan, op.cit., pp.169-170.

N.Krishnan, Manager of T.P.I.Company, suggested the name 'Travancore Labour Association' which was accepted by all. And the early plan to call the organisation as Labour Union was changed into the Travancore Labour Association with nearly 200 members.¹⁰⁵

To be sure, the first organisation of workers in Travancore was not constituted on the lines of a trade union. It was fully a workers union at first. Yet the Travancore Labour Association was the mother of trade unionism in the state. The Labour Association in its infancy was more a philanthropist organisation than an effective trade union. It had also a social reformist outlook to a certain extent. This association was to improve the condition of the labouring class, to educate them and to make them render mutual help. The real object of the Association was to organise labour against capital.¹⁰⁶ During the next few years, workers were encouraged to join the association by Moopans sympathetic to Bhava, who deducted the association's dues from the wages. In the beginning, the membership fee was one rupee and two annas. Within a few months it was reduced to four annas and the monthly subscription to

105. Bhaskaran Unnithan, K., The Coir Industry in Travancore-Cochin, M.Litt. thesis in Economics, University of Travancore, 1956, pp.296-297.

106. Political Report to the Dewan of Travancore, op.cit.

four annas by collecting one anna a week which was less than one per cent of even an ordinary workers' wages.¹⁰⁷ The first act of the association was to establish a funeral benefit fund.¹⁰⁸ The workers and their families appreciated the benefit and began to contribute more willingly to the association.

During the early days the annual celebrations of the Association was like a local festival, with both workers and non-workers joining and contributing liberally to the occasion.¹⁰⁹ During the anniversary celebrations in 1923, the Labour Association passed resolutions demanding labour representation in the State Legislature, medical aid, primary education, fixation of wages, stopping of wage-cuts and undue fines and payment of wages in cash.¹¹⁰ It also began to provide limited help for sick workers, to sponsor regular public meetings and to run a reading room, opened in March 1924. In the same year the Association celebrated its second anniversary under Sardar K.M.Panikkar and decided to affiliate the Association to the All India Trade Union Congress. The admission fee and monthly contributions of the members were fixed to be four annas and

107. Govindan, K.C., 'Trade Union Prasthanam', op.cit., p.191.

108. Payment on the death of an adult rupees twenty five or a child rupees fifteen to defray funeral expenses.

109. Interview with M.N.Govindan Nair, Pattom, Trivandrum, 21 August 1984.

110. Bhaskaran Unnithan, K., op.cit., p.297.

two annas respectively.¹¹¹ In 1925, the Association began a fortnightly journal Thozhilali or the worker which survived until the General Strike of 1938. The Thozhilali was an educator and a source of inspiration to the workers. As most of the coir factory workers were Ezhavas, the S.N.D.P.Yogam showed interest in the activities of the Association and the Labour Association requested the Yogam to fight for the redressal of the grievances of the coir factory workers.

111. Ibid., p.297.

CHAPTER II

MORE OF TRADE UNIONS

The example set aside by the organisation of the Travancore Labour Association excited the working people in other industrial spheres and the agricultural workers. Soon the idea of organisation gained currency among the labour class. Spreading the principle of communalism the movement of workers shifted from welfare association to militant union. Inspired by the industrial workers' force in Alleppy area, the agricultural workers of Kuttanad also began to organise. The employers now began to react to the challenge posed by the growing power of the workers. They too formed employers' organisations in response to the threat of labour associations. Still the idealism and excitement of unionism had stepped forward from the idea of organisation of workers to that of consolidation of different unions. Consequently history of labour movement in Travancore is the story of organised labour in the State.

Consolidation of Coir Workers

The concentration of large number of people in manufacturing centres had given rise to new problems. "In the distant socio-political horizon, the working class has

now begun to appear as an active, independent factor in gathering mass revolts in the commercial town of Alleppy".¹ The Travancore Labour Association in the beginning was only a welfare association. The association was not conscious of itself as a force against the capitalists. Instead of that the Association was concerned with the welfare measures for its members.²

In the next decade after the war, the value of manufactured exports of coir goods from Travancore rose from rupees 18.13 lakhs in 1918-1919 to rupees 90.41 lakh in 1927-1928.³ But by 1931 the effects of the world economic depression had sent the price of coir goods crashing. The unique fact about the coir industry in the 1930's was that demand for coir products remained high so long as the price remained low. However the George Committee, has clearly marked the continuous high volume of demand for coir goods.⁴ Both the quantity of mats and matting produced and its value increased during the depression. However for the coir workers this rising demand was to mean a continuation of employment even at lower wages. Indeed in many parts of Travancore the

1. Proceedings of the Travancore Sri Chitra State Council, Vol.1, No.3, 1935, p.113.

2. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.53.

3. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., p.247.

4. Ibid., p.255.

wages were reduced even upto seventy five per cent.⁵ At the same time production of coir goods had a steady growth. The value of export of coir goods rose from rupees 22.96 lakhs in 1919-1920 to rupees 116.57 lakhs in 1936-1937.⁶

In response to the increase in production and growing demand, the number of workers in the industry also increased. The Census Report on Travancore for 1931 has enumerated more than 7,000 factory workers and more than 1,20,000 cottage workers in the coir industry.⁷ Thus the number of workers employed in factories rose during the depression. As per the Census Report, 6,000 people were employed in factories of all kinds in the industrial town of Alleppy. In 1939 the number of factory workers in Alleppy area rose to 11,000.⁸ With the corresponding increase in the number of workers, the number of factories also increased from 187 in 1935 to 298 in 1939.⁹ The Board of Conciliation has reported that the coir factories alone amounted to 290 extended between Arur in the north and Kadakkavoor in the south with 4335 matting looms and 7350 mat looms.¹⁰

5. The Hindu, 16 March 1938, p.2.

6. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., p.433.

7. Census of India 1931, Travancore, Vol.XVIII, Part I, p.279.

8. Minutes of the Alleppy Chamber of Commerce, 18 October 1939, D.Dis.3332/1944/CS.

9. Velupillai, T.K., op.cit., Vol.II, p.786.

10. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., p.249.

Though real wages may not have fallen disastrously during the depression, a worker who had known pre-depression rates could feel a deep grievance that he now got less money for the same work. The money wages were reduced disastrously. In fact even the factory owners have agreed that the rate of wages have been reduced by twenty to forty per cent during the period between 1925 and 1939.¹¹ In the coir factories a male worker received twenty one chackrams while a women worker got twelve chackrams as wages during 1930s. The wages in the plantation industries was very much below the level that of the coir factories. But food too was cheaper and paddy prices were down fifty per cent.¹² The complications of the piece-work wage system and the haphazard nature of many of the factories make it difficult to fix a blanket percentage for wage reductions. In fact the coir workers' union grew in strength and militancy during the period of depression.

The demand for cheap coir products remained good, as indicated by the increase of small factories located in and around Alleppy. In addition, the number of jobs in the industry

11. Ibid., p.363.

12. Report of the Debt Relief Committee, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1939, p.13.

also increased during the period though not enough to absorb the thousands of political workers. By 1938 Alleppy itself had forty such small coir factories and 4500 looms.¹³ Between 1929 and 1938, more than 130 shippers had been listed in the official publications and then vanished. Only twenty three of such shippers had survived throughout the ten years. As the small factories spread, they exposed larger number of people to factory conditions. Men drifted into Alleppy for a few months or years, then drifted back to their villages and were replaced by others. Consequently, although the labour force in the Alleppy factories may have been only 7,000 in 1930, perhaps three or four times that number had experience in the industry. Moreover the spread of country factories introduced workers to the grievances of factory labour and ultimately to the spread of workers organisations. This turnover of labour ought to have hindered the formation of a strong movement of workers in Travancore.¹⁴ The experiences of organised agitation in the State, the influence of western liberal thought and the course of the struggle for independence in the British India gave the people of Travancore an awareness of the significance of organised struggle for the attainment of their rights. By carrying their new ideas into the country side, the coir factory workers created

13. George Committee Report, op.cit., pp.12-13.

14. Robin Jeffrey, op.cit., p.1160.

around themselves a sympathetic rural buffer which could become a source of support. When a worker came to a coir factory for the first time, talk of unions, strikes and capitalists need not have been totally new to him.¹⁵

The membership figure for the Travancore Labour Association was also increasing throughout this time. During the depression the number of members almost doubled from about 3,000 to more than 7,000 by the beginning of 1939.¹⁶ Meanwhile the round of strikes led to P.K.Bhava's departure from the Association. Already a wealthy man on the point of starting his own factory, Bhava advised workers in the Empire Coir Factory to accept a four anna cut in wages. The workers refused and Bhava, who was also being accused of tampering with the Association funds, was forced to resign. In a special general body meeting of the Travancore Labour Association on 24 March 1924 under the Presidentship of K.M.Krishnan, P.K.Bhava relinquished his office and K.Velayudhan was elected as the General Secretary and K.C.Govindan as the Assistant General Secretary.¹⁷ In the beginning, leadership of the Labour Association was discontended in matters of administration. And in the annual festival of the Association in April 1924, discontentment among the leaders

15. Ibid., p.1160.

16. President, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, Alleppy, 23 June 1942, Letter to K.T.Chandy, Bombay, D.Dis.299/1942/CS.

17. Usha Muraleedharan, op.cit., pp.168-169.

led to the formation of a new association namely, Thozhilali Mitram with K.C.Govindan as Secretary.¹⁸ The new group had published a moderate weekly dealing on topics of labour questions under the title Thozhilali Mitram with P.Kunju Krishna Pillai as editor.¹⁹ Later, on 1 November 1924 the Thozhilali Mitram was merged with the Travancore Labour Association at the initiative of Vadappuram Bhava himself. A new working committee was elected in addition to the existing Managing Committee. Thereafter the growth of the Labour Association was phenomenal.

The Managing Committee meeting of the Labour Association held in 1926 requested all social and political organisations in the State to fight for the redressal of the grievances of the coir factory workers.²⁰ But only the S.N.D.P. Yogam responded to the request of the Association. Accordingly the Yogam, in connection with the annual meeting on 26 March 1926, held a labour conference at Quilon.²¹ The conference recommended to the Government a labour legislation protecting the interests of the coir factory workers and giving assurance

18. Andalat, (ed.), Sakakale Mungattu, (Malayalam), Vol.II, Trivandrum, 1979, p.42.

19. The District Magistrate, Trivandrum, 24 October 1924, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis. 341/1924/Legislative.

20. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.54.

21. Twenty third Annual Report of the S.N.D.P.Yogam, Quilon, 1926, p.20.

against retrenchment and wage reduction. Recalling the fact that a majority of the workers were Ezhavas, eight of the ten men who held the Secretaryship of the Labour Association between 1922 and the end of 1934 were also Ezhavas, two were Nairs. Moreover among the 30,000 coir factory workers in Alleppy during 1938, eighty per cent of them were Ezhavas, eight per cent Christians, one per cent Muslims, one per cent Hindu Nairs and the remaining ten per cent from the other backward communities.²² However the fact that men from all the major communal groups in Travancore occupied the presidentship indicated that the Labour Association, even in its early years, was not the organ merely of a single caste.²³ In all the Travancore Labour Association overpowered communal fissures which elsewhere in India ripped unions apart.

In 1928 the Labour Association was drawn into brief strikes in Alleppy coir factories over the reduction of wages. The Association organised a three day strike of the coir workers to protest against massive retrenchment. Factory owners, though still enjoying excellent export conditions, realised that potential workers now exceeded available jobs. The first of the consequent wage cut came in the factory of

22. Nilkam Perumal, The Truth about Travancore, Madras, 1939, p.54.

23. Govindan, K.C., "Labour Associayeshante Charitram", op.cit., p.183.

William Goodacre Company in late April 1928, coinciding almost exactly with the beginning of the great textile strike in Bombay that was to last six months.²⁴ As most of the coir factories were owned by foreigners, the workers and the Labour Association leaders sought the help of educated men and lawyers who could negotiate in English with the foreign owners. V.K.Velayudhan, who was practicing as a lawyer at Alleppy and most of the important leaders of the S.N.D.P.Yogam, was associated with the Travancore Labour Association in this context.²⁵

However the longest of the four strikes in 1928 lasted three weeks, and in all cases the managements largely succeeded in imposing their settlements. Infact the Labour Association took the lead in none of the strikes. This attitude of the Association was mainly because it stood for labour welfare measures and had no plan to fight against the owners for rights in the beginning. Rather, workers called on the Association for help once, they had angrily and spontaneously struck work rather than ^{accepting} heavier duties or lower wages.²⁶ In 1930 V.K.Velayudhan was elected the Honorary Secretary of the

24. Morris, M.D., The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India, Bombay, 1965, pp.37-38.

25. Usha Muraleedharan, op.cit., p.171.

26. Govindan, K.C., 'Labour Associyeshante Charitram', op.cit., pp.185-186.

Association.²⁷ During this time the management of the coir factories reduced the wages of workers arbitrarily. The Manager of the William Goodacre Company, who was not willing to concede to the demands of the workers refused even to meet the labour leaders. Soon the Labour Association retaliated by staging the first concerted strike on 28 July 1931 over wage reductions.²⁸ The strike continued for three months amidst the obstinancy of the management. Though the strike did not achieve its aims, it was said to have astonished the employers. Shortly when the Dewan visited Alleppy, V.K.Velayudhan and other labour leaders presented a memorial to him in which the grievances of the labour like uncertainty in wages, denial of representation in the Assembly and neglect of factory regulation were highlighted. Further wage reductions gave P.Kesava Dev, the newly elected General Secretary of the Association the opportunity, to launch a strike in some factories simultaneously in January 1934.²⁹ Once again the strike brought only partial concessions. But the significance of the strike was that the owners learned that they could no longer dictate terms unopposed. Through all these strikes, the workers, for the first time, heard revolutionary slogans.

27. Twenty Third Annual Report of the S.N.D.P.Yogam, op.cit., p.21.

28. Jeyadevadas, D., Working Class Politics in Kerala, Trivandrum, 1983, p.107.

29. The Hindu, 9 January 1934, pp. 5 and 14.

By this time the radical ideology was also gaining currency among the workers in Travancore.³⁰ The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-1933 had its effect on hundreds of young Malayalis. Introduced to Marxist ideas in the jails, they sought to propagate these ideas after their release. By the mid 1930's they were moving into closer relations with the coir workers.³¹ The conditions of the depression gave these youngmen a convincing setting in which to expound their ideas; the nature of the coir industry gave them a large audience; and the social conditions of Travancore ensured that it was a receptive one. Moreover, within the State itself, the Abstention Movement, led by members of the Christian, Muslim and lower caste Hindu middle classes, attempted to force the princely government to remove all privileges hitherto reserved for higher caste Hindus. Labour leaders like P.K.Velayudhan and R.Sugathan took active part in the Movement.³² Thus the coir workers were soon caught up in the excitement generated by the Abstention Movement in Travancore. In an annual meeting of the Travancore Labour Association in September 1933, E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, leader of the Self Respect Movement in Tamilnadu, explained his experiences in Soviet Union to the

30. Kusuman, K.K., The Extremist Movement in Kerala, Trivandrum, 1977, pp.19-23.

31. Travancore Police Weekly, Secret Bulletin, Vol.1, No.26, 23 June 1934.

32. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.79.

workers. The meeting injected the radical spirit among the working people.³³ In Sherthalai area, the idea of unionism emerged mainly from 1935. R.Sugathan was moving among the workers exhorting them to organise. Consequently a branch office of the Labour Association was started at Sherthalai on 10 February 1936.³⁴

Now the rising tempo of working class in the State had received the attention of the administration. A member of the State Legislative Council, M.N.Parameswaran Pillai, cautioned, ".... in their anxiety, to conserve their power, to put down the surging wave of political consciousness in the people by repressive measures, by issuing orders prohibiting public meetings, or by arresting individual leaders or even by gagging the press by number of proclamations, the situation is not going to improve unless the causes of soreness that exist in the country are completely removed".³⁵

Organisation of Boatmen

The emergence of unions among the factory workers in Alleppy and Quilon excited the boatmen who poled the heavy barges on the canals and backwaters. An association of boatmen

33. Govindan, K.C., 'Trade Union Prasthanam', op.cit., p.206.

34. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.82.

35. Proceedings of the Travancore Sri Chitra State Council, op.cit., p.113.

needed a massive consolidation work since they had no idea of unionism in the beginning. In an attempt to organise the boatmen, a meeting was held at Karunagapally in Central Travancore in March 1930 with G.Raman Menon as Chairman.³⁶ This meeting dealt with the long pending grievances of the boatworkers in Travancore. In a sympathetic milieu, all who attended the meeting were unanimous to organise a Union of Boatworkers. Thus in March 1930 the 'Travancore Boat Workers' Union' was established with M.K.Raman as Secretary.³⁷ The inaugural meeting was attended by Mannathu Padmanabhan, Kumbalathu Sanku Pillai, M.R.Govinda Pillai, V.V.Velukutty Arayan, K.P.Narayanan and others. The union office was at Ponmana in Karunagapally. Soon after its formation, the Union presented a memorial of grievances represented by about 5,000 boat workers under the leadership of G.Raman Menon to Dewan V.S.Subramaniya Aiyer in June 1930. The boat workers amidst economic demands extended support to the political movement for Responsible Government in the State. On 13 September 1933 the Travancore Boat Workers' Union was registered as an association under section 26 of the Travancore Companies Regulation I of 1917.³⁸

36. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.44.

37. Andalath, op.cit., p.42.

38. Registrar of Joint Stock Companies, 5 October 1938, Letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.3429/1938/Judl.

Meanwhile the condition of Alleppy port workers became grave. They had no proper working hours. At the instigation of the Labour Association leaders P.K.Padmanabhan and K.K.Kunjan, the port workers of Alleppy were organised.³⁹ Through its sub office near the Alleppy port, the Association was also fighting the cause of boat workers to free them from the exploitation of Moopans or contractors.

Quilon Factory Workers Union

Old ideas were constantly challenged and this intellectual ferment reached the highly literate labourers and left them ready to accept radical explanations of and remedies for their woes. Soon the ideology of unionism had spread among other industries. Quilon was an industrial town of tile, cashew and coir factories.⁴⁰ The condition of workers in the factories at Quilon was precarious. Consequently, the labourers of Alleppy who were very radical were eager to establish a new pattern of worker-owner relationship. The first consolidated attempt to organise the labourers in various factories at Quilon succeeded when the 'Quilon Thozhilali Sangham' was changed into 'Quilon Labour Union' in 1928.⁴¹ The objects of the Quilon Labour Union were to improve the conditions of labourers by

39. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.48.

40. Census of India, 1931, Travancore, Vol.XXVIII, Part II, Trivandrum, 1932, p.270.

41. Political Report to the Dewan of Travancore, op.cit.

raising their wages, reducing the number of working hours and to educate the workers. However, the Government of Travancore contended that the real object of the Union was to organise the labourers and to work against the European Companies when opportunities occurred.⁴² The labour leaders behind the organisation of the Quilon Labour Union were K.G.Sankar, K.P.Damodaran and K.P.Narayanan. Actually the Travancore Labour Association was guiding the proceedings of the Quilon Labour Union. And the labour leaders of Alleppy and Quilon held joint talks on labour welfare measures. Significantly M.R.Govinda Pillai who led the labour force in Quilon had participated the annual celebration of the Travancore Labour Association in 1929.⁴³ Later the Quilon Labour Union began to deal with political issues also. President of the Union K.G.Sankar, a Congress radical, was giving instructions to labourers regarding Communism and Bolshevism.⁴⁴

The Quilon Labour Union, however, had enough local and general influence throughout Travancore. When the Salt Satyagraha volunteers passed through Quilon, K.G.Sankar presented a purse on behalf of the labourers and encouraged the volunteers by promising that the labour population of

42. Ibid.

43. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.38.

44. Political Report to the Dewan of Travancore, op.cit.

Quilon were prepared to help them with any number of volunteers and money.⁴⁵ Moreover K.G.Sankar was the President of the committee formed to receive Jawaharlal Nehru when he visited Quilon in 1931.⁴⁶ With the registration of the union under the Travancore Trade Union Act of 1938, Kannathodathu Janardhanan Nair became the President of the Union.

In the second anniversary meeting of the Union at Quilon on 13 October 1940 the leaders had described that disabilities of the labourers could be removed only when they attain economic freedom. K.Joseph, Secretary of the Kannitta Labour Union at Alleppy added that the goal of each and every labourer was to satisfy hunger and to remove nakedness. In fact, the speeches generally were intended to condemn capitalism.⁴⁷ The Quilon Factory Workers Union, while cautioning the administration against the factory owners who violated the factory rules, organised workers of many more factories to come under the purview of factory bills. The Union slowly came under the control of radical leadership. Moving among the labourers and organising them against capitalists, labour leaders M.N.Govindan Nair, Kannathodathu Janardhanan Nair and N.Sreekantan Nair led an active movement of workers in Quilon. In the third annual meeting of the Union on 11 January 1942, N.Sreekantan Nair was elected President.⁴⁸

45. Ibid.

46. It is significant to note that most of the factory owners were Europeans. Being a Socialist Nehru seriously criticised the British administration. He had awakened the workers against exploitation.(Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.38.)

47. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, No.293, 15 October 1940,

48. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.121.

All Travancore Cashewnut Workers Union

Exclusive dependence on agricultural sector for work meant for the workers low and uncertain income, arbitrary terms and condition of work and long spells of forced idleness. Thus the establishment of cashew factories opened up for these agricultural workers some chances of regular wage payment. The cashew factories in Quilon employed nearly 13,900 workers in 1931 out of whom 6,285 were women.⁴⁹ The workers in the cashew factories were subjected to inhuman treatment. Drawn from places far away from the factories, the workers were put to work at least sixteen hours a day.⁵⁰ The institution of Moopan in the cashew factories performed the same function as in the coir factories. Moopan was usually a senior man and recruitment and control of workers was his responsibilities.⁵¹ The wave of unionism swept away the cashew factory workers also and they felt the need of an organisation. Consequently the first union of cashew workers, the "Travancore Kasuandi Thozhilali Union" (Travancore Cashew Workers' Union) was formed in 1936.⁵² K.P.Sanu, S.Polikarp, K.Chellappan and C.O.Mathew were the early leaders of the cashewnut factory workers.

49. Census of India 1931, Travancore, op.cit., p.271.

50. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.46.

51. Mathew, P.M., Exploitation of Women Labour, An Analysis of Womens' Employment in Kerala, Social Scientist, Vol.13, No.10-11, October-November 1985, p.36.

52. Andalat, op.cit., p.43.

In 1939, the workers in the Quilon Cashew factory of A.Thangal Kunju Musaliar, declared a strike. Thangal Kunju Musaliar was a prominent cashew magnate who owned at that time eight cashew factories in Quilon.⁵³ When Musaliar declined to yield to the labour demands, the Quilon Factory Workers' Union took the cause of the cashew workers. Soon the unrest spread to the neighbouring factories and was followed by strikes. Thangal Kunju Musaliar, in retaliation to the labour strikes, retrenched the workers on strike. But it only inspired the labourers to organise and to fight against the capitalist. Meanwhile the Quilon Factory Workers' Union, led by President P.N. Krishna Pillai and Secretary K.C.Govindan, carried on an intensive campaign to enlist all cashewnut factory workers in Quilon and suburbs as members of the Union.⁵⁴ Becoming aware of the class consciousness among cashew workers, the Government asked their officials to exert influence on the cashew factory workers to wean them off from joining the labour unions. As a precautionary measure the Inspector General of Police himself camped at Quilon.

Nevertheless the labourers of Quilon were active in opening new branches of the Union at many places and preparing

53. John Thomas, A Study of the Cashew Industry in Kerala, Trivandrum, 1965, p.80.

54. Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, 11 May 1939, Letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.238/1939/CS.

for an agitation.⁵⁵ The labour had been getting more and more aggressive. Finally because of the organised move of the workers, Musaliar had to come to an agreement with the striking workers. The end of the strike was an unprecedented turn in the history of labour movement in the State. On 2 November 1939 the cashew workers of Quilon organised 'Quilon Cashewnut Factory Workers' Union' with P.K.Kunju of Kayamkulam as President.⁵⁶ In 1940 the Union was registered as the "All Travancore Cashewnut Workers' Union" on behalf of the workers by Thangal Kunju Musaliar himself under the Travancore Trade Union Act. In fact this employer sponsored organisation was the first trade union in the cashew industry.

The Cashew Workers' Union had specific demands for lower hours of work, payment of bonus and better condition and terms of work. The Union in its meeting on 9 June 1940 under the presidency of K.P.Madhavan passed resolution demanding labour representation in the State Legislative Assembly.⁵⁷ Since it was possible to secure many of these demands only within the limits of the factories act, the Quilon Factory Workers' Union, the central labour organisation of the town, demanded

55. Inspector of Police, Alleppy, May 1939, report submitted to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.295/1939/CS.

56. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, No.254, 7 November 1939, D.Dis.851/1945/C.S.

57. Ibid., No.293, 15 October 1940, D.Dis.854/1945/CS.

the administration to include all cashewnut factories within the purview of the factory bills. Consequently most of the trade unions in the cashew industry were affiliated to the central organisation. However, the All Travancore Cashewnut Workers' Union had political affiliations with the Communist Party of India.⁵⁸ In 1942, M.N.Govindan Nair took the leadership of the cashewnut factory workers in the State. Besides the socialists from Malabar, labour leaders of Alleppy P.A. Solomon, P.K.Purushothaman and V.L.Thomas were moving among the labourers of Quilon and having discussions on labour issues. Very soon the message of Unionism had spread among the agricultural labourers of Kuttanad.⁵⁹

Travancore Agricultural Labourers Union

The system of paddy cultivation in Kuttanad was known as Punja cultivation with the distinctive features of building and bailing out of water before the fields were prepared for sowing. The paddy lands in Kuttanad were divided into various blocks, each called a padam comprised within one continuous ring bund all round.⁶⁰ Each padam had an identifying name attached to it. The blocks consisted of bunds belonging to several individual cultivators. Some owners cultivated their

58. Kannan, K.P., Cashew Development in India: Potentialities and Constraints, New Delhi, 1983, p.105.

59. Geographically the region extending from Karunagapally to Alwaye is known as Kuttanad.

60. Administrative Report, Economic Development Board, 1941, Appendix II, D.Dis.920/1942/Devpt.

lands themselves and others through their lessees. According to local custom each cultivator had to put up a specific portion of the outerbund. The introduction of pumbing engine in 1912 had changed the entire face of cultivation in Kuttanad.⁶¹ Kuttanad had a three layered system of land holdings, held by upper caste Namboodiri and Brahmin jenmis, the Nair Kanamdars and the Ezhava verumpattom tenants. The caste-based hierarchy in Kuttanad and the protected land market kept out low castes from acquiring land. Moreover there was no tenancy legislation in the State except the Travancore Jenmi and Kudiyam Act of 1934 A.D. which applied to jenmom lands.⁶²

In the early days all form of work was done by Harijan workers and they were paid wages mostly in kind.⁶³ The agricultural labourers worked as permanent and attached labour to jenmis and Nair kanamdars. The attached workers in most cases worked from morning till night and did all kinds of domestic and agricultural work.⁶⁴ Each jenmi had an adiyan or mootha pulayan to supervise all cropping operations including recruitment of outside labour. The treatment given to Harijan

61. Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, op.cit., p.8.

62. The Secretary, Board of Revenue, 21 July 1954, letter to Secretary to Government, Travancore-Cochin, D.Dis.3614/1954/Food.

63. Varghese Vaidyan, T.K., President, Karshaka Thozhilali Union, Alleppy, 18 March 1945, Memorandum to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.1000/1945/Devpt.

64. Daniel and Alice Thorner, Land and Labour in India, Bombay, 1962, p.31.

labour working as paniyal was menial. The paniyals received a small proportion of the produce of the fields in which they worked. They also received certain gifts from the farmers on festive and ceremonial occasions. But in return the paniyals were expected to make themselves available whenever their master required their services.⁶⁵ In the traditional situation wage rates, working conditions, mode of payment of wages, pattern of discipline and other aspects of work relations were regulated by the farmers. Very often the agriculturist was complaining that a particular pulaya worker or his wife was going about dressed neatly or trying to look stylish.⁶⁶ Indeed the relation between the jenmis and agricultural workers was of a feudal nature.

The condition of agricultural workers deteriorated further when migrant labour from the languishing coir industry was looking for employment in Kuttanad. Thus arose the problem of excess labour which began to depress the wage rates.⁶⁷ The landlords used different paras for measuring paddy for each type of transaction. No advances of wages was made to the workers. Moreover even within Kuttanad, the pattern of working

65. Changing Agrarian Relations in India, National Institute of Community Development, Hyderabad, 1975, p.40.

66. T.K.Varghese Vaidyan, op.cit., D.Dis.1000/1945/Devpt.

67. Speech of Sirdar Thejo Singh, S.N.D.P.Yogam meeting at Quilon, January 1938, D.Dis. 248/1938/CS.

hours was different from region to region. The work involved was of an arduous nature, to be carried out in the most unhygienic conditions with considerable risk even to life.⁶⁸

Dissatisfaction slowly developed among the agricultural workers. When the introduction of pumping engines and electrification reduced the employment chances, the agricultural workers became aggressive. Moreover, during the Second World War the condition of agricultural labour in Kuttanad itself became worse. Till then they were being paid in paddy. But due to war and shortages, the price of paddy rose from six annas to five rupees per para.⁶⁹ The landlords then began to pay wages in cash which obviously stepped up the rate of exploitation. Thus the discontented agricultural workers began to form their unions. This trend was encouraged by the movement of workers in the coir factories of Alleppy and Sherthalai.

Compared with other areas in Kerala, the proportion of agricultural labourers was higher than that of owner cultivation in Kuttanad. The total agricultural population in Travancore had increased from 3,11,443 in 1921 to 3,62,885 in 1937, by seventeen per cent.⁷⁰ A unique feature of agricultural

68. Report of Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, op.cit., p.22.

69. Ramachandran Nair, Industrial Relations in Kerala, New Delhi, 1973, p.235.

70. The Travancore Directory 1937, Part V, Trivandrum, 1938, p.5.

labour in Kuttanad was that they were highly organised. The belief in radical ideology was the most among the labourers of Alleppy. And this change in ideological orientation had led them to demand higher wages and improved work relations. The radical ideology soon penetrated into the innermost recesses of waterlogged Kuttanad and gradually the attached labourers also came under its influence. The enthusiasm and momentum gathered by the peasant struggles, especially in Malabar, made tremendous impact upon the Kuttanad workers and made them aware of the need for organised fighting. The wide prevalence of literacy among the workers in this region made organisation easier than was generally the case with agricultural labourers elsewhere in India.⁷¹ The economic difficulties of the War period provided a stimulating background for union activities.

The early leaders of the agricultural workers were S.K.Das, T.V.Thomas, T.K.Varghese Vaidyan, K.P.Joseph, V.S. Achuthanandan, K.M.George and Damodaran. Induced by the leaders of coir factory workers, in September 1939, a committee was formed at Pallathurithy near Alleppy to start organisational work among the agricultural workers of Kuttanad with S.K.Das as convener.⁷² As a result in December 1939 the Travancore

71. Pillai, V.R., and Panickar, P.G.K., Land Reclamation in Kerala, New York, 1965, p.127.

72. Das, S.K., "Agricultural Workers' Movement in Kuttanad", Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union Golden Jubilee Souvenir, p.134.

Agricultural Labourers Union was formed with its office at Mancompu in Kuttanad taluk.⁷³ The Union was affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress. The Union had demanded higher wages, noon rest, reduction in working hours, stopping of abuse by jenmis and protection against tractor ploughing and migrant labour. In many parts of Alleppy agricultural workers were powerfully organised and that the farmers had no alternative but to accept and adapt themselves to labour demands for carrying on cultivation.⁷⁴ However the organisational strength of the Union enabled the agricultural labourers to effect drastic changes in the nature of their relations with the farmers.

There was intensive union work among the agricultural labourers of Kuttanad after the formation of the Travancore Agricultural Labourers' Union. This union of agricultural workers was not registered under the Trade Union Act.⁷⁵ The labour leaders had stressed the necessity of the Kuttanad labourers getting organised under the banner of the Agricultural Labourers Union. In fact the class consciousness of the agricultural workers was revealed by the demonstrative processions in which thousands of labourers raised slogans of "down with capitalism",

73. Lukose, ANI, Role of Labour Movements On Agrarian Relations in Kerala, Ph.D. thesis in Sociology, University of Kerala, Trivandrum, 1982, pp.72-73.

74. Changing Agrarian Relations in India, op.cit., pp.45-46.

75. The Union was registered as per the Travancore Trade Union Act only in 1953. (Pillai, V.R., and Panickar, P.G.K., op.cit., pp.127-128.)

"eradicate starvation" and "organise".⁷⁶ The Union carried out a policy of peaceful settlements of every dispute between the workers and the employers. At the same time it stressed the workers of their duty to strive for production and to cooperate with the various steps by the Government to solve the food crisis in the State.⁷⁷ The Union concentrated on educating the workers about the need and strength of their organisation. Moving among the workers in the field, the Union representatives excited the labourers to organise against exploitation.⁷⁸ The vigorous challenge posed by the agricultural labour had effect on the administration. Realising the seriousness of the situation the Government arranged meetings of landlords and labour leaders to settle labour grievances by discussions.⁷⁹

All Travancore Estate Workers Union

Unionism among the plantation workers was a later development. In the beginning the plantations were mainly maintained by private individuals, but the capital outlay required for tea soon led to the appearance of the limited liability company usually floated in London.⁸⁰ The Economic

76. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 19 January 1942, D.Dis.846/1945/CS.

77. Varghese Vaidyan, T.K., op.cit., 30 December 1944, D.Dis.1000/1945/Devpt.

78. The Tahsildar, Ambalapuzha, 24 April 1945, letter to Division Peishkar, Quilon, D.Dis.1000/1945/Devpt.

79. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 26 January 1942, D.Dis.846/1945/CS.

80. Mayne, W.W., op.cit., 29 January 1945, D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.

Depression Enquiry Committee had reported that in 1931* Travancore had 61,986 acres of rubber, 74,618 acres of tea and 48,000 acres of cardamom estates.⁸¹ However a major part of the plantations in the State was under the control of British owners. By 1935 there were thirty seven tea plantation companies incorporated and registered in Travancore in addition to twenty two other tea plantations incorporated and registered outside but working in Travancore.⁸² The workers in tea and rubber estates in Travancore had increased from 16,786 in 1921 to 71,159 in the year 1937.⁸³

Plantation crops between the two World Wars had reflected the general economic instability. This economic instability has had a very important bearing on problems of improvement of labour conditions. In the process of the development of plantations, the labour requirement remained high when the crop reached maturity. Thus a certain amount of labour came to the estate merely for the crop season. Mostly estate labourers were drawn from the agricultural worker classes. The labour employed in the larger tea districts of central Travancore was mostly Tamils from the nearby districts of Tamilnadu.⁸⁴ But a certain amount of labour employed was

81. Report of the Economic Depression Enquiry Committee, op.cit., p.15.

82. The Statistics of Travancore, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1935, p.27.

83. The Travancore Directory, op.cit., p.5.

84. Mayne, W.W., op.cit., 29 January 1945, D.Dis.2284/1945/ Devpt.

strictly local, who were residents of villages and came to work on the estate each day. In fact only a small portion of the estate labourers was permanent, returning to the villages only at long intervals. There was a constant movement of workers from the fields of ordinary agriculture to the plantations. The employer accepted less responsibility for the conditions of life of the workers and his contacts with them were strictly limited to the actual working hours. There was no legal contract entered into between the labourers and the employer.

The control of large areas of plantation in the State by the British owners and the inhuman treatment in the British plantations of North Travancore resulted in the labourers to feel more relief in Indian-owned plantations than of the British. Consequently any small friction between management and workers in the British-owned plantations could blow up into a confrontation with anti-British implication.⁸⁵ On 6 December 1928, T.C.Kesava Pillai had cautioned the Government of the very bad treatment to the labourers in the British-owned estates.⁸⁶

Conscious of the need for an organisation, the estate labourers began to organise. Meanwhile many leaders of the

85. Vanaja Rangaswami, The Story of Integration: A New Interpretation, New Delhi, 1981, p.16.

86. Travancore Legislative Council Proceedings, 1929, Vol.14, p.237.

Travancore Labour Association were visiting the estates to organise the labour for trade union purposes. They held discussions and meetings within the estates to make the workers aware of an organisation. Soon the private estates had remarked the labour leaders as outsiders and asked the labourers to get permission of the estate manager in case such 'outsiders' were to address labour meetings.⁸⁷ Yet the vigorous work for labour solidarity among the estate workers resulted into the formation of a Union. In 1930 George Kaakanadan and other leaders of Mundakayam in central Travancore formed the "Sanmargodayam Kooli Vela Sangham".⁸⁸

The example of Sanmargodayam Kooli Vela Sangham was an excitement for the estate labourers of Punalur. Leaders from Alleppy visited Punalur and exhorted the workers to organise. At Ponkunnam and Ranni, labour meetings were organised by R.Sugathan and T.V.Thomas, extending the message of labour consolidation. Finally in 1940 the All Travancore Estate Factory Workers Union was formed, representing mostly the estate workers in and around Punalur.⁸⁹ The Union elected T.V.Thomas, as its president and Achary as secretary. This Union was the

87. Mayne, W.W., op.cit., 29 January 1945, D.Dis. 2284/1945/Devpt.

88. Andalat, op.cit., p.42.

89. Report on Memorandum of All Travancore Estate Factory Workers Union by Ag.Labour Commissioner, Travancore, 27 July 1945, D.Dis.2197/1945/Devpt.

first trade union of estate workers in Travancore. The Travancore Government had commented on the union "as a side-show put up by the trade union workers at Alleppy just to extend trade union activity to the planting estates".⁹⁰ By the end of 1942 the action council of the Union was recognised with P.A.Solomon as the General Secretary to expedite the Union activities. And in 1943 the All Travancore Estate Factory Workers Union had constituted eleven branches between Kulasekharam in South Travancore and Vandiperiyar in central Travancore.⁹¹ President T.V.Thomas, explaining the deplorable condition of labourers in the rubber estates of South Travancore had urged them to organise for a fight with the capitalists.⁹² The Union had brought the demands of the estate workers to the notice of the authorities and the public and succeeded in its attempts to get a just wage for its members.⁹³ In July 1945, the Union changed its name into the "All Travancore Estate Workers' Union".

Punalur Mill Workers Union

Punalur had been the centre of estate and mill workers. There was only one paper mill in Travancore, situated at Punalur. The Punalur paper mill had been producing largely

90. Ibid.

91. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.131.

92. Report of Inspector of Police, Thiruvattar, 22 February 1945, D.Dis.1010/1945/CS.

93. Kerala Bhushanam, 12 January 1946, Press Cuttings, D.Dis.156/1946/CS.

five hundred tons of kraft paper per annum.⁹⁴ By 1940 there was an idea of unionism among the mill workers of Punalur. This change in ideology among the workers of Punalur was mainly due to the advent of unionism among the factory and estate workers of Alleppy, Quilon and other industrial areas. The Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union had sent a deputation of labour leaders to Punalur who met the workers and exhorted them to organise. Labour leaders of Alleppy P.G.Padmanabhan, K.P.Pathrose, V.L.Thomas, Simon Asan and V.K.Karunakaran settled at Punalur permanently to organise the labourers.⁹⁵

The workers of Punalur Paper Mill were discontented mainly because of the hostile attitude of the management. However by November 1940 a section of workers in the mill succeeded in their attempt to establish the 'Punalur Paper Mill Workers' Union'.⁹⁶ The formation of the Union was mainly because of the consolidation work of the workers of the Punalur Paper Mill themselves. The Union elected Vaisyanazhikam Narayanapillai as President, K.Gopala Pillai as Vice-President and P.A.Solomon as Secretary. At its meeting on 25 November 1940 at Punalur, the Union appealed to the management of paper mills to render all possible help for an amicable settlement between the Union and the employer.⁹⁷

94. Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, 29 November 1937, Draft paper to Sir Geoffrey, Calcutta, D.Dis. 1660/1937/CS.

95. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.115.

96. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, No.336, 27 November 1940, D.Dis.855/1945/C.S.

97. Ibid.

The management of Punalur Paper Mills had reacted to the formation of Union among its workers and removed from service the Secretary of the Mill Workers' Union, P.A.Abraham.⁹⁸ In fact the infant union of mill workers could not form any organised protest against the dismissal of its Secretary. On 29 March 1941 the workers of the mill struck work, protesting against the inhuman practices of the management. T.V.Thomas, President of the Union visited Punalur and assisted the strike, advising the labourers to organise. Further the All Travancore Trade Union Council had constituted an action council consisting of T.V.Thomas as convenor and P.N.Krishna Pillai, K.A.Muhammed, Kannathodath Janardhanan Nair and P.O.Spencer as members to deal with the strike.⁹⁹ Thus the incessant attempts of the Union compelled the management to take back into service the retrenched workers.

Reaction Against Labour Unions

In the process of labour consolidation, the sporadic labour unions in the State were in search of a central organisation to co-ordinate their activities. Very soon they have found a united body in the All India Trade Union Congress. The labour unions in Travancore had supported the resolutions of the All India Trade Union Congress in all its later developments.¹⁰⁰ And

98. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.114.

99. Ibid., p.115.

100. Resident for Madras States, 31 December 1940, Secret letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.4/1941/CS.

this relation brought the labour organisations in Travancore to have link with the contemporary developments in the neighbouring parts of the country. The working class of the State responded to all the labour strikes throughout India. A meeting of the AITUC on 1 November 1939 at Quilon presided over by M. Suresh Chandra Banerjee, President of the AITUC was attended by about 20,000 people. In this meeting Banerjee insisted on the importance of good relationship between the Trade Union Congress and the Indian National Congress.¹⁰¹

In response to the emerging labour organisations in the State, the employers also began to organise. The formation of the organisation of capitalists was mainly in retaliation to the sweep of the trade union movement. The business communities joined together and organised Chambers of Commerce. The first of these was the Travancore Chamber of Commerce and Industry incorporated in 1923.¹⁰² The membership of the Chamber was open to Indian and European firms as well as individuals. The Travancore Chamber advised the Government in matters of commerce and industry. The Alleppy Chamber of Commerce established in 1929, represented the Indian business community in Alleppy.¹⁰³ It had a substantial interest in industries concerned.

101. Malayala Rajyam, 1 November 1939, Press Cuttings, D.Dis.317/1945/CS

102. The Hindu, 1 November 1941, p.12.

103. Minutes of Proceedings, Meeting of Alleppy Chamber of Commerce, 17 April 1942, D.Dis.139/1943/Devpt.

In 1935 a Chamber of Commerce was constituted to safeguard the interests of the business community of South Travancore and this Trivandrum Chamber of Commerce belonged to the Indian trading community of Trivandrum. As a matter of fact the Trivandrum Chamber of Commerce dominated the Travancore Chamber of Commerce consisting of both Travancore and European business communities. The emergence of different Chambers of Commerce implied the inherent contradictions within the business community between the British Indian capital and the Travancore capital.¹⁰⁴ In addition the South Indian Coir Manufacturers' Association was formed at Alleppy with the main object of promoting the interests of the manufacturers of coir products. In the beginning the Association was registered as a Joint Stock Company.¹⁰⁵

Subsequently the agriculturists also organised themselves into a united body to withstand the growing force of their workers who had begun to demand higher wages. The agriculturists had understood that unless they were organised strongly, they would not be able to face the challenge from the labourers. Shortly the farmers of Travancore had formed their association namely the 'Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham' in 1932.¹⁰⁶ The Sangham

104. Jeyadevadas, D., "Genesis of Trade Union Movement in Travancore", op.cit., p.119.

105. President, the South Indian Coir Manufacturers' Association, Alleppy, 29 October 1934, D.Dis.2440/1935/Judl.

106. Oommen, T.K., FAO Survey on Peasant Organisations in India: The Case of Alleppy (Kerala), Delhi, 1974, p.122.

had its office at Kottayam and aimed to uplift the agriculturists of Travancore with appeals to the administration to remove the difficulties of the farmers.¹⁰⁷

The Sangham aimed to create a proper organisational structure and to expand its membership among the agriculturists. They also recognised the need to act as a pressure group at the political level. But in Alleppy, in the face of farmers' resistance, the labourers were so powerfully organised that the agriculturists had to adapt themselves to labour demands for carrying on cultivation. By the existing system in Kuttanad the wages for workers were assessed only at the end of harvest season. Often the employers had spread a propaganda even at the beginning of the harvest season that the workers were upto create troubles.¹⁰⁸ As a result when there was a dispute, the settlement of the employer would always prevail.

In fact the agriculturists of Travancore were also labouring under serious difficulty. Thus the Economic Development Board had recommended to the Government of Travancore that a member might be nominated to represent the special and direct interests of the paddy cultivators of Kuttanad on the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly.¹⁰⁹ However the taxation in Nanjinad was the

107. Articles of Association, Travancore Agriculturists Association, Kottayam, 1937, R.Dis.1289/1938/Judl.

108. T.K.Varghese Vaidyan, .op.cit., 30 December 1944, D.Dis.1000/1945/Devpt.

109. Administration Report, Economic Development Board, 1939, Government of Travancore, p.15.

maximum realised as rupees thirty five per acre, which did not exist anywhere in the whole of the civilised world.¹¹⁰ Soon the Government took note of the fact and appointed the Agricultural Debt Redemption Committee in 1935 to enquire into the whole problem and to make recommendations for the alleviation of the distress of the agriculturists. The Committee reported on 1 October 1935. On the basis of the recommendations of the committee, the Government formulated legislative proposals for relief in a Bill which was placed before the Assembly in April 1936. The Bill proposed three methods of relief, viz., the conciliation of debts; reduction of interest on debts; and concessions in the executive of decrees for debts. On 7 November 1936 a deputation of bankers, moneylenders, merchants and landlords of Travancore, led by Malloor K. Govinda Pillai met Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer and presented him with a memorandum praying that the Government might drop the Agricultural Relief Bill.¹¹¹ Meanwhile the Travancore Government again appointed a committee in order to deal with the matter. Based more or less on the report of that committee, Government initiated legislation for the relief of agriculturists. As a first step of implementing the recommendations of the committee, the Travancore Agriculturists Debt Relief Regulation III of 1937 was passed.¹¹² Yet in an

110. Proceedings of the Sri Chitra State Council, 1936,
Vol. IX, p. 143.

111. Speech of C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, Dewan of Travancore,
Kottayam, 7 November 1936, D. Dis. 662/1936/CS.

112. The Madras States Directory 1938, Cochin 1938, p. 278.

attempt to protect the agriculturists against the labour legislations, again the Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham had submitted memorials to the Dewan of Travancore, urging to effect considerable changes in the Agriculturist Debt Relief Act.¹¹³ Moreover the Sangham formed an organised effort to intimidate the workers from joining the Union and its work.

In response to the developing force in the plantations, the planters had also become aware of forming their own associations to keep themselves safe. The fact was that from the very beginning the Planters of Travancore were represented in the State Assembly. Moreover the Association of Planters of Travancore was the most important district member of the United Planters Association of South India, with a membership of 1,41,104 acres.¹¹⁴ The Association of planters of Travancore had dealt with local affairs and in co-operation with the main body in matters affecting the plantation industry as a whole. The Association was registered under section 26 of the Travancore Companies Regulation I of 1917.¹¹⁵ The other planters' associations in Travancore primarily concerned with local matters were the South

113. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.I, No.191, 5 September 1939, D.Dis.845/1945/CS.

114. The UPASI was formed in 1893 representing 2,64,543 acres of plantation crops in South India. The three classes of members of the Association were owners of plantations, companies interested in the plantation industries and fifteen district plantations. The General Executive committee meeting of the members had control over the affairs of the Association. (Mayne, W.W., op.cit., 29 January 1945, D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.)

115. Palace draft, Rol.No.2119, 8 April 1938, D.Dis.1255/1938/Judl.

Travancore Planters Association, the Central Travancore Planters Association, the Mundakayam Planters Association and the Kannan Devan Planters Association. The members of all these associations were qualified to become electors for the State Legislature from the Planters' Constituency.

In an another attempt the Indian Planters' Association of Kerala was formed in 1927 to safeguard the interests of the planting community in general and that of the rubber planters in particular. On 21 July 1928 the Association was registered under the Joint Stock Company Regulations with its office at Kottayam.¹¹⁶ The Planters Association had also appointed a deputation which waited upon the Dewan of Travancore to represent the grievances of planters. Thus in parallel with the growth of workers Unions, the employers also developed their own organisations under the guise of industrial relations. Meanwhile an association representing cardamom growers in various parts of the State was formed to safeguard and promote the interest of the cardamom planting industry with headquarters at Kottayam.¹¹⁷ This association was mainly in retaliation to the association of Tamil owners of Cardamom plantations in Cumbum valley.

It is significant to note that the coconut growers too formed their association with Changanacherry K. Parameswaran

116. Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, Licence issued No.1334, 21 July 1928, R.Dis.1433/1936/Judl.

117. Report of Proceedings, Cardamom Growers Association, 26 May 1941, R.Dis.4509/1945/Judl.

Pillai as President. And the Travancore Kerakarshaka Sangham (Travancore Coconut Growers Association) was registered as a Joint Stock Company.¹¹⁸ The Sangham had, from time to time, brought to the notice of the administration the needs and the demands of its members. In fact the Government have formed a counter move in the employer associations to meet the growing threat of labour power in the State. Significantly Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer personally attended the inaugural meeting of the All Kerala Kerakarshaka Sangham at Karunagapally on 18 October 1937.¹¹⁹ To sum up, the spread of unionism among the workers posed a serious challenge to both the employers and the administration and that the latter had also organised to resist the labour power.

118. President, Travancore Kerakarshaka Sangham, No.3904, 21 May 1935, Letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, R.Dis.1111/1936/Judl.

119. File D.Dis.1185/1939/Devpt./Government of Travancore.

CHAPTER III

CONGRESS SOCIALISTS AND WORKING CLASS

In the process of the growth of labour movement, new leadership was also emerging. The caste conscious working people of the State became class conscious. The social change and the consequent political awakening in Travancore made the workers to find asylum in political leadership. By this time as part of national developments, the Kerala Province Congress Committee was formed in Malabar in 1934. Soon the message of socialism had wider appeal in Travancore also. However the socialist leaders, as part of their political campaign encouraged the labour force to consolidate. Political leaders began to decorate the presidentship of labour associations. With the formation of the State Congress, the socialist programmes became radical. Meanwhile the workers in Travancore developed into an independent class. The vacillating leadership of the State Congress facilitated the socialist perspectives. With the support of the radical youth leaguers, the Malabar socialists found no difficulty in attracting the working class to their platform.

Emergence of Congress Socialists

With the spread of labour unions, proper leadership of the movement became the need of the time. The political

transition in the princely state was from Congress Gandhians to Congress Socialists. Though the ideology behind the worker-peasant organisations was circumscribed by the Congress Socialist Party, no doubt, many leaders got inspiration from the revolutionary upsurge in Soviet Union and the vigorous attempt on the part of many leaders of the national movement to imbibe the principles of scientific socialism so to build a movement based on cadre building and leadership.¹ The public men who came forward to help labourers from their unions were mostly political workers. There were few who did not have any link or association with the national movement that was developing in the country. In the initial stage many leaders of the Indian National Congress were predominantly associated with the trade union movement. The first president of the All India Trade Union Congress was the radical leader, Lala Lajpat Rai who was at the sametime the president of the Indian National Congress.² Thus from the very beginning the trade union movement was very closely linked with politics and political issues.

The Gandhian era brought the Congress committees to Travancore. Quite a good number of Congress men from Travancore

1. Pillai, P.P.(ed.), Agricultural Development in Kerala, New Delhi, 1982, p.52.

2. Aiyer, S.P., and Srinivasan, R.,(ed.), Studies in Indian Democracy, Bombay, 1965, p.656.

participated in the political conference at Ottapalam in 1921.³ For the first time political matters on Kerala were discussed in the Ottapalam conference. In consequence, nearly sixty four Congress committees were formed in Travancore.⁴ The Congress leaders of this period were A.K.Pillai, V.Achuta Menon, C.Sanku Pillai and K.G.Sankar. This revealed the potential for nationalist political mobilisation that existed in Travancore. A number of workers in Alleppy area took four anna membership in the Congress.⁵ Closely following the freedom movement was born the organised and militant trade union movement in the Malabar area, which however was able to attract to itself the already existing trade union organisations in Travancore. In fact the new peasant movement in Malabar included in its ranks the entire peasantry, including the agricultural labourers. There was a difference in the development between the Malabar area on the one hand and Travancore on the other. While the centre of all provincial activities was the struggle for freedom from British rule in Malabar, the question of political and socio-cultural democracy directed against the princely rule dominated in Travancore.⁶ Soon the political parties ideologically committed

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3. Thomas Isaac, T.M., "The National Movement and the Communist Party in Kerala", Social Scientist, Vol.14, Nos.8 and 9, August-September 1986, p.66.
 4. Balaram, N.E., Keralattile Communist Prasthanam(Malayalam), Part I, Trivandrum, 1973, p.29.
 5. Jeyadevadas, D., "Genesis of Trade Union Movement in Travancore", op.cit., p.132.
 6. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., "The Struggle for Proletarian Hegemony: A Short Note on Freedom Struggle in Kerala", Social Scientist, Vol.12, No.9, pp.36-37.

to improve the conditions of the working class have championed the cause of the workers and have organised themselves into unions. The emergence of Congress socialists to the working class leadership was in parallel to the growth of modern democratic consciousness in Travancore. The Vaikom Satyagraha agitation in 1924 was the last direct intervention of Congress leadership in the political development of Travancore till the end of the thirties.

Political Overtones

Supported actively by the Congress leaders of Malabar, the lower castes of Travancore wanted the eradication of untouchability and right of entry into temples. The Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee entrusted the work to K.Kelappan Nair, T.K. Madhavan, Murur Nilakantan Namboodiripad, T.R.Krishnaswamy Aiyer and K.Velayudha Menon.⁷ Moreover in a meeting at Quilon on 6 February 1924 it was resolved to work for temple entry for the Harijans and for their freedom of movement on all public roads.⁸ Soon a satyagraha campaign was started in front of the temple at Vaikom in central Travancore on 30 March 1924. The Satyagrahis were led by T.K.Madhavan, K.P.Kesava Menon, A.R.Pillai,

7. Daniel, D., op.cit., pp.23-24.

8. Ravindran, T.K., Vaikom Satyagraha and Gandhi, Trichur, 1975, pp.51-52.

C.V.Kunju Raman, Mannathu Padmanabhan and K.Kelappan. The non-Brahmin Congress leader of Tamilnadu E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker also joined the satyagraha at Vaikom.⁹ At the initiative of the social reformists, the Indian National Congress chose to sponsor the satyagraha struggle at Vaikom temple. To illustrate, in February 1924 the Congress leaders summoned at the office of Swarat, a daily published from Quilon, and resolved to proceed with their fight against untouchability.¹⁰ Thus the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924 first demonstrated the interaction of the social reform movement on the working class.

In April 1924, the Travancore Labour Association had resolved to hold a festive annual meeting in imitation of the Indian National Congress.¹¹ The three day labour conference was attended by more than 2,000 workers including lawyers and journalists of different castes. By the time a band of volunteers led by K.P.Kesava Menon walked to the temple precincts, they were served with ban orders by the District Magistrate. In defiance, many batches of volunteers staged satyagraha and courted arrest.¹² During the labour conference, word was received of

9. David Arnold, The Congress in Tamilnadu, New Delhi, 1977, p.84.

10. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.33.

11. Govindan, K.C., 'Labour Associayeshante Charitram', op.cit., p.182.

12. Damodaran, K., and Narayana Pillai, C., Keralattile Swatantriya Samaram (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1957, p.120.

the arrest of leading satyagrahis at Vaikom. At once fifty volunteers were despatched across the backwater to aid the satyagraha including K.C.Govindan, who was to serve as General Secretary of the Labour Association for more than five years.¹³ At the meeting, one of the speakers asserted that just as the Russians managed to obtain freedom by putting an end to their royal family, so the Ezhavas must also fight to the very end and that they must be prepared to sacrifice their lives when time comes.¹⁴ The satyagraha ended in compromise in November 1925 with the Travancore Government building a short stretch of new road. In fact the Vaikom Satyagraha greatly contributed to the social awakening in the State.

The Vaikom Satyagraha was followed by a forceful demand throughout the State for temple entry. In 1928 the Self Respect League was established at Nagercoil in South Travancore with P.Chidambaram Pillai as President and R.Ramalingam as Secretary.¹⁵ The members of the League, mostly Ezhavas, aimed to break the caste system in the State and wanted the right of entry at Suchindrum temple. With the influence of the leaders

13. Govindan, K.C., 'Labour Associayeshante Charitram', op.cit., pp.182-183.

14. Robin Jeffrey, 'Destroy Capitalism', op.cit., p.1160.

15. Field, D.W., No.26, 24 June 1933, Political Report to T.Austin, Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.746/1933/CS.

of Self Respect Movement in Tamilnadu like E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker, R.K.Shanmukham Chetti and Sundara Pandya Nadar, the League passed a resolution requesting the Travancore Government to approve Suchindrum Satyagraha.¹⁶ In April 1930 the satyagraha campaign was started at Suchindrum. This campaign of social rights echoed the effects of the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924 and the consequent political consciousness of the downtrodden sections in Travancore.

By 1930 the Travancore Labour Association became increasingly militant. It became more and more a ground for young leftward moving activists politicised in the Civil Disobedience Struggle of 1930-1933. The fact was that the Labour Association staged a public meeting to welcome the volunteers on their way to Malabar to offer civil disobedience in May 1930.¹⁷ While the Congress was emerging as the undisputed leader of the democratic people, an internal crisis was slowly developing within the Congress organisation itself. The new revolutionary forces of left nationalism and socialism that had taken shape in the course of the 1930-1932 struggle had crystallised into a definite socialist group within the Congress challenging the Gandhian leadership.¹⁸ In May 1930 a section of volunteers led by Ponnara G.Sreedhar from Travancore who were

16. Ibid.

17. Robin Jeffrey, op.cit., p.1161.

18. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., Kerala-Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, p.153.

on their way to join the Salt Satyagraha, received a warm welcome from the Labour Association at Alleppy. Further, when the Salt Satyagraha volunteers had passed through Quilon, K.G. Sankar presented a purse on behalf of the labourers and encouraged them by promising that the labourers of Quilon were prepared to help the volunteers with any number of men and money.¹⁹ And when Jawaharlal Nehru visited Quilon in 1931, he received a warm welcome from the labour population of Quilon led by K.G.Sankar.²⁰ In fact the search for an alternative by the disillusioned nationalists attracted them to the Congress Socialist Party platform that was emerging at the national level as a left pressure group within the Congress.

In Travancore the changing class relations forced a large number of people, without any consideration of caste or creed to join the agricultural and industrial labour force. When the old family pattern and the land had gone, it was not surprising that the helpless young Nairs drifted towards the excitement and idealism of first Gandhian and later Marxist politics. Men of many castes met at the work spots, all of them indignant at the disabilities enforced against them by the old society. However political developments in the state

19. Field, D.W., *op.cit.*, 24 June 1933, D.Dis.746/1933/CS.

20. Prakasam, R., *op.cit.*, p.38.

also revealed a social awakening among the people, especially the working class. The preconditions to modernisation were much more strong in Travancore than in Malabar area. The Ezhava Social Reform Movement was the most radical aspect of the social awakening that accompanied the rise of capitalism.²¹ The widespread discrimination of the radical interpretations of Sree Narayana Guru's teachings played an important role in the emergence of the modern democratic consciousness in the state. The Congress policy of non-interference in the affairs of princely states contributed to thwarting the emergence of secular national platforms for the cause of caste oppressed in Travancore. It should be noted that the resentment against caste discrimination and savarna domination was much stronger in Travancore and had given the higher level of economic development and capitalist relations in the region. The new social class of capitalists emerged not from the traditional dominant castes but from the non-Hindu communities such as Muslims and Christians or avarna castes like Ezhavas. Their efforts to gain a social status and political leverage more befitting to their improved economic conditions inevitably led to political questions given to the Hindu princely order closely linked to the caste hierarchy. Meanwhile the working people of Travancore were seriously watching the political developments in the state through the Travancore Labour Association.²²

21. Thomas Isaac, op.cit., p.66.

22. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.79.



The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-1933

attracted scores of young Travancoreans who were radicalised in the jails of British India.²³ And a number of volunteers from Travancore left for Malabar to join the Civil Disobedience agitation. While in jail, the young satyagrahis had come into contact with the representatives of left trends within Congress as well as non-Congress nationalists such as the terrorist groups. However E.M.S.Namboodiripad considers this as an important reason for the course of evolution of the young radical nationalists into Congress Socialists rather than Communists.²⁴ When they came out of prisons, the idea of socialism was not new to them. The notable leaders among them were P.Krishnapillai, E.M.S.Namboodiripad, A.K.Gopalan, K.P. Gopalan, Keraleeyan, Chadayanuri and K.Damodharan.

In the meantime the Constitutional Reforms of 1932 complicated the socio-political condition in Travancore. These reforms provided for an electoral scheme based upon property qualifications, giving enough chance to the Nair community who formed the major land-owning class.²⁵ Thus within the State itself the Abstention Movement led by members of the Christian,

23. Robin Jeffrey, "Matriliny, Marxism and the British of the Communist Party in Kerala 1930-1940", Journal of Asian Studies, Vol.XXXVII, No.1, November 1928, pp.84-88.
24. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., Communist Party in Kerala(Malayalam), Vol.I, Trivandrum, 1984, pp.12-13.
25. President, All Kerala Catholic Congress, Kottayam, 28 November 1931, Memorial submitted to the Maharajah of Travancore, pp.28-30.

Muslim and lower caste Hindu middle class, attempted to force the princely government to remove all privileges hitherto reserved for higher caste Hindus. The coir workers in Travancore, dismayed at the reductions in wages, were soon caught up in the excitement generated by the abstention campaign. In a meeting at Trivandrum on 17 December 1932, the abstentionists presided over by E.J. John, an active Congress leader, formed a common political organisation, the All Travancore Joint Political Congress.²⁶ The leaders of the Labour Association, P.K. Velayudhan and R. Sugathan took active part in the working of the joint political Congress and the abstention campaign. Once again the political overtone on the workers' movement in Travancore was revealed when the working class of Alleppy led by R. Sugathan had struck work, protesting against the arrest of C. Kesavan, a leading abstentionist.²⁷ However under the shadow of socialists in the Congress, the labour class of Travancore formed a force to face the threat of administration as well as the capitalists.

Formation of the Congress Socialist Party

Radical idealism gained currency in Travancore with the formation of the Travancore Youth League. In the beginning, the association of Youth League with the Congress programmes were only moderate in tone. Though many socialists in the Congress

26. Kovoov, E.M., T.M. Varghese (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1965, pp.52-53.

27. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.79.

Party had no clear idea of what 'socialistic principles' meant, a large number of young people were completely dissatisfied with the reformist facets of the Gandhian philosophy and were looking for a revolutionary alternative. In Travancore these socialists first extended their work among the coir workers of Alleppy in collaboration with the Youth League.²⁸ Thus the administration had readily admitted that a body of persons styling themselves as the Travancore Youth League were openly advocating socialistic and communistic doctrines.²⁹ In fact the work of young socialists excited a large number of workers and middle-class people to join the political struggle. Amidst their political campaign, the Congress leaders now concentrated on the grievances of the workers. By 1930 the idea of socialism became quite familiar among the labourers, creating a socialistic movement in the State. In a conference of Ezhava Youth at Quilon in 1930, S.Ramanathan, leader of the Self Respect Movement in Tamilnadu, described the glory of Soviet Revolution.³⁰ Moreover the leftist publications like Mathrubhoomi, Swadeshabhimani, Swarat, Sahodaran, Mitavadi and Yuktivati began to publish articles on the October Revolution.

28. George Woodcock, op.cit., pp.243-244.

29. Press Communique, Government of Travancore,
D.Dis. 283/1933/CS.

30. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.38.

It was from 1931 that the 'Communist League' began to function at Thaicaud in Trivandrum. This pioneering group of communists had no organisational contact with communists outside. The leaders behind the organisation of the League were Ponnara G.Sreedhar, N.C.Sekhar, G.Sivasankara Pillai, Thiruvattar Thanupillai and N.D.Kurukkal. Significantly this group of leaders organised the Trivandrum Press Workers Union with V.Achutha Menon, a Congress sympathiser, as president.³¹ Meanwhile the Labour Association at Alleppy trained a large number of labour leaders to observe the socio-political developments in the State and to lead the labourers towards a socialistic society. The leadership of the Indian National Congress also desired the integration of peasantry with the nation in order to strengthen the striking capacity of the anti-imperialist forces.³² Meanwhile the principle of the participation of outsiders in the organisation of trade unions in India was given legislative recognition by the Trade Union Act 1926 of British India. Thus the achievements of the labour movement in India during 1925-1930 were mainly due to the missionary spirit in which outsiders guided the working class. The attitude of Government of India in this period, in respect of labour problems, was one of non-interference. They stepped in only to keep law

31. Ibid., p.41.

32. Tripathi, H.N., "National Integration and Peasantry", Seminar on National Integration and Communal Harmony, New Delhi, 1982, p.175.

and order. Further, there were sporadic splits among the trade union organisations at the national level. In Travancore leading newspapers were publishing notes on socialism, revealing to the labour population the secrets of economic revolution and exhorting them to organise.³³ ♡

When the radicals in Indian National Congress met in Patna in May 1934 and organised the Congress Socialist Party, a branch of the new party was established in Malabar also.³⁴ The Kerala Branch Committee in Malabar under the leadership of young socialists P.Krishnapillai, K.P.Gopalan, and E.M.S.Namboodiripad provided ample scope for the radicals to extend their activities among the working class. They participated with great enthusiasm in organising peasants and workers. The first meeting of the Congress Socialist Party held at Calicut under the chairmanship of K.A.Kelappan elected a committee of seven with C.K.Govindan Nair as President and P.Krishnapillai as Secretary.³⁵ The organisation of peasants and workers on socialistic principles was made a principal item of the constructive programme of the Congress. By the end of December 1934 the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee appointed an action committee consisting of

33. Kerala Kaumudi, 6 June 1937, Press Cuttings, D.Dis.1500/1937/CS.

34. Kurup, K.K.N., "The Peasant Movement in Kasargod Taluk 1935-1942", Journal of Kerala Studies, Vol.II, Part I, Trivandrum, March 1975, p.95.

35. Gopalan, A.K., Ente Jeevitha Katha, (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1980, p.67.

P.Krishnapillai, K.P.Gopalan, and Chandroth Kunhiraman Nair, to organise labour.³⁶ Thus the working class had awakened as part of the freedom movement in Kerala. The organising workers in Travancore found proper leadership with the Congress Socialist leaders. The socialists could successfully link up the class struggle of industrial workers and its allies with the overall national struggle.³⁷ Very soon the Communists in Travancore found asylum in the Congress Socialist Party and continued their activities within that Party until 1939.³⁸ In fact the growth of the Communist Movement in Travancore can be traced back to the direct involvement of the members of the Congress Socialist Party who later joined the Communist Party of India.

New Leadership

The formation of the Congress Socialist Party inspired the workers to consolidate. The organisation of workers became part of their programme. By the end of 1934 they organised a meeting of socialist leaders to expedite the works of Congress movement in the State. This meeting constituted

36. History of Freedom Movement in Kerala, Vol.2, Regional Records Survey Committee, Trivandrum, 1970, p.435.

37. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., Kerala: Society and Politics; An Historical Review, New Delhi, 1984, p.142.

38. Kusuman, K.K., The Extremist Movement in Kerala, Trivandrum, 1977, p.49.

an adhoc committee for the purpose with A.K.Gopalan as Secretary. Soon A.K.Gopalan and P.Krishnapillai visited Travancore and continued their work of consolidation to attract many more workers to the socialist movement. They organised meetings at Trivandrum and Neyyattinkara.³⁹ Meanwhile certain newspapers in Travancore published articles cautioning the people against joining the Socialist Party. Even the Youth League advertised the Congress as a movement of capitalists. Yet the socialist leaders were successful to get a number of new members to the Party from Travancore. It is the political leadership and the organisational capacity of P.Krishnapillai which backed the growth of Socialist Party as well as the trade union movement in the State.

Now P.N.Krishna Pillai who had already a reputation with the government as a young radical moved from Trivandrum to Alleppy, the industrial city of Travancore. Soon the link between the Youth League and the Travancore Labour Association became more tangible. The enthusiasts of the Youth League claimed to have sent P.N.Krishna Pillai to Alleppy to establish a firm connection with the workers.⁴⁰ P.N.Krishna Pillai became the Vice-President of the Labour Association in May 1937, and was an important figure in the events surrounding the General

39. Gopalan, A.K., op.cit., p.68.

40. Robin Jeffrey, "Destroy Capitalism", op.cit., p.1162.

Strike of 1938.⁴¹ Socialist leaders like P.Krishnapillai, K.K.Warrior and K.Damodharan had selected active young coir workers and educated them on topics dealing with politics, economy and society of Kerala. In Alleppy a group of Congress Socialists led by K.N.Das was inculcating political leadership to the industrial workers.⁴²

The Congress nationalists generally denounced the Abstention Movement and its demand as anti-national. But the Kerala Branch of the Congress Socialist Party argued for active intervention of Congress in the politics of the princely States and extended support to the Abstention Movement, despite its communal overtones. Prabhadam, a weekly published from Shoranur since 1935 and sponsored by the socialist leader E.M.S.Namboodiripad, backed the Abstention Movement and the cause of the workers.⁴³ At the same time the socialists were striving for the creation of class organisations against the barriers of caste and community. The most important contribution of the Congress Socialist Party to the political development of Travancore was the leadership it provided for the emergence of an independent working

41. Report of Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 17 November 1938, D.Dis.461/1939/CS.

42. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.83.

43. Ibid., p.79.

class movement. But unlike in Malabar a militant peasant movement did not develop in Travancore. The only notable development in the State was a movement of coconut cultivators protesting the fall in coconut prices.⁴⁴ In the absence of a strong peasant movement in Travancore, therefore, the Congress Socialist Party confined its intervention in developing class movements mostly among the industrial workers. Nevertheless, it is significant to note that the socialists programme emphasised the need for not only organising the workers but also the peasants, combining demands for abolition of landlordism and removal of indebtedness with improvement of working conditions of agricultural labourers. In August 1935, A.K.Gopalan, speaking at a meeting of Congress workers, stressed on the immediate need for organising peasants.⁴⁵ In addition the socialists were able to bridge the anti-savarna struggle as part of the general working class struggle for democracy.⁴⁶ Though K.A.Kelappan and C.K.Govindan Nair were among the important leaders of the Congress Socialist Party with whom the radicals had their differences, the anti-imperialist struggle necessitated the need for unity with wider sections.

44. Govindan Nair, M.N., Emmante Atmakatha, (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1984, pp.205-206.

45. The Hindu, 23 August 1935, p.6.

46. Thomas Isaac, "From Caste Consciousness to Class Consciousness: Alleppy Coir Workers during the Inter-War Period", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XX, No.4, 1985, p.1245.

From 1930 the Travancore Labour Association sponsored the Thozhilali paper with incessant publication of notes on the development on the labour movement. The paper gained wide circulation throughout the State.⁴⁷ In Alleppy the Congress Socialist Party was functioning in the office of All Kerala Thozhilali Dance Club. As a matter of fact, the Joint Political Congress formed in 1932 backed the programmes of the Congress Socialist Party from the very beginning. Moreover the socialist led Congress committees and Congress conferences also lent support to the demands of the working class. Thus was brought about the coordination of the independent class organisation of the peasantry with Congress committees which laid the basis for a real anti-imperialist united front with the peasantry as its main driving force.⁴⁸

By 1934-1935 the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee was one with a leftist majority. And these left radicals convened the first All Kerala Trade Union Congress at Calicut in May 1935. This labour conference was attended by a number of labour leaders from Travancore. The conference set up an all Kerala Trade Union Committee, helping the formation of a number of trade unions in the princely State. While urging the workers

47. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.87.

48. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., Kerala: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, p.155.

to join the struggle for political freedom, the Conference demanded membership in the Congress for all members of the trade unions.⁴⁹ Moreover the socialist conference had many resolutions supporting the immediate demands of workers and peasants. In fact the right wing leaders of the Congress stoutly opposed all these resolutions. In Travancore the resolutions of this socialist conference were carried out by M.N.Govindan Nair, P.T.Punnose, K.C.George, and others.⁵⁰ Thus while giving a proper leadership to the workers' movement, the Congress Socialist Party had also a programme to connect the working class movement with the National movement.

As a result of the organisational work by the socialists, they could achieve the confidence of the working people in the state. Thus it is very clear that the Congress Socialists took the initiative in organising the labour conferences. By this time the Government of Travancore was trying to conserve their power by putting down the surging wave of political consciousness of the people by repressive measures. In fact the members of the State Legislative Council warned the administration that "the best way out of the present impasse is to establish a responsible government in Travancore".⁵¹ The Second Labour

49. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.73.

50. Victor, M.Fic., Kerala: Yenon of India: Rise of Communist Power: 1937-1938, Bombay, 1970, pp.16-17.

51. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Chitra State Council, Vol.I, No.3, 1935, p.113.

Conference at Trichur on 25 April 1937, after the formation of the Congress ministries, revealed heightened maturity of the working class. The political consciousness of the workers was evident at the Trichur conference. The Second Trade Union Conference resolved to establish a branch of the AITUC in Kerala and nominated P.Krishnapillai for the purpose. It exhorted the associations to affiliate with the AITUC. In order to coordinate the labour activities in the state, the Trichur conference constituted an All Kerala Labour Committee with P.Krishnapillai as Secretary.⁵² The socialist leaders by their speeches excited the labourers to do away with the capitalists and encouraged them to move against British imperialism. Soon the workers emerged as an independent class which later hastened the spread of Communist ideology among the socialist leaders.

Politicisation of the Working Class

When the socialist leadership could consolidate the labour force, the labourers as a class had achieved political consciousness. In Travancore the labour agitations had always been controlled and led by political agitators.⁵³ Significantly the origin of Congress Socialist Party was simultaneous with the

52. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.76.

53. Report of ASP, Alleppy, 2 November 1938, D.Dis.159/1938/CS.

birth of the State Congress. It was in Alleppy that the first group of socialists was formed under K.N.Dutt in 1938.⁵⁴ In fact the Congress Socialist Party welcomed the State Congress move and attempted to rally the democratic sections under the banner of the Congress to fight for responsible government in Travancore. Moreover when the State Congress started Civil Disobedience Campaign in August 1938, the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee came out in active support of the struggle. They organised jathas to Travancore and set up a Travancore Struggle Aid Committee. Actually the socialists linked up the working class struggle with the agitation for responsible government launched by the State Congress in Travancore. In their meetings, the labour leaders exhorted the workers to join the State Congress.⁵⁵ The association of socialists with the State Congress converted their programmes radical and soon the revolutionary ideas gained popular recognition.

As a consequence to the consolidation work of the socialists, the demands of the labourers now included political issues also. It should be remembered that the first Trade Union Conference at Calicut in 1935 resolved to lead the workers towards the struggle for national freedom. The socialist leaders inculcated confidence in the working people and directed them towards

54. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.110.

55. Report of ASP, Alleppy, 2 November 1938, D.Dis.159/1938/CS.

the strike movement to achieve their rights. Consequently the Alleppy workers readily came forward to become the members of the Party. Through the socialist press the labour leaders put forward their political demands such as labour legislation, legislative representation, franchise right and responsible government in Travancore. Labour processions have been organised from Alleppy to present their grievances before the administration. The Government, with a serious note on the labour question, have noted the demands of the labour unions as "controversial and unconnected with labour questions".⁵⁶ Meanwhile in August 1937 the Socialist Party submitted a memorandum of grievances of the labour class to the Government of Travancore. They had protested against the reduction of wages for the coir workers of Alleppy. But the administration was silent in convincing the labour force and the socialist leaders and, this later resulted in the General Strike in 1938.

Between 1930 and 1935 the socialist leaders led many labour strikes in Alleppy resulting in the formation of many new labour associations. Meanwhile the Prabhadam paper had revived its circulation from 11 April 1938 after a brief interval from Calicut with E.M.S.Namboodiripad as editor. With a wide circulation in Travancore, the paper brought the message of

56. Confidential letter from Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, No.257, 11 October 1940, D.Dis.257/1940/CS.

Socialist Party to many sections of the State.⁵⁷ By 1938 the Congress Socialist Party organised its strong wing at Alleppy. On the other hand, influenced by socialistic and revolutionary ideas, the Youth League also aspired for speedy and positive action. Thus when the Alleppy workers had struck work, the socialist leaders such as P.Krishnapillai, K.K.Warrior, R.Sugathan, C.O.Mathew, Pathrose, P.K.Padmanabhan and K.K.Kunjan could readily organise the workers and lead the strike to a successful end. To help the striking workers, the Socialist dominated Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee appointed an Aid Committee at Ernakulam consisting of P.Krishnapillai, E.M.S.Namboodiripad, P.Narayanan Nair and K.A.Damodhara Menon.⁵⁸ The Working Committee of the Congress had resolved to send a jatha of volunteers to Trivandrum to support the strike movement in the State. The Committee appointed A.K.Gopalan as convener for the jatha programme.⁵⁹ The Shadow Committee appointed by the State Congress also extended their support to the socialist leaders to lead the labour. Indeed the socialists were doing vigorous propaganda work among the labourers and agricultural workers to unite both these organisations, with a view to utilise their services in case civil disobedience was declared by the Indian National Congress.⁶⁰ Secret correspondence regarding this move was passing between the leaders

57. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.97.

58. Ibid., p.110.

59. Gopalan, A.K., op.cit., p.108.

60. Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, 25 March 1940, Copy of Secret Report, D.Dis.504/1940/CS.

of All India Congress Socialist Party and K.C.George who represented Travancore in the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee. The prominent members of Travancore Youth League such as Ponnara G.Sreedhar, Poojapura Krishnan Nair, Sreekanteswaram, Raman Pillai, N.P.Kurukkal, N.Kunjuraman Nair, N.Thanu Pillai and others were secretly working under the direction of K.C.George.⁶¹ The Resident for Madras States had informed Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer, the attempts of the Malabar Socialists to assist the strikers of Travancore by incessant jathas from outside the State into Travancore.⁶²

The labour agitation in certain centres at Alleppy created even a situation of armed confrontation between the workers and the police. Nevertheless socialist leaders like P.Krishnapillai and others toured many parts of the State encouraging more workers to join the strike. In fact they had converted the labour force in the State into a mass political power. In Alleppy A.K.Gopalan, soon after his release from jail, met a number of Youth Leaguers from Trivandrum in the first week of November 1938 to enlist support to the striking workers.⁶³ By early November the labourers had noted the betrayal of the State Congress. The socialist leaders too reinforced coir workers' suspicion of the State Congress and the sense of their own united

61. Ibid., D.Dis.504/1940/CS.

62. Skrine, C.P., Resident for Madras States, No.84171, 6 December 1938, Secret letter to C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer, Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.206/1938/CS.

63. Report of ASP, Alleppy, 12 November 1938, D.Dis.4490/1938/CS.

and independent identity. It was this failure of the State Congress that brought most of the Socialists and Youth Leaguers to the logic of forming Communist Party in Travancore.⁶⁴ With this a crop of class conscious cadres rose to the leadership of the Working Class Movement in Travancore. The organised workers experienced with the vacillations of political leadership of the State Congress, quickly found out a proper leadership with the Congress Socialist Party in the State.⁶⁵ By 1940 most of the Congress Socialists in Travancore had joined the Communist Party along with growing numbers of the most politically active coir workers. These Congress Communists consolidated the labour force and remained within the fold of the maternal organisation.⁶⁶ In fact the Kerala Socialists were seriously considering the question of sending deputation of agitators to assist the labour and kisan movements in Travancore.⁶⁷ To sum up, under the guidance of the socialist leadership, the Working Class Movement in Travancore began to grow with wider perspectives.

64. The New Age, 7 April 1957, p.11.

65. However A.K.Gopalan has commented that the Congress Socialist Party merely adopted Gandhian ideology and advocated capitalism. To him, the Party had emerged not from a class-conscious movement but from the national movement for freedom.(Gopalan, A.K., op.cit., pp.84-85).

66. Victor, M.Fic., op.cit., p.18.

67. The Resident for Madras States, Doc.158, 14 December 1939, letter to Dewant of Travancore, D.Dis.504/1940/CS.

CHAPTER IV

TRAVANCORE TRADE UNIONS ACT, 1937

The Trade Union Movement in Travancore was the direct outcome of organised labour in the State. Guided by the Union of coir workers in Alleppy, the ideology among factory workers changed from their fight with employers to a struggle for labour legislations and recognition of their unions. At their encouragement, the agricultural workers also joined the struggle for labour legislations. The Factory Acts in Travancore on the lines of British India failed to convince the workers or even to promote the condition of factory premises. By this time the Congress Socialist leaders had attracted the workers to their party and ideology. Under the active guidance of the Socialist Party, the working people exhorted the Government to control the labour unions on statutory lines. The administration enacted the Travancore Trade Union Act of 1937. The Coir Workers' Union at Alleppy by having registered first under the Act, became an example of being the pioneer for all other trade unions in the State.

Failure of Factory Acts

In Travancore the factory workers constituted a powerful section of the labour class. They were the first to have their own organisation. The factory premises in the State from the very beginning was uncomfortable. The working condition in factories had disappointed the workers who came for work

expecting a better wage and a pleasant premises.¹ Throughout the country the life of factory workers remained far from satisfactory. The workers lived at an incredibly low level of existence, in "filthy, disease-ridden hovels".² The condition of factories in Travancore even at the dawn of twentieth century also was not an exception.

As early as 1894 the Government of Travancore began to observe the working of factories in the State. The regulation of the conditions of employment in factories began to receive the serious attention of the administration. Consequently in 1903 the Government of Travancore ordered the District Magistrates and the local Medical Officers to inspect the factories within their respective jurisdiction and submit periodical reports with regard to ventilation, sanitation, security from accidents, number of labourers employed, their wages, etc.³ The reports received from time to time disclosed the deteriorating health and safety of workers in the factories. The State felt an urgent need to regulate conditions of labour in factories. Therefore, a bill to regulate factory labour was introduced in the State Legislative Council on 1 June 1908. The Bill was based on the Indian

1. Govindan, K.C., 'Labour Associayeshante Charitram', op.cit., p.79.
2. Jawaharlal Nehru, M., op.cit., p.356.
3. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VI, No.11, July 1946, p.37.

Factories Act of 1881.⁴ Soon the Bill was referred to a Select Committee. In the meantime, the Government of India had introduced another factory Bill in 1909, on the basis of the recommendations of the Factory Labour Commission of 1907. Later the Bill was passed into the Factory Act in 1911.⁵ In consequence the original Bill presented before the Travancore Legislature in 1908 was given up and instead a new bill was introduced mainly on the lines of the latest Factories Act of 1911 in British India. This Bill came into force as the first Factories Act in Travancore on 31 October 1913.⁶

The Factories Act of 1913 introduced some regulations in the working of factories in Travancore. Still the Act was applied to textile factories only.⁷ The Regulation was applicable only to factories using power and employing fifty persons or more. In the textile factories the hours of work for children and men were restricted to six and twelve respectively. Women and children were prohibited from employment in certain dangerous processes and also from working between 7 p.m. and 5-30 a.m.⁸

4. The regulation of the conditions of employment in factories in India started only in the year 1881 when the first Indian Factories Act was passed. (The Indian Labour Year Book 1947-1948, Labour Bureau, Government of India, New Delhi 1949, p.31.)

5. The Commercial Review, Vol.IV, No.11, February 1939, p.62.

6. Travancore Administrative Report 1939-1940, p.114.

7. Travancore Information and Listener, op.cit., p.37.

8. The Commercial Review, op.cit., p.63.

Children were required to be in possession of a certificate of fitness for employment. The major defect of the Act was that it did not fix the maximum hours of work per week. Section 3 of the Factories Regulation of 1913 provided, among others, for the medical inspection, working hours, etc. of factories. A notable aspect of the Act was that the plantations did not come under Factories as defined in the Regulation.⁹ In fact the first Factories Act could not promote the welfare of workers within the factory premises. Moreover in Travancore the workers as well as the employers were yet to have a trade union. In the absence of an organisation, the labour class in the State continued to suffer in factories for want of basic comforts.

The conclusion of the First World War witnessed considerable industrial unrest in India. About the same time the International Labour Organisation was set up. The draft conventions and recommendations adopted by the International Labour Conference and general pressure of public opinion necessitated a revision of factory legislation.¹⁰ Therefore the Government of India passed a revised and more comprehensive Factories Act in 1922. During the succeeding years there was unrest among the working population demanding legislation for labour welfare measures. They demanded reduction of working hours in factories to reasonable limits to secure for the workers humane social

9. Travancore Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol.XV, Trivandrum, 1930, p.557.

10. The Indian Labour Year Book 1947-1948, op.cit., p.31.

conditions and adequate leisure to enable them to improve their standard of living and also for increasing efficiency of industrial labour. In 1922 the twelve hour limit was reduced to eleven hours and that the Act was extended to non-textile factories also. For the first time in 1922 a sixty hour week was introduced in pursuance of a special provision relating to India at the first International Labour Conference held at Washington in 1919.¹¹

The industrial unrest, economic discontent and political frustration in India were providing an active trade union movement in the country. When the Government considered the union of workers as an illegal conspiracy and convicted the labour leaders, the working class felt the need for a trade union law.¹² Legislation for the registration of trade unions was accordingly passed in 1926. The Indian Trade Unions Act of 1926 came into force on 1 June 1927.¹³ The Indian Trade Unions Act provided for compulsory recognition of a representative trade union by the employers. While guaranteeing registration for a trade union with seven or more members, the Indian Trade Unions Act of 1926 provided that at least half of the total number of its office bearers must be persons actually engaged in the industry

11. Memorandum, Seventh Labour Conference at New Delhi, Government of India, 24 October 1945, D.Dis.1646/1946/Devpt.
12. Sanjivayya, D., Labour Problems and Industrial Development in India, New Delhi, 1970, p.81.
13. The Resident for Madras States, No.4353, 28 December 1939, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.1441/1940/Devpt.

to which the union belongs. The fact was that under the Act, registration of trade unions was not compulsory.¹⁴ Indeed the Act provided the fundamental right of freedom of association to Indian workers. However section 17 of the Trade Unions Act of 1926 in British India made it clear that the members of a registered trade union were exempted from punishment for criminal conspiracy.¹⁵ The principle of participation of outsiders in the organisation of trade unions in India was given legislative recognition by the Indian Trade Unions Act of 1926.¹⁶ No wonder the Indian Trade Unions Act was an inspiration for the growing labour unrest in Travancore. There were incidents of unrest among the labourers in the State.

Shortly after the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924, the nationalist movement in Kerala acquired the character of an agrarian struggle. The labour leaders convened the first Kisan Conference of Kerala at Ernakulam in April 1928.¹⁷ The conference passed a resolution demanding a new and far reaching labour legislation. Conscious of the emerging labour agitations, the Government of India appointed the Royal Commission on Labour in

14. The Indian Labour Year Book 1947-1948, op.cit., p.105.

15. Indian Journal of Labour Economics, Vol.4, Lucknow, 1961, p.55.

16. Grahampole, D., India in Transition, Delhi, 1984, pp.342-343.

17. Kurup, K.K.N., op.cit., p.95.

July 1929. The Commission examined the existing factory laws in detail and made recommendations in March 1931. The Royal Commission in its report remarked that the working class in Travancore was neither sufficiently organised nor properly stabilised.¹⁸ In fact the Commission mainly dealt with labour in the organised industries. In their memorandum to the Royal Commission, the United Planters' Association of South India stated that "wages were generally fixed by district/^{level}agreements and the amount was dictated by economic considerations and by the supply of labour at the time when it was required."¹⁹ As a result of their investigation, the Royal Commission on Labour in India recommended for perennial factories at fifty four hours week with a daily limit of ten hours which would permit working either six days of nine hours each or five days of ten hours each and a half holiday on the sixth day.²⁰

In the early years, it was highly necessary to educate both the factory owners and workers regarding the details of the factory legislation. The factory inspectors had to be mostly moving about during the first year. The Report of the Royal

18. Bhaskaran Unnithan, K., op.cit., p.283.

19. Grahampole, D., op.cit., pp.302-303.

20. Memorandum, Seventh Labour Conference at New Delhi, op.cit., D.Dis.1646/1946/Devpt.

Commission of Labour had emphasised the unsuitability of entrusting factory inspections to District Magistrates. They deliberately viewed that "the inspection of large factories by the District Magistrates or the Civil Surgeons was a useless formality which ought to be abolished".²¹ The Commission however suggested that the system of wage payment in full to plantation workers at regular intervals would go far to breakdown the prevailing system of taking advances from the Maistries or Moopans at the time of recruitment.²² However the United Planters' Association of South India has commented on the report of the Royal Commission that it failed to indicate the variety of relations between the labourers and the plantation estates with reference to advances and modes of payment. The Royal Commission felt that those who were actually employed under the capitalists would not be assertive and independent enough, if they cared for their job, to take an equal terms with the employer. In fact the Commission recognised the need for outside element for leading trade unions.²³ For establishing close contacts and cordial relations between the owners and the workers, the Royal Commission

21. Director of Industries, Trivandrum, No.490, 29 April 1939, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, R.Dis.1752/1940/Devpt.

22. Mayne, W.W., op.cit., 29 January 1945, D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.

23. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly, Vol.IX, Trivandrum, 1938, p.414.

suggested three possible lines namely, development of stable trade unions, appointment of labour officers and formation of works committees. The Commission also recommended the appointment of conciliation officers to bring about settlement between the parties at the earlier stages of a dispute.²⁴ On the basis of the Royal Commission's recommendations, Government of India framed a bill and passed it into the Factory Act of 1934, which incorporated most of the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

Demand for Labour Legislation

With the same effects of Factory Acts in British India, the Travancore Government also enacted factory legislations. On 31 July 1935 Travancore Government had introduced a more progressive and comprehensive bill in the legislature with a view to regulate labour conditions in the State.²⁵ The Bill was drafted mainly on the lines of the British Indian Factory Act of 1934. Soon after the presentation of the factory bill before the State Legislature, the Alleppy Chamber of Commerce pointed out to the Government that conditions obtaining in Travancore were entirely different from those in British India and that necessary alternatives should be made in the Bill to protect the industries of the state from heavy commitments especially at a period when every industry was undergoing a severe set-back on

24. Giri, V.V., Labour Problems in Indian Industry, Bombay, 1962, p.74.

25. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.81.

account of low prices and poor demand for manufactured articles.²⁶ The Chamber had also exhorted that a representative of the Indian Coir Factories should be nominated to the Legislative Assembly in the discussions of the Labour Bills so as to enable the factory owners to protect their cause too.

By this time the Travancore Labour Association was making incessant demand for labour laws and labour representation in the State Legislature through the labour weekly, Thozhilali. When the resolutions and petitions resulted in no immediate effect, the Labour Association had decided for direct action.²⁷ K.K.Joseph was elected as the Secretary of the action committee formed for the purpose. Wide propaganda was given to a proposed labour procession from Alleppy and massive public meetings were organised throughout the coastal area of Alleppy to propagate the procession and enlist mass support. The object of the labour procession was to cause the removal of certain conditions in the status, work and remuneration of the labourers. With the unrest of labour, situation in the Alleppy Municipal area was serious.²⁸ The leaders of the procession made revolutionary speeches at Alleppy warning the administration that they were intended to adopt the "Communist method of terrorism" and

26. The Commercial Review, Vol.1, No.12, August 1935, p.431.

27. District Superintendent of Police, 16 May 1935, Report to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.2780/1935/Judl.

28. President, Alleppy Municipality, No.C.4083, 2 June 1935, telegram to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.2780/1935/Judl.

even bloodshed, if the capitalists would not comply with their demands.²⁹ As the movement was gaining popular support the administration became alert. On 29 May 1935 the labour procession was banned and the three ring leaders of the agitation, K.C. Govindan, K.K. Joseph and V.K. Purushothaman were arrested.³⁰ When the leading newspapers also favoured the move of the labour leaders in Alleppy, the administration had averted the further move of Alleppy labourers. Soon the labour force reacted to the ban order. On 11 June 1935 the Travancore Labour Association held a special general body meeting to protest the ban on processions.³¹ The Government now adopted a double faced policy to face the labour force. While oppressing the workers' movement by ban and prosecutions, the administration formulated plans to appease the workers. Consequently the Government nominated M.L. Janardhanan Pillai as the representative of owners and P.S. Muhammed as the representative of workers to the State Assembly.³² When the labour bills were tabled for discussion in the Legislature, the Government also nominated the labour representatives P.N. Krishna Pillai to the Legislative Council and C.O. Ponnama to the State Assembly convincing the Travancore Labour Association for the first time.³³

29. District Superintendent of Police, Quilon, 16 May 1935, op.cit., D.Dis.2780/1935/Judl.

30. Menon, P.K., The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala, Vol.III, Trivandrum, 1972, p.436.

31. Jeyadevadas, D., Working Class Politics in Kerala, p.133.

32. The Commercial Review, op.cit., p.431.

33. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.81.

As per the Bill, factories which employed twenty or more workers and which worked with the aid of power were recognised as factories. The novel provision of the new Regulation was that the Government could declare by notification as factories any place where the work was carried on with or without the aid of power and where ten or more workers were under work. Exercising this provision, the Government of Travancore have declared all the cashewnut factories and coir factories as factories.³⁴ The new Factory Bill, for the first time, distinguished between seasonal and non-seasonal factories. It provided for a ten hour day and a maximum fifty hours week for non-seasonal factories. In the case of seasonal factories the Bill fixed a sixty hour week and a eleven hour day. The Factory Regulation introduced the principle that persons between fifteen and seventeen years of age should not be employed as adults unless they were medically certified to be fit to work as adults. However the progressive aspect of the legislation was that while in British India women and children were allowed to work between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m. in any factory, in Travancore they could be employed only between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m.³⁵ Further the Bill enlarged the powers of the factory inspectors and empowered Government to make rules regarding labour welfare measures within the factory premises.

34. Travancore Information and Listener, op.cit., p.32.

35. Ibid., p.38.

The Factory Acts proved inadequate to meet the labour demands. The rate of wages they got was quite insufficient even for their sustenance.³⁶ In some of the coir factories there was no prompt payment of wages and when it was done, they were paid in kind at inflated rates.³⁷ In fact the labour representations to the Government did not receive due attention. Moreover the factory Acts had no proper effect in the beginning. For instance, the cashew factories in Travancore which also employed about 40,000 labourers were brought under the purview of the Travancore Factories Act of 1913 only in 1944.³⁸ The District Magistrate of Quilon was the Inspector of Factories in Quilon and Alleppy under the Factories Regulation V of 1914. But the District Magistrate had never inspected any of the factories in Quilon or Alleppy even ten years after the passing of the Regulation.³⁹ Under the conscious role played by the Congress Socialist leaders, the workers felt encouraged to go with the struggle to achieve their political rights.

In the absence of statutory recognition of workers' Unions and their rights, labour troubles had been much in evidence during 1930's in Travancore. With the spread of political ideas among the workers, they became conscious of their organisation

36. Malayala Manorama, 14 January 1939, p.4.

37. The Hindu, 9 January 1938, p.3.

38. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly, op.cit., p.329.

39. Ibid., Vol.11, Trivandrum, 1935, p.1022.

and became more assertive. It led to unrest which manifested in different forms. The coir factories in Alleppy had to face several strikes, walk-outs and passive resistance.⁴⁰ Observing the labour proceedings, the Travancore police reported the change of labour movement from a welfare association to a militant union, succeeding the principles of communism.⁴¹ There were eighteen coir factories for making coir mattings of which sixteen were in Alleppy. The Travancore Labour Association was actively consolidating the workers of Alleppy to achieve their political demands. Labour leaders P.K.Padmanabhan, Pathrose, Quilon Joseph, Simon Asan, P.V.Andrews and K.K.Kunjan were conducting study classes to educate the labourers on the ideas of organisation.

In Travancore, a large number of coir factories were established especially after the First World War. There had been a phenomenal increase in the production and export of coir mattings during the post-war period. The increase of production was from 1.115 million yards in 1919-1920 to 9.578 million yards in 1936-1937, by about 860 per cent.⁴² In fact the growing number of factories with a corresponding increase in the number of the workers rendered necessary a legislation recognising the legitimate interests of the labour. Demanding a labour law recognising union of workers, the labour class held organised

40. The Commercial Review, op.cit., p.431.

41. Travancore Police Weekly Secret Bulletin, Vol.1, No.26, 23 June 1934.

42. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., R.Dis.478/1940/Devpt.

agitations in Alleppy and Quilon. Yet the Government had contented with the preliminary enquiries about the strike and no special officer was appointed in Alleppy or Quilon under the Factories Regulation to inspect the factories.⁴³ In 1937 the number of strikes involving maximum workers was the highest in Travancore since 1921.⁴⁴

The Agricultural Workers' Unions in Travancore fought against wage reduction and attack on agricultural labourers. The factory workers in the State also fought for the labour legislations. The Labour Association at Alleppy passed resolutions requesting the Government to grant proper representation in the Legislature.⁴⁵ Since most of the coir factory workers in the State were Ezhavas, the S.N.D.P.Yogam took part in the activities for the welfare of the labourers and their movement. At the annual meeting of 1935 the S.N.D.P.Yogam passed resolutions to lead and effectively conduct the workers' movement.⁴⁶ The meeting requested the Government of Travancore to make laws regulating wage and working hours of the workers and to make proper representation to the labourers in the legislature. The inhuman practices in the factories and insufficient wage payments urged the labourers to demand for a statutory legislation.

43. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly, Vol.11, Trivandrum, 1935, p.1003.

44. As per the labour statistics for 1937 not less than 379 strikes involving 6,47,801 workers occurred in Travancore. (The Commercial Review, Vol.IV, No.5, May 1939, p.143.)

45. Travancore Police Weekly Secret Bulletin, Vol.11, No.39, 28 September 1935, D.Dis.1061/1935/CS.

46. Sanoo, M.K., Sahodaran K.Ayyappan, Kottayam, 1980, p.248.

The competition among industrialists only caused the articles produced by labourers being sold at low rates thereby entailing much suffering by the labour class. This encouraged the labourers to demand for the control of Government on labour organisations.⁴⁷ Labour had no voice in the determination of conditions of employment as it had no part in the control of industry. Moreover there was no provision to give due consideration to the interests of labour in the case of conflict between the labour and the capital. Thus the discontented labour force felt it necessary to organise and to fight for law to compel the employers to recognise trade unions.⁴⁸ The fact was that the factory owners did not accord adequate recognition to the workers' unions and that those who were suspected of taking an active part in the Union work were sometimes given unjust punishments such as fines, wrongful dismissals, etc.⁴⁹ Therefore recognition of labour unions became the primary concern of the labourers. By the time leaders like P.N.Krishna Pillai, M.S.Aniruddhan, K.K.Kuruvilla, Changanacherry Parameshwaran Pillai, T.K.Kittan, Kottoor Kunjukrishna Pillai and P.S.Muhammed demanded a labour legislation recognising the labour unions in the State.

47. Sirdar Tejsingh, Speech at Sherthalai Labour Conference, 15 October 1937, D.Dis.1638/1937/CS.

48. Achuta Menon, V., The Socio-economic Reconstruction of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1937, pp.110-112.

49. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., 28 November 1938, R.Dis.478/1940/Devpt.

The administration also felt the need for a trade union act in the State. In 1936 the State Legislative Assembly passed the Labour Bill presented in the previous year and sent it to the consideration of the Legislative Council.⁵⁰ The labour representatives in the Legislative Council pointed out the defects in the Bill during the time of discussion and remarked on the experience of the Trade Union Act in British India. There was considerable opposition in the State Legislature. The members of the State Assembly pointed out the fact that the Travancore Labour Association still remained unregistered even though there were facilities for registration under the Joint Stock Companies Regulation. They have cautioned that the workers associations would always like to be without any control from Government or any other recognised bodies. K.C.Karunakaran, member of the Assembly urged the Government that there must be a statute for compulsory registration of these trade unions.⁵¹

The period of Maharajah Sri Chitra Tirunal of Travancore witnessed the inauguration of a new era of progressive industrialisation. On 18 March 1937 the Travancore Trade Union Act, the first labour law in the State, had received the Royal assent and had been placed in the Statute book of the State.⁵²

50. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.86.

51. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly, Vol.IX, Trivandrum, 1930, p.336.

52. Director of Public Relations, Chamber of Princes, New Delhi, Note on labour conditions in Indian States, No.2971, 2 October 1945, D.Dis.2256/1946/Devpt.

In fact Travancore was the first native State in India to give statutory recognition to the union of workers.

Provisions of the Act

The Travancore Trade Union Act of 1937 was indeed a turning point in the history of working class movement in the State. With the growth of labour power, the administration had now turned its attention from factory legislations to trade union acts. In fact the Trade Union Act of 1937 was the recognition to labour unions in the State. It became an another step in forward towards the growing solidarity of labour unions. The trade unions in the state had now progressed from illegal organisations to the recognised representative bodies.⁵³

The Travancore Trade Union Regulation was drawn up mainly on the lines of the British Indian Trade Union Act. "Any seven or more members of a trade union could apply for registration and could be granted a certificate of registration provided that they satisfy the requirements in regard to the rules as laid down in the Act".⁵⁴ The Registrar of Trade Unions issued a certificate of registration on the Union being registered under the provisions of the Act. The Act provided for immunity

53. The Commercial Review, Vol.III, No.7, July 1937, p.243.

54. Travancore Information and Listener, op.cit., p.35.

from civil suit in certain cases as in British India. Provision was also made in the Act for the proper supervision of the union by the Registrar of Trade Unions and for the submission of audited annual returns by them to the prescribed authority. One fundamental difference between the Trade Union Act of British India and that of Travancore was that in the former compulsory registration was not insisted on while in the latter unions were to be compulsorily registered if they were to function in the state.⁵⁵ Section 14(2) of the Travancore Trade Union Act provided that "no trade union shall be formed or shall function unless it is registered under the provisions of the Act".⁵⁶ Violation of this provision leads to fine upto rupees five hundred.⁵⁷

Another significant difference in the Act from that of British India was with regard to the composition of the executive of trade unions. The Travancore Trade Union Act provided that "not less than three fourths of the total number of officers of every registered trade union shall be persons actually engaged or employed in any trade or business with which the trade union is actually connected".⁵⁸ The notable fact that in British India the executive of the union needed

55. Velupillai, T.K., op.cit., Vol.IV, Travancore, 1940, p.341.

56. The Commercial Review, op.cit., pp.35-36.

57. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Chitra State Council, Vol.IX, 1936, p.565.

58. Travancore Information and Listener, op.cit., p.36.

to have only two third of its members as actual workers. This provision was in keeping with the progressive conditions in the State considering the high percentage of literacy among the workers in Travancore. As per the Statistics of Travancore for 1937, there were over two hundred factories under the old Factories Act distributed throughout the State.⁵⁹ The Trade Unions during the time were mainly combinations of employees in coir, cotton, textile, engineering, tiles, transport and other industries. The Trade Union Act required the registered trade unions to submit annual returns to the Registrar of Trade Unions with a duly audited statement of receipts and expenditure. They were also required to keep account books open for inspection by an officer or member of the union.⁶⁰ However the Act did not provide for the inspection of books of trade unions by the Registrar. In the absence of authoritative inspection of the unions, it was impossible to check the unhealthy system that seemed to be developing in some of the unions registered under the Trade Unions Act.⁶¹

The Travancore Trade Unions Act of 1937 was to recognise and safeguard the right of industrial combination and this at once accorded labour those privileges which took labour

59. Director of Industries, Travancore, No.490, 29 April 1939, letter to Chief Secretary to Government, R.Dis.1752/1940/Devpt.

60. The Indian Labour Year Book 1947-1948, op.cit., p.73.

61. Ibid., p.74.

in Great Britain many years of struggle to secure. The very object of the Act was "to safeguard the right of industrial combination whether for the purpose of improving the wages or conditions of labour or of increasing the profits of capital".⁶²

In fact the immediate purpose of the introduction of the Travancore Trade Union Act was the progress of labour movement in the state. There were some labour organisations in the state conducted to the welfare and advancement of labourers in the matter of better conditions of life. But they had no definite official status. Thus the Trade Union Act of 1937 was a step in advance giving statutory recognition to the union of workers. The Act defined that "Trade Union means any combination, whether temporary or permanent, formed primarily for the purpose of regulating the relations between workers and employers or between workmen and workmen or between employers and the employers or for imposing restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade or business and includes any federation of two or more trade unions."⁶³ Actually the trade unions were the principal schools in which the workers learn the lessons of self-reliance and solidarity.

The Act became the most powerful instrument for creating a new industrial society in the state. When the Trade Union Bill

62. Director of Industries, Travancore, 6 September 1945, Note on the Labour Laws, D.Dis.2308/1948/Devpt.

63. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Chitra State Council, Vol.IX, 1936, pp.190-191.

had become law in Travancore, the Government appointed the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies as the Registrar of Trade Unions.⁶⁴ The Registrar himself was competent to authorise the registration of trade unions under Section 8 of the Travancore Trade Unions Act of 1937.⁶⁵ In the new industrial environment introduced by the Travancore Trade Union Act, the administration began to consult trade union representatives at times of disturbance or when new labour legislation was being considered. The governmental control on trade unions had inspired the workers to get organised and to achieve their legitimate demands. The factory owners who had registered false cases against the members of the labour associations⁶⁶ had now begun to recognise the right of labourers to organise.

Trade Unionism in Travancore

The Travancore Trade Union Act provided the objective basis for an organised workers movement in the state. The Trade Union Movement in Travancore, though young, was fairly strong. From the very beginning the trade unions were closely linked with political issues. Thus the political movement had its repercussions in the economic field. Still labour solidarity had been

64. Director of Industries, Travancore, ROC No.6866, 18 September 1939, letter to Chief Secretary to Government, R.Dis.1752/1940/Devpt.

65. Confidential Report from Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, No.C.975, 30 June 1948, D.Dis.404/1948/CS.

66. Pillai, P.P., op.cit., p.285.

the goal of the trade union movement. Employers have exploited the divisive forces of caste, religion and language and applied the familiar method of divide and rule to the working class. They often encouraged the formation of rival unions towards the same purpose. At the same time the workers were alone in preventing this excitement of ideological ferment from being used to create communal, rather than class, enemies.⁶⁷

Eventhough the Trade Union Act had received Royal assent in 1937, the law had come into force only from the 14th May 1938.⁶⁸ Since then there came into existence several trade unions in Travancore. The coir industry once again took leadership in the development of trade unionism in the State. As soon as the Trade Union Act came into force, the Labour Association got itself registered under the Act on 24 July 1938.⁶⁹ The association subsequently changed its name into the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union with its head office at Alleppy. The General Body Meeting held on 26 July 1938 under P.K.Achuthan, decided to transfer all properties of the Labour Association to the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union.⁷⁰ The Managing Committee of the Travancore Labour Association became the Managing

67. Robin Jeffrey, 'Destroy Capitalism', op.cit., p.1164.

68. Travancore Administrative Report 1939-1940, p.114.

69. Ibid., p.116.

70. Sugathan, R., First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union, September 1939, D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

Committee of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union. Besides the coir workers union at Alleppy, there were also three district unions of recent origin at Sherthalai, Muhamma and Aroor. The Kannitta and Oil Mill Workers' Union, Muhamma Coir Factory Workers' Union and Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers' Union were constituent parts of Alleppy Coir Workers' Union, but registered separately in 1938.⁷¹ The George Committee, however, have recorded that there were 7,481 members on the register of the Union as on 28 February 1939.⁷²

In the subsequent years new trade unions were registered at Sherthalai, Alleppy, Quilon, Punalur and Mundakayam at the inspiration of the Trade Union Act. As an illustration, on 21 May 1939 a meeting of the coir yarn labourers of Ambalapuzha was held at Paroor near Alleppy with R.Sugathan as President. In this meeting it was decided to register the union of coir yarn labourers as par the Travancore Trade Union Act.⁷³ The trade unions had exhorted the administration to bring into force further legislations of labour welfare. The growing power of trade unionism in the state helped the workers to achieve their legislative demands. In response to the labour demand the Government nominated T.V.Thomas to represent coir workers in the

71. Report on the Indian Coir Industry, 1 July 1946, D.Dis.546/1946/CS.

72. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., 28 November 1938, R.Dis.478/1940/Devpt.

73. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.1, No.86, 23 May 1939, D.Dis.290/1939/CS.

State Assembly.⁷⁴ There were twenty four trade unions in Travancore at the end of 1940. In 1941 seven more trade unions were registered. Of the seven unions, two were of boatmen, two of coir workers, one of paper mill workers and two of factory workers.⁷⁵ The Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union at Alleppy, the Quilon Factory Workers Union and the Labour Union at Thuckalay in South Travancore were some of the most successful trade unions which have been recognised by the employers.⁷⁶

Meanwhile the idea of trade unionism had spread to all major organised industries coordinating the total force of labourers to achieve trade union solidarity. Between 1940 and 1942 a number of trade unions were registered under the Travancore Trade Union Act.⁷⁷ The Travancore Trade Union Act brought among the working people of the State enough hopes and aspirations. The Act had a wide appeal among the workers. The Act was the response of the Government to the growing power of workers in their struggle for legislative rights. However it is surprising that the Travancore Trade Union Act did not make any provision for the settlement of industrial disputes or for collective bargaining. Thus with the recognition of workers' right to

74. Proceedings of the Travancore-Cochin Legislative Assembly, Vol.XIII, No.11, 1949, p.910.

75. Administration Report, Department of Industries, 1941, D.Dis.1209/1942/Devpt.

76. Ibid.

77. The major trade unions were (i) Alwaye Factory Workers Union, (ii) Aluminium Factory Thozhilali Union, (iii) Ottu(Tile) Company Thozhilali Union, (iv) Glass Company Thozhilali Union, (v) Rubber Vettu Thozhilali Union, (vi) Municipal Thozhilali Union, etc. (Audalat,(ed.), op.cit., pp.44-45.)

organise, there was incessant labour organisations as well as unrest in the State. To make matters worse, the Act did not come into force immediately after its enactment.⁷⁸ Nevertheless some factory owners were reluctant to recognise the workers' unions as per the provision of the Act. The workers, who were discontented due to the non-implementation of the Act, continued their struggle to achieve recognition for their unions.⁷⁹ This struggle for solidarity led them to declare the general political strike in 1938 which necessitated the Government to appoint the George Enquiry Committee.

78. Travancore Administrative Report 1939-1940, p.114.

79. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.92.

CHAPTER V

THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1938

Deteriorating economy of the factory labourers had added militance to the labour solidarity campaign. Soon with a charter of economic demands the coir factory workers started a strike movement. Yet the State Government had contented with preliminary enquiries on labour problems. When the Travancore State Congress launched the Civil Disobedience Campaign, the labour unions had responded well. The work of the socialist leaders from Malabar and other neighbouring states intensified the struggle and it culminated into a General Strike in October 1938. When the State Congress deserted the workers amidst the days of strike, the Youth Leaguers and socialists inspired them to continue the struggle. However, by the middle of November 1938, the striking workers returned to work accepting token economic concessions and the promise of an inquiry. In fact identifying itself as an independent political force, the organised labour had alerted the administration for an inquiry and subsequently for labour welfare measures.

Labour Unrest

In Travancore there were too many factories, too much plants and too much labour in the industry with the result that there was tremendous competition, dwindling profits, wage cuts and unemployment. The coir industry in and around the town of Alleppy was in a serious crisis. It is significant to note that

in 1938 there were 290 factories producing mats and matting in Travancore as recorded by the George Committee.¹ This resulted in the economic deterioration of the working people. The Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union represented the demands of the labourers. The immediate demands of the workers of Alleppy were:²

- i) control of the system of wage reduction,
- ii) wage in cash,
- iii) facilities for giving the wages per week,
- iv) legislation regulating the working hours,
- v) minimum wage of rupees thirty per month; and
- vi) maternity leave and salary facilities.

In a memorandum submitted to the Dewan on 14 July 1937, the Travancore Labour Association stated that "wages obtained now in the factories are so very low that it is quite insufficient even for the highest paid labour to have a livelihood".³ In a vast majority of factories there was no regular or fixed time for payment of wages. The wage accounts of the worker, in most cases, were seldom settled completely. The intervals ranged from two weeks to six weeks and the workers' accounts were never completely settled at each payment, the settlement in

1. Interim Report on the Coir Industry in the Travancore-Cochin State, 6 July 1953, D.Dis.6354/1952/Devpt.

2. Andalat, (ed.), op.cit., p.50.

3. Jeyadevadas, D., Working Class Politics in Kerala, p.142.

such cases being delayed upto six months.⁴ The fact was that inspite of the large membership in the Coir Workers Union at Alleppy, the members of the Union received the lowest wages than in any other part of India, leaving the labour class to live on the verge of starvation.⁵

In July 1937 a deputation consisting of M.S.Anirudhan, P.N.Krishna Pillai, P.K.Kunju, P.K.Atchutan, and R.Sugathan met the Dewan and submitted a memorandum listing the sufferings of labourers because of unemployment and reduction of wages.⁶ Still the administration did not show due concern to the growing grievances of the labour. In fact the moderate leadership of the socialist party among the working class during this time did not protest against the silence of the Government. The labour class received only reactionary measures from the employers and the State administration. The fact was that the wage rates in the coir industry have been reduced by fifty to seventy five per cent during the fifteen years between 1924 and 1938.⁷ Meanwhile the working people of the state began to raise the demand for bonus also. In Quilon they demanded three months' salary as bonus.⁸

4. George Committee Report, op.cit., p.101.

5. Narayana Pillai, C., Thiruvithamcore Swatantra Samara Charitram, (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1972, p.594.

6. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union, September 1939, D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

7. Ramachandran Nair, K., op.cit., p.94.

8. Letter from Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, No.724, 8 July 1948, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

The Factory Acts were not properly administered. Therefore, it was highly necessary to educate the factory workers in the beginning, with regard to the details of the factory legislation so as to implement the act smoothly. Prosecution was to be undertaken only as the last resort after sufficient educative work was done and sufficient warning had been given. Moreover the Inspectors had to command the esteem and confidence of the labour leaders and the large labour force in whose interest they had to work. In this situation the first labour legislation in the State was only yet to be practised. Now the Travancore Labour Association in a memorandum to the Dewan of Travancore exhorted the administration to bring into force the Travancore Trade Union Regulation.⁹ However the irresponsible reply of the Government irritated the working people and they began to turn violent.

The discontented labour force have determined to adopt the strike movement. In fact there were signs of much labour trouble in the State even from 1933. The labour force in the State was planning for a rebellious outburst.¹⁰ The centre of labour troubles in Alleppy was mostly around coir factories.¹¹ The reduction of wages consequent to the abnormal

9. Extracts of Memorandum, Travancore Labour Association, 8 December 1938, R.Dis.2787/1938/CS.

10. The Commercial Review, The Alleppy Chamber of Commerce, Vol.I, No.12, August 1935, p.431.

11. District Magistrate, Quilon, No.334, May 1936, D.Dis.2962/1936/Judl.

fall in the prices of commodities and the introduction of piece-work system in the factories led the labourers to a state of unrest. They have demanded an enquiry into the prevailing working conditions in the coir factories of Alleppy and suburbs. Conscious of this growing protest movement among the workers, the administration started to take up precautionary measures.

In their letter dated 23 February 1938 the management of William Goodacre and Sons brought to the notice of Government the possibilities of a General Strike at Alleppy under the auspices of the Travancore Labour Association as a means of ventilating their grievances.¹² They suggested an official enquiry in respect of the allegations made by the Labour Association. Accordingly the State Government directed T.Chandy, the District Magistrate of Quilon, to conduct an enquiry into the grievances alleged by the factory labourers.¹³ The labour leaders welcomed the magisterial enquiries on labour problems. The District Magistrate conducted the necessary enquiries and received an elaborate memorandum from the Travancore Labour Association. The memorandum, enumerating labour grievances, has suggested the fixation of wages on a time basis instead of the present piece-work basis.¹⁴ The magistrate had also received replies from the

12. The Agent to the Governor General, Madras States, No.P.2634, 17 October 1935, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.1193/1939/Devpt.

13. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., 20 November 1938, R.Dis.498/1940/Devpt.

14. Bhaskaran Unnithan, K., op.cit., p.260.

principal employers like the Travancore and Alleppy Chambers of Commerce and finally submitted his report on 14 September 1938.¹⁵ The report revealed the fact that the labour force in the state was becoming a militant movement. But the administration took no action after enquiring about the strikes and no special officer was appointed in Quilon or Alleppy under the Factories Regulation to inspect the factories.¹⁶ Instead, the Government tried to settle the labour disputes by conciliatory methods and timely intervention. Thus the enquiry commission failed to convince the labour force in the state. The fact was that, instead of conducting a judicial and impartial enquiry, the District Magistrate of Quilon simply obtained reply from organisations and industrialists of the state. Hence nothing came out of the memorandum and from the recommendations of the enquiry.

As a precautionary measure the Travancore Government have introduced the Factory Regulation Bill, the Trade Disputes Bill, the Workmen's Compensation Bill and the Trade Union Bill with a view to regulate labour conditions in the state. These bills were drafted mostly on the lines of the British Indian Factory Act.¹⁷ The Alleppy Chamber of Commerce pointed out to the Government the difference between the conditions prevailed

15. The Agent to the Governor General, op.cit.,
D.Dis.1193/1939/Devpt.

16. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly, Vol.11,
Trivandrum, 1935, p.1003.

17. The Commercial Review, op.cit., p.431.

in British India and in Travancore and suggested some alteration in the Bills. It exhorted the Government to protect the industries of the State from heavy commitments at this time of severe set back on account of low prices and poor demand for manufactured articles. The Alleppy Chamber had also demanded that a representative of the Indian Coir Factories should be nominated to the Legislative Assembly so as to enable the factory owners also to present their cause in the discussions on the labour bills. The Government have accepted the suggestions of the chamber and have nominated M.L.Janardhana Pillai, Honorary Secretary of the Alleppy Chamber of Commerce to the State Assembly.¹⁸ The organised force of coir factory workers were constantly influenced by people, events and ideas from outside their own immediate world. Believing the link between politics and freedom the working class soon responded to the political agitations.

Workers and Civil Disobedience Campaign

The Travancore State Congress, a combination of politicians formed in February 1938, began a Civil Disobedience Campaign for responsible government on 26 August 1938, actively supported by the Youth League.¹⁹ In support of the move, the

18. Ibid., p.431.

19. Malayala Rajyam, 23 August 1938, p.5.

labour unions have also revived their agitations. From the beginning of the State Congress, there had been talk of linking with workers and of a general strike. In fact labour leaders like V.K.Velayudhan, P.K.Kunju, T.V.Thomas and P.N.Krishna Pillai were all active members of the State Congress.²⁰ There was even a rumour about the Alleppy Coir Workers' Union being amalgamated with the State Congress.²¹ Indeed the driving force behind the labour union has been the State Congress and the labour agitations have always been controlled and led by political agitators. In the labour meetings leaders exhorted the workers to join the State Congress. In order to convince the labourers the State Congress appointed a committee to enquire into the frightful atrocities perpetrated on the labourers by the authorities.²² The committee visited Alleppy and other parts of the State to awaken the labour to organise. Soon the Government had noted that a body of persons styling themselves as All Travancore Youth League were openly advocating socialistic and communistic doctrines and were secretly inciting the working class to violence and disturbance of peace.²³

20. Narayana Pillai, C., op.cit., p.154.

21. Commissioner of Police, Trivandrum, ROC 24 (144) ISR,
4 November 1938, D.Dis.159/1938/CS.

22. Report of ASP, Alleppy, 2 November 1938, D.Dis.159/1938/CS.

23. Press Communique, Government of Travancore, No.283, 1938,

Consequently the State assumed extra powers under an emergency regulation called the Criminal Law Amendment Act I of 1938 and declared the State Congress and the Youth League as unlawful associations.²⁴ The labour leaders were arrested and jailed. Youth leaguers N.C.Sekhar, K.Damodharan and Sreedharan were arrested for organising the labourers for a struggle.²⁵ The fact was that the ban orders did not even permit to hold the annual celebration of the Alleppy Coir Factory Workers Union in 1938.²⁶ Moreover the administration had warned that the State Congress's campaign of Civil Disobedience would lead to grave dislocation of the ordinary life of the country and to many injurious consequences.²⁷ In spite of the warnings, the Youth League continued to propagate radical views among the workers. The earlier association of the League with the State Congress programmes were moderate and non-violent in tone, whereas during the present State Congress Campaign, radical and revolutionary ideas gained popular recognition. Many labour leaders maintained close association with the State Congress. Significantly the president of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers

24. The Hindu, 25 October 1938, p.10.

25. Secretary, Factory Workers Association, Quilon, R.No.6983, 22 September 1938, Telegram to Private Secretary, Maharajah of Travancore, D.Dis.446/1945/CS.

26. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

27. Press Communique, Government of Travancore, No.283, 1938.

Union P.K.Kunju and the Vice-President P.N.Krishna Pillai were members of the State Congress.²⁸ Therefore a vast majority of the workers joined the Civil Disobedience Campaign in 1938.

The labour agitations were controlled and led by leaders who took leading part in the State Congress activities. Even the demands of the labourers have been dictated by the State Congress high command.²⁹ They have taken up the cause of the labourers and by sedulous propaganda dissuaded workers from resuming work. The political influence changed the tone and temper of the Working Class Movement in Travancore. The demands of the labourers now included the establishment of responsible government, release of political prisoners, repeal of Regulation I of 1938 and the institution of an enquiry into the alleged atrocities of the authorities in connection with the State Congress activities.³⁰

Work of Malabar Socialists

Once the Civil Disobedience became likely, the Socialists in Malabar looked for ways of aiding and intensifying the struggle, particularly by involving the coir workers. At the time of entry of the Congress Socialist Party into Alleppy,

28. Narayana Pillai; C., op.cit., p.154.

29. Copy of Report of the ASP, Alleppy, 2 November 1938, D.Dis.159/1938/CS.

30. Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 19 October 1938, Report to the District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.130/1945/CS.

the Travancore Labour Association had already become a militant trade union. The Socialist leaders linked up the rising tempo of the working class struggle at Alleppy to the agitation for responsible government launched by the State Congress. Under the guidance of a group of socialists from Malabar led by P.Krishnapillai, the Coir workers prepared themselves for a General Strike not merely for economic but also political demands. The Kerala Provincial Congress Socialist Party under E.M.Sankaran Namboodiripad and P.Krishnapillai assured to render assistance from Malabar and Cochin by way of sending volunteers to Travancore.³¹ The socialists helped the struggle of Alleppy workers in organising their general strike by sending dozens of militant activists trained in organisational work from Malabar to organise militant action in the course of Travancore's movement for responsible government.³²

P.Krishnapillai, the Secretary of the Congress Socialist Party in Malabar and already a secret Communist, travelled to Travancore and reported a fair chance of a political General Strike in the State. Even P.Krishnapillai who was closely related to many peasant protests in Malabar was amazed at the size of the Alleppy working class which was numerically huge.³³

31. Malayala Manorama, 6 September 1938, p.3.

32. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., "The Struggle for Proletarian Hegemony", op.cit., pp.37-38.

33. Robin Jeffrey, 'Destroy Capitalism', op.cit., p.1163.

He himself was the master-mind of the General Strike, moving freely by day disguised as a vegetable seller and holding meetings by night. Indeed the Travancore Police could not realise P. Krishnapillai in Alleppy throughout the Strike.³⁴ Meanwhile the secretary of the Malabar District Congress Committee, H. Manjunatha Rao, member of the central committee of the Communist Party of India S.V.Ghate and Joint Secretary of the All India Congress Socialist Party E.M.S.Namboodiripad have arranged to send jathas continuously from outside the State into Travancore and so kept alive labour unrest in the State.³⁵ Moreover S.V. Ghate, attended the labour meeting at Trichur which resolved to send volunteers to Alleppy to help the workers in organising a General Strike.³⁶

Thus during the later half of September, the political atmosphere in Travancore assumed the proportions of a civil war. The Government, on the other hand, adopted a policy aimed at keeping law and order in the State. The administration instructed the magistrates to proceed against the ring leaders who had influence on the people. As a result V.K.Velayudhan, C.Kesavan, R.Sankar, R.Sugathan and K.C.Govindan were detained on 7 September

34. Gopalan, A.K., In the Cause of the People, Madras, 1973, p.110.

35. Resident for the Madras States, 6 December 1938, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.206/1938/CS.

36. Warrior, K.K., 'Marakanakatta Sambhavam', Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union - Golden Jubilee Souvenir, p.182.

1938.³⁷ By this time P.Krishnapillai, E.M.S.Namboodiripad, K.A.Damodharan Menon and P.Narayanan Nair formed themselves into a Travancore Campaign Aid Committee with its headquarters at Ernakulam and had a close contact with State Congress.³⁸ Thus the Civil Disobedience Movement represented one of the well planned agitations in Travancore. It was for the first time that the Government under C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer faced such an organised agitation of the working people.

The Working Committee of the Congress Socialist Party had decided to help the General Strike and the Party workers have determined to participate in the strike. Accordingly on 10 September A.K.Gopalan led a volunteer jatha consisting of thirty two members from Calicut to Alwaye in Travancore. The jatha reached Alwaye on 19 September 1938.³⁹ Immediately the State police arrested and detained them at Perumpavoor and Alwaye. Four of them including A.K.Gopalan were sentenced to undergo imprisonment for six months and to pay a fine of rupees 1,000 each.⁴⁰ To sum up, the consolidation work of the socialists and the participation of volunteer jathas from the adjoining territories added to the excitement of the labourers for a General Strike.

37. Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, 19 September 1938, letter to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.11691/1944/CS.

38. Krishnan, T.V., Sakavu; Biography of P.Krishnapillai, (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1969, p.105.

39. Gopalan, A.K., Ente Jeevitha Katha, p.109.

40. Gopalan, A.K., Volunteer Captain, 1 November 1938, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.163/1938/CS.

Orientation and Labour Power

Organised under the banner of political parties, the workers of Travancore, now prepared for a political General Strike. In doing so the coir workers of Travancore demonstrated not only strength and solidarity, but a readiness to respond to appeals that went far beyond simple issues of wages and working conditions. The strike challenged a system not just an employer. The fact was that the workers were prepared to embark on such a strike and able to sustain it demonstrated a quality. Further, the strike brought home for all Travancore the fact that the coir workers were a force that, in future would have to be reckoned with.

With this readiness, the workers continued to present their grievances to the Government. Even in November 1937 a deputation consisting of P.N.Krishna Pillai, C.O.Ponnama, P.K. Atchutan, and R.Sugathan met the Dewan at the Alleppy tourist bungalow and submitted a report on the sufferings of labourers.⁴¹ Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer also promised to solve their grievances within a period of one month. But the promise remained unfulfilled. Now the Union gave two months period for the Travancore Government and the employers to find out some remedy for the workers' grievances. But even before the declaration of the

41. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

decision for a General Strike, the Alleppy Chamber of Commerce and some factory owners raised a hue and cry of the dangers involved in it. The Chamber also urged the Government to take serious action against the workers. They described that "a strike should be the last weapon in the hands of the labourers but in Alleppy this is threatened even from the start".⁴²

The administration continued to consider law and order within the State as of primary concern. Before any move was taken by the Union, the Quilon District Magistrate proclaimed a ban order on all activities of the workers union. P.K.Purushothaman, C.K.Velayudhan and R.Sugathan were arrested on 24 March 1938 and P.N.Krishna Pillai and P.K.Kunju on 25 March.⁴³ Aware of the Government policy of suppression, the workers protested against the arrest of leaders by conducting hartals in Alleppy. In return the Government banned labour processions within the State and arrested the ring leaders. However, determined to proceed with an organised move, the Labour Association, at its meeting at Alleppy, had resolved to declare the General Strike. But the administration had proceeded with their policy of suppression. When the police was trying to bring the arrested leaders to prison on 24 March, the workers gathered in large

42. Jeyadevadas, D., Working Class Politics in Kerala, p.157.

43. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

numbers in front of the Alleppy Police Station, blocking the police force to move further. Subsequently the police lathi charged and a number of workers were wounded. Bava, a worker, died in the struggle. Soon after this incident, the Labour Association had swung into action. The Association had collected a 'Bava Fund' to help the family of the coir workers who became the first martyr in the workers' struggle.⁴⁴

Still with the expectation of a proper report on labour welfare from the Quilon District Magistrate, the Labour Association postponed the General Strike. But the Government as a follow up of the magisterial enquiry, appointed another committee of enquiry under K.N. Govindan, the Quilon District Magistrate with five members each of the employers and the workers.⁴⁵ The Labour Association responded to the new enquiry committee without inhibitions. But the Association informed its inability to cooperate with the enquiry for the existing ban order on labour meetings and leaders. Further the Association was dissatisfied with the Quilon District Magistrate who had passed some executive orders based on the pre-conceived notions which he formed earlier.⁴⁶ The Government and the employers were in their concerted effort to put the sole responsibility for the delay in the enquiry on the Travancore Labour Association. Naturally the enquiry committee could not do anything for relieving

44. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.100.

45. The Agent to the Governor General, op.cit.,
D.Dis.1193/1939/Devpt.

46. Jeyadevadas, D., Working Class Politics in Kerala, p.160.

labour grievances. Taking advantage of the situation, the employers in and around Alleppy began to reduce wages, inflict more fines and retrench employees. Therefore the Association authorised R.Sugathan, V.K.Atchutan, V.K.Purushothaman and V.K.Velayudhan to meet the District Magistrate and represent labour problems.⁴⁷ In fact it did not take much time for the capitalists to understand that things were not moving and would not move as they desired. A General Strike became an imminent now.

The Government in retaliation was in search of ways and means to avoid any such organised agitation from the labour force. Though most of the State Congress leaders were in jail, the movement against the Government continued. The Union coopted the labour representatives, C.O.Ponnama for Sri Mulam Assembly and P.N.Krishna Pillai for Sri Chitra Council to counsel the labour problems. Once the decision on the policy of the General Strike was brought to attention, the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union elected a 'Strike Committee' consisted of P.K.Kunju, P.N.Krishna Pillai, R.Sugathan, V.K.Velayudhan and P.K.Purushothaman.⁴⁸ Thus the labour population got ready for a General Strike.

47. Ibid., p.163.

48. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

In the absence of P.K.Kunju and R.Sugathan, other leaders like P.N.Krishna Pillai and P.K.Atchutan were elected as President and General Secretary respectively. Various sub-committees were also formed to proceed with the strike preparations. Apart from these committees, about 180 factory committees were also set up under P.K.Kunju in the coir factories between Aroor and Ambalapuzha.⁴⁹ The entire strategy was worked out by a 'Shadow Cabinet' consisting of E.M.S.Namboodiripad, P. Krishnapillai, P.Narayanan Nair, Sharmaji and K.C.George. Below the Shadow Cabinet and the Congress Socialist Party nucleus was the Strike Committee under the secretaryship of C.O.Mathew.⁵⁰ The Strike Committee trained about 5,000 red volunteers. For the effective functioning, the entire Ambalapuzha-Sherthalai taluks were divided into wards and ward-committees were constituted. Revolutionary literature were printed at Ernakulam and widely circulated in Ambalapuzha-Sherthalai areas despite the Government ban orders. A volunteer Sangham of 400 members was also formed with E.Govindan as president. Separate camps were organised for volunteers and Strike Committee members.⁵¹ However, the strike preparations were mostly political and not militant for the labour leaders knew that the latter method would isolate

49. Ibid.

50. Jeyadevadas, D., Working Class Politics in Kerala, p.167.

51. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

the working class from the public sympathy. By the end of September 1938 the Strike preparations were almost complete.

In a managing committee meeting of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union in September 1938 under V.A.Simon, reasons for the strike were discussed. Political and economic problems were included in it. In fact the working class of the neighbouring parts of Malabar had a close watch on these preparations for an organised labour strike in Travancore. Significantly the General Strike became a living feature of the belief not just of the Alleppy working class but of the left in Kerala.⁵²

The Strike Days

The impact of the intense political campaign was so impressive that when the strike actually began it was more in the nature of a political strike in support of the demands raised by the State Congress. On 12 October, boatmen who poled the heavy barges on the canals and backwaters struck at Alleppy, and all boatmen in central and north Travancore were on strike from October 17.⁵³ To the surprise of the administration, the lightning strike among the boatmen of Ambalapuzha, Mavelikara and Karunagapalli brought the backwater traffic almost to a standstill. The General Strike received full vigour when the

52. Robin Jeffrey, 'Destroy Capitalism', op.cit., p.1163.

53. Ibid.

Alleppy Coir Workers also joined the strike. At a public meeting of about 50,000 people on 19 October 1938 at Kidagaporambu maidan in Alleppy, C.O. Mathew proclaimed the decision of the Managing Committee to start the General Strike from 21 October 1938.⁵⁴ A Strike Committee of six members was formed with P.K. Purushothaman as president, C.O. Mathew as secretary and V.A. Simon as treasurer. P.K. Purushothaman presented the following charter of labour demands:

- i) minimum wage legislation for coir factory workers,
- ii) control of working hours,
- iii) to stop contract system,
- iv) payment of wages in money,
- v) to stop all exactions and retrenchments,
- vi) one month leave with wage for all workers, and
- vii) three months maternity leave for women workers with wage.

Above all the workers raised political demands like recognition to labour associations, release of political prisoners, removal of the ban order on the Youth League and the State Congress and the establishment of a responsible government in Travancore.⁵⁵ On 21 October the Muhamma Coir Factory Workers Union and the Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers Union have also struck work.

Realising the seriousness of the challenge, the Government tried to reach a compromise with the State Congress

54. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

55. Narayana Pillai, C., op.cit., pp.579-580.

leadership. They instructed officials to negotiate with the boatmen to grant the minimum concessions that will induce them to call off the strike.⁵⁶ On 23 October the Government released the State Congress Civil Disobedience prisoners to deprive the General Strike of its sharpest focus.⁵⁷ The administration had also suspended the operation of all notifications issued thereunder.⁵⁸ Soon the Civil Disobedience Campaign was virtually reduced to reception meetings for the released political prisoners in various parts of the State. The State Congress repudiated the release of prisoner as no concession at all.

However the campaign came to a standstill when at the insistence of Gandhiji the State Congress leaders withdrew the memorandum submitted to the Maharajah of Travancore for it contained personal allegations against the Dewan. At a public meeting in Trivandrum on 24 October, presided over by A.Thanu Pillai, the Civil Disobedience Campaign was suspended temporarily on grounds of release of the prisoners.⁵⁹ This decision had ruined the prestige of State Congress among the striking workers. It also created great resentment among the radicals in the State Congress especially the members of the Youth League. The leaguers interpreted the decision of the State Congress as a surrender to

56. Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, 15 October 1938, letter to District Magistrates, D.Dis.4488/1944/CS.

57. Government Order No.409, 23 October 1938, D.Dis.887/1945/CS.

58. Press Communique, Government of Travancore, 22 October 1938, D.Dis.323/1938/CS.

59. The Hindu, 25 October 1938, p.10.

the Government.⁶⁰ Thereupon the radicals reluctantly submitted to the persuasion of the Congress Socialist Party leaders and concentrated among the workers of Alleppy who went on strike from 21 October 1938. According to the police reports 250 Youth League volunteers have moved from Trivandrum to Alleppy in the first week of November to support the strike.⁶¹ A.K.Gopalan met and organised a number of Youth Leaguers to carry forward the strike. From the factories of Alleppy, red shirt volunteers came in procession shouting the slogans of "Down with Sir C.P.", "Destroy Capitalism" and "Long Live Revolution".⁶² On 23 October, the striking workers asked the shopowners of Alleppy town to pull down their doors and hold a hartal.⁶³

While the State Congress leadership had submitted themselves before the administration, the working class of Alleppy who had struck work in their support continued the path of struggle braving vicious repression let loose by police and military. From Aroor to Nirkunnam all coir factory workers joined the strike with their women and children. When the strike started, the Alleppy rickshaw workers also struck work in favour of the General Strike.⁶⁴ Processions, picketings and meetings

60. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., Kerala: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, p.163.

61. Report of the ASP, Alleppy, 12 November 1938, D.Dis.4490/1940/CS.

62. Narayana Pillai, C., op.cit., p.581.

63. Ibid., p.595.

64. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

continued. On 23 October 1938 a large gathering of people led by 5,000 volunteers and 2,000 red scrafed boys accompanied by thousands of women held a procession from the Alleppy Union office. Simultaneously in Trivandrum, a grand procession was conducted on the same day led by Accamma Cherian. It is reported that the procession was actually led by the workers from Alleppy. The young volunteers dressed in red uniform, holding the red flag and uttering slogans took position in the forefront of the procession. The Congress workers did clear the way when they marched forward in military order.⁶⁵

At a meeting held under the presidentship of K.K. Warrior in Alleppy, he asked the working people to strike work in favour of their political demands. And for that he was arrested and beaten up. The workers who had returned after the meeting were lathi-charged. Consequently terror was let loose in Alleppy town and nearby areas. Volunteer camps and union offices were raided by the police. On 24 October military fired at the north of Chavakotta bridge and at Punnapra.⁶⁶ As a result of the firing two workers died and seventeen people were injured. Police arrested 250 volunteers in this connection. The Strike Committee treasurer V.A.Simon, V.K.Atchutan, and the Union President P.N.Krishna Pillai were also arrested. The arrests were immediately followed by the protest meetings of the workers. Between

65. Haridas, T.V., "Tiruvananthapurathu Chuvappu Sena", Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union: Golden Jubilee Souvenir, p.103.

66. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

23 and 26 October, a factory was burned, a police station attacked, boats were sunk, telegraphic wires cut and roads barricaded.⁶⁷ At Sherthalai, the Inspector of Police reported that hundred red-shirt men, followed by 3,000 workers, forced all shops to close and set up two camps where they gave talks and collected staves and daggers. He reported that these were all "factory coolies".⁶⁸

Meanwhile the striking labourers were suffering actually from starvation.⁶⁹ Immediately the Youth Leaguers summoned their working committee on 4 November 1938 and decided to help the suffering workers and to lead them in the strike. Their working committee meeting appointed a sub-committee with Pandalathu Sanku Pillai as convenor and C.B.Pandarathil, K.C. Thomas, G.Gopalan Nair and C.S.Gopala Pillai as members to help the labourers in continuing the strike and in collecting subscriptions for the workers' expenses. They have also decided to shift the headquarters of the Youth League from Trivandrum to Alleppy and stressed upon the need to continue the State Congress agitation for the attainment of responsible government.⁷⁰ P.N. Krishna Pillai and R.Sugathan visited Sherthalai and exhorted the labour to continue the strike till the capitalists yield to their demands.

67. Report by Lt.Col.H.Watkis, 26 October 1938, D.Dis.1490/1938/CS.

68. Report of Inspector of Police, Sherthalai, 23 October 1932, D.Dis.156/1938/CS.

69. Travancore Police Daily Report, 8 November 1938, D.Dis.981/1945/CS.

70. Travancore Police Weekly Secret Bulletin, Vol.V., No.45, 5 November 1938.

The association of radicals with the striking workers made them popular among the working class. By early November, it was becoming clear that the State Congress was deserting the strikers. Released from prison, the State Congress leaders, made attempts to bring the workers to their side with public meetings and resolutions. They toured the Alleppy area for a week, receiving garlands and making speeches,⁷¹ but later departed the labour force for their own political gains. Certainly there was a feeling among the labourers that the State Congress had not helped them.⁷² However, the State Congress appointed an enquiry committee on the labour strike. The Enquiry Committee visited Alleppy on 3 November 1938. Thus when the State Congress failed to attain its political purpose immediately, the Youth League found it as a suitable opportunity to concentrate its attention among the industrial workers. In fact to assert their respective political methods and policies, the State Congress and the Youth League leadership inaugurated a period of acute rivalry since October 1938. Now the moderate leaders in the Strike Committee P.K.Kunju, R.Sugathan, V.K.Velayudhan, Abdullah and others had issued notice advocating that the strike must be called off.⁷³

71. The Hindu, 10 November 1938, p.10.

72. Travancore Police Daily Report, 21 November 1938, D.Dis.981/1945/CS.

73. Kunjan, K.K., op.cit., p.43.

Finally in the middle of November due to the manoeuvres of the moderate trade union leaders who had become active in Alleppy after their release from the jail, the General Strike had to be withdrawn. However, the strike continued until the boatmen, rewarded with substantial concessions, went back to work on 3 November.⁷⁴ The coir workers hung on until November 15 and later accepted some economic concessions and the promise of an enquiry into the industry.⁷⁵ The labour leaders could feel the dangers involved in the event of continuing the strike. So the Strike Committee was immediately summoned. In the prolonging deliberations, P.Krishnapillai and A.K.Gopalan explained the possible dangers to the labour movement in the event of a split in the Union.⁷⁶ Thus the General Strike of the labourers was called off. The Strike Committee was disbanded and the labour has returned to work on 15 November 1938.⁷⁷

When the Government and employers tried to divide the strikers with offers of token concessions, it was two former workers, R.Sugathan and C.K.Velayudhan, who issued a notice calling for acceptance of the proposals.⁷⁸ The labour leaders now saw no point in prolonging the workers' suffering. But it was remarkable that about half of the striking workers were

74. Malabar Herald, 5 November 1938, p.5.

75. Travancore Police Daily Report, 8 November 1938, D.Dis.981/1945/CS.

76. Kunjan, K.K., op.cit., p.43.

77. Copy of Report, Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 17 November 1938, D.Dis.461/1939/CS.

78. Note on State Congress Meeting at Alleppy, 11 December 1938, D.Dis.213/1938/CS.

prepared to hold out longer. Able to fall back on their villages and with sympathisers in the coir areas for fifty miles around, many of the workers were convinced that they had a cause and that they could win. Though the workers returned to the factories, the moderate leaders were thoroughly discredited before the mass of workers. C.K.Velayudhan was shouted down when he tried to justify the settlement to a huge meeting in Alleppy on 11 December 1938.⁷⁹ It appeared that a large section of the workers would have accepted the lead of the Malabar Socialists and the Youth League and continued the strike. However, once dissension appeared, P.Krishnapillai advised united acceptance of a settlement.

The Strike Settlement

In the end of the General Strike a settlement talk was held with the inclusion of Alleppy Municipal President A.V.Thomas, labour leaders, Government officials and the representatives of the owners. The main points arrived at were:⁸⁰

- i) to raise the wage of workers by $6\frac{1}{2}$ per cent which was equal to one anna,
- ii) to stop truck system,

79. Janardhana Pillai, M.L., 11 December 1938, letter to C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer, Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.213/1938/CS.

80. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

- iii) to give proper employment to all workers on strike,
- iv) to give wages at the proper time, and
- v) to order an enquiry on the labour conditions in the coir industry.

The suffering labourers, deserted by the State Congress in the midst of active strike, reluctantly accepted an agreement. As a precautionary measure the Government delayed the withdrawal of cases against the labour leaders so as to confirm that there was no more relation between labour and politics.⁸¹ In the beginning some sections of employers were not prepared for any settlement with labour in Sherthalai, Muhamma and nearby areas. However, A.K.Gopalan negotiated with the employers of Sherthalai and Muhamma and convinced them to abide by the Strike treaty.⁸²

Ever since the General Strike of 1938, the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union had been revitalised. The Union had set up in each factory a committee consisting of representatives from each section of the factory.⁸³ These committees were set up on the basis of one committee for each factory by means of free election by the workers of the factory. These factory committees were recognised by the managements as accredited representative of the workers. These committees had dealt with

81. Inspector General of Police, 22 March 1939, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.461/1939/CS

82. Gopalan, A.K., Ente Jeevitha Katha, p.119.

83. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.1, September 1946, p.39.

the questions affecting individual factories and their workers alone.⁸⁴ The duties of members of committees were mainly to bring to the notice of the managements concerned, any case of irregularity or exactions on the part of the contractor, Moopan⁸⁵ or any of the subordinate staff and to secure immediate redress.

The General Strike awakened and exhorted the employers to attend to the deteriorating economic conditions of the labour class. From 1938, the Travancore Chamber of Commerce gave lead to the movement for Dearness Allowance.⁸⁶ The Chamber directed its constituent members to pay Dearness Allowance to all workmen whose earnings were rupees twenty or less per month. Dearness Allowance was granted to workmen in the coir mats and matting industry first in November 1938, amounted to 6¼ per cent of basic wage.⁸⁷ Since then the Travancore Coir Mats and Matting Manufacturers' Association began to pay systematically Dearness Allowance at the rate of one anna in the rupee to all its members.

In fact, the General Strike proved to be a training for the workers. They began to perceive their interests as distant from the State Congress leadership who had virtually ignored the strike after the compromise of 23 October. In the

84. Indian Labour Gazette, Vol.IV, January-June 1947, p.528.

85. Ibid., Vol.X, January-June 1953, p.557.

86. Ramachandran Nair, K., op.cit., p.70.

87. Indian Labour Gazette, Vol.X, January-June 1953, p.552.

General Strike three external forces were at work namely the Travancore State Congress, the militant Youth Leaguers of Trivandrum and the Secret Communists of Malabar-based branch of the Congress Socialist Party. In the outcome, the State Congress lost disastrously and the Youth Leaguers and the socialists from Malabar who both led and learned from the coir workers, drew closely together.⁸⁸ Another notable outcome of the General Strike was that the Travancore Trade Disputes Act had since come into force with effect from 25 October 1938.⁸⁹ The Trade Disputes Act provided for the formation of conciliation Boards and Courts of Enquiry for the amicable settlement of disputes between employers and labour. The Act penalised strike in works of public utility.⁹⁰ However the Coir Workers Union of Alleppy considered that the Act was to infringe considerably the fundamental right of the workers to strike and they will tend to strifle the growth of trade unions in the State.⁹¹ The Travancore Trade Disputes Act was mainly on the lines of the British Indian Trade Disputes Act of 1929. Soon after the Travancore Trade Disputes Act was passed, the Government decided to appoint a Board of Conciliation to conduct a detailed investigation into the labour disputes in the coir industry.

88. Robin Jeffrey, 'Destroy Capitalism', op.cit., p.1162.

89. Proceedings of the Maharajah of Travancore, 1 May 1939, D.Dis.1075/1939/Industries.

90. Note on Labour Laws by Director of Industries, 6 September 1945, D.Dis.2308/1945/Devpt.

91. Extracts of Memorandum submitted by Alleppy Coir Workers' Union, 8 December 1938, R.Dis.2787/1938/CS.

CHAPTER VI

LABOUR WELFARE MEASURES

An immediate outcome of the General Strike of 1938 was an enquiry into the coir industry of the State. After the strike, the administration invoked the provisions of the Travancore Trade Disputes Act for the settlement of disputes between the Alleppy Coir Factory owners and workers. In 1938 a Board of Conciliation was constituted with the representatives of both the labour and the capitalists. The recommendations of the Board resulted into some of labour legislations and welfare measures. Yet the State policy on labour failed to convince the labour force and the workers continued to organize in order to achieve their rights under the shadow of political parties. Therefore while contending with the State policy on labour, Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer continued his attempt to isolate labour from politics.

Board of Conciliation

With the introduction of the Trade Disputes Act from 25 October 1938, the State Government felt it effective and appropriate to appoint a judicial enquiry into the coir industry and the labour problems. Soon the Government constituted a Board of Conciliation as contemplated in Section 3(b)

of the Regulation V of the Trade Disputes Act,¹ with K. George, the land revenue and income tax commissioner, under section 6 (2) of the Regulation as Chairman. The five member Board of Conciliation consisted of two representatives each of the labour and the capital as members.² The appointment of the Board was duly notified in the Government Gazette dated 28 November 1938. The Board included the following members:³

1. N.G.Haydon, nominated by the Travancore Chamber of Commerce,
2. N.Sankara Mannar, nominated by the Alleppy Chamber of Commerce,
3. P.N.Krishna Pillai, nominated by the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, and
4. V.K.Atchutan, nominated by the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union.

This enquiry was also in response to the memorandum presented by the Labour Association to the District Magistrate of Quilon in connection with the enquiry conducted by him.⁴

The Board aimed to inquire into the labour condition prevailing in the factories at Alleppy with particular reference to standardisation of wages, the question of payment in kind,

1. Proceedings of the Maharajah of Travancore, 1 May 1939, D.Dis.1075/1939/Industries.
2. Haydon, Report of Interview with the Dewan of Travancore, 20 October 1938, R.Dis.2787/1938/CS.
3. First Annual Report, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, op.cit., D.Dis.413/1939/CS.
4. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., R.Dis.478/1940/Devpt.

and imposing the requisite restrictions on the establishment of factories with a view to avoid insubstantial concerns with no capital springing up and prejudicially affecting both employers and labourers. The Board was asked to submit a report to the Government with suitable recommendations for the removal of the grievances of labourers, on the lines indicated in section 7 of the Trade Disputes Regulation as expeditiously as possible.⁵

When the Board had its preliminary sitting on 3 December 1938 at Alleppy, the members of both labour and capital interests agreed that the present enquiry should not be limited to the coir-mats and matting factories in Alleppy but that it should cover the whole of the Coir mats and matting industry and also rehanding and baling of coir yarn in the whole of Travancore.⁶ Accordingly it was resolved that the terms of reference to the Board should be modified. However the Chairman of the Board recommended that 'the Board will enquire into the labour conditions prevailing in the whole of the coir mats and matting industry in Travancore including rehanding and baling of coir yarn. Therefore it was resolved that the Board may accordingly be referred to as 'the Board of Conciliation of labour disputes in the Coir-Mats and Matting Industry'.⁷

5. The Division Peishkar, Trivandrum, C.No.767/15, 1 July 1943, D.Dis.2293/1946/Devpt.

6. George, K., Chairman, Board of Conciliation, C.No.9811, 6 December 1938, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.368/1939/Devpt.

7. Ibid.

The appointment of a court of enquiry on the labour problems raised the hopes and aspirations of the workers and they expected a wide package of welfare measures. The Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union submitted a memorandum of the labour sufferings before the enquiry committee. However the Board could not convince the political parties that the State Congress contented the appointment of the Board of Conciliation in consequence of the General Strike, as a 'Victory for the popular cause'.⁸ It is significant that at the deliberations of the Board, the question of bonus was never raised by the Travancore Coir Workers' Union.⁹ The problem of standardisation of wages became the primary submission before the Board. But when the Board resumed its sitting on 19 April 1939 under Chairman K. George, E.L. Pollard, Chairman of the Travancore Chamber of Commerce and Manager of William Goodacre and Sons Limited, argued that at the present stage the coir industry could not bear any increase in wages to workers.¹⁰ He advised the labour unions not to participate in political agitations, provided such participation in no way affected the interests of labour and capital.

The disappointed workers became more aggressive. They were active in opening new branches of unions in many places

8. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.84.

9. Ramachandran Nair, K., op.cit., pp.84-85.

10. The Hindu, 26 April 1939, p.3.

and organising themselves for agitation.¹¹ Subsequently two labourers, Chacko and Ummini who gave evidence before the Trade Disputes Enquiry Committee were allegedly assaulted by the police. In return, a procession of about 300 labourers led by R.Sugathan arrived at Kidangamparambu maidan in Alleppy on 26 May 1939 and a protest meeting was held under P.N.Krishna Pillai.¹² The labour leaders condemned the assault on labourers as an example of repression of the labour movement by the Government and capitalists and declared a hartal on the same day. Now the administration had sarcastically remarked that it was primarily with a view to exhort the labour enquiry committee and to make them recommend maximum concessions in favour of the labourers.¹³

Amidst the attempts of the administration to suppress the labour force, the labourers continued their struggle and presented their problems before the Board. The labour had threatened to strike work till the capitalists yielded and promised to pay wages in cash.¹⁴ However in an attempt to maintain the coir industry, the leading newspapers in the State suggested for the non-official majority in the Board of Conciliation.¹⁵ Meanwhile an executive committee meeting of the All

11. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.I, 26 May 1939.

12. Ibid., 26 May 1939.

13. Inspector General of Police, Alleppy, May 1939, Report submitted to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.238/1939/CS.

14. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.1, No.156, 1 August 1939, D.Dis.844/1945/CS.

15. The Deepika, 15 September 1939, Press Cutting, D.Dis.414/1939/CS.

Kerala Labour Organisation at Cochin on 12 July 1939 protested against the prohibition by the Travancore Government of the shouting of labour slogans and the carrying of red flags bearing labour emblems. The meeting resolved to observe '26 July' as a day of protest against the attitude of the Travancore Government. The Board of Conciliation submitted their report in August 1939.¹⁶ In fact the Report became an important document for the administration to proceed further with their policy on labour welfare. It was the response to the organising power of the workers.¹⁷

The Report of the Board of Conciliation of labour disputes in the Coir-Mats and Matting Industry, generally known as the "George Committee Report", disclosed a complete picture of the state of coir industry and the condition of workers. It became an outstanding record of labour grievances in Travancore prevailing then. The report exposed the problems of the working people and exhorted the workers to the benefits of organised labour. Old ideas were constantly challenged, and this intellectual ferment reached the highly literate labourers and left them ready to accept radical explanations of their difficulties.

In their report of August 1939, the Board analysed primarily the condition of wages for factory labour and conse-

16. The Hindu, 7 July 1939, p.3.

17. Speech by P.N.Krishna Pillai, Annual celebration of Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, 1 October 1939, D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

quently of the bonus scheme.¹⁸ As a result the George Committee had identified that too many factories and too much labour in the coir industry had resulted in tremendous competition, wage reduction and unemployment.¹⁹ The Committee felt that one of the basic reasons for friction and strife in the industry was the absence of personal contact between employers and employees. In due course of its deliberations, the labour representatives had brought to the notice of the Board of Conciliation that in most industries supervision and control by the management were practically non-existent. They complained that the payment of wage was made through the contractors who were paid lumpsums. Generally the contractors paid a portion of the wages to the workers and retained the rest for themselves.²⁰ Therefore the Board was of the opinion that under this system, there was no certainty that the workers actually received any wage. They had noted that the general wage-rates have been reduced by twenty to forty per cent during the period between 1925 and 1939. Thus the George Committee had readily agreed that unscrupulous owners could have further reduced the wage actually paid to the workers.

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18. Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, No.724, 8 July 1948, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.
 19. Scheme for organisation of the coir industry, 13 September 1952, D.Dis.6353/1952/Devpt.
 20. Report of Board of Conciliation, op.cit., R.Dis.478/1940/Devpt.

A good number of the manufacturers were not sufficiently accommodating or conciliatory in the matter of recognising the rightful claims of the workers.²¹ The Travancore police have also confirmed beyond doubt that varying wages were paid in various factories for the same kind of work.²² Hence the committee found that in 1939 a worker with fulltime work of twenty six days per month could earn a minimum of rupees twelve to a maximum of rupees forty per month. And to the surprise a survey in 1938 of the earnings of the factory workers in 1409 families showed that actual earnings of the factory worker was not more than an average of rupees seven per month.²³ Therefore, it was fully appreciated by all members of the Board of Conciliation that earnings of the worker and not piece-work rates were the important factor for labour discontentment. The George Committee have recorded that there were about 361 factories in Travancore area employing approximately 30,000 workers in 1939.²⁴ After making a detailed study on the coir industry and labour grievances, the Board of Conciliation have recorded their observations with suggestions and recommendations for future measures on labour welfare and efficient working of the factories.

The major recommendation of the George Committee was on the question of standardisation of wage. In Travancore there

21. Director of Industries, Alleppy, 21 December 1940, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.326/1945/CS.

22. Inspector General of Police, Alleppy, Report, 24 December 1940, D.Dis.326/1945/CS.

23. Bhaskaran Unnithan, K., op.cit., p.290.

24. Ibid., p.282.

were a large number of coir factories outside Alleppy almost all of which were small units. They were in an unorganised condition. In the race for senseless reduction of price, the organised industries protected labour. But the large orders placed on factories outside the organisation resulted in the exploitation of labour.²⁵ From 1927 there had been a large influx of shippers and manufacturers or non-shippers into the coir trade. The number of shippers was considerably in excess of the ability of the industry to support them. However, the labourer was given enough to keep him alive and his account was seldom completely settled, and very often the poor labourer did not know what was due to him. These irregularities were rampant in certain factories before the General Strike in 1938. The strike brought about some improvement in regard to the payment of wages.²⁶ The committee recommended against any kind of exaction or exploitation on labour like Moopu kasu, Dharmavu and free labour to the contractors. The Board viewed the recovery of Moopu kasu and Dharmavu as unjust deduction from wages and that the practice should be given up completely. In the Payment of Wages Act, the Board proposed to declare all compulsory deductions from wages as illegal.²⁷

25. Vice Chairman, Coir Trade Committee, Alleppy, 28 January 1944, letter to Chief Secretary to Government, D.Dis.598/1944/Devpt.

26. Ibid.

27. Report of the Board of Conciliation, op.cit., R.Dis.478/1940/Devpt.

The superfluous labour supply had become detrimental to the well-being of labour. The pool of surplus labour had increased. The George Committee also reported a floating population at all times in the Alleppy Municipal area. The committee recommended that all the labourers who were in the industry already should be required to hold licenses issued on a nominal fee. Further the report suggested that no unlicensed worker should be allowed to work in the factories and no more licenses should be issued for the next five years from 1939, unless there was a demand for increased labour from a duly constituted organisation of the factory owner.²⁸ This would check, the Report added, to a great extent the draft of labour into the industry and prevent unemployed and underemployed labour becoming an embarrassment to other labourers, employers and the State.

The Report had remarked the irregularities in the system of employment of labour through the contractors and viewed that under this system there was no guarantee for proper wages to the workers. Still the Board of Conciliation could not arrive at a unanimous conclusion on the standardisation of wage for workers. While pointing out the result of previous enquiries on the 'so exploited and low paid' labourers, the committee recommended the substituting of direct employment of labour for contract labour wherever practicable.²⁹

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

Throughout the mats and matting industry, except in the case of a small percentage of daily paid workers in some factories, wages were paid on a piece-work basis. Therefore the labour memorandum submitted to the Board of Conciliation has suggested that wages should be fixed on a time-basis, instead of the piece-work basis. The memorandum also considered the piece-work labour as detrimental to sound labour conditions. Consequently the Report recommended for an alternative for the piece-work basis wage system, by laying down a minimum wage based on earnings.³⁰ The Board of Conciliation made it clear that the minimum wage meant 'the minimum earnings that a normal worker would make in a unit of time'. The Board had also recommended the statutory establishment of wage-boards based on the British Trade Acts of 1909 and 1918.³¹

The Board of Conciliation had recommended ways and means for the development of the coir industry also. They reported that the coir industry was in a serious crisis because of unhealthy competitions and recommended measures to control unwarranted competition and thus to enable the industry to earn reasonable profits.³²

The Committee found out that various abuses in the payment of wages to the workmen such as payment in kind instead

30. Report of Inspector General of Police, Alleppy, 24 December 1940, D.Dis.326/1945/CS.

31. Ibid.

32. Scheme for organisation of the Coir Industry, 15 September 1952, D.Dis.6353/1952/Devpt.

of cash existed in the factories and unanimously recommended that legislation on the line of the Payment of Wages Act in British India should be introduced in Travancore also.³³ The recommendations of the Board of Conciliation led to many labour laws.

The appointment of the Board of Conciliation and the subsequent report on labour problems indicate the State response for the challenge of the growing movement of workers in Travancore. It was for the first time that the administration responded to the labour demand by giving proper representation in the State-sponsored Board of Conciliation. While exposing the labour grievances, the Board had asserted in what manner and to what extent labour interests could be advanced. The Report, became the guideline for the administration to carry on labour welfare measure in future and raised the hope and aspiration of the labourers.

Labour Welfare Measures

The George Committee and its recommendations proved well. The warning which the General Strike of the workers gave to the capital was so effective that the employers remarked it as 'untoward happenings'.³⁴ The report of the Committee when received

33. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VI, No.11, July 1946, p.39.

34. The Travancore Economic Journal, Vol.XX, No.10, October 1941, p.438.

by them, was seriously considered. Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer promised that steps would be taken as early as possible to enact measures to further advance the cause of the labour.³⁵ In January 1940 the Dewan called a meeting of representatives of the industry at Bhakti Vilas in Trivandrum to discuss the report. At the discussion, the Dewan stressed the urgency and the imperative need of a Coir Manufacturers' Association. The Government constituted a Board of Industries in 1940 under the Travancore State Aid Industries Act.³⁶ The labour leaders considered the move of the Government as a tendency for compromise and cooperation

In continuation of the discussions at Bhakti Vilas, the Quilon Factory Workers' Union had resolved that a deputation should wait on the Dewan to represent grievances of the workers.³⁷ The members of the deputation were P.N.Krishna Pillai, K.C. Govindan, K.Nanoo, K.Parameswaran Pillai, M.Kunju Pillai and C.G.Kesavan. The Dewan met the members on 20 December 1939.³⁸

35. Dewan of Travancore, Roc.No.29, 2 February 1940, letter to the Resident for the Madras States, D.Dis.1441/1940/Devpt.

36. Administrative Report, Department of Industries, 1945, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.1245/1946/Devpt.

37. Letter from the Secretary, Quilon Factory Workers' Union, November 1939, D.Dis.455/1939/CS.

38. Ibid., 20 December 1939, D.Dis.455/1939/CS.

The labour leaders presented before the Dewan about the labour cases pending in Alleppy, the license of Thozhilali paper and demand for Dearness Allowance as the immediate demands of the workers. On the basis of the discussions with the owners and delegations from the workers, the Travancore Government moved towards the new labour welfare measures.

The Travancore Workmen's Compensation Act, on the model of the British Indian Act, was passed on 13 March 1939.³⁹ Accordingly compensation was payable by the employers in case of injury caused by accident arising out of and in the course of employment. But the Act applied only to persons earning upto rupees three hundred per month and the scope of the Act was limited.⁴⁰ The Labour Commissioner was entrusted with the administration of the Act. The Travancore Workmen's Compensation Act had an immediate effect among the employers. Most of the factories started to pay correct compensation to the injured workers on the basis of the wages they were receiving.⁴¹

The Government also enacted the Travancore Payment of Wages Act in 1941, on the lines of the British Indian Act. The Act was intended to regulate the payment of wages to employees

39. Note from Legislative Section, Government of Travancore, No.C.2358, 23 March 1939, R.Dis.2546/1936/Labour.

40. Director of Industries, Note on the Labour Laws, 6 September 1945, D.Dis.2308/1945/Devpt.

41. Commissioner for Workmen's Compensation, Travancore, 11 June 1940, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, R.Dis.2638/1941/Devpt.

whose average wages for a month were less than rupees two hundred. Besides fixing the wage period, it regulated fines and other deductions made in the wages. The Act was concerned only with making provisions in respect of rights and obligations which would have existed apart from the Act.⁴² However the provisions of the Travancore Payment of Wages Act XX of 1941 applied only to factories coming under the Factories Act.⁴³ There were some variations between the Payment of Wages Act passed by Government of India in 1936 and the Travancore Payment of Wages Act. The scope of the Travancore Act was much wider and covered persons employed in mines also.⁴⁴ When in most of the Indian States, Factory Inspectors were responsible for the Payment of Wages Act, in Travancore the Labour Commissioner had administered the provisions of the Act. Indeed the Travancore Payment of Wages Act was a great relief to the workers from the practice of payment of wages in kind and the compulsory deductions by the contractors.

In Alleppy most of the factories were functioning on false records. The wage books had no relation with the attendance books in most of the factories and this made the work of the Labour Commissioner painstaking.⁴⁵ Significantly

42. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VI, No.11, July 1946, p.39.

43. Director of Industries, op.cit., D.Dis.2308/1945/Devpt.

44. The Indian Labour Year Book 1947-1948, op.cit., p.56.

45. Director of Industries, 27 March 1941, Report to the Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.471/1945/CS.

the Mats and Matting Manufacturers Association, which had over twenty five factories as its members, had divided on payment of wages on the principle of what they considered as a reasonable daily earning of an average skilled adult worker. They had fixed a minimum earning of eight annas per day as the reasonable amount.⁴⁶

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T.V.Thomas, / labour leader condemned the attitude of employers and stated that the case of women and children was left out and that the term 'normal adult male workers' was being interpreted by each factory in its own way. The Alleppy Labour Union demanded full settlement of the wages for the work done after fixing the wages by Wages Investigation Board.⁴⁷ The president of the Union was not prepared to agree with the entries in the factory books as true. In return the employers held on to the wage-rates they had already fixed. But the labourers were discontented with the vacillating wage-policy of the employers in Alleppy and the result was that the situation became aggressive. While both the capital and the labour were not prepared to yield, threats of stay-in-strikes, picketing, satyagraha and lockouts were planned.⁴⁸ Now the Dewan promised to the Labour Union that he was asking to Labour Commissioner to go to Alleppy and

46. Ibid.

47. Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 16 March 1941, Report to the Inspector General of Police, D.Dis.471/1945/CS.

48. Labour Commissioner, 27 March 1941, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.471/1945/C.S.

take timely steps concerning disputes between the labourers and factory owners in respect of wages. He asked the labourers to accept the present wages given to them only as an advance.⁴⁹

In the meantime, in order to maintain proper control over the striking labourers, the Coir Workers Union had organised a Strike Committee consisting of eighteen members under leadership of P.Gonzago and a volunteer corps consisting of twenty five members under P.O.Spencer.⁵⁰ On 7 March 1941 the Wage Investigation Board had its meeting to deal with the disputes between the labourers and factory owners. But the Labour Union President did not agree with the Board's interpretation of the average earning of a normal adult skilled worker. When manufacturers fixed the minimum wage at eight annas, the labour union wanted a flat rate of ten annas.⁵¹ But the owners could not concede this. Thus when the Wage Investigation Board also became helpless, the relation between the manufacturers and the labour union have reached a deadlock.

Now the Travancore Police had advised the Labour Commissioner to reach Alleppy and tackle the problems.⁵² On 21 March 1941 the Labour Commissioner arrived in Alleppy and

49. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 19 March 1941, D.Dis.975/1945/CS.

50. Ibid., 31 March 1941, D.Dis.975/1945/CS.

51. Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 16 March 1941, Report to Inspector General of Police, D.Dis.471/1945/CS.

52. Ibid.

immediately began to investigate the problems between the labour and the capital. It was insisted that there would be no demonstration, picketing or strike of any kind before the enquiries were completed. The Labour Commissioner submitted his recommendations on 28 March 1941 to the Wage Investigation Board.⁵³ He suggested two alternatives to the piece-rate system and the daily earnings system. In an emergency meeting on 28 April 1941 at Alleppy under T.V. Thomas, the Managing Committee of the Coir Factory Workers' Union refused to accept the suggestion of the Labour Commissioner to argue in favour of the present ^{system,} wage/ regardless of the wages of the previous work.⁵⁴ The labour force threatened the administration that if a definite decision was not reached within ten days regarding the wages, they would continue their fight vigorously. Moreover the Union had formed a new programme of action which brought under its purview all the labourers from Alleppy to Aroor.⁵⁵ Now the Travancore Government guaranteed a twelve and a half percentage dearness allowance and a uniform wage rate was accepted.⁵⁶

The Labour Unions now forced the Government to introduce the Maternity Benefit Act and the Minimum Wages Act. In 1942 when the Maternity Benefit Bill came before the State

53. Labour Commissioner, op.cit., 27 March 1941, D.Dis.471/1945/CS.

54. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 30 April 1941, D.Dis.976/1945/CS.

55. Ibid., 4 May 1941, D.Dis.977/1945/CS.

56. Bhaskaran Unnithan, K., op.cit., p.299.

Assembly, T.V.Thomas represented the cause of coir workers.⁵⁷ Consequently the legislation on Maternity Benefit had been enacted in the State in 1943. Under the provisions of the Act, every women worker in a non-seasonal factory shall be entitled to the payment of maternity benefit at the rate of fourteen chackrams a day for the actual days of her absence during the period immediately preceding her confinement and for the four weeks immediately following her confinement.⁵⁸ The Act, however, did not apply to seasonal factories. It is significant to note that the maximum period for which a woman was entitled to this benefit in the Madras Province was seven weeks whereas it was eight weeks in Travancore.⁵⁹

Meanwhile the labour force demanded the fixation of minimum wages in various industries. The George Enquiry Committee had also recommended the desirability of a wage-fixing machinery constituted on a statutory basis. But the Government, after carefully considering the recommendations and labour representations, had resolved that proper machinery for fixing wages on a statutory basis should be constituted.⁶⁰ Accordingly the Travancore Trade Boards Bill was introduced in the State Legislature.⁶¹ The Travancore Trade Boards Bill was drawn up mainly

57. Proceedings of the Travancore-Cochin Legislative Assembly, Vol.XIII, No.11, 1950, p.910.

58. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VI, No.11, July 1946, p.39.

59. Ibid., p.40.

60. Ibid., p.40.

61. Indian Labour Gazette, Vol.11, July-December 1944, pp.81-83.

on the model of the British Trade Boards Acts of 1909 and 1918. In fact Travancore was the first State in India to introduce such an advanced measure in the interest of labour.⁶² The main feature of the Bill was that it provided for the establishment and constitution of Trade Boards for those trades to which the Bill applied and the introduction of minimum rates of wages for workers engaged in such trades. Accordingly Trade Boards were to be constituted by the Government with five members nominated by them, two of whom to represent employers and two to represent the workers in their trades concerned. The Chairman of the Board was to be an officer of the Government. The Board had power to fix minimum rates of wages for workers both on time-work basis and piece-work basis.⁶³ When a Board was dissolved the functions and duties of the Board were to be carried on by such authority as Government might appoint. After making a scheme of organisation and function of the Board, the Bill was committed to a Select Committee to consider the vital question as to whether wages of agricultural workers should also be brought within the ambit of the Bill.⁶⁴

62. Government Note, 31 August 1945, D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.

63. Indian Labour Gazette, op.cit., pp.81-83.

64. However the Minimum Wages Bill was introduced in the Travancore Legislative only in 1948. (The Indian Labour Year Book 1947-1948, p.57.)

Simultaneously the administration of labour laws have also come to the serious attention of the Government. At first it was decided to divide the state into three labour divisions with their headquarters at Trivandrum, Quilon and Kottayam.⁶⁵ But since there were only fewer labour organisations in South Travancore compared to north and middle Travancore, the administration later changed its decision to divide the whole state into two labour divisions instead of three. The headquarters of the Southern Labour Division extending between the taluks of Thovala and Shencottah was at Quilon. The Northern Labour Division, with its headquarters at Muvattupuzha, included the area between the taluks of Pathanamthitta and Parur.⁶⁶ Each of these labour divisions was placed under an Inspector of Factories. The coordination of the working of several labour laws were entrusted to the labour commissioner. In fact Inspector of Factories in Travancore was also the Labour Commissioner. He was entrusted with powers to function as the liaison officer between labour and Government or capital in matters of controversy.⁶⁷

As an additional welfare measure a number of large industrial establishments in Trivandrum, Quilon, Alleppy and

65. Krishnamurthi, A., Palace, Trivandrum, No.540, 26 February 1940, letter to the Dewan of Travancore, R.Dis.1752/1940/Devpt.

66. Director of Industries, 18 May 1940, letter to Chief Secretary to the Government of Travancore, R.Dis.1752/1940/Devpt.

67. Administrative Report, Department of Industries, 1941, D.Dis.1209/1942/Devpt.

Always had voluntarily opened canteens for the benefit of their factory workers. In these factories canteens were under the direct supervision and management of the factory authorities. All the initial expenses in opening the canteens have in most cases been met by the factory owners themselves. Out of the total of 5,600 workers employed in all these factories together, about 4,750 workers were taking cooked-food from the canteens.⁶⁸

In fact even when the report of the George Committee was on its implementation, employers began to make trouble to the workers. The promises given to the workers by the Government and the employers had gone unattended. The Alleppy Chamber of Commerce had turned down the labour demands unsympathetically.⁶⁹ The administration also turned their attention from labour welfare measures to the war efforts. Consequently about 12,000 coir factory workers were thrown out of employment throughout the State.⁷⁰ In spite of repeated complaints from the labour union, the administration did not take any action to promote the condition of workers.⁷¹ In fact the formal labour legislations could not convince the labour. Therefore under the command of leftist leaders, the working people became more aggressive. But the Dewan warned the labour force that they could not always dictate the capital and the Government.⁷²

68. Ibid., 1945, D.Dis.1245/1946/Devpt.

69. Letter from Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, Alleppy, 21 March 1940, D.Dis.516/1940/CS.

70. Krishna Pillai, P.N., Speech at annual celebration, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, 1 December 1939, D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

71. Letter from Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, 8 July 1948, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

72. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.1, September 1946, p.11.

Attempts at Isolation of Labour

The labour force was always a major challenge for the administration of Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer. The Dewan while supporting the organised movement of workers as part of development of industrial relations, was against the wedlock of labour with politics. Consequently the Dewan amidst convincing the labour unions, tried to separate the labourers from political agitations. The fact was that since March 1939 the working class in Travancore grew in alacrity and turned more aggressive under the guidance of the radicals.⁷³ By 1940 most of the labour unions in the State turned out to be under the control of the Communist Party. Taking advantage of the discontent among the workers, the political parties concentrated their attention on organising the workers to achieve their political goals. The political leaders by their revolutionary speeches incited the working class into a state of war with the capitalists particularly at Alleppy.⁷⁴ Indeed for the first time the State administration faced an organised movement of the workers.

In order to divert the attention of political parties on the working class, Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer encouraged many communal organisations loyal to the Government and created difficulties to the proper working of the political parties. He induced some of the labour leaders to deprive the labour. In

73. Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 25 May 1939, Report to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.295/1939/CS.

74. Inspector General of Police, 19 January 1941, Copy of report submitted to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.740/1944/CS.

fact P.S.Muhammad, a stooge of C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer and a former leader of coir workers, organised a Government-sponsored union by name 'Alleppy Labour Union'.⁷⁵ It is to be recalled that when the Travancore Government introduced the four important labour bills in the legislature, P.S.Muhammad had asserted that these bills had already created hopes in the mind of the labourers and that they have better prospects before them.⁷⁶ The Government also constituted a 'Rajabhakta Sangham' to give propaganda against the State Congress and to advocate the cause of the administration.⁷⁷ In its attempt to weaken the influence of the State Congress, the administration pursued the policy of encouraging these rival organisations. When more members have joined the radical section of the State Congress, the Government arrested the labour leaders. In retaliation the workers held processions, protest meetings and hartals, all with political tones.⁷⁸ Meanwhile the Dewan announced that his Government had come to the conclusion that in all concerns a system of participation of labour in their net profit should be introduced.

In spite of the Dewan's warnings, most of the Travancore Youth League leaders like N.Sreekantan Nair, T.K.Varghese Vaidyan,

75. Jeyadevadas, D., Working Class Politics in Kerala, p.135.

76. Ibid., p.141.

77. Thanupillai, A., 7 August 1938, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.128/1938/CS.

78. District Magistrate, Quilon, May 1939, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.295/1939/CS.

Ponnara G.Sreedhar, C.K.Velayudhan, R.Sugathan and others concentrated upon the labourers of Alleppy and exhorted them for political struggles.⁷⁹ Socialist leaders of Malabar visited Travancore and associated themselves with the labour activities.⁸⁰ Irritated with the political influence on workers' organisations, C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer proclaimed that "the associations and affiliations of the Communist organisation, the funds which were collected for that organisation, the men who are intermingled with that organisation and who have clandestinely given many kinds of help to it, they were not only those who were immature or misled but people who ought to know better".⁸¹

In fact the Dewan was reluctant to receive any representation from the labour unions except on labour questions. The administration described the political demands of the workers as "controversial and intemperate in character".⁸² To illustrate, the Third All Kerala Labour Conference was to be held at Kanjikuzhy in Sherthalai on 19 February 1939 with Suresh Chandra Banerjee presiding. Soon the Government issued an order prohibiting under section 127 Cr.P.C., the holding of the Labour

79. Travancore Police Daily Report, 6 November 1938, D.Dis.981/1945/CS.

80. Travancore Police Weekly Secret Bulletin, Vol.V, No.45, 5 November 1938, D.Dis.362/1948/CS.

81. The Travancore Economic Journal, Vol.XIX, Nos.VII and VIII, July-August 1940, p.313.

82. Chief Secretary, Government of Travancore, 11 October 1940, letter to General Secretary, Muhamma Coir Factory Union, D.Dis.257/1940/CS.

Conference at Kanjikuzhy and the entry of Suresh Chandra Banerjee into Kottayam district for two months from 7 February 1939.⁸³ Later when it was decided to invite P.Narayanan Nair, President of Malabar Karshaka Sangham, instead of Suresh Chandra Banerjee to preside over the conference, immediately the State had withdrawn all prohibitory orders.⁸⁴ However the working committee of the conference invited the Congress Socialist leader Moid Moulavi to inaugurate the labour conference. In an another instance, the Managing Committee of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, in March 1940, had resolved to depute P.N.Krishna Pillai, R.Sugathan and P.K.Padmanabhan to wait on the Dewan in order to present the immediate demands of the workers. But pointing out the political affiliations of the Union President P.N.Krishna Pillai, the Dewan refused any interview with the deputation of the Labour Union.⁸⁵

However with the arrest of K.C.George on 8 April 1940, the administration had realized that there existed a Communist cell in the State consolidating all the labourers. A bundle of communist papers with the arrested leader brought to light the existence of a communist organisation in Travancore.⁸⁶ Considering

83. District Magistrate, Kottayam, C.No.142, 7 February 1939, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.198/1938/CS.

84. Ibid., 11 February 1939, D.Dis.198/1938/CS.

85. Chief Secretary, Government of Travancore, 22 April 1940, letter to P.N.Krishna Pillai, Alleppy, D.Dis.516/1945/CS.

86. Inspector General of Police, 10 April 1940, report to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.463/1945/CS.

this as a conspiracy against the Government, Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer had warned the invasion of Communistic and Socialistic doctrines without any idea of tranquility to create civil disturbance in the State.⁸⁷ And he alerted the police to have a close watch on labour centres and labour agitators.

In December 1941, the President of the labour conference at Sherthalai, N.Janardhanan Nair, proclaimed that labour movement could not be any longer diversified from politics and exhorted the State Congress to intensify its campaign for responsible government.⁸⁸ The Quilon Workers Union also passed resolutions promising support to any political organisation in the state which stood for responsible government. These resolutions forced C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer to issue a warning on the dangers of mixing up political issues with problems arising out of the relations between capital and labour.⁸⁹ He issued orders under the Defence of Travancore Act restraining N.Sreekantan Nair, K.P.Janardhanan Nair and T.V.Thomas from participating in any meeting. At the same time he insisted that it was the duty of the capital to make the labour contented and happy and to preserve utmost amicable

87. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly,
Vol.XV, No.8, 19 June 1940, p.540.

88. Vanaja Rengaswami, op.cit., pp.209-210.

89. Press Communique issued by C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer,
27 February 1942, D.Dis.469/1944/CS.

relationship with capital.⁹⁰ The attempts of the Dewan to isolate the labour as a separate force had only provoked the labour unions to consolidate under an all Travancore Trade Union Congress.

90. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.IV, No.8, March-April 1944, p.36.



CHAPTER VII

ALL TRAVANCORE TRADE UNION CONGRESS

As a new step towards the growth of trade unionism, the sporadic labour unions in the State had united to form a central organisation. Guided by the trade union leaders, the labour in Travancore organised the All Travancore Trade Union Federation in 1939. Soon the administration reacted and the Dewan exhorted the employers to organise for a counter move against the growing power of the labour and to promote industrial relations. Consequently the employers have also organised. When the associations of both workers and owners decided to settle disputes by conciliation, the Industrial Relations Committee in Travancore had to do much to promote welfare measures and to achieve a peaceful settlement of labour problems. However the labour, conscious of the need for a state level organisation, constituted the Travancore Trade Union Congress in 1942 which decided the destiny of the working class movement in the state for the following decades.

All Travancore Trade Union Federation (1939)

The General Strike of 1938 in Alleppy had revealed a lesson to the working people of the State and now they began to follow the socialist leadership. There was an attempt in

Travancore among labour leaders to establish an organised force of workers. They have described the attitude of administration for compromise as an outcome of labour organisation.¹ But the labour leaders cautioned that the sympathy of Government towards labourers was to create split among the workers and their organisations. In fact the idea of organisation was fast growing among the trade unions in the state.

There was growing class consciousness among the workers which excited them to coordinate the activities of various trade unions in the state. Moreover by 1935 the Congress Socialist Party became a definite platform for the struggle of workers for democracy. From isolated attempts of organising the workers, the socialist leadership had already developed an idea to coordinate all labour unions in the state. P.Krishnapillai a socialist leader from Malabar, was practically the brain behind this new step of coordination.² In May 1935 the first All Kerala Workers' Conference at Calicut gave shape to this method of achieving workers' solidarity. In fact this conference resulted in a widespread awakening among the workers of Travancore. Now they have prepared not merely for an economic struggle but to achieve their political demands.

1. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, 31 July 1939, D.Dis.378/1939/CS.

2. Prakasam, R., op.cit., pp.71-72.

The Second All Kerala Workers' Conference at Trichur, held on 25 April 1937, was another step in the process of co-ordinating various trade unions in the state. Significantly in between these two labour conferences, sixteen trade unions had been organised from Trivandrum to Cannanore.³ The Trichur conference took effective steps to affiliate the different trade unions in the state with a central organisation. In the meantime the conference had resolved to provide proper representation to the local units of all Kerala labour conferences.⁴ No wonder there were repercussions of these labour conferences in Travancore.

The Provincial Committee of the All India Trade Union Congress in Travancore had also made attempts to coordinate the scattered labour organisations in the state. In a mass meeting of the AITUC at Quilon, attended by nearly 20,000 people, president Suresh Chandra Banerjee, while exhorting unionism among workers, had insisted on the importance of good relationship between the Trade Union Congress and the Indian National Congress.⁵ The All India Trade Union Congress also acknowledged the need of unity among the labour unions in the state. Meanwhile the Malabar Congress Socialist Party wing was considering the unity among labour unions in Travancore as their primary concern.⁶

3. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.71.

4. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.76.

5. Malayala Rajyam, 1 November 1939, Newspaper Abstract, D.Dis. 317/1945/CS.

6. The Resident for Madras States, 14 December 1939, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.507/1940/CS.

The Alleppy Labour Conference in February 1939 influenced the workers of Travancore to become aware of political developments from outside their own immediate world. The labour conference expressed deep concern over the political developments in the international sphere. Moreover the Alleppy Conference had resolved to constitute the Kerala State Trade Union Council. As a prelude to the preparations for this council, it constituted a committee with N.C.Sekhar as convener and R.Sugathan, P.Krishnapillai, K.K.Warrior, P.N.Krishna Pillai, P.Gangadharan and A.K.Gopalan as members.⁷ The Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union got primary membership at the conference, for R.Sugathan was the General Secretary of the Union and P.Krishnapillai the President.

On the other side, the radical labour leaders had been considering the need of constituting a coordinating body representing all the labour unions in the state. On 18 June 1939 the All Travancore Trade Union Conference was held at the Alleppy Coir Factory Workers Union office with P.N.Krishna Pillai in the chair.⁸ This conference was represented by Quilon Factory Workers' Union, Chavora Mineral Workers Union, Chungam Kannitta Thozhilali Union, Steam Motor Boat Association, Muhamma Coir Factory Workers Union and Arur Coir Factory Workers Union. As

7. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.105.

8. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.106.

an outcome of the conference, an All Travancore Labour Union Committee was constituted to lead the movement for the unity of trade unions in Travancore.⁹ The All Travancore Trade Union Conference passed resolutions for the implementation of factory acts, recognition of unions and the recognition of rights to strike and processions. The conference protested against the ban orders of Travancore Government.

Meanwhile preparations to form a central organisation of labour unions in the state became more possible. On 5 July 1939 the representatives of different trade unions in Travancore met at the office of Quilon Factory Workers Union.¹⁰ The meeting resolved to form an organisation called the All Travancore Trade Union Federation with the primary object of giving instructions to the trade unions and of promoting unity among the workers of Travancore. The Federation gave affiliation to all the labour organisations in Travancore. The meeting discussed and adopted the draft rules of the Federation and resolved to hold a labour conference at Alleppy in August 1939 with representatives of different unions to decide the details of registration and election of office bearers.¹¹ The All Travancore Trade Union Federation took the cause of the integration of various trade

9. Ibid., p.107.

10. The Hindu, 6 July 1939, p.3.

11. Ibid., p.3.

unions in the state as a unique example in India. In fact, the employer manipulations, communal antagonism and Governmental repressions could not disintegrate the trade union solidarity in Travancore.

Integration of Unions

Since the formation of the All Travancore Trade Union Federation, the isolated labour organisations in the state were gradually integrated. Meanwhile badly affected by the economic crisis of the post-Second World War period and the general rise in the cost of living, the labourers now demanded an increase in wage and dearness allowance.¹² By 1940-1942 most of the labour unions in Travancore come under the control of the Communist Party. Communist labour leaders published pamphlets which printed the grievances of labourers and exhorted them to wake up from lethargy, to get organised and achieve equality and to agitate for getting their grievances redressed even at the risk of their lives.¹³

The Travancore administration under Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer soon banned labour slogans and red flags bearing labour

12. Travancore Administrative Report 1941-1942, p.103.

13. Inspector General of Police, 13 April 1940, report submitted to the Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.1923/1944/CS.

emblems. On 12 July 1939 the Executive Committee meeting of the All Kerala Labour Organisation held at Cochin under P.Gangadharan resolved to establish a strong central labour organisation in Travancore with two members each from the labour Unions.¹⁴ In the meantime the annual conference of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union held on 1 October 1939, resolved to amalgamate the coir workers union with the All Travancore Trade Union Federation.¹⁵

In order to assist the work of integration of trade unions in Travancore, the socialists of Malabar sent a deputation of leaders trained in organisational work of the labour and kisan movements.¹⁶ Encouraged by the new radical leadership, the labour associations were active in integrating sporadic unions in the state. Thus the ban and prohibitions of Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer against the union of politics with labour could not disintegrate the united movement of workers in Travancore. On 10 March 1940 the All Kerala Labour Conference was held at Trichur where about sixty delegates from various parts of Kerala were present. The President of the Conference, Raman Kutty Nair hoisted the red flag and urged the workers to unite and to work for the establishment of a socialist system in India and in other parts of the world.¹⁷ Expressing pro-Russian

14. The Hindu, 17 July 1939, p.3.

15. Sub-Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 2 October 1939, report to the Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

16. The Resident for Madras States, op.cit., D.Dis.504/1940/CS.

17. Secret letter to the Dewan of Travancore, DCO No.83, 24 March 1940, D.Dis.500/1940/CS.

sentiments, he condemned the Travancore Government for their repressive policies. A very significant contribution of the conference was that it formed a labour committee for the purpose of coordinating and guiding the labour movements in Travancore, Cochin and British Malabar.¹⁸ The organised labour now demanded the proper administration of labour laws to avoid distress and discontent among the labourers. Noticing the developing power of the labour, the Travancore Government soon prepared to face them by repressive measures and by counter organisation of employers maintaining it as to promote a peaceful industrial relations in Travancore. Thus the immediate reaction to the coordination of trade unions was the formation of coir manufacturers' association in the State.

Reaction of the Manufacturers

In retaliation to the labour threat, the employers were preparing for counter moves by petitions to the Government and protests. But efforts to form a manufacturers' association did not materialise till the owners totally faced the common calamity of World War.¹⁹ The Second World War completely paralysed the coir manufacturing industry due to the absence of shipping facilities to the European countries. Amidst the threat

18. The Resident for Madras States, op.cit., D.Dis.504/1940/CS.

19. The Travancore Economic Journal, Vol.XX, No.10, October 1941, p.438.

of the factory workers being thrown out of employment, the prices of foodstuffs and other essential commodities rose high.²⁰ Consequently poverty and starvation became rampant among the labourers. The employment in coir factories of Travancore was comparatively small, approximately 25,000 workers. But spread over the whole coast of Travancore and along the shores of the backwater were three lakh families whose main source of subsistence was one or other of the process in the preparations of coir products.²¹ Their efforts to represent industrial conditions through the Alleppy and Travancore Chambers of Commerce had no fruitful response. In fact when the labour became united, the manufacturers felt the need for an employers' association.

It was during this time Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer created the actual momentum. In January 1940 he summoned a meeting of representatives of coir industry at Bhaktivilas in Trivandrum to discuss the report of the Board of Conciliation.²² In this meeting, represented by both workers and owners, C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer stressed the urgency and the imperative need of a coir manufacturers association. Consequently the European manufacturer - shippers and Indian counterparts formed a joint 'Travancore Coir Mats and Matting Manufacturers Association' on 30 June 1940.²³ In fact the coir manufacturers association was an immediate outcome of the advise given by C.P.Ramaswamy

20. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.11, No.171, 27 June 1940, D.Dis.1141/1945/CS.

21. Travancore Economic Journal, op.cit., p.437.

22. Ibid., p.438.

23. Pollard, E.L., Report of the Travancore Coir Mats and Matting Manufacturers Association for 1940-1941, Alleppy, 1942, p.8.

Aiyer who continued to guide and foster the growth of the Association.

The coir manufacturers in Travancore who till then organised under two different chambers of commerce came together to form a joint association. This joint association of owners put an end to the suicidal competition and price war between the established European shippers, who once monopolised the European markets and the upcoming Indian entrepreneurs.²⁴ The coir manufacturers, thus, gradually withdrew from direct management of the production and increasingly confined themselves to the field of trade. They retrenched their workers, closed down the large scale factories and transformed themselves from manufacture-shippers into merchant shippers. However the Mats and Matting Manufacturers' Association constituted a London Committee in July 1940 which, by continuous representation to the Ministry of Supply and Shipping, managed to secure import licenses in the United Kingdom.²⁵ Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer was personally interested to see the growth of the Manufacturers' Association to develop the coir industry and to convince the factory owners. On 9 July 1940 he visited Alleppy and discussed with the members of the Association about the grave situation of labour disputes.²⁶

24. Mathew, C.J., Industry and Society, Trivandrum, 1982, p.26.

25. Administrative Report, Department of Industries, 1941, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.1209/1942/Devpt.

26. The Travancore Economic Journal, op.cit., p.438.

The Dewan made attempts with the Government of India to develop the coir industry in the state. At his initiative, G.Parameswaran Pillai, Chief Secretary to the Government of Travancore and E.L.Pollard, President of the Travancore Coir Mats and Matting Manufacturers Association visited Delhi as representatives of the Government of Travancore to secure for the coir industry the best consideration possible at the hands of the Government of India.²⁷ The Dewan's persuasive endeavours with the Government of India induced the latter to accept coir mattings and other coir products for war purposes in the place of other textiles.²⁸ Moreover the Manufacturers Association brought several representatives of the Government of India to Alleppy and had shown the pitiable plight of the starving labourers. They placed before the representatives various items that the industry could supply and convinced them of the extreme necessity of recognition of the coir industry and relief measures for the aggressive labour.²⁹

The Manufacturers Association was to tackle several labour questions from the beginning. In July 1940 figures of unemployment in the coir industry were the highest on record.³⁰

27. Ibid., p.438.

28. Administrative Report, Department of Industries, 1941, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.1209/1942/Devpt.

29. Dewan of Cochin, Ernakulam, 21 March 1942, letter to Dewan of Travancore, through the Resident for Madras States, D.Dis.139/1943/Devpt.

30. The Travancore Economic Journal, op.cit., p.440.

The welfare measures of the Government and the capitalists could provide them only very little relief. Some industries which were themselves badly hit by the War were not in a position to engage their usual labourers. On the contrary certain industries like the textile, paper and engineering were casting in more profits than they were accustomed to during the period immediately preceding the declaration of war.³¹ These industries could afford to pay higher wages and dearness allowance. Moreover among the workers themselves, there was no unanimity of feeling in regard to increments in wages or dearness allowance. Some of the workers were even prepared to work for reduced wages so as to avoid total starvation.

The Travancore Government was scared of an immediate unrest of the coir workers who formed the major portion of the working population. The practice of collective bargaining was still new to the industry and that the labour indulged in press propaganda and threats of strike.³² In response to the mounting unrest among workers, the employers now began to yield to their immediate demands. The Travancore Chamber of Commerce gave lead to the movement for the grant of dearness allowance. Now the Mats and Matting Manufacturers' Association also resolved to pay dearness allowance to the coir factory workers in view of the increased cost of foodstuffs. They had

31. Administrative Report; Department of Industries, 1941, op.cit.

32. The Travancore Economic Journal, op.cit., p.440.

paid dearness allowance to the workers from 5 May 1941 at the rate of one anna to those whose earning did not exceed rupees five in anyone week and with its non-applicability to overtime rates. The Punalur Paper Mills, the A.D.Cotton Mills, the Travancore Sugars and Chemicals and some of the mineral companies in the state had also paid similar allowance to their workers.³³

Some other organisations were also formed considering the welfare of owners in Travancore. In 1940 the Travancore Coir Dealers' Association was registered at Alleppy representing the interests of the coir products and coir dealers in the State.³⁴ This Association made repeated representations to the Government of India demanding adequate representation for them in the Coir Board. As another step to coordinate the employers' organisations, an informal conference was held at Cochin Dewan's house on 25 June 1942 with the approval of the Government of Travancore.³⁵ The Alleppy Mats and Matting Manufacturers' Association represented Travancore at the conference. This conference had resolved to constitute a 'Malabar Coast Association' to deal with the trade of coir products. For the purpose, the conference constituted a body consisting of Travancore Mats and Matting Manufacturers' Association of Alleppy, Cochin Coir Manufacturers' Association of Palluruthy, Cochin Chamber of Commerce, Indian

33. Administration Report, Department of Industries, 1941, op.cit.

34. Copy of resolution, Managing Committee of the Travancore Coir Dealers Association, Alleppy, 11 May 1953, D.Dis.6353/1952/Devpt.

35. The Hindu, 29 June 1942, p.6.

Chamber of Commerce of Mattancherry, Calicut Chamber of Commerce, Malabar Chamber of Commerce and a representative each of the Government of Travancore, Cochin and Madras.³⁶ This central organisation of manufacturers had guided the growth of the coir manufacturers association of Alleppy in its attempts to promote the industry.

Again the Coir Trade Committee was formed on 16 December 1943 to arrange the manufacture and supply of coir goods in Travancore. The Coir Trade Committee consisting of representatives of the coir trade interests in Travancore and Cochin had its office at Alleppy with the Dewan of Travancore as Chairman, E.L.Pollard as the Vice-Chairman and K.C.Karunakaran, the Convener.³⁷ However concerned over the raising labour unrest in the state, the Manufacturers' Association on 7 July 1944 resolved to give an additional dearness allowance of two annas in the rupee with effect from 1 August 1944.³⁸ Some other isolated attempts of organisation were also made by employers of Travancore. The Cashewnut Manufacturers of Travancore organised themselves into an association called the South India Cashewnut Manufacturers' Association in September 1943.³⁹ A meeting of

36. Dewan of Cochin, 21 March 1942, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.6353/1952/Devpt.

37. Note on working of the Coir Control Scheme in 1945, D.Dis.1982/1946/Control.

38. Letter from Convener, Coir Trade Committee, Alleppy, No.C.10341, 11 July 1944, D.Dis.636/1947/Control.

39. Administration Report, Department of Industries, 1944, D.Dis.2174/1944/Devpt.

the planters of Quilon district in January 1944, decided to form the Punalur Planters' Association for the purpose of promoting and fostering the interests of the planters of Quilon district.⁴⁰ The Planters' Association aimed to be the representative of the interests of the owners of tea, rubber, cardamom and coffee estates in Quilon district. It had decided to protect owners in legislative matters affecting planting industries and to act as arbitrator in the settlement of disputes arising among its members.⁴¹ However the administration now determined to bring the workers and owners together to settle labour disputes of conciliation.

Industrial Relations Board

Realising the importance of amicable settlement of labour disputes, both the manufacturers' association and the workers' union evolved a plan for the voluntary settlement of disputes by discussion and agreement rather than by strikes and lockouts or reference to Government under the Trade Disputes Act. The result was a conciliation machinery as an outstanding instance in the history of industrial relations in Travancore. In the absence of a conciliation machinery, the Commissioner of Labour and the Inspector of Police were deputed by Government

40. Ninan, A.P., Elderslie Estate, Thenmalai, 2 February 1944, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, R.Dis.1039/1945/Judl.

41. Memorandum of Association of Punalur Planters' Association, R.Dis.1039/1945/Judl.

to bring about a settlement of disputes.⁴² This preliminary method of discussion drew closer together the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union and the Travancore Coir Mats and Matting Manufacturers' Association. At a meeting of the representatives of the Coir Workers' Union and the Manufacturers' Association on 18 June 1941, the members unanimously agreed to set up the 'Industrial Relations Committee'.⁴³ Accordingly Industrial Committees were set up at Alleppy and Sherthalai. These committees gave equal representation to the workers and owners.

The Industrial Relations Committee had dealt with questions involving general principles and not those relating to individual managements, otherwise the pressure upon the committee would have been too heavy.⁴⁴ Soon after the formation of the Industrial Relations Committee the President of Coir Workers' Union was advised to arrange for the election of representatives of the Union to the Committee. In fact the Industrial Relations Committees in Travancore, introducing collective bargaining in industrial relations, was a unique institution in the whole of India. The Committee had been functioning for the settlement of disputes entirely on a voluntary basis.⁴⁵ Mainly

42. The Travancore Economic Journal, Vol.XX, No.10, October 1941, p.440.

43. Extracts from the Minutes of Meeting of the representatives of Coir Workers Union and Manufacturers' Association, 18 June 1941, D.Dis.2293/1946/Devpt.

44. It is to be remembered that ever since the General Strike of 1938, the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union had set up factory committees for industrial peace. (Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.1, September 1946, p.39.)

45. Report, Committee on Coir Mats and Matting Manufacturing Industry, Trivandrum, 29 August 1955, D.Dis.20146/1955/Devpt.

disputes related to wage-rates and bonus, besides conditions of work, had come up before the Industrial Relations Committee, which settled it by mutual discussions. However the Industrial Relations Committee, as a grievance machinery was not intended to supplement the Union bargaining activities.⁴⁶

As part of their consolidation programme the representatives of both the workers and the owners favoured the establishment of a new conciliation machinery on a statutory basis, instead of voluntary settlements. They have pointed out the absence of an Industrial Disputes Act in Travancore. Moreover the Manufacturers' Association pointed out the weakness of the voluntary conciliation method and that its decisions were not binding on factories which were not members of the association.⁴⁷ As a result of this, many labour disputes were settled without any reference to the Industrial Relations Committee. This created uncertainty of the Voluntary Machinery of Conciliation. Further, the decisions of the Committee were not effective in some cases. Thus there was a wide demand for a central conciliation machinery by law, the All Travancore Industrial Relations Board.

The labour leaders of Alleppy suggested the formation of Industrial Relations Committees for each industry or for

46. Indian Labour Gazette, op.cit., Vol.XVII, July-December 1959, pp.447-448.

47. Report, Committee on Coir Mats and Matting Manufacturing Industry, op.cit., D.Dis.20146/1955/Devpt.

industries together. Accordingly the Industrial Relations Board was to be composed of representatives of employers and labour elected by each of the Industrial Relations Committees.⁴⁸ They have also recommended that for the above purpose the State of Travancore should be divided into convenient industrial areas like Alwaye, Alleppy, Sherthalai, Quilon, Punalur, Nagercoil or some other convenient centre in South Travancore. It should be noted that during 1942-1943 there were thirty nine registered unions in the State.⁴⁹ On 29 April 1943 a conference was held at Alleppy in connection with the formation of an All Travancore Industrial Relations Board.⁵⁰ Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer participated in the opening ceremony of the conference. The main aim of the conference was the establishment of Industrial Relations Committees for various industries or group of industries in several centres of the state. The conference had resolved to form an All Travancore Industrial Relations Board, which should function as the central organisation to coordinate the general policy of industrial relations in Travancore.⁵¹ Accordingly as

48. A Short memorandum on the formation of All Travancore Industrial Relations Board, Alleppy, 29 March 1943, D.Dis.2293/1946/Devpt.

49. Indian Labour Gazette, Vol.11, July-December 1944, p.153.

50. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 1 May 1943, D.Dis.860/1945/CS.

51. Minutes of Proceedings of the Industrial Relations Conference, Alleppy, 29 April 1943, R.Dis.2293/1946/CS.

per the resolution passed by T.V.Thomas in the Alleppy Labour Conference, an All Travancore Industrial Relations Board was constituted.⁵² Thus conciliatory machinery for labour disputes had come into being in the state.

Since the establishment of the All Travancore Industrial Relations Board with equal representation for both the owners and the workers, almost all labour disputes had been settled by the Board without creating any major industrial unrest. The Dewan, convinced of the proceedings of the Board, congratulated the functioning of the Board on statutory lines.⁵³ The remarkable effect of the Industrial Relations Board in Travancore was that the labour secured far higher standards than those obtaining in the same industry was also able to maintain steady and unbroken output in the production of war materials. The Government of Travancore was aware that the settlement of disputes was only a measure and not the final solution of the labour problem which had many phases and penetrated into the structure of the industry.⁵⁴ This ideological and institutional coordination of trade unions resulted at last, the formation of a state level trade union congress as the central agency.

52. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, op.cit., D.Dis.860/1945/CS.

53. In fact the Industrial Disputes Act was employed for setting disputes in the industries at Alleppy only from 1948 onwards. (Report, Committee on Coir Industry, op.cit., D.Dis.20146/1955/Devpt.)

54. The Travancore Economic Journal, op.cit., p.440.

From Federation to Congress

The work of the Trade Union Federation had resulted the necessity of a new central organisation to coordinate the different trade unions in the state. Moreover in Alleppy all local labour unions were awaiting to fall in with the programme of action to be decided on by the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union.⁵⁵ This facilitated the work of trade union leaders in their attempt to coordinate the sporadic trade unions in the state.

At a labour conference held in Quilon on 12 October 1941 and attended by representatives of various labour organisations in the state, under the presidentship of P.N.Krishna Pillai, the decision to form an All Travancore Trade Union Congress was taken. The conference had authorised a committee to carry on necessary steps for the formation^{of} the Trade Union Congress.⁵⁶ The committee consisted of T.V.Thomas, K.P.Janardhanan Nair, P.N.Krishna Pillai, K.A.Muhammed and P.O.Spencer. The conference had also resolved to observe 24 October as "All Travancore Labourers Day".⁵⁷ Soon the committee had started preparation

55. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, 6 May 1941, D.Dis.977/1945/CS.

56. Ibid., Part I, 13 October 1941, D.Dis.1145/1945/CS.

57. 24 October or Thulam 8 of every year was celebrated as also Labour Repression Day, in memory of those labourers who were victims of the alleged lathi charges and firing during the Alleppy labour riots in 1938.(Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, No.233, 17 October 1939, D.Dis.850/1945/CS.)

for a central labour organisation. Meanwhile the third anniversary meeting of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union was scheduled to be held on 25 January 1942. And it was also proposed to conduct the inaugural meeting of the Travancore Trade Union Congress in the same meeting.⁵⁸

At the anniversary meeting of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union at Alleppy, the All Travancore Trade Union Congress was inaugurated on 26 January 1942.⁵⁹ P.N.Krishna Pillai was the president of the inaugural function. Nearly two hundred representatives of various trade unions were present at the function. In fact the All Travancore Trade Union Congress was an organisation to bring together all trade unions in Travancore. However, this central organisation of all trade unions in the state was not registered under the Travancore Trade Union Act.⁶⁰ In the meeting president P.N.Krishna Pillai had asserted that such an organisation was to realise the kingdom of the agriculturists and workers.⁶¹ The Trade Union Congress elected its

58. The Powradhwani, 19 January 1942, Newspaper abstract, Part II, D.Dis.846/1945/CS.

59. The original members of the Trade Union Congress were:
(i) Travancore Boat Workers Union, (ii) Coir Factory Workers' Association, Sherthalai, (iii) Mineral Workers Union, Travancore, (iv) Punalur Paper Mills Union, (v) Professional Motor Workers Union, (vi) All Travancore Estate Workers Union, (vii) Quilon Factory Workers Union, (viii) Travancore Cashewnut Workers Union and (ix) Alleppy Kannitta Workers Union.
(Inspector General of Police, Travancore, 27 January 1942, Report to the Chief Secretary to Government, D.Dis.469/1944/CS.)

60. Confidential Report of Chief Secretary, Government of Travancore, 30 June 1948, D.Dis.404/1948/CS.)

61. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, 28 January 1942, D.Dis.846/1945/CS.

office bearers with T.V.Thomas as President, P.N.Krishna Pillai and C.K.Karunakara Panicker as Vice-Presidents, N.Sreekantan Nair, P.G.Padmanabhan and C.G.Sadasivan as General Secretaries, and K.P.Janardhanan Nair as Treasurer. Besides the work of coordinating various labour unions in the State, the All Travancore Trade Union Congress had also strived for the progress of workers by establishing connections with the other labour organisations of the world.⁶²

The Trade Union Congress had its first meeting at Alleppy on 8 March 1942 with T.V.Thomas in the chair. In the course of its deliberations, the Congress had settled many labour disputes amicably through the Industrial Relations Committees. In the absence of such settlements the Trade Union Congress rendered all assistance to the workers to seek redress of their grievances. T.V.Thomas succeeded in constituting an Industrial Relations Committee at Alwaye, coordinating all labour organisations in the area.⁶³ By this time according to the decision of the Working Committee meeting at Calicut, the All Kerala Trade Union Congress conducted a class at Alleppy to coach the trade union delegates of Travancore and Cochin about the working of the trade unions. Trade Union representatives

62. Inspector General of Police, Travancore, 27 January 1942, *op.cit.*, D.Dis.469/1944/CS.

63. Prakasam, R., *op.cit.*, pp.130-131.

from Quilon, Sherthalai, Muhamma and Alleppy attended the study classes.⁶⁴ As the result of the work of N.Sreekantan Nair, T.V.Thomas and R.Sugathan, many new trade unions began to emerge coordinating with the central organisation. By 1942-1943 the number of trade unions in the State went upto thirty nine.⁶⁵ The fact was that about eighty trade unions in Travancore were affiliated to the All Travancore Trade Union Congress. As a successive step of solidarity, the first anniversary meeting of the Travancore Trade Union Congress on November 1943 at Alleppy was attended by about 1500 persons including 204 delegates representing eighteen trade unions in Travancore.⁶⁶ In consultation with the Manufacturers Association and the Industrial Relations Board, President T.V.Thomas was successful in getting bonus to the workers.

The labour force in Travancore under the guidance of the Trade Union Congress chalked out joint programmes of action. By the time in order to strengthen their organisation, the Communist Party had nominated many labour leaders for propaganda work at Alleppy. They were to work at particular places under instruction from the district committee of the Travancore Communist Party.⁶⁷ There were eighteen labour unions in Alleppy

64. Inspector General of Police, 4 December 1942, Secret Bulletin to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.1154/1945/CS.

65. Travancore Administration Report 1942-1943, Trivandrum, 1944, p.99.

66. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 4 November 1943, D.Dis.866/1945/CS.

67. Ibid., 1 June 1943, D.Dis.861/1945/CS.

consisting of 40,000 labourers and meetings under the auspices of one union or the other were being held on all days. The Travancore administration felt this as to create an impression on the strength and solidarity of the labour unions.⁶⁸ Indeed the All Travancore/^{Trade} Union Congress provided a platform for all left wing trade unions in the state. Organised under a militant leadership, the labourers worked out their programmes on communist lines. Almost all the labourers in Alleppy were Communist sympathisers.⁶⁹ The All Travancore Trade Union Congress, influenced by the radical leadership, had taken up the cause of factory workers and agricultural labourers and also made attempts to modify the franchise system of Ezhava community. The administration on the other hand deprecated the aim of the Trade Union Congress and warned that it would be very difficult for employers to negotiate with the political demands of the workers totally unconnected with the industry.⁷⁰ The pro-Government press also warned of the political leadership of the Trade Union Congress as unnecessary and asked the administration not to allow the trade unions in the State to work under the control of political leaders. As an illustration, the newspaper Bharathi in an article 'Labour Movement' advised the Government to appoint a full time

68. District Superintendent of Police, Quilon, 18 December 1945, letter to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.2547/1946/Devpt.

69. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 23 May 1943, D.Dis.860/1945/CS.

70. Press Communique, 27 January 1942, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.1103/1944/CS.

Labour Commissioner and an Advisory Committee to control the trade union activities in the state.⁷¹ On these grounds the Government banned the participation of political leaders in public meetings.

The formation of the Trade Union Congress was an inspiration for the agricultural workers too in the State. With the growth of trade unionism among the factory labourers, the agricultural labourers felt the necessity of a coordinating organisation. The agricultural labourers who were hitherto quite contented with their lot had begun to express signs of unrest. Meanwhile the Travancore Police had cautioned the administration that these agricultural labourers were organising themselves to form a united body with the demands for higher wages.⁷² In fact the labour leaders of Alleppy were moving among the agricultural workers inducing them to make a united demand for getting uniform wages.⁷³ On 24 January 1942, a meeting of the leading landlords of Kuttanad and labour leaders was held at Alleppy with the District Magistrate of Quilon presiding. In the meeting T.V.Thomas, T.K.Varghese Vaidyan and P.N.Krishna Pillai represented the labour. The labour and the

71. The Bharathi, 3 February 1945, Newspaper abstract, D.Dis.291/1945/CS.

72. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 24 April 1945, D.Dis.846/1945/CS.

73. Ibid.; 18 December 1942, D.Dis.1154/1945/CS.

capital had come to an agreement of this meeting.⁷⁴ But not too later, the agriculturists had refused to pay the wages decided at this joint meeting. By the end of 1942 the Communist leaders were active in organising the discontented agricultural labourers throughout the state. The work of establishing agricultural workers unions was entrusted to C.S.Gopala Pillai, a Communist leader. By consolidating the factory workers and agricultural labourers and by coordinating the different trade unions in the state, the Communist Party had established their control over the working class in Travancore.

74. The landlords unanimously agreed to give for planting paddy seedlings, nine chuckrams per male, six chuckrams per female and five chuckrams for boys between age of twelve and eighteen years. (Ibid., Part I, 26 January 1942, D.Dis.846/1945/CS.)

CHAPTER VIII

COMMUNIST LEADERSHIP

By 1940 the working class in Travancore came under the direct control of the Communist Party. Dissatisfied with the vacillating policy of the State Congress, the left wing in the Party organised themselves into a radical section. The labour class, controlled by the Communist leadership, joined the struggle for a democratic Government in Travancore. Amidst the governmental policy of suppression, the Communist leaders could organise a labour force and establish their control.

Influence of Radicalism

In Travancore the Communists made attempt to function openly from 1931. The speedy growth of the leftist movement under a separate organisation started with the formation of the Travancore Youth League. In 1931 a group of young political activists met at Trivandrum and founded the Youth League with Ponnara G.Sreedhar as president, N.P.Kurukkal as organising secretary and N.C.Sekhar, G.Chandra Sekhara Pillai, Thiruvattar Thanupillai and others as members.¹ Apart from many socialistic objectives, the Kerala Provincial Organisation of the Indian Communist Party planned to establish permanent connection between

1. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.41.

the intellectuals and the workers.² Explaining the aims and objectives of the League, N.P.Kurukkal published a pamphlet entitled "the Communist Party Kerala Provincial Organisation". Sharply reacting to the dissemination of radical and socialist views, the Government prevented the circulation of this pamphlet within Travancore.³

Even after the formation of the radical group, the driving force behind the labour unions in Travancore was State Congress. The socialist leaders like H.Manjunatha Rao, S.V.Ghate and E.M.S.Namboodiripad arranged processions continuously from outside the state into Travancore and kept alive the unrest in the State.⁴ The Travancore Police had, however, identified C.K.Narayanaswamy, a Congress Socialist of Bombay involved in the labour troubles of the state, Besides the governmental measures of repression and the communal tension, there prevailed in Travancore the Abstention Movement, resulting in the absence of civil liberties in the State.⁵ And this put a set back to the immediate growth of the leftist movement in Travancore.

2. Note on the Indian Communist Party, Kerala Provincial Organisation, D.Dis.775/1931/CS.

3. Order of the District Collector of Devikulam, 5 May 1931, D.Dis.2572/1931/CS.

4. The Resident for Madras States, 6 December 1938, Secret letter to the Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.504/1940/CS.

5. Note on individual liberty, 20 September 1946, D.Dis.2526/1946/Devpt.

In fact the Communists found asylum in the Congress Socialist Party and continued their activities within the party until 1939.⁶ Now in order to strengthen their influence over the workers and agriculturists, the Communists continued their propaganda technique.

Following the suspension of the move for direct action in March 1939, the State Congress lost much of its prestige.⁷ This sudden move caused so much of demoralisation in Congress circles that a distinct lull was seen in the activities of the leaders all over the State. Provoked at these vacillating policies of the State Congress leaders, the Youth League organised itself into a separate radical group in May 1939 with M.N.Govindan Nair as the Secretary.⁸ The members of this radical group, except for a small faction led by N.Sreekantan Nair, became the leading core of the Communist Party in Travancore. The solidarity campaign started by these radical elements brought them into close contact with the Working Class Movement. The labour union leaders who had so long extended their support to the State Congress now drifted towards the radical section.⁹

6. Kusuman, K.K., The Extremist Movement in Kerala, p.49.

7. As per the advise of Gandhiji and for fear of outbreak of violence by the extremists, the State Congress leadership dropped all plans of direct action proposed to launch from 25 March 1939. (The Hindu, 25 March 1939, p.8.)

8. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.1, No.101, 7 June 1934.

9. Ibid., Vol.I, No.89, 26 May 1939, D.Dis.1137/1945/CS.

In the absence of any political movement since March 1939, labour leaders like T.K.Varghese Vaidyan had concentrated among the workers of Alleppy for strengthening the newly developed Radical Party. Meanwhile twelve prominent members of the Managing Committee of the Coir Factory Workers' Union at Alleppy have enrolled themselves as members of the radical section of the State Congress.¹⁰ The open rift between the State Congress and the Radical Party manifested itself at the State Congress annual conference held at Karunagapalli on 7 September 1939. At this conference the leaders discussed the issue of responsible government and the stand of the State Congress. P.T.Punnoose, a radical leader, brought an amendment and wanted to change the goal of the State Congress at 'either full responsible government or something that leads the way to it'. This resulted in the ideological tuzzle between the two groups. At last when the amendment was put to vote, it was defeated by one hundred and seventy six votes against ninety one votes.¹¹ The radicals thereafter shaped their political programmes on independent lines. At the conference of the Congress Socialist Party at Pinayari in Tellicherry taluk, the Congress Socialist Party of Kerala transformed itself into the

10. District Magistrate, Quilon, May 1939, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.295/1939/CS.

11. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.II, No.179, 27 June 1940, D.Dis.1141/1945/CS.



Communist Party.¹² In fact the Kerala Provincial Organisation of the Communist Party provided the best platform for the radicals to organise the workers in Travancore.

Work of the Communist Party

From 1940 the impact of the Second World War on the economic condition in Travancore helped the left wing to secure the support of the working class. The War and the resultant famine affected Travancore seriously. The worst affected area was Alleppy. As a result of the War, more than 25,000 workers employed in the coir factories at Alleppy, Sherthalai, Quilon and other areas were thrown out of employment.¹³ There was steep rise in the price of all commodities. As a consequence, the labour class as a whole was put to great distress. The sea-borne trade with the United Kingdom and the neutral countries in coconut and coir products practically came to a standstill. The collapse of coir trade with European countries affected nearly three lakh people engaged in the coir work.¹⁴ In spite of all possible measures taken by the Government in the matter of control, purchase and rationing of foodstuffs and providing employment to a large number of people for war purposes, the conditions of

12. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.151.

13. Travancore Administrative Report 1939-1940, p.117.

14. Proceedings of the Sri Mulam Assembly, Vol.XVI, No.3, 23 July 1940, pp.139-141.

the unemployed workers continued to be very grave and pathetic.¹⁵ The situation turned so serious that in most parts of Sherthalai taluk poverty-stricken women and children, formerly employed in the coir factories, were reduced to the extent of moving about in the bazaars and bust stands begging alms.¹⁶ In order to escape from the peril of poverty, the workers were prepared to receive any ideology that could provide them amenities to get away from this delicate situation.

The leftist leaders in Travancore now concentrated their effort on the consolidation of their influence upon the working people. In fact by 1939 Communist cells were constituted in Ernakulam and Trivandrum.¹⁷ Influenced by their ideologies, the discontented working class in Travancore began to organise. Taking advantage of the discontent among the workers, the Communists also concentrated their attention on organisational work. The slogan of socialism and revolution had a powerful appeal among the workers. Having thus consolidated their influence on the working people, the radicals held their first secret conference at Alleppy on 9 July 1939.¹⁸ Presided over by N.Sreekantan Nair, this conference was attended by about twenty eight members including T.V.Thomas, a prominent labour leader. The members of

15. Ibid., Vol.XXII, No.1, 19 July 1943, pp.1-2.

16. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.II, No.250, 4 September 1940.

17. Nossiter, T.J., Communism in Kerala, New Delhi, 1982, p.83.

18. Copy of Secret Report of a Police Officer, 10 July 1939.

the conference expressed revolutionary ideas and decided to work according to the plan of Subash Chandra Bose. They have planned to work as secretly as Bhagat Singh and his men did. The radical leaders of the conference were ready even to shed their blood to establish their ideology.¹⁹

Since the basic demands of superior tenants have already been met in Travancore from the second half of the nineteenth century, there was no possibility for the peasants to rise. Thus the leftist movement in the state concentrated mostly on factory workers and agricultural labourers.²⁰ The labour leaders, T.V.Thomas, R.Sugathan, V.L.Thomas, C.O.Mathew, P.A.Solomon, K.V.Pathrose, C.K.Velayudhan and K.Vasudevan incited the working class, by their revolutionary speeches, into a state of war with the capitalists particularly at Alleppy.²¹ In fact the Communists in Travancore organised themselves into an independent political party. The centre of the radical movement was Alleppy with leaders of the town playing a prominent role. Alleppy, which became active from April 1940 was the convenient centre for the growth of the discontented labour. The Communist leaders took to intensive propaganda techniques. Printing and circulation of revolutionary literatures on socialistic ideologies

19. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.I, No.136, 12 July 1939.

20. Pillai, P.P., Agricultural Development in Kerala, New Delhi, 1982, p.79.

21. Inspector General of Police, 19 January 1941, Copy of report submitted to the Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.740/1944/CS.

and on the sufferings of the labourers formed the most noteworthy propaganda measure adopted since 1939. From the beginning of 1940, the leftist propaganda in Travancore was jointly carried out by the Socialists, Communists, the Youth League and the Forward Bloc.²²

In order to escape from Governmental repression, the leftist leaders carried on propaganda clandestinely. The various publications and party pamphlets were distributed usually by post through an elaborate system of residential addresses and through the use of couriers.²³ Despite all these precautions, the coordination of leftist propaganda in the State soon received the attention of the administration. On 8 April 1940 the Travancore Police arrested K.C.George, a noted Communist leader, with a bundle of Communist papers in possession.²⁴ He was convicted and sentenced to undergo imprisonment for one year. The literature seized from him revealed the fact that several radical State Congressites were connected with the Communist agitators of Bombay, Malabar and Bengal.²⁵ It also disclosed the existence of a Communist Cell in Travancore with its headquarters at Ernakulam. Soon the Dewan summoned a conference of

22. Resident for Madras State, 28 April 1940, Secret letter to the Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.155/1940/CS.

23. Barlay, V.T., Intelligence Bureau, Simla, 21 May 1940, Secret letter to Superintendent of Police, C.I.D., Madras.

24. Inspector General of Police, 10 April 1940, report to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.463/1945/CS.

25. Administration Report of Police Department, Government of Travancore, 1940, Trivandrum, 1941, p.22.

police officers at Trivandrum on 10 April 1940 to find ways and means of counter-attack on the growth of Communist movement in the state. The police conference had evolved effective measures to arrest political agitators and to find out whether there was any Communist underground-cell in the state. The police began to have a close watch on all labour centres and labour leaders against Communist infiltration.²⁶ In spite of the vigilant police force, the radical leaders in Travancore continued their work to organise the working people under their control. The spread of communism among the working class at Alleppy was so momentous that the former moderate leaders had lost their relations with the workers.

Impact of the World War II

The first phase of the war rapidly transformed the loose and open organisational structure of the Congress Socialist Party into the Communist Party. After Britain had entered the war in Europe, Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India, declared India a belligerent. This act of the colonial authorities without any preliminary consultation with representatives of the Indian political parties arose widespread public unrest. During the autumn of 1939 a wave of demonstrations and public rallies swept across the country. Anti-war demonstrations in India organised

26. Proceedings of the Conference of Police Officers, Trivandrum, 10 April 1940, D.Dis.157/1940/CS.

by Communists and Congress Socialists had started as early as September 1939. The Congress leadership took a negative view of the mass action organised by left forces and did not support the strike movement of the working class.

In Travancore the trend of ideology belonging to the members of the Radical Bloc was revolutionary. They strived for socialism and the real communist movement. At a secret meeting in Alleppy on 9 July 1939 they decided not to give any help to the British Government during the war.²⁷ The consequent police repression and preventive detention of cadres and the declaration of Communist Party of India as an illegal party forced the young Communists in the State to adopt underground organisational forms and new methods of mass-work.²⁸ The prominent labour leaders in Travancore moved among the working people of the state and gave a wide anti-war propaganda. Considering the consolidated work of the leftist leaders, the Inspector General of Travancore Police immediately reported P.N.Krishna Pillai, N.Sreekantan Nair, T.V.Thomas, Muhammed Basheer, Ponnara Sreedhar, N.P.Kurukkal, R.Sugathan, K.C.George, P.T.Punnose and N.C.Sekhar as anti-war propagandists.²⁹

27. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.1, No.136, 12 July 1939, D.Dis.1140/1945/CS.

28. Thomas Isaac, 'The National Movement and the Communist Party in Kerala', Social Scientist, Vol.14, Nos.8-9, August-September 1986, p.71.

29. Inspector General of Police, No.39768, 9 September 1939, report to the Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.411/1939/CS.

In fact the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union at Alleppy became an organ of the leftist leadership in Travancore. At its annual conference on 1 October 1939 at Alleppy, the Union passed resolutions congratulating the Government of Soviet Russia in destroying capitalism and China for withstanding the Japanese invasion.³⁰ It is significant to note that at the All Kerala Labour Conference held at Trichur on 10 March 1940, the trade union representatives expressed anti-war, anti-British and pro-Russian sentiments.³¹ In Travancore, the Communists could organise well during the time of war. The anti-war agitation of the Communists in Travancore was secretly instructed by the Bombay Communist Party headquarters. The following instructions were sent out secretly from the party headquarters in Bombay: ".... organise secret meetings of militant kisans to explain the nature of the war and day-to-day war developments. Organise a whisper campaign against the War Committees and Defence loans on the basis that the British are losing. Organise, if possible, a whisper campaign among recruits and in the areas where they come from. Use as slogans the British are losing the War. Don't join the British army. Join the National army for freedom. Stick to your homes".³² These instructions gave a clear cut precaution

30. Sub-Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 2 October 1939, Confidential Daily Report to Inspector General of Police, D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

31. Resident for Madras States, 24 March 1940, Secret letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.500/1940/CS.

32. Ibid., 29 August 1940, D.Dis.350/1940/CS.

to the radical leaders in Travancore in their programmes. The Communist Party was very keen on its organisational work and they asked even for details as to which castes and from which centres recruitment in the army was taking place.³³ These precautions became the forecast for the future change in the attitude of the leftist leaders in Travancore in alliance with the move of Soviet Russia.

In 1941 the attitude of the Communist Party underwent an unexpected change. With the German invasion of Russia, the Communist Party declared the War as the Peoples' War.³⁴ Pursuing independent policy towards the war, the radicals announced their readiness to help the Government in its efforts to tackle the problems created by it. No wonder the All Travancore Trade Union Congress gave shelter to all left-wing trade unions in the State. The Working Committee of the Travancore Trade Union Congress which met at Alleppy on 31 March 1942 passed a resolution asking the various trade unions and the labourers of Travancore to maintain the most peaceful atmosphere in the industrial world and to cooperate with the Government in their war efforts.³⁵ This resolution identified the labour movement in the state with the Communist Party on issues related to international matters. The Communist Party held anti-Japanese and anti-facist meetings

33. Ibid.,

34. Govindan Nair, M.N., General Secretary, State Congress Radical Party, 26 April 1942, letter to the Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.350/1942/CS.

35. Padmanabhan, P.G., Joint Secretary, All Travancore Trade Union Congress, Alleppy, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.424/1944/CS.

all over the state with a view to prepare the people for an 'all for war effort'.³⁶ The leading newspapers in Travancore also stressed the Kuttanad Agricultural Association to cooperate with the Government.³⁷ Khedjikhar, one of the secretaries of the All India Trade Union Congress, visited Alleppy and exhorted the members of the Coir Factory Workers' Union to accelerate production and thereby help the war efforts, so that Japanese aggression may be put to an end.³⁸ The members of the trade unions in the state were appealed to strike utmost for turning out more work on the orders for war materials as it was the only way by which the labourers could help to win the war.³⁹

Inspired by the leftist doctrines, the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union gave leadership in supporting the war-efforts ever since the war has become a Peoples' War. Significantly in 1942 out of 15,000 and over workers employed, the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union at Alleppy had about 12,000 workers on its roll.⁴⁰ The labour leaders stressed the significance of labour participation in the war as well as the

36. Govindan Nair, M.N., op.cit., D.Dis.350/1942/CS.

37. The Deepika, 1 December 1942, Newspaper abstract, D.Dis.1154/1945/CS.

38. The Powraprabha, 2 December 1942, Ibid.

39. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 3 June 1942, D.Dis.1149/1945/CS.

40. The President, Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union, Alleppy, 27 July 1942, letter to K.T.Chandy, Bombay, D.Dis.299/1942/CS.

early termination of the war since the end of the war will mark a new era in human history. At a labour meeting at Kulasekharam in South Travancore, T.V.Thomas asked the estate workers to organise on the lines of trade union to achieve the total destruction of the Nazi Germany.⁴¹

Before long, the attitude of the Travancore Government towards the Communists softened. Thus under the guise of war efforts, the leftist leaders in Travancore expressed their anxiety to see the creation of an atmosphere, wherein, the trade union activities of the State can be conducted without obstruction from Government.⁴² Between 1942 and 1945 the Communist Party made significant gains in terms of membership and organisation. The Travancore Trade Union Congress now called upon the workers and peasants to get ready to organise themselves and take up arms against Fascism.⁴³ In fact the Communist leadership had prepared the working class in the state for a revolt to achieve responsible government in Travancore.

Demand for Democratic Government

By the early 1940's the relation between the employees and the employers in the State became more important. Generally people

41. Report from Sub-Inspector of Police, Thiruvattar, 22 February 1945, D.Dis.1010/1945/CS.

42. Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, 15 May 1942, Report to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.350/1942/CS.

43. Ibid., 27 January 1942, D.Dis.459/1944/CS.

of Travancore were highly politically conscious and particularly of their rights. Exploitation of any sort was resented. Workers were organised under the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union which was under the control of left-wing leaders. Yet the Travancore Police have identified that the demands of the labourers were dictated by the State Congress high command.⁴⁴ Significantly the demands of the labourers included the establishment of responsible government, release of political prisoners, repeal of Regulation I of 1939 and the institution of enquiries into the alleged atrocities of the Government authorities in connection with the State Congress activities. The large army of unemployed and famine-stricken workers extended their support to the radical communists in conducting the struggle for responsible government.⁴⁵

The trade union wing of the Communist Party took the opportunity and began to consolidate the ranks of the working class. Meanwhile in December 1941 the Sherthalai Coir Workers' Union had extended its support to the State Congress to intensify its campaign for responsible government.⁴⁶ At its annual conference held at Alleppy on 25 January 1942, the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union passed a resolution reiterating its view that the establishment of responsible government was an

44. Report of Assistant Sub-Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 2 November 1938, D.Dis.159/1938/CS.

45. Ramachandran Nair, K., op.cit., p.108.

46. Vanaja Rengaswami, op.cit., pp.209-210.

urgent necessity.⁴⁷ This resolution confirmed the political affiliations of the labour movement in the state. The deliberations of the conference however made it clear to the administration that the labour leaders were determined to organise the working class in support of the State Congress for realising the goal of responsible government. The new resolution of the Alleppy Coir Workers Union appeared contrary to the previous decision of the Managing Committee of the Union to the effect that they should not identify themselves with any political organisation in the State in their activities.⁴⁸ In fact the Travancore Trade Union Congress was formed with the precise object of coordinating all labour unions to fight for their demands.

Observing the joint move of the Trade Union Congress and the State Congress for responsible government, the Travancore Government contented it as an attempt to coordinate the several labour unions with the idea to start an agitation at some critical time.⁴⁹ An important fact was that in its previous agitations the State Congress was not accompanied by labour unions and only now the newly formed Travancore Trade Union Congress organised the trade unions in the State with the assistance of the State Congress to achieve a democratic government in the State. More-

47. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.140.

48. Confidential Police Report, D.Dis.460/1939/CS.

49. Inspector General of Police, 27 January 1942, Report to Chief Secretary to the Government of Travancore, D.Dis.459/1944/CS.

over, the State Congress during this period did not support the Communist controlled trade union movement.⁵⁰ Under the command of the leftist ideology, the labour leaders in Travancore were always for the self government and viewed with hatred any idea of compromise between the labour and the capital. They have proclaimed that the aim of the labour unions was to transfer the administrative machinery into the hands of the labourers and the agriculturists.⁵¹ They had determined to end the British administration^{so} to achieve economic emancipation of the masses.

The declaration of the Quit India Resolution on 8 August 1942 proved an opportune signal for the Travancore Government to clamp down on all activities of trade unions. But the Quit India Movement did not produce any significant impact on the political agitation in the state. For, the movement was not related to the major issue of responsible government and it was observed as a mark of respect to Gandhiji and the Indian National Congress. There was much confusion among the leftist leadership in the State as to how to link up their support to the World War with the struggle for national liberation. Finally they forgot to take into account the patriotic motives behind the Quit India Movement, and evolved a tactic to establish leftist ascendancy on the working class

50. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.140.

51. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, No.46, 13 April 1939, D.Dis.1138/1945/CS.

of the state. In accordance with the general policy adopted by the Communist Party of India, the Communists and the trade unions in Travancore dissociated with the Quit India Movement.⁵²

Following the arrest of Gandhiji on 9 August 1942, the labourers and the students in Travancore organised protest meetings. But influenced by the Communist Party, later they not only withdrew from the movement but also openly opposed its observance in the state. At a political conference at Trivandrum on 16 and 17 August 1942, the leftist leaders pleaded for extending support to the British in war against Germany and for non-cooperation to the Quit India Movement.⁵³ The stand taken by the Communist Party of India on the Second World War brought out a clash of interests among the progressive elements. It created for the first time a generation of leftists in Travancore, who were anti-communists.⁵⁴ Trade Unionism in the State got split into the radical left under T.V.Thomas and the left socialist group under N.Sreekantan Nair and T.K.Divakaran. Alleppy became the stronghold of the radical communists. The non-Communist left-wing within the trade union movement became the major influence in Quilon. They strongly backed the Indian National Movement.⁵⁵

52. Ibid., Part I, No.243, 31 August 1942, D.Dis.1189/1944/CS.

53. Inspector General of Police, 2 September 1942, Note submitted to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.462/1945/CS.

54. Sreekantan Nair, N., Kazhinjakala Chitrangal (Malayalam), Kottayam, 1976, p.84.

55. Naavikulam Sukumaran Nair, N.Sreekantan Nair: Vektiyum Prasthanavum (Malayalam), Kottayam, 1980, p.195.

On 2 September 1942, the Managing Committee of the Coir Factory Workers Union met at Alleppy and criticised the Quit India Campaign as a self-invitation of fascists.⁵⁶ The union stressed the responsibility of each labourer to support the cause of a national Government in Travancore. It asked the labourers to keep aloof from the Civil Disobedience Movement contemplated by the Indian National Congress and the State Congress.⁵⁷ In order to counter the mass influence of the Communists, the Congress pursued a policy of splitting the existing mass organisations or setting up rival ones. Since their disapproval of the Quit India Movement in Travancore, the Communist and labour leaders received a favourable treatment from the Government. But the Communist Party in Travancore took this as a favourable situation for strengthening the organisation.

Communist Ascendancy

After creating divided loyalties in the State Congress, the leftist leaders in Travancore continued their work to organise the workers as a class. During the war period, every opportunity provided by the newly granted legality to the Communist Party was used to educate and coordinate the various worker's organisations in the state. In 1940's the organised coir workers were in the forefront of the Working Class Movement in Travancore in

56. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, No.250, 7 September 1942, D.Dis.1151/1945/CS.

57. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.141.

terms of militancy and political consciousness. The Communist Party conducted study classes and set up volunteer camps at Alleppy, Kottayam, Changanacherry, Quilon and Balaramapuram and trained them in 'guerilla warfare' and squad drill.⁵⁸ In many of the high schools in Travancore there were secret study classes conducted by the Communists for school-going children.⁵⁹ In South Travancore, Communist propaganda was not as intense as in other parts, where the public emotion was mostly directed towards the Tamil Province Movement. In December 1945, at a meeting at Nagercoil, the leaders formed the All Travancore Tamilian Congress, subsequently called Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress. S.Nathaniel was elected president, but A.Nesamony wielded the real influence. The Party decided to work for the merger of Tamil speaking areas of the princely state with Tamilnadu.⁶⁰

The labour leaders in Alleppy visited villages during night and held ward-meetings to educate the workers. The labourers were taught about the ideals of socialism and trained them in such a way as to come forward at any moment.⁶¹ The labour leaders were instructed by the Communist high command in Bombay to organise secret meetings of militant kisans.⁶² The

58. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly, Vol.XXI, No.3, 31 May 1943, p.163.

59. Velayudhan, R., Ernakulam, 12 March 1949, letter to Adviser to the States Ministry, D.Dis.703/1949/Home.

60. Rajayyan, K., History of Tamilnadu 1565-1982, Madurai, p.392.

61. Inspector General of Police, 1 June 1942, Secret Bulletin Part I to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.1149/1945/CS.

62. Resident for Madras States, op.cit., 29 August 1940, D.Dis.350/1940/CS.

Kerala Congress Socialist Party leaders were doing vigorous propaganda work among the labourers and the agriculturists with a view to unify both these organisations. Under the guidance of the Communist leadership, the labour force became a challenge to the capitalists. The red flag became the recognised flag of the labour unions in the State. The new leadership inspired the workers and the agricultural labourers of Alleppy, moved among the labourers of Quilon to organise them effectively and instructed them to make a united demand for getting uniform wages.⁶³ In Kuttanad T.K.Varghese Vaidyan was moving about to organise the agricultural labourers. The District Committee of the Travancore Communist Party at Alleppy with the idea of developing and strengthening the organisation nominated many persons for propaganda work. They were to work at particular places under instructions from the Party.⁶⁴ Training classes were held to enable the local communists to teach communism to the members of the labour unions.

In Alleppy secret classes were held by labour leaders like R.Sugathan, K.Vijayaraghavan, P.G.Padmanabhan and K.K.Kunjan. The delegates who attended classes were G.S.Mony of Marthandam, Puthupally Raghavan, N.C.Sekhar and K.C.George of Trivandrum, K.E.Koshy of Tiruvalla, K.Krishnan Unnithan of Pathanamthitta,

63. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, 18 December 1942, D.Dis.1154/1945/CS.

64. Ibid., 1 June 1943, D.Dis.861/1945/CS.

P.G.Padmanabhan and T.K.Alexander of Quilon, C.A.Bharathan, P.Nanu, P.K.Madhavan, V.L.Thomas, E.Vasudevan, T.K.Ismail Khan and K.K.Thangappan of Alleppy.⁶⁵ Later the Travancore District Committee of the Indian Communist Party at Alleppy was dissolved and the Kerala Communist Party had taken up its work. K.C.George was the organiser of the Communist Party for the whole of Travancore. In a Communist class at Alleppy on 22 November 1943, E.M.S.Namboodiripad urged that the trade unions should abide by the instructions of the Communist Party.⁶⁶ In 1944 the Communist Cell in Travancore had changed the name of the party into 'All Travancore Communist Party' instead of 'All India Communist Party'.⁶⁷ This was to make resolutions and carry on Communist activities in the state as they pleased without the consent and approval of the central committee of the All India Communist Party. In fact the radical leaders have instructed the labour force to take up arms if they were suppressed by the armed forces of the Government.⁶⁸

The Travancore Communist Party distributed revolutionary literatures among the workers portraying the difficulties

65. Ibid., Part I, 23 May 1943, D.Dis.860/1945/CS.

66. Ibid., 24 November 1943, D.Dis.866/1945/CS.

67. Inspector General of Police, 19 December 1944, op.cit., D.Dis.320/1945/CS.

68. Chief Secretary, Government of Travancore, 24 April 1948, letter to R.Sugathan, Alleppy, D.Dis.33/1939/CS.

that the workers experienced. The Peoples War and the Desabhimani were the chief organs of the Communist Party. However Thozhilali was the main newspaper of the labour force in the state.⁶⁹ But all these publications were subjected to the prohibitory orders of the administration. Yet in addition to the permanent press as an organ of ideology, the Party published timely propaganda pamphlets also. A booklet 'Kisan Songs' in Malayalam, printed at the V.V.Press at Trichur and published by the Cochin Ryots' Association was circulated among the workers of Travancore. This booklet was full of socialistic ideas asking the labour class to organise and fight to effect a change in the existing social order.⁷⁰ The latter part of the booklet captioned 'Organize!' portrayed the day-to-day difficulties of the landless labour class. Moreover literature with Communist ideology was circulated at their secret study classes. Significantly the leftist leadership won over certain newspapers to give propaganda for their radical objectives.⁷¹

In the meantime the war and consequent closure of markets rendered the problem of unemployment more acute. These circumstances contributed towards an increase in the volume of crimes in the state.⁷² Several families have been reduced to

69. Secretary, Sherthalai taluk Beedi Workers Union, 12 September 1945, letter to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.1519/1945/CS.

70. Inspector General of Police, 5 April 1940, op.cit., D.Dis.92/1940/CS.

71. Copy of Report of ASP, Alleppy, 24 May 1948, D.Dis.3277/1948/Judl.

72. Administrative Report, Police Department 1940, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1941, p.9.

starvation due to the closure of factories and the consequent want of labour. The prominent members of labour organisations have now felt the necessity of diverting their attention from political activities to the present situation arising out of the scarcity of rice and other food commodities.⁷³ At a meeting of the coir workers union on 17 May 1939 at Alleppy R. Sugathan appealed to all labourers to help their comrades on strike.⁷⁴ He exhorted the members of the Managing Committee of the Union to visit various parts of the state and get the labourers organised.

The labour movement in Travancore was active during this period by organising strikes and protest meetings inspite of repeated warning from the administration. Quite often the factories under British nationalists' management or Government management became the centres of strike.⁷⁵ Mostly the speeches of labour leaders were intemperate in tone. The Communists have sent trained men to various estates to organise labour under their control. This has resulted in organised agitations in many estates.⁷⁶ The leftist leaders met at a conference on 2 July 1944 to reactivate their organisation and in August 1944 they had organised thirty two branches of their organisation in the state, with the headquarters at Alleppy.⁷⁷ The labour agita-

73. Confidential Circular from Chief Secretary, Government of Travancore, 27 August 1940, D.Dis.201/1940/CS.

74. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.I, No.82, 19 May 1939, D.Dis.283/1939/CS.

75. File, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.424/1944/CS.

76. Extracts from Police Daily Report, 1 November 1946, D.Dis.16/1947/CS.

77. Ibid., D.Dis.3257/1944/CS.

tions were organised in such a way that strike committees and volunteer associations were formed to conduct the strike. These strike committees have undertaken the whole responsibility of continuing the strike.

It was in 1941 that the women's factory committees began to be organised. In fact it was P.Krishnapillai, the noted Communist leader, who put forward the suggestion of organising women's factory committees and developing a women's organisation.⁷⁸ Another notable feature was the formation of the Labour Defence Fund to defend the disbanded labourers. For this purpose various labour unions in the state formed relief committees to render financial help to the unemployed section of the working class. The unions appealed to the labourers to subscribe towards the Labour Defence Fund and to defend the labourers and labour cases.⁷⁹ In many parts of Kuttanad labourers collected alms even begging from different houses in the form of paddy and money.⁸⁰ In the meantime the Travancore Communist Party launched a 'Grow More Food Campaign' through meetings and processions, with a view to consolidate their influence on the suffering people of the State.

78. Meera, V., "Women Workers and Class Struggles in Alleppy 1938-1950", Social Scientist, Vol.11, No.2, December 1982, p.51.

79. Kaumudi, 3 November 1939, Newspaper abstract, D.Dis.851/1945/CS.

80. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.11, No.200, 18 July 1940, D.Dis.980/1945/CS.

The Communists have decided to collect funds and to open poor-feeding centres at different places in the state. They have also resolved to carry on propaganda through the labour unions, Karshaka Sangham, Students organisations and Grama Seva Sanghams.⁸¹ On the otherside the Travancore Government also started a Labour General Distress Relief Fund at the close of 1941. It was to give relief to the labourers who were thrown out of employment as a result of the outbreak of war.⁸² The Government constituted committees to start relief works in Alleppy and Sherthalai to relieve unemployment on account of the closure of factories. There were systems of stock control and price control to regularise the process of distribution of foodstuffs in the state. Moreover Taluk Food Control Committees were set up in the state. These committees consisted of the Tahsildar, members of Legislature representing the taluk, Chairman of a well organised co-operative society in the taluk, Chairman of the Municipal Council and the Inspector of Police. Even then the working people were in difficulties on account of irregularities in exercising control.⁸³ Now the Communist labour leaders have requested the capitalists to give just wages to their

81. Inspector General of Police, 29 August 1944, op.cit., D.Dis.1621/1945/CS.

82. Administration Report of Police Department, op.cit., p.27.

83. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, No.860, 26 May 1943, D.Dis.860/1945/CS.

labourers with due consideration of the inflation of prices. In Alleppy the workers organised volunteer corps and these volunteers were to help the authorities in Kuttanad and other places in the purchase of paddy.⁸⁴ As an assistance to the administration, the Alleppy taluk committee of the Communist Party collected statistics showing the acreage and yield of paddy fields owned by prominent landlords in Kuttanad.⁸⁵ The Party had also deputed some Communist workers to Kuttanad for extending the scope of the paddy purchasing scheme.

The Travancore Government introduced the quota system in the distribution of cloth to the workers with the intention of making cloth available to people at a fixed rate.⁸⁶ But the merchants have proved themselves an obstacle and the scarcity of cloth had begun to affect the people of Travancore. Immediately the Communist Party wing at Sherthalai advised the Government to introduce 'ration system' for cloth distribution.⁸⁷ Accordingly the State implemented the ration system for cloth distribution. The local Tahsildars issued orders to distribute cloth only for those who had ration cards. With the introduction of rationing all taluk committees ceased to exist.

84. Ibid., 6 November 1943, D.Dis.865/1945/CS.

85. Ibid., 11 December 1943, D.Dis.945/1945/CS.

86. Secretary, Sherthalai Taluk Beedi Workers Union, op.cit., D.Dis.1519/1945/CS.

87. Resolutions passed at Communist Party Branch, Sherthalai, 12 September 1945, D.Dis.1520/1945/CS.

In fact the Travancore Communist Party, in the disguise of helping the poor and the Government in the matter of distribution and collection of food grains, were strengthening their organisation by rapidly spreading socialism in the state. Assisted by the Communist leaders of Malabar, the Travancore Communist Party was able to wean away the labour into their control.⁸⁸ By the end of 1945 the labour population in the state, especially in Alleppy over 40,000 strong, passed under the direct control of the Travancore Communist Party.

88. Inspector General of Police, 18 December 1945, Copy of Note submitted to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.168/1945/CS.

CHAPTER IX

CLASS STRUGGLE AND STATE REPRESSION

The Working Class Movement in Travancore successfully sublimated the deep caste and religious antagonisms. Thus by 1940 the organisations of workers became itself a class-conscious movement. The Communist leadership developed in them a spirit of class-consciousness and as a result the workers now prepared for an open revolt against capitalism. Simultaneously the labour class had become a serious challenge for the imperialist rule. The new leadership injected in the minds of the labourers the ideas of socialism and class. Now the labourers turned more assertive.¹ Meanwhile the administration had faced the labour force with repressive measures and utmost caution. In spite of the Government policy, the workers as a class expressed their militance and stamina.

Labour Against Capital

A class-conscious labour force had steady growth against the capitalists through the time. The traditional social structures and institutions such as inheritance system and family structure became impediments in the path of further progress of the capitalist forces. In fact the caste hierarchy in the State had been crumbling throughout the 1920's. E.M.S.

1. Travancore Administrative Report, 1939-1940, p.114.

Namboodiripad maintains that his party did not allow the caste, communal or any other consideration to stand in the way of the workers' unity against the capitalists, the peasants' against the landlords, other sections of the working people for their own demands—all of them against British imperialism and autocratic rule in the princely states.² Ideas of socialism and class thus intruded into something that was atleast an ideological wasteland if not an ideological void.³

At first a strong current of atheism and free thought about religion grew out of the social reform movement led by middle class Ezhavas. The efforts of the middle class to gain a social status and political leverage more befitting their improved economic conditions inevitably led to political questions given the Hindu princely order closely linked to the caste hierarchy. In the temple entry agitations, the middle class leadership gave consistency and direction which were absent in the early spontaneous revolts against caste oppression. The Temple Entry Proclamation of 12 November 1936 was acclaimed as the most beneficent and epoch-making reform introduced in the Hindu society.⁴ It is true that the experiences of the middle-class workers in the temple entry agitations made them feel

2. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., "Once Again on Caste and Classes", Social Scientist, Vol.9, No.12, December 1981, p.15.

3. Robin Jeffrey, 'Destroy Capitalism', op.cit., p.1168.

4. The Regulations and Proclamations of Travancore, Vol.IX, Trivandrum, 1937, p.2.

necessarily as a class, opted to fight for rights. And this idea of unity would have caused them to forget their religion and to move for any other sect to achieve social status. As a result low castes in the state were exhorted to reject Hinduism.

Throughout the early 1930's low caste leaders threatened caste Hindus with wholesale conversion to Christianity or some other religion.⁵ The Christian missionaries were making vigorous propaganda among the workers and agricultural labourers with the promise of equal rights to the backward christian communities within the church. They spoke for 'equal rights for all within the State'.⁶ In South-Travancore, the Aiyannavar community, majority of whom were the attached agricultural labourers, adopted Christianity. However, the idea of socialism also began to gain currency with the current of atheism. The workers were instructed that Lord Ram was a wicked man, and instead of his name, they should chant the name of Lenin, for Soviet Russia was the most prosperous area of the world.⁷

Trapped in the old social order, the Nair aristocracy could not take advantage of the possibilities of enrichment

5. Robin Jeffrey, (ed.), People, Princes and Paramount Power, New Delhi, 1978, p.162.

6. The South Travancore Aiyannavar Sangham, Trivandrum, 27 March 1920, Memorandum to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.21/1920/Genl.

7. Travancore Police Weekly Secret Bulletin, Vol.I, 31 March 1934.

that capitalism offered. Diverting from traditional occupations, the emerging low castes have begun to dominate in economic development. The intellectual revolution, coupled with the socialistic ideology resulted in the labouring people the concept of class solidarity. The fact was that the emerging Self Respect Movement in Tamilnadu had highly influenced the workers' class-consciousness in Travancore.⁸ The October Revolution created strong ripples among the Malayali intellectuals. Having an idea of contradictory interests of the various classes in jails that were being drawn into the national struggle, leaders like R.Sugathan organised the Alleppy workers with a class-consciousness. In their agitations, the Alleppy workers raised slogans that made them jump from caste and communal outrage to class conflict. However the strike of January 1934 brought the slogan of capitalism among the Alleppy workers.⁹ The most important among them was 'Destroy the Nayars'. Then it shifted and demonstrated how a Malayalam word had acquired new meaning 'Destroy Capitalism'.¹⁰ The idea was taking firm root that owners were a group with interests directly antagonistic to the workers they employed. The slogans of capitalist was just one indication of the processes going on in the mind of workers.

8. Balaram, N.E., op.cit., p.38.

9. Puthupalli Raghavan, Sakhavu Sugathan (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1979, p.42.

10. Robin Jeffrey, 'Destroy Capitalism', op.cit., p.1162.

Being the most literate area of India, the literacy rate among the factory workers in Travancore was seventy five per cent in the late 1930's.¹¹ Through literatures and reading rooms, the Travancore labourers were easily accessible to ideas of class solidarity and socialism. It is a significant fact that the Travancore Labour Association, even at the very beginning had sponsored a reading room in March 1924. The factory labourers in Travancore were much more educated than those in British India. Most of them were able to read and even edit newspapers.¹² P.Kesava Dev, who had been the general secretary of the Travancore Labour Association was a marxist influenced Malayalam novelist. Between 1922 and 1937 a vast number of literary works appeared for circulation among workers, inspiring the labourers to take steps towards solidarity. In addition to a steady flow of pamphlet literature, the weekly newspaper Thozhilali appeared regularly throughout the 1930's. This weekly published a wide range of poems and articles on labour-capital relations, educating the workers in class-consciousness and socialism. The Thozhilali newspaper called for worker-peasant solidarity to achieve responsible government in Travancore. The labour leaders while stressing on the satisfaction of hunger and removal of nakedness, stated that the dawn of socialism was not far off.¹³ The fact

11. George Committee Report, op.cit., pp.201-202.

12. Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly Proceedings, Vol.VII, 1935, p.478.

13. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, No.293, 15 October 1940, D.Dis.854/1945/CS.

was that such a large proportion of literate workers accelerated and reinforced the spread of ideas of class solidarity. Coupled with the decay of old values, the literacy of the workers went far in explaining the unreservedness with which they embraced the new ideas of class.

The spirit of class-consciousness led to labour unrest which manifested in different forms. In Alleppy there was always the universal antagonism between capital and labour which could lead to disturbance at the slightest provocation.¹⁴ In a labour meeting at Karunagapally on 11 April 1939, President P.N.Krishna Pillai spoke about the might of the labourers if they got organised. He referred to the labour strike of 1926 in England and said that even the king Emperor had to flee for his life from the Buckingham Palace.¹⁵ In his speech P.K.Purushothaman, referring to the agitation for responsible government, had remarked that the administration favoured the capitalists and neglected the interests of the majority. He had insisted that the aim of labour organisations was to transfer the administrative machinery into the hands of the labourers and agriculturists. 'Economic emancipation of the masses' he asserted, 'could be achieved only if there was an end to the British administration.

14. Karunakaran, K.C., Member of the Legislative Assembly, 20 May 1936, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.2962/1936/Judl.

15. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.1, No.46, 13 April 1939, D.Dis.239/1939/CS.

Lenin and not Budha or Christ discovered the root cause of evil and holding out Russia as an example of peace and prosperity'.¹⁶

The labour leaders condemned the system of worker-owner relationship as unscientific and slavery.¹⁷ The Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union in its annual conference in October 1939, passed resolutions congratulating the Soviet Government for destroying capitalism.¹⁸ While inviting all people's organisations to take direct action for securing responsible government, the labourers promised joint cooperation and support of the labourers for achieving it.¹⁹ However the Communist work on consolidation of the labourers also raised a spirit of class-consciousness among the workers. The Youth League functioned as the rallying centre of radical minded people. As a champion of revolutionary ideas, N.P.Kurukkal approved the political goal of Bhagat Singh and his men and attacked Gandhian methods of non-violence and passive resistance.²⁰ The administration had noted with resentment that the radical Youth Leaguers were openly advocating socialistic and communistic doctrines and were openly as well as secretly inciting people to violence.²¹ In

16. Ibid.

17. Padmanabhan, P.G., Speech at Pathanamthitta, January 1942, D.Dis.61/1945/CS.

18. Sub-Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 2 October 1939, Confidential Daily report to Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, D.Dis.413/1939/CS.

19. Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, No.12576, 20 September 1946, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.3085/1946/Devpt.

20. Travancore Police Daily Bulletin, Vol.I, No.136, 12 July 1939.

21. Press Communique, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.283/1938/CS.

fact the working class organised in caste organisations were subsequently brought into class-conscious organisations, concentrating on a revolutionary movement. Soon the workers' struggle in Travancore assumed an anti-feudal character. They began to revolt in response to the increased exactions brought about by colonial capitalist relations. Indeed the solidarity campaign of the Communists were inspired not only by immediate economic goals but also by a belief in revolutionary class struggle.²²

Preparations for a Workers' Revolt

There was significant increase in the trade union activities and mass participation in the functioning of the unions. Meanwhile in the disguise of creating an anti-fascist atmosphere, the Communist leadership in fact incited the labourers to rise in rebellion. By their revolutionary speeches, the labour leaders incited the working class into a state of war against the capitalists particularly at Alleppy.²³ Though the strike of 1934 brought only partial concessions, the workers in Travancore, revealed the power of organised labour even in the beginning. For the first time the strike introduced revolutionary slogans to the workers.²⁴ In the early 1940's, the

22. Kathleen Gough, "Peasant Resistance and Revolt in South India", in Desai, A.R., (ed.), Peasant Struggles in India, New Delhi, 1979, p.726.

23. Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, 19 January 1941, Copy of report to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.740/1944/CS.

24. Kesava Dev, P., Ormakalude lokatil(Malayalam), Kottayam, 1972, pp.150-151.

Thozhilali newspaper pursued in themes on revolution of the workers. In its articles the paper invited the workers to unite not merely for a public organisation, but for revolution.²⁵ Communist leaders like P.Krishnapillai, A.K.Gopalan, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, K.C.George, P.Gangadharan, P.T.Punnose, C.G. Sadasivan, N.Sreekantan Nair, N.S.P.Panicker and others clandestinely toured the area and conducted study classes among the labourers, imparting to them the fundamentals of Marxism and convincing them of their invincibility.²⁶ The labour leaders, however, warned that they intended to adopt violence if the capitalists failed to comply with their demands.²⁷

In the State Legislative Council, the members alerted the administration that in the distant socio-political horizon of the commercial town of Alleppy, the working class had begun to appear as an active independent factor in gathering mass revolts. They had cautioned the government of the beginning of a working class revolt.²⁸ It is significant that the Inspector General of Police, Travancore in his report to the Government on February 1939 had noted the fight between labour and capital in the State.²⁹

25. Thozhilali, 26 May 1938, p.3.

26. Kusuman, K.K., Extremist Movement in Kerala, p.59.

27. D.S.P., Quilon, 16 May 1935, Report to District Magistrate of Quilon, D.Dis.2780/1935/Judl.

28. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Chitra State Council, Vol.I, No.3, 1935, p.113.

29. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 23 February 1939, D.Dis.152/1939/CS., and 1 June 1942, D.Dis.1149/1945/CS.

In Alleppy the labour leaders visited the villages during night and held ward meetings and educated the workers. They taught the labourers about the ideals of socialism and gave training to organise themselves in such a way as to come forward at any moment. With this idea, meetings were organised at various places in the disguise of opening new trade union sub-offices. In fact the Communist leaders instructed the labour force in Travancore to arrange secret meetings of militant workers and to explain the day-to-day political developments.³⁰ With incessant demonstrations the labour situation in Alleppy became serious. The workers of Alleppy were exhorted to oppose fascism and to help Soviet Russia in the Second World War to bring unconditionally freedom for India. In a Communist meeting at Balaramapuram on 5 April 1943, P.K.Karunakaran, a Communist leader urged the volunteers to prepare the working class for a revolution.³¹ The labour force was convinced that if they get organised and united, no government, however oppressive they might be, would be able to suppress them. However the workers were reminded that the real motive behind their struggle was to create such a new world order.³² At a public meeting of

30. Col.Murphy, Resident for Madras States, 29 August 1940, letter to C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer, Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.350/1940/CS.

31. Press Note, 9 May 1943, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.4227/1944/CS.

32. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, 9 August 1943, D.Dis.863/1945/CS.

the Factory Workers Union held at Quilon on 7 December 1943, the labour leaders warned the administration that the labour organisation was a volcano and that great dangers would result if it bursted. The speakers at the meeting made it clear that wherever the labour force bursted, it would bring to an end the sufferings of labourers and then it might not be possible for the Government to check it.³³

It is remarkable that immediately after the General Strike of 1938, the Labour Strike Committee at Alleppy published a leaflet entitled "Governmentum Mudalalimarum Sutkchikanam" in Malayalam which meant that the Government and the capitalists should be careful.³⁴ The leaflet published in the name of P.G.Padmanabhan, Secretary of the Union, was full of communistic ideas. The literatures circulated by the radicals during 1940 reveal the preparations of the labour force for a class struggle. 'Kisan Songs' a booklet in Malayalam circulated among the workers of Alleppy was seethed with socialistic ideas and exhorted the labourers and the ryots to organise and fight to bring about a change in the existing social order.³⁵ Another booklet 'Labour Songs' attacked the capitalists and urged the factory workers to dismantle the fortress of religion and

33. Chellappan, K., Speech at Public Meeting of Quilon Factory Workers Union, Quilon, 7 December 1943, D.Dis.1097/1945/CS.

34. Letter to Advocate General, Trivandrum, 15 November 1938, D.Dis.177/1938/CS.

35. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 5 April 1940, D.Dis.92/1940/CS.

encouraged them to rise against capitalists.³⁶ Moreover Tejo Singh, a socialist of Sherthalai, published a booklet in Malayalam 'The Lamp of Poverty', emphasising organisation as the labour strength and strike as the only weapon of the working class.³⁷ Being an organ of the revolutionary party in Travancore, the 'Spark', another radical periodical, infringed all the existing laws enforced by the Travancore Government. In spite of its secret circulation, the Government soon proscribed the 'Spark' on 16 July 1940. In fact by circulating radical literature among the workers and agricultural labourers, the Travancore Communist Party was able to prepare a strong labour force for a class struggle.

In Travancore, the workers viewed with hatred any ideas of compromise between labour and capital. On 23 September 1943 Communist labour leaders K.C.Mathew and Puthupally Raghavan met Pattom Thanupillai and induced the people of Quilon to open Kisan Sanghams.³⁸ T.V.Thomas, speaking at the meeting of All Travancore Estate Factory Workers Union, had dwelt upon the fact that the labourers had recourse only to an open strike and bloodshed to meet their ends. He, however, advised a differen

36. Ibid., 13 April 1940.

37. Ibid., 30 June 1940.

38. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 23 September 1943, D.Dis.1576/1945/CS.

weapon to face the capitalists, ie. enhancing production which would save not only the labourers but the owners and the public as well. In fact the incidents at Alleppy and Sherthalai in 1946 were sufficient proof to what labourers could achieve by efficient organisation.

In the labour field, especially among the coir factory workers, there was tremendous propaganda work organised by the Communists. The agricultural labour in Travancore was also being organised by the Communists rapidly. The labour force at Alleppy and Quilon, under the Communistic influence, planned joint labour conferences. Soon the Government, pointing out the intemperateness in language and action of labour leaders, objected to the labour conferences as it would cause disturbances to the orderliness of the State.³⁹ But the labour leaders made it clear that if the Government was going to view the labour movement with suspicion, they could not expect to have peace in this land. They have pointed out that if the exploitation and repression of employers and the studied ignorant attitude of the Government were to take place in any other country, bloody revolution would have been the outcome.⁴⁰ Thus organised and guided by the Communist leadership, the working class in Travancore was getting ready for a violent reaction.

39. Ibid., 20 June 1945, D.Dis.1492/1945/CS.

40. Inspector General of Police, Quilon, 16 February 1942, Copy of report, D.Dis.847/1945/CS.

Repressive Measures

Within a short time, the Government viewed with suspicion the activities of the Communists and warned them of dire consequences if they utilised the food campaign as a means of violent and subversive political propaganda.⁴¹ Despite the warning, the Travancore Communist Party continued its work with new vigour. When the Government was convinced that the Communist Party with the support of other radical sections was planning for a revolt of agricultural and industrial workers, they imposed the policy of repression on the activities of labour unions in the State. Prohibitory orders were issued against the proceedings of the Communist Party and the labour class during the war-time in Travancore. The Government banned even the civil liberties of the people.

The speeches of labour leaders were often violent in tone. Seriously concerned over the labour situation, the Government banned the holding of processions except with the permission of the magistrates of the concerned districts.⁴² The Travancore Government, aware of the growing power of the workers started the new policy to suppress individual liberty in the State. In alliance with the governmental policy, the

41. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly, Vol.XXVII, No.1, 19 July 1943, p.16.

42. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 25 November 1943, D.Dis.462/1947/CS.

anti-Communist forces also tried to ban the Carpenters' Union, Agricultural Workers' Union, Coconut Tree Climbers' Union and Fishing Workers' Union.⁴³ The administration banned speeches by trade union leaders and perpetually shadowed them. Punnose, a Communist labour leader, was prohibited from any political activity within the State.⁴⁴ However, the workers reacted to the arrests by holding hartals. As an illustration, Mathan Moopan, a contractor of Darrah Smail Company at Alleppy lodged a complaint to the local police against three labourers, Chacko, Ummuni and Krishnan stating that they chased him with dagger for his having sent Krishnan out of work. The Inspector of Police had threatened the labourers with arrests. Consequently a protest meeting was held on 24 May 1939. Closely following this incident was the arrest of R.Sugathan. At once the Managing Committee of the Alleppy Coir Factory Workers' Union called for a general hartal on 26 May 1939 as a protest against the arrest.⁴⁵

By now the developing force of the working class in the State and the increasing infiltration of leftist leadership became a major threat to the administration. The Dewan remarked that the labour organisations associated with the

43. Kusuman, K.K., "Punnapra Vayalar Uprising 1946", Journal of Kerala Studies, Vol.III, Part I, March 1976, pp.137-157.

44. Note on Individual Liberty, 29 September 1946, D.Dis.2526/1946/Devpt.

45. Copy of report from Inspector General of Police, Trivandrum, 29 May 1939, D.Dis.301/1939/CS.

Communist Party in the state was 'immature and misled'.⁴⁶ The administration had organised vigilant patrols by the armed reserve police to control the growth of leftist labour force in Alleppy and Sherthalai areas.⁴⁷ The patrols at night have gone a great way in preventing the labourers from attending night classes by Communists. Meanwhile the Travancore Government banned the circulation of Communist literature within the State. While prohibiting Deshabhimani, People's Age, Malabar Mail and other leftist literature in Travancore, the administration cancelled the license of the workers' newspaper Thozhilali. It refused to recognise the resolutions passed at the Second Annual Conference of the Muhamma Coir Factory Workers' Union referring the political demands of the Union.⁴⁸ In spite of all these repressive measures, the working class was determined to put forward their fight against capitalism.

With the Government's attitude of suspicion on labour movement, the employers also adopted a policy of suppression. To cite an example, the authorities of the William Goodacre and Sons at Quilon have threatened to put down the labour agitation with strong repressive measures.⁴⁹ In fact some newspapers also

46. The Travancore Economic Journal, Vol.XIX, No.VII and VIII, July-August 1940, p.313.

47. Inspector General of Police, 27 May 1948, letter to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.3277/1948/Judl.

48. Letter to General Secretary, Muhamma Coir Factory Workers Union, 11 October 1940, D.Dis.257/1940/CS.

49. Confidential Report from Quilon Town Station, to Inspector General of Police, 31 August 1940, D.Dis.372/1940/CS.

supported the Governmental measures. In its editorial, the Prakasam newspaper congratulated the Government and the authorities for suppressing the labour agitation in Kuttanad.⁵⁰ The paper cautioned that the Communist control on the labour unions was bad both to the State and to the Union. It pleaded that the labour leaders should cooperate with the administration.

In connection with the arrest of K.C.George on 8 April 1940, the police organised seventy five searches to spot out communist activities and seized printed and manuscript literature of Communist character.⁵¹ Consequently, Communist-labour slogans and red flags were prohibited from the State. In exercise of the powers conferred by the rule 56 of the Defence of Travancore Rules, the Government banned public meetings and processions throughout the state for a period of fifteen days from 9 September 1942.⁵² Soon the All Travancore Trade Union Congress at its meeting in Alleppy passed resolutions protesting against the ban on processions and shouting of slogans.⁵³ In fact during the war period even fundamental rights of the people were mostly absent in Travancore. However, in June 1943, the

50. The Prakasam, 31 January 1942, Newspaper abstract, Part I, D.Dis.847/1945/CS.

51. Administrative Report, Police Department, 1940,
Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1941, p.22.

52. The Travancore Government Gazette Extraordinary, No.10, 10 August 1942, D.Dis.1517/1945/CS.

53. Inspector General of Police, January 1945, report to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.300/1945/CS.

administration lifted the ban on the activities of the Travancore State Congress. The lifting of the ban signalled the recurrence of labour activities. The All Travancore Trade Union Congress, at its first meeting on 1 November 1943 requested the Government to lift the ban on Desabhimani and other communist literature in the state.⁵⁴ But the Government, convinced of the risk behind the circulation of leftist literature in the State, paid no heed to the demand.

The Travancore Government treated the labour meetings and processions as a part of the leftist propaganda policy to spread socialism in the State. In fact, ^{the} Dewan warned the danger of mixing up politics with problems arising out of the relations between capital and labour. Fearing that the labour situation would worsen, the Government had again banned the holding of processions for a period of two months from 14 November 1943.⁵⁵ Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer warned T.V.Thomas and Janardhanan Nair, both members of the Executive of All Travancore Trade Union Congress, that the nomination of two seats to the Legislative Assembly and one to the Legislative Council would be withheld if they collaborated or helped the Travancore State Congress in the elections.⁵⁶ As a result the Parliamentary Board

54. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, Part I, 4 November 1943, D.Dis.1576/1945/CS.

55. Inspector General of Police, 25 November 1943, Weekly note to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.462/1947/CS.

56. Ibid., 14 June 1944, letter to T.V.Thomas, D.Dis.1621/1944/CS.

of the State Congress meeting in March 1944 was unwilling to include left wing trade union candidates among its nominations. At a conference on 10 June 1944, the State Congressites and the Communists drew up a statement declaring that the Travancore State Congress and the Trivandrum Communist Party were two independent organisations, unconnected with each other.⁵⁷

In this situation the leaders of Travancore Communist Party assured the Government that they would confine their activities, at this time of the war, to the solution of food problem and the relief of grievances. But the Government was not prepared to allow any more Communist propaganda within the state.⁵⁸ Thus the prohibitory orders on the Communists and shouting labour slogans continued to be in force in Travancore. The leftist leaders, however, continued underground activities to consolidate the labour force with new vigour. The All Travancore Trade Union Congress changed its method of petitions and shouting of slogans.⁵⁹ They demanded the immediate release of labour leaders. The General Council of the All India Trade Union Congress at Nagpur condemned that this frantic campaign against civil liberties was deliberately launched to suppress

57. Police Report on the State Congress Meeting, 10 June 1944, D.Dis.1456/1944/CS.

58. Press Note, 24 March 1944, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.366/1946/CS.

59. Inspector General of Police, 1 March 1945, Report to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.300/1945/CS.

the working class people in the state and demanded the Government to permit free exercise of democratic rights and liberties of the Working Class Movement.⁶⁰ In fact the continuous process of suppression by the Travancore Government to liquidate the Communist controlled labour unions only inspired the workers to organise themselves in camps at different parts of the State.

60. Resolutions passed at the meeting of General Council, All India Trade Union Congress, Nagpur, 20 and 21 April 1946, D.Dis.1650/1946/Devpt.

CHAPTER X
IN PURSUIT OF A WORKERS' GOVERNMENT

By the end of 1945 economy of Travancore was at its serious predicament. The impact of Second World War only resulted in further hardships to the working class. However, the Communists took this as a favourable situation. From the very beginning of 1946, there was an active wave of strikes in the State with the main demand for bonus. In the meantime, the All Travancore Trade Union Congress was vigorously coordinating the labour unions in the state, resulting in the growth of the labour movement. The labour force, now demanded a self government for the State. These developments posed a serious threat to the administration. The Dewan soon was forced to announce on 16 January 1946, a forthcoming constitutional reform. Yet the militant labour unions in the state could not be convinced. When the attempts of the administration to pacify the labour force through tripartite labour conferences also proved negative, it resulted in the Punnapra-Vayalar Revolt of 1946.

Organised Strikes

Following the war, there was scarcity of foodgrains and a steep rise in the prices of foodstuffs and other essential commodities. The sea-borne trade with the United Kingdom and the neutral countries in coir products came to a standstill. Consequently more than 25,000 workers employed mostly in the

coir factories at Alleppy, Sherthalai and Quilon were thrown out of work.¹ Tormented with poverty and penury, the working class was receptive to any ideology that could provide them means to get away from these acute economic distress. Thus the spirit of socialism and revolution inculcated by the leftist leaders had a wide appeal among the workers. The fact was that many a times the Managing Committee meeting of labour unions was held in the Communist camp at night.² The new spirit of class solidarity naturally generated militancy among the workers.

Meanwhile the Government of India summoned a Tripartite Labour Conference in September 1943. Travancore was one of the six industrially important Indian states represented in the labour conference and the Standing Labour Committee.³ The conference had resolved to formulate a 'machinery to investigate questions of wages and earnings, employment and housing and social conditions generally.'⁴ As a result, the Government of India appointed the Labour Investigation Committee to enquire about labour conditions as decided at the Tripartite Conference. The Committee visited Travancore on 13 March 1944⁵ and conducted

1. Travancore Administrative Report 1930-1940, p.117.
2. Inspector of Police, Quilon, 9 April 1945, Confidential report to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.687/1945/CS.
3. Administrative Report, Department of Industries, 1944, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1945, p.15.
4. Joshi, D.S., Deputy Secretary to Government of India, 12 February 1944, letter to Travancore Government, D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.
5. Adarkar, B.P., Member Secretary, Labour Investigation Committee, 25 February 1944, letter to Director of Industries, D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.

an enquiry upto 16 March into the conditions of labour in the coir mats and matting industry in the state. The committee in its report had estimated the number of workers employed in industry around 30,000 during 1944-1945.⁶ The condition created by the war was so acute that soon after the war many of the coir factory workers were thrown out of employment and were forced to take up agricultural work. For the existing workers in the factories, wages were reduced to half the rate of 1939. Therefore, labour unions began to complain about the low wage rates, lack of proper medical aid to the labourers, supply of ration at high prices and insecurity of employment. In addition to unemployment, Sherthalai area was also affected by the ravages of famine. In spite of the efforts by the administration, unemployment continued unabated. The Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers Union sarcastically pointed out the situation as 'man-made famine'.⁷

After the war ended, the purchasers of coir goods especially from United States of America were showing a tendency to bargain for prices and insist on quality goods. This changed the trend of coir goods in the international markets. During the war they did not bargain for prices or insist on quality.

6. Indian Labour Gazette, January-June 1953, Vol.X, p. 533.

7. President, Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers' Union, 18 October 1945, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.2/1946/Control.

Anything could be sold during the war. The hust owners in Travancore who were small capitalists tried to increase the price still higher and to unreasonable levels. Though the labour charges for spinning had not increased, the higher prices of coir forced a tendency to increase the price of yarn. The factory workers were also keen to demand increased wages. Consequently, the price of coir products had only increased. In America, whose ceiling prices were still operative, purchasers seemed to expect a fall in price due to the cessation of war hostilities.⁸ The result was that they seemed to watch for sometime and to purchase only their immediate requirements. They therefore made counter offers for reduction in prices against the wishes of local manufacturers. These facts seemed to be the causes of reduction in the value of orders received in Travancore. The Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers' Union, however, suggested to the Government the recognition of the entire coir trade. The reduction in orders for coir goods seriously affected the local coir factories in Alleppy-Sherthalai area. In fact, when the War ended, nearly fifty to sixty per cent of the labourers were unemployed.⁹

8. Coir Controller, 7 November 1945, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.2/1949/Control.

9. President, Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers' Union, 18 October 1945, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.2/1946/Control.

There were more piece-rate workers than time-rate workers in the coir industry in Travancore. By the beginning of 1946, a male worker in the coir factory received one rupee and nine annas as wage while an agricultural labourer of Kuttanad area got one rupee and eight annas as wage for a day.¹⁰ Since the prices of foodstuffs and other essential commodities rose high, poverty and starvation became rampant. In Alleppy town the cost of a standard meal became one rupee, which was only one and a half anna before the war.¹¹ Thus the shortage of food that prevailed during the war did not abate even after the end of it. To make matters worse, there were irregularities in the ration system. In fact the immediate post-war period saw the mounting grievances of the labourers in Travancore. As a result there was incessant strikes of industrial workers in Travancore by the beginning of 1946.

By 1940's labour strikes became a common feature in Travancore. The strike movement not only explained the solidarity of the working class but also the influence of leftist forces in them. In 1940 the labour force proposed to launch a general strike. The police, however, maintained that a general strike of the labourers would be a failure.¹² But

10. The Statistics of Travancore 1946-1947, Trivandrum, 1948, p.184.

11. Sixteen annas were equal to one rupee.

12. Inspector General of Police, 5 April 1940, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.286/1940/CS.

soon the administration exercised the powers conferred by rule 56 of the Defence of Travancore Rules and banned all public meeting and processions in any part of the state.¹³ Yet the labour force revealed their class solidarity through constant agitations. They have set up action council, volunteer organisation, strike committee and publication committee as part of their strike movement. The most remarkable feature was the number of workers involved in the strikes and their militant solidarity. By 1946 bonus became the major demand of the industrial workers. Between 1938 and 1944 the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union organized six anniversary functions and brought their demand to the attention of the administration. Moreover the All Travancore Trade Union Congress Working Committee which summoned at Quilon in 1943 reminded the legal demand for bonus to the attention of the State and the capitalists.¹⁴ Gradually the bonus issue had grown into an all-Travancore issue, leading to organised strikes.

The workers' strike movement had the support of the public bodies like the S.N.D.P.Yogam. In the twelfth anniversary meeting of the Yogam at Karunagapally on 31 March 1945, C.Kesavan asked the Ezhava caste members of the state to join workers' struggle.¹⁵ Meanwhile the Kuttanad agricultural

13. Travancore Gazette Extraordinary, 10 August 1942, D.Dis.1571/1945/CS.

14. Ibid., 8 July 1948, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

15. Kesavan, C., Speech at Twelfth Anniversary, S.N.D.P.Yogam, Karunagapally, 31 March 1945, D.Dis.970/1945/CS.

labourers had been organised for a state-wide agitation. Labour leaders, like Kambalathu Sankupillai, P.T.Punnose, C.Kesavan and others moved among the agricultural labourers and consolidated their demands.¹⁶ In the industrial town of Alleppy labour meetings and processions became an everyday affair. On 31 January 1946 the Quilon Cashewnut Factory Workers Union had struck work, led by its president M.N.Govindan Nair.¹⁷ The Union, however, claimed that the labourers should be given three months wage as bonus. Meanwhile the attempts of the administration to settle the dispute with the Union Secretaries Chellappan and K.R.Nanoo and the president M.N.Govindan Nair failed.¹⁸ Soon the strike wave had spread to other industries in the state.

Militancy of the Labour Class

From the beginning of 1946, the labour leaders worked out their political strategy in more aggressive proportions than ever before. Since the end of the war, there took place rapid political and constitutional changes in India. The British government had announced their intention of early realisation of full self government in India. In the midst of these developments, Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer announced on 16 January 1946,

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16. President, Karshaka Union, Changanacherry, 22 February 1945, Telegram to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.276/1945/CS.
 17. District Magistrate, Quilon, 2 February 1946, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, D.Dis.600/1946/Devpt.
 18. SHO, Quilon Cusba, 31 January 1946, letter to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.600/1946/Devpt.

a constitutional reform to be introduced shortly.¹⁹ The administration had claimed that this reform was modelled on that of the United States of America in the matter of relations between the Legislature, the executive and the judiciary.²⁰ In reality the reform made no significant departure from the constitution promulgated in 1932. Moreover, C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer sought to safeguard his position as Dewan within the monarchical set up and to put an end to the issue of responsible government. The political parties in the state had been waiting for an opportunity to rehabilitate their fortunes. The Communist Party appealed to the workers to rally under their banner to organise a struggle for ~~terminating~~ terminating the dewan rule for ever. It should be noted that the Travancore police had already cautioned the administration that 'all the labourers in Alleppy numbering about 40,000 were Communists and that they were _____ led by Communist leaders like E.M.S.Namboodiripad and others.'²¹ Consequently, the workers organised processions with the slogan of 'American Model in Arabian Sea'.

By now the trade union activity in the State became active with labour strikes as a regular feature. At the seventh annual conference of the Quilon Factory Workers' Union held on 22 April 1946, both tricolour and red flags were hoisted. The

19. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.142.

20. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VI, No.6, February 1946, p.7.

21. Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 13 October 1945, Copy of report to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.4200/1945/Judl.

proceedings of the conference commenced with the salute to the flag by labour volunteers, mostly red-shirts including women clad in red sarees.²² The labour conference, while expressing dissatisfaction over the new reforms, protested against the curtailment of civil liberties in the state. In fact there was a move to organise strikes in every industry. On 26 January 1946, the All Travancore Trade Union Congress organised the Strike of Alleppy workers to protest against the proposals of the Government regarding constitutional reforms.²³ Taking note of the emerging labour strikes, the Dewan had remarked that it became the habit of the labour to declare a state-wide strike when the demands of the labourers even in a particular locality were not redressed.²⁴

The Government of Travancore through their gazette on 5 February 1945 had ordered under the Defence of Travancore Rules prohibiting strikes and lockouts without notice in connection with trade disputes. It provided that 'no person employed in any undertaking shall go on strike in connection with any trade disputes without having given to his employer within one month before striking not less than fourteen days' previous notice in writing of his intention to do so.²⁵ The

22. Phone message from Sub-Inspector of Police, Quilon, 22 April 1946, D.Dis.2283/1946/Devpt.
23. Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 29 January 1946, letter to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.539/1946/Devpt.
24. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly, Vol.XXVIII, No.6, 27 July 1946, pp.481-482.
25. Press Note, 3 February 1946, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.2554/1946/Devpt.

Travancore Government had extended full support to the police and magistracy in dealing with labour agitations and especially with communists.²⁶ The Labour Commissioner and the Inspector General of Police had camped at sensitive areas of labour troubles, carrying on negotiations for settlement with employers and labour union representatives.²⁷ Amidst all precautions by the administration, the labour force went ahead with their weapon of strike. In fact the militancy of the workers and their eagerness to press the strike forward appeared to have outstripped even that of the leaders to close their ranks. However in a new turn of developments of trade unionism in the state, the factory managements have now agreed that they would recognise workers' trade unions if they were properly constituted and organised on trade basis.²⁸

Early in April 1946 there were sporadic labour strikes at different parts of the state. The labourers were often found within the factory premises shouting slogans. The state's heavy handling of communist activities forced them to declare in April 1946 that they were determined to establish a national government. It was in April 1946 the central committee of the

26. Secretary to Government, Trivandrum, 5 February 1946, letter to Inspector General of Police, D.Dis.600/1946/Devpt.

27. Labour Commissioner, Quilon, 9 February 1946, Phonocom to Private Secretary to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.600/1946/Devpt.

28. Acting Labour Commissioner, 23 February 1946, Memorandum of Settlement to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.829/1946/Devpt.

Communist Party of India called on the provincial wing of the party to develop spontaneous struggles into local battles and to raise the question of State power.²⁹ On 5 April 1946 the labour leaders made speeches at the meeting of cashew factory workers union that they must change the present system of administration by revolution if necessary.³⁰ The administration retaliated by banning processions and the use of red flag by the workers in the State. Labour leaders like R.Sugathan and P.G.Padmanabhan were prevented from making speeches at public meetings. In this circumstances, the general council of the All India Trade Union Congress at its Nagpur Session on 20 and 21 April 1946 emphatically protested against such measures of the Travancore Government and demanded the withdrawal of all restrictions on trade union leaders and to allow free exercise of the democratic rights and liberties of the workers.³¹

On 7 August 1946 there was a general strike of coir factory workers in the Alleppy-Sherthalai area, on the alleged ground of unsatisfactory rations.³² Consequently, the Government has summoned a joint meeting of labour representatives and the

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29. Isaac Thomas, T.M., 'The National Movement and Communist Party in Kerala', op.cit., p.75.
30. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, 5 April 1946, D.Dis.394/1946/CS.
31. Resolutions passed at General Council of AITUC, Nagpur, 20 and 21 April 1946, D.Dis.1650/1946/Devpt.
32. Labour Commissioner, 26 August 1946, report to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.2567/1946/Devpt.

officers concerned on 8 August 1946 with K.R.Narayana Iyer, Director of Food Supplies, as mediator.³³ T.V.Thomas represented the labour at the joint conference. The conference had resolved that 'the existing taluk committees would be recognised and reconstituted immediately and there would be representations for the labour in the committee'. Soon a sub-committee was appointed to various places in this taluk to establish hotels where meals were served on reasonable terms and also fair price shops for storing and distributing tapioca and fish. Finally in pursuance of the settlement arrived at Alleppy, the strike was called off. When the workers resumed work on 10 August, they were delighted to realise their stamina as a class. At Punnapra this excitement caused the fishermen to form the All Travancore Coastal Workers Union in 1946. The Union was registered in accordance with the Trade Union Act in June 1946.³⁴

Organised labour all over the state started demanding annual bonus equal to one quarter of the total annual wages, including all allowances. By then the leftist labour leaders N.Sreekantan Nair, M.N.Govindan Nair and K.R.Nanoo were exciting the workers to join the strike movement. Thus under political

33. Ambalapuzha Taluk Rationing Officer, August 1946, report to Civil Supplies Commissioner, D.Dis.1318/1948/Control.

34. Professor of Marine Biology, University of Travancore, 23 August 1946, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.1515/1946/CS.

leadership, the labourers revived their militancy. The District Magistrate of Quilon had directed the police to detain the political leaders immediately in custody under the Defence of Travancore Rules. However, the frequent warnings from the Government could not stop the active trade union movement. The remarkable growth of the labour movement was that the workers now organised volunteer corps of men and women for the conduct of the strike. Interestingly, the coir factory owners of Alleppy and Sherthalai area had retaliated the labour strikes by lock-outs. They had put up notices declaring their intention even to close down their factories.³⁵

The All Travancore Trade Union Congress had guided various labour unions in their organised struggles. On 5 September 1946 the Trade Union Congress called upon the labourers to strike work in order to express their protest against the continued repressive policy of the Government on the workers and the Communists.³⁶ Though partially successful, the strike exposed to the workers the benefits of organised labour. However, the Trade Union Congress had decided to bring the bonus issue to the attention of the Travancore Mats and Matting Manufacturers' Association and the Industrial Relations Committee. Consequently, the Industrial Relations Committee discussed the bonus issue and resolved to give bonus for 1946 to the workers in two instalments, equal to 8½ per cent of one year's basic wage of coir workers.³⁷

35. Note submitted by Acting Labour Commissioner, 21 September 1946, D.Dis.2567/1946/Devpt.

36. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 22 September 1946, D.Dis.84/1946/CS.

37. Ibid., 8 July 1948, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

The rapid growth of militant labour movement under the Communist leadership had its reaction. Influential business men organised rival trade unions or supported the administration in suppressing the labourers.³⁸ At the request of factory owners, the Government posted military at the centres of labour unrest. Moreover the administration had demonstrated that they were definitely determined to deal against law-breakers with the aid of the armed police and the military.³⁹ However, the administration did not realise a struggle was brewing. There were attempts to register trade unions on communal lines like the Travancore Christian Factory Workers Union and the South Travancore Sambhavar Agriculturist Labour Union. In fact even the Labour Commissioner contempered the District Magistrate for his instructions favouring the factory owners. The Labour Commissioner had written to the administration that 'if the magistracy appear to be taking sides with the law breakers, labour was likely to be driven to desperation'.⁴⁰

Determined to put an end to the labour strikes, the Government ordered the arrest of prominent labour leaders.

38. Ibid., 20 October 1946, D.Dis.133/1948/CS.

39. Inspector General of Police, 30 September 1946, Note submitted to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.2793/1946/Devpt.

40. Labour Commissioner, Trivandrum, 27 February 1946, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.998/1946/Devpt.

Public meetings were banned for three months with effect from 7 September 1946.⁴¹ The police had trespassed into the trade union offices and threatened the labour leaders. As a mark of protest against the arrest of leaders, the factory workers of Alleppy struck work on 20 September. In a leaflet published by K.K.Kunjan, the coir workers' union had retaliated that 'the graneries of landlords and not trade union offices should be searched.' The Union exhorted for the unity of all freedom lovers to reestablish civic rights in Travancore. The Communists held a conference at Alleppy on 23 September 1946, with T.V.Thomas in the chair. It was attended by eighty three representatives for fifty five trade unions.⁴² The labour conference had resolved to submit to government a charter of nine demands relating to political and labour problems.⁴³ It included ;

- (i) the release of all political and labour prisoners,
- (ii) the removal of ban order on labour meetings,
- (iii) grant of bonus and unemployment allowance in case of no work;
- (iv) protection in old age and sickness,
- (v) reduction of working hours,

41. Inspector General of Police, 22 September 1946, fortnightly report to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.84/1946/CS.

42. Sreekantan Nair, N., Vanchikkappatta Venad, (Malayalam), Ernakulam, 1947, pp.9-10.

43. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 17 October 1946, D.Dis.732/1946/CS.

- (vi) withdrawal of military from labour centres,
- (vii) recognition of all industries,
- (viii) elected representative of the people to the
Indian Constituent Assembly, and
- (ix) end of the Dewan rule.

The workers as a class raised the demand for the establishment of an interim Government in Travancore and the election of a constituent assembly on adult franchise to decide the future constitution of the state. Meanwhile the Alleppy Coir Workers' Union had warned that the capitalists who deny labour rights and try to trouble the labourers with the help of the police and the military should face strong labour revolt. At the labour representatives' conference, P.T.Punnose, proposed a general strike to mark the beginning of the working class struggle for a Responsible Government in Travancore. The conference resolved to begin a political general strike after 13 October 1946.⁴⁴ The labour slogans had now demonstrated the confidence that official domination and the Dewan rule would terminate.

44. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.161.

Tripartite Labour Conference

The militant move of the workers invited the serious attention of the Government on labour problems. The sympathetic milieu which favoured the labour cause encouraged the workers to be hold. In retaliation the Travancore Government promulgated the Emergency Powers Act on 1 October 1946, and declared a state of emergency in the State.⁴⁵ By this Act, the Government banned strikes, hartals, processions and labour meetings. Further, the administration secured powers to confiscate property and to imprison persons involved in subversive activities. In fact the Act gave the administration absolute power over the individual and corporate life of citizens.⁴⁶ In spite of the threat from administration, the Travancore Trade Union Congress and the Communist Party jointly displayed their protest against the promulgation of the Act and threatened to observe a general strike. The Trade Union Congress had converted the demand for bonus into an all Travancore workers' issue. Noticing the turbulent stand of the labour, the Government felt the need for an effective and early settlement with the labour class.

45. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 5 October 1946.

46. Travancore Peoples' Association, Bombay, News Bulletin, No.1, 29 October 1946, D.Dis.767/1946/CS.

The Government soon convened a Tripartite Labour Conference at the Legislative Chamber of the Government Secretariat, Trivandrum on 7 and 8 October 1946.⁴⁷ Inaugurating the Conference, Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer made a plea for labour and capital to cooperate in the task of putting the industrial house of the state in order. The conference was attended by the Industrial Liaison Officer, the Inspector General of Police, the Director of Industries, Labour and Assistant Labour Commissioner representing the Government.⁴⁸ N.Sreekantan Nair and T.V.Thomas represented the workers in the Tripartite Conference. The conference was also represented by various chambers of commerce, manufacturers and employers' associations. The agenda of the conference included questions of annual bonus, holidays with pay, reduction in hours of work, fixation of minimum basic rates of wages for organised industries, labour welfare schemes, recognition of trade unions, establishment of Industrial Relations Committee for organised industries and enquiry into labour conditions in plantations.

The Dewan had maintained that the conference brought about a general agreement on all important labour questions.⁴⁹

47. Inspector General of Police, 8 July 1948, letter to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

48. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.3, November 1946, p.16.

49. Travancore Administration Report 1946-1947, p.94.

But fact was that the conference could not bring any settlement between the owners and workers. At the conference on 7 October a sub-committee was formed to go into details and to draw up definite proposals for the payment of bonus for the various industries.⁵⁰ The members of the sub-committee included the Labour Commissioner, M.L.Janardhanan Pillai, P.S.George, T.V. Thomas and N.Sreekantan Nair. However, the sub-committee reported to the conference the following resolutions:⁵¹

- (i) Bonus must be given to workers of all recognised industries,
- (ii) In no circumstances bonus should be reduced below four per cent of the total income;-
- (iii) Bonus problem must be decided by the representatives of the workers and owners concerned to the particular work or factory and
- (iv) Disputes related to bonus should be settled by a committee including Labour Commissioner, E.L.Pollard, T.V.Thomas and N.Sreekantan Nair.

The Tripartite Conference acknowledged the report of the sub-committee and resolved that "every worker in all organised industries should be given annually a lumpsum payment

50. Labour Commissioner, op.cit., 2 October 1947, D.Dis.2330/1947/Devpt.

51. Coir Factory Workers 1946-1947 Bonus, Booklet, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

amounting to an absolute minimum of four per cent of his total earnings in the year".⁵² The Dewan had made it clear that in respect of the Government sponsored industries, bonus should be paid only on the availability of a surplus and that with respect to private concerns, the employers and the employees should evolve a formula by putting their heads together.⁵³ Under this provision, the owners refused bonus to workers. However C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer had agreed to pay four per cent bonus on the condition that the working class would cut off their relations with political parties and should support the American Model Constitution of the Dewan. In fact the Dewan was shrewd in his idea to isolate the working class movement from the National Movement.⁵⁴ But the militant and class-conscious workers had refused the offer. No wonder the Tripartite Labour Conference marked the breakdown of final efforts at a powerful settlement between the labour and the capital.

Now the Dewan warned the trade union leaders of serious consequences, if they struck work. He had asserted that 'any strike or agitation started at the instance of any political

52. Report of the Committee on Coir Mats and Matting Manufacturing Industry, D.Dis.201466/1955/Devpt.

53. Advocate General, No.LR 207, 22 August 1954, letter to Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.17151/1954/Devpt.

54. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.162.

party as a means of labour trying to change the form of Government could not be countenanced.⁵⁵ The Dewan had insisted that so long as the present Government policy lasted, responsible government in the British sense was not going to be contemplated in Travancore. "That being clear and final", he added, "if on that basis there was going to be a general sympathetic strike, it would have to be dealt with all powers under the command of the Government". In this circumstance the Travancore Trade Union Congress met at Alleppy on 13 October 1946 and decided to observe a general strike with effect from 22 October 1946.⁵⁶ The Trade Union Congress constituted a Council of Action of five members consisting of the Communists, socialists and trade unionists to formulate the future course of action.⁵⁷ The determination of the labour force to counter the military power at last, generated a violent confrontation at Punnapra and Vayalar.

A Violent Confrontation

Labour in Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha area had for the last few years come under the influence and control of the Communist Party. When the factory workers were getting ready

55. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.3, November 1946, p.19.

56. George, K.C., Punnapra Vayalar (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1972, pp.42-43.

57. Inspector General of Police, 26 March 1948, Short note on Communist activity submitted to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.265/1948/CS.

for a direct confrontation, there occurred conflicts between workers and the landlords. At Kadakkarapally near Sherthalai, clashes occurred between the workers and the owners on 13 and 14 October, resulting the death of the owner.⁵⁸ Now the Government reacted firmly. The military that arrived at the spot raided the Coir Factory Union Office at Sherthalai, removed the Union flag, arrested leaders and assaulted the workers. In protest against this military action, the Travancore Trade Union Congress called for a sympathetic one day strike in Alleppy on 17 October 1946. It was responded by most of the labour unions.⁵⁹ Meanwhile a body of workers left for Punnapra, a coastal area five kilometres south of Alleppy, and exhorted the local fishermen to join the strike. The fishermen soon extended their support.⁶⁰ Consequently there was clash between the strikers and some pro-Government workers. The tense situation was eased only after the arrival of military.

In retaliation to the military action, the workers formed six camps to the south of Alleppy town at Punnapra, Paravur, Vandanam, Vattayal, Vattakkal and Kalarkode. Moreover in Sherthalai volunteer camps were set up at Olathala, Vayalar, Kalavancode, Menasserri, Muhamma, Kattoor, Varakadu, Mararikullam and Puthengadi. K.K.Kumaran was ^{the} supreme commander.⁶¹

58. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.149.

59. Quilon District Magistrate, 17 October 1946, Report to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.133/1948/CS.

60. Interview with M.N.Govindan Nair, 21 August 1984, Pattom, Trivandrum.

61. Kusuman, K.K., Punnapra Vayalar Uprising 1946, op.cit., pp.137-157.

However Vayakar was the headquarters of the volunteer training camps, which the workers called as their 'Moscow'. Each of these training centres consisted of not less than 2,000 workers. Trenches were dug in Vayalar and weapons like stakes of arecanut trees and sharp granite pieces were collected and got ready. The Communist leaders formed concentration camps in different places and armed themselves to attack the police and military.⁶² The workers were taught to lie flat during any firing. The Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers Union office was the nerve centre of the organised labour movement. It was surprise that there were courts within the camps to try and let off relenting labourers on the promise that they would cooperate with the struggle.⁶³

The Government had by now branded this as an 'organised insurrection' and ordered repressive measures to put down the brewing struggle. They have mobilised police and military to the taluks of Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha. On 19 October 1946 the Government declared the Fish Workers' Union at Alleppy and Punnapra, the Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers Union, the Travancore Communist Party and all bodies connected with it as unlawful associations.⁶⁴ The administration declared as illegal

62. Administrative Report, Police Department, Part III, 1947, R.Dis.2429/1948/Judl.

63. Inspector General of Police, 21 December 1946, Report to the Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.11/1947/CS.

64. Travancore Government Gazette Extraordinary, 19 October 1946.

nearly sixty labour unions affiliated to the Communist Party.⁶⁵ Moreover the leading landlords of Sherthalai met at the local Tourist Bungalow on 19 October 1946 and made plans to set fire to the houses of labour leaders and to organise rowdies.⁶⁶

Following the ban of the Travancore Trade Union Congress and the Communist Party, a general strike was declared on 22 October 1946 which continued the next day too, the birthday of Sri Chitra Tirunal, the Maharajah of Travancore.⁶⁷ An underground movement had also taken its direction mainly from the Malabar Communist Party leaders. There was always the danger of their communist brethren from across the border participating in the movement directly. Communist leaders P.Krishnapillai, A.K.Gopalan, E.M.S.Namboodiripad, K.C.George, P.Gangadharan, P.T.Punnose, C.G.Sivadasan and others toured the area, imparting marxism to the labourers.⁶⁸ The general strike marked the beginning of an agitation at Sherthalai, Vayalar and Alleppy where buses and boats carrying rice proved convenient targets. As a precautionary measure, the Travancore Police cut off communication by backwaters against the landing of Communists in the State. Only bonafide passengers were allowed

65. Inspector General of Police, *op.cit.*, 11 October 1947, D.Dis.138/1948/CS.

66. Kusuman, K.K., 'Punnapra-Vayalar Uprising 1946', *op.cit.*, pp.137-157.

67. Quilon District Magistrate, 22 October 1946, Report to Administrative Secretary to Dewan, Travancore, D.Dis.139/1948/CS.

68. Kusuman, K.K., *op.cit.*, pp.137-157.

to cross the backwaters. Armed police had patrolled the backwaters day and night.⁶⁹

On 24 October, there was a clash between the Reserve Police and the workers at Punnapra. A party of processionists, trained and equipped with wooden spears, axes and locally available weapons, made a planned attack on a police party encamped in a house at Punnapra.⁷⁰ In the attack police Sub-Inspector Velayudha Nadar, a head constable and two constables who were in charge of the police camp were murdered.⁷¹ On 25 October the administration promulgated martial law in Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha taluks. The army under the command of Major General V.N.Parameswaran Pillai took charge of the situation.⁷² At the turn of events, Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer took over the direct command of the State Forces to coordinate the civil and military authorities.⁷³ He adopted stern measures to put down the revolt. However, the revolting labourers cut telephone and telegraphic wires and demolished bridges and small culverts. In return the State Forces opened fire at the labourers, killing a number of rioters. The number of persons died in the fight,

69. D.S.P., Kottayam, 13 December 1946, letter to Inspector General of Police, D.Dis.283/1948/Judl.

70. Travancore Police Daily Report, No.298, 25 October 1946, D.Dis.466/1947/CS.

71. Report of Administration, Police Department, 1947, Part I, D.Dis.2429/1948/Judl.

72. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.4, December 1946, p.44.

73. The Hindu, 26 October 1946, p.6.

however, vary between Government and private reports.⁷⁴

In Sherthalai, there was a violent confrontation between the military and the rioting workers. On 27 October a military detachment raided the labour camps at Olathala and Menasserri. On the same day military advanced to Vayalar, employing motor boats. Surrounded by swamps and sea, Vayalar was not easily accessible and was made a major centre of the Communist volunteers. In a bold confrontation, the mob of armed rioters numbering more than a thousand, daringly faced the military.⁷⁵ In a fierce fighting the military resorted to firing, which took many lives of the workers at the spot.⁷⁶ The administration had maintained that from all information to them, only about 190 persons were killed throughout the struggle in the firing by the military and the police.⁷⁷

The punitive action taken by the Travancore Police and the declaration of martial law confined the movement to the Punnapra and Vayalar area and did not allow the struggle to spread to other centres of the State. The practically

74. George, K.C., op.cit., p.140.

75. The Hindu, 30 October 1946, p.6.

76. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.153.
The fact that when the enquiry committee of the State Congress reported the death roll as ninety four, K.C.George, a leading organiser of the struggle put it as more than a hundred and fifty. (George, K.C., op.cit., p.155.). The police had burnt many dead bodies by pouring petrol on them, in order to reduce the number. (Vanaja Rengaswami, op.cit., pp.213-215.)

77. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.5, January 1947, p.7.

complete absence of agitation in other parts of the State enabled the Government to concentrate on the trouble spots and to quell the agitation within days. As a result of stern military action, most of the prominent Communist leaders went underground. The State Congress, however, did not support the agitation and a section of Congress leaders came out even openly against the uprising.⁷⁸ Immediately after the Vayalar revolt, leaders dispersed the camps and T.V.Thomas, president of the All Travancore Trade Union Congress, appealed to the labourers to resume work. With the rounding up of the Communist leaders and other strikers, the labourers resumed work. Now the administration maintained that the Communist menace in the state was halted.⁷⁹ Since the situation was getting normal, the administration withdrew the martial law with effect from 10 November 1946.⁸⁰ The Dewan, however, took full responsibility and blame for the military action which he said had been taken deliberately as he had seen no point in going piecemeal. He had described the incidents at Punnapra and Vayalar as an 'organised insurrection' by a section of the public, especially the younger generation, with the help of the State Communist Party.⁸¹

78. Daniel, D., op.cit., pp.155-156.

79. Report of Administration, Police Department, 1947, Part III, R.Dis.2429/1948/Judl.

80. Travancore Government Gazette Extraordinary, 8 November 1946.

81. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.4, December 1946, p.46.

It is a remarkable fact that while the General Strike of 1938 revealed the class solidarity of the workers, the Punnapra Vayalar Revolt has proved their militancy in the class struggle. Indeed the revolt set an example to the Indian Working Class. As K.C.George had described, the revolt formed a significant scene in the long fight organised under the leadership of the Communist Party and the organised labourers for the achievement of responsible government and to end the Dewan rule.⁸² In his report to the Dewan of Travancore, the Inspector General of Police had stated that "it was the irresponsible and misled of the labour movement by the Communists that has committed the mishappenings and the consequent suppression".⁸³ But Travancore State Congress took an altogether independent line. While the State Congress warned the Government against repression and the declaration of the martial law, it had deplored the violent methods adopted by a section of labour under the guidance of Communist leadership. In fact the Communists had claimed their positive role in the struggle.⁸⁴ The State Congress too expressed itself on the side of the labour to whom it appealed to free themselves from the Communist leadership who were

82. George, K.C., op.cit., p.185.

83. Inspector General of Police, 21 December 1946, report to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.11/1947/CS.

84. Ranadive, B.T., "The Role Played by Communists in the Freedom Struggle of India", Social Scientist, Vol.12, No.9, September 1984, pp.31-32.

responsible for their troubles. The Dewan characterised the attitude of the State Congress as unhelpful and obstructive.⁸⁵ Nevertheless George Woodcock is right in his remark that the memory of the battles at Punnapra and Vayalar still arises strong feelings in Travancore.⁸⁶ The Travancore working class, making a common cause with the political leadership for the first time boldly confronted with the administrative machinery. However, in order to end the Communist power and to restore peace, the Government ruthlessly put down the labour force.

85. The Hindu, 31 October 1946, p.6.

86. George Woodcock, op.cit., p.248.

CHAPTER XI

RESTRICTION AND RECONCILIATION

The Government of Travancore faced the 'organised insurrection' of the workers in 1946 with a stern military action. While the administration ruthlessly put down the revolt, it was also determined to put an end to the growing strength of the Communists in the State. But amidst repression and ban orders, the workers' movement had stepped forward, asserting their class solidarity. Amidst the political changes in the preceding years, trade unions had revived their activities. The working class could claim a major role in the termination of the Dewan rule and the attainment of responsible government in Travancore. By 1948 the administration, conscious of a growing movement of the workers in the state, began to attempt conciliation with the labour.

Repression and Ban

The Government relied on excessive political violence to suppress the revolt of 1946. The end of the workers' uprising brought a period of uneasy calm. In the mopping up operations immediately after the violent confrontation at Punnapra and Vayalar, the administration banned all major trade unions in the state, including the Travancore Trade Union Congress.¹ For

1. Vanaja Rengaswami, op.cit., p.217.

the first time the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union was banned. On the very first day of the withdrawal of strike, Union President T.V.Thomas, Vice-President P.K.Padmanabhan and hundreds of union workers were arrested. Leading writers and literary critics in any way connected with the socialist programme like P.Kesava Dev, Ponkunnam Varkey, Takazhi Sivasankara Pillai and K.Ramakrishna Pillai were put under detention. The Government adopted a new method in impounding all ration cards of the suspects and allowing only those with the Tahsildar's permit to draw rice and textile.²

The military raided the trade union offices and^c destroyed most of the records. At Vaikom, the local Inspector of Police visited the factories almost every day and the labourers were given necessary instructions not to join hands the revolutionaries. The police had patrolled the backwaters day and night allowing only bonafide passengers to cross the waters.³ Moreover exercising the powers conferred by Section 13(1) of the Travancore Emergency Powers Act of 1947, the administration had passed orders that no labour meeting should be held for a period of three months from 7 December 1946 in any part of the State.⁴ As a result of the repressive measure

2. Ibid., p.217.

3. D.S.P., Kottayam, 13 December 1946, letter to Inspector General of Police, D.Dis.283/1948/Judl.

4. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 22 November 1946, D.Dis.1879/1948/Judl.

adopted by the administration, most of the prominent labour leaders went underground. In this state of disorder, the State Congress has revived its activity. However the State Congress gained no immediate advantage of the situation, for it adopted a neutral policy because of its anti-government and not pro-Communist attitude.⁵

The Travancore Police found out a copy of circular of the Communist leader P.T.Ranadive in the possession of an arrested industrial worker at Sherthalai.⁶ Soon the Government had learnt about the night schools and squad works of Travancore Communists among the working class, in pursuance of the instructions received from the all India high command. So in order to prevent labourers from attending the Communist night classes, the Police have organised night patrols.⁷ It should be recalled that since the uprising at Alleppy and Sherthalai in October 1946, the State Congressites and the Communists started working together against the Dewan's declaration of independent Travancore. Consequently the police have detained five out of eleven members of the State Congress Working Committee under custody. Moreover,

5. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.159.

6. Copy of report of A.S.P., Alleppy, 24 May 1948, D.Dis.3277/1948/Judl.

7. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 27 May 1948, D.Dis.3277/1948/Judl.

the district magistrates issued ban orders on meetings and processions for fifteen days from 12 June 1947 in the state.⁸ Yet the Communist-controlled labourers proceeded with their programmes in defiance of the ban orders. Realising the seriousness of the situation, the Government invoked the Emergency Powers Act of 1946, banning any public procession without permission.⁹

Now the labour leaders have decided to start a programme of direct action for the early settlement of responsible government. Meanwhile the Communists printed propaganda materials at Ernakulam, Trichur and Calicut and secretly imported them into Travancore. Booklets containing accounts of alleged atrocities of the capitalists and the consequent sufferings of the labourers were also printed at the South Indian Press, Parassala in South Travancore and circulated among labourers.¹⁰ Being aware of these developments, the administration instructed the Excise and Labour Commissioners to seize such literature at the various centres. Vaarikunthangal, a publication by Ponnunnam Damodaran, praising the Punnapra-Vayalar Revolt was banned by the Government as an objectionable publication.¹¹ In its

8. Copy of report, A.S.P.Trivandrum city, 14 June 1947, D.Dis.268/1947/CS.

9. The Hindu, 20 June 1947, p.4.

10. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 7 May 1949, D.Dis.58/1949/CS.

11. Commissioner of Police, Cochin, 2 July 1948, letter to District Magistrate, Trichur, R.Dis.31293/1949/Cochin file.

monthly bulletin entitled "The Trade Union Record" for November 1946, published from Bombay and addressed to the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union Alleppy, the All India Trade Union Congress gave propaganda regarding the uprising at Alleppy and Sherthalai area. Soon the Government had prohibited the publication or circulation of the Trade Union Record in the State.¹² It is true that the working class in Travancore had seldom exhibited militancy since the days of Punnapra-Vayalar uprising. Perhaps the reason was that all prominent labour leaders were detained by the Government with a view to halt the growth of Communist power. Yet the trade unions in the state had revived their activities in the state.

Revival of Trade Unionism

Among the changing political trends in Travancore, the trade unions revived their activities. Meanwhile absence of civil liberties in the state received national attention. Trade Unions in the neighbouring states were also exhorting the Dewan to remove the ban and prohibitions and to declare civil rights in Travancore. At its meeting on 1 November 1946, the Bombay Provincial Trade Union Congress passed resolutions asking the Travancore Government to remove the repression in

12. Notification, Government of Travancore, December 1946, No.1932, D.Dis.52/1947/CS.

the State. The Congress demanded the release of trade union leaders.¹³ Meanwhile the members of the Coir Factory Unions in Travancore had surrepticiously entered into the government-sponsored committees and these committees became platform for the political struggle of the workers.¹⁴

In 1947 India was on the threshold of attaining freedom. On 20 February 1947 Clement Atlee announced in the House of Commons the decision of the British Government to effect the transfer of power to responsible Indian people by a date not later than June 1948.¹⁵ However, the Mountbatten plan proposed the division of the country into two dominions, India and Pakistan, and the transfer of power to take place on 15 August 1947 instead of June 1948.¹⁶ In fact the political trend in Travancore was against the national interest. On 11 June 1947 Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer announced his idea of independent Travancore at a press conference at Trivandrum.¹⁷ In pursuance of his policy, the Dewan held a discussion with M.A.Jinnah, who agreed to receive a trade agent in Pakistan on

13. General Secretary, Bombay Provincial Trade Union Congress, No.1860, 10 November 1946, letter to the Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.770/1946/CS.

14. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.166.

15. Gupta, D.C., Indian National Movement, Delhi, 1970, p.226.

16. Majumdar, R.C., History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol.III, Calcutta, 1963, p.754.

17. Press Note, Government of Travancore, 11 June 1947, D.Dis.268/1947/CS.

its establishment as a dominion.¹⁸ Against the stand of the Dewan, there was unanimous opposition from the Peoples' Organisations in Travancore. Now both the Communist and State Congress parties have decided to agitate jointly against the Dewan's independent Travancore. Thus the political situation turned favourable for a renewed agitation. The State Congress now called upon the workers to launch mass civil disobedience and exhorted them to strike work.¹⁹

In the meantime the Indian National Congress leaders were convinced of the need of preserving the integrity of India, when the nation was on the eve of attaining freedom. For this purpose they decided to gain popular support all over the country in favour of considering the states as legally and morally part of it. Vallabhai Patel appealed to the rulers to join the Constituent Assembly of India and to accede to the Indian Union.²⁰ In order to settle the matters in consultation, Lord Mountbatten invited C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer to Delhi. In fact the efforts of the Congress leaders and the viceroy and the pressure from the Political organisations in the State could not win over the Dewan's idea of an independent Travancore. On 25 July 1947 an

18. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.11, July 1947, p.60.

19. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 26 June 1947, D.Dis.278/1947/CS.

20. Murthi, R.K., Sardar Patel: The Man and his Contemporaries, New Delhi, 1976, p.9.

'unknown assailant' made an attempt on the life of C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer at the Swati Tirunal Music Academy at Trivandrum.²¹ Fortunately the Dewan's life was safe and the assailant had escaped. However, this incident put an end to the issue of 'independent Travancore'. On 30 July 1947 the Maharajah of Travancore accepted the Instrument of Accession into the Indian Union.²² On 13 August, Travancore was acceded to the Indian Union.²³ Subsequently within a few days after freedom, on 19 August C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer relinquished his Dewanship.²⁴ The long pending demand of the working class to remove the Dewan Rule from Travancore was thus now fulfilled.

Inspite of the declaration of political freedom, Travancore was yet to receive a Responsible Government. By this time the Communist leaders who were underground and absconding due to the repression of the Government had come out to consolidate the labourers to their side again.²⁵ Amidst the bans and prohibitions, the workers formed the Alleppy Coir Workers Committee to continue the work of the banned trade union. Moreover in Quilon, the Cashew Factory workers have organised into

21. The Hindu, 23 July 1947, p.1.

22. Menon, V.P., The story of Integration of Indian States, New Delhi, 1969, p.112.

23. The Hindu, 15 August 1947, p.8.

24. Travancore Government Gazette Extraordinary, 19 August 1947.

25. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 22 August 1947, D.Dis.448/1947/CS.

the Cashew Workers Council. Both the Alleppy Coir Factory Workers' Committee and the Cashew Workers Council were affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress. The leaders reiterated the demand for responsible government and threatened civil disobedience movement on an extensive scale.²⁶

In the change of events, P.G.Narayanan Unnithan, Administrative Secretary of C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer, assumed office as the officiating Dewan on 21 August 1947. In fact after the attack on the former Dewan, the administration softened its attitude towards political agitators. In September 1947 Dewan P.G.Narayanan Unnithan lifted the ban on the coir factory workers' union.²⁷ Martial law in the Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha taluks were lifted and most of the prominent labour leaders were released. The labour force received their released leaders at Alleppy amidst excitement.²⁸ After making compromise with the State Congress in their political struggle, the new Dewan agreed to concede the demand for a responsible government in the State. Accordingly, advised by the Dewan, the Maharajah issued a Royal Proclamation on 4 September 1947 granting Responsible Government.²⁹ Now the working class under the

26. Copy of Report, ASP, Alleppy, 20 August 1947, D.Dis.448/1947/CS.

27. Bhaskaran Unnithan, K., op.cit., pp.300-301.

28. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.169.

29. Travancore Information and Listener, No.2, October 1947, pp.5-6.

leadership of P.T.Punnose and R.Sugathan prepared for the first anniversary of Punnapra-Vayalar Revolt. With processions and meetings they proved their strength and solidarity. In fact for the joint work of the Communists and the workers, the administration found it difficult to single out the Communists.³⁰

However the Punnapra Vayalar prisoners were not released even after independence. Consequently the labour organisations and the leftist parties, even from outside the State, demanded the immediate release of political prisoners. In a meeting of the Kerala Socialist Party at Quilon on 13 November 1947, the socialist leaders demanded the release of prisoners of Alleppy-Sherthalai riot case.³¹ The Kerala Socialist Party had definitely planned to launch direct action for effecting the release of the labour leaders within a short time. In the processions, the labourers carried placards with inscriptions "impeach Sir C.P.", "withdraw Punnapra-Vayalar cases" and "withdraw all bans".³² Meanwhile the Trivandrum Communists and Socialists have planned to observe 'Vayalar-Punnapra Day' on 24 October 1947 at Trivandrum. They also

30. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 22 August 1947, D.Dis.448/1947/CS.

31. Ibid., 15 November 1947, D.Dis.550/1947/CS.

32. Extract from Police Report, Kottayam, 13 September 1947, D.Dis.485/1947/CS.

decided to organise Communist jathas from different parts.³³
Realising the gravity of the situation, the administration
had freed some Communist and Socialist political prisoners.³⁴

The released labour leaders had concentrated on the relief measures for the worker's families. In fact the labour unions have utilised the political freedom to reinforce their rights. In the meantime the labour leaders in jails had started hunger strike demanding the withdrawal of cases against political prisoners without delay.³⁵ Now the Kerala Provincial Trade Union Congress has constituted an enquiry committee to visit and study the realities of the Punnapra-Vayalar Revolt. Interestingly while making enquiries the Committee had collected a fund to help the proceedings of labour cases and for labour relief measures. The fact was that the Communist labour leaders have had regular correspondence with the under-trial prisoners in the central prison.³⁶ Besides, the bonus issue was also raised by the labour class. They demanded bonus as accepted by the Tripartite Conference held in October 1946. However the Labour Commissioner had maintained that the sub-committee appointed by the Conference to go into the bonus details, could

33, Ibid., Trivandrum, 20 October 1947, D.Dis.528/1947/CS.

34. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 30 October 1947, D.Dis.485/1947/CS.

35. District Magistrate, Quilon, 20 August 1948, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.3327/1948/Judl.

36. Judicial Note, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.220/1948/Judl.

not work on account of the fact that the labour representatives in it had either absconded or been detained consequent to the violent labour uprising that occurred at Punnapra and Vayalar, soon after the conference.³⁷ In its first meeting after the Punnapra Vayalar uprising held at the Quilon Textile Workers Union office in January 1948, the All Travancore Trade Union Congress Working Committee passed a resolution asking the Government of Travancore to grant bonus to workers as accepted in 1946.³⁸

Attempts at Conciliation

In an attempt of conciliation with the labour, a conference of representatives of the agricultural labour, agriculturists and the Government was held on 23 February 1948. At this conference, agreement was reached regarding wage rates and conditions of employment with respect to certain categories of workers employed in the paddy cultivation in Kuttanad.³⁹ Moreover as a prelude to the establishment of a responsible government, the Travancore Government constituted a representative body consisting of members elected on adult franchise. They have also appointed a Reforms Committee to submit proposals for a new constitution. The committee submitted its report on 20 November 1947.⁴⁰ Accepting its recommendations, the administration ordered elections to the representative body in January-

37. Labour Commissioner, Trivandrum, 2 October 1947, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, D.Dis.2330/1947/Devpt.

38. Prakasam, R., op.cit., pp.177-178.

39. Labour Commissioner, Trivandrum, 29 May 1950, letter to

February 1948. However the Kerala Socialist Party had condemned the administration for holding elections while ban orders were in force. They have remarked that a man of self-respect could never permit an election while the labour and trade union representatives were in jail.⁴¹ In the election campaign the Communists opposed the State Congress for most of the seats. Labour leaders like T.V.Thomas, V.A.Simon, C.K.Velayudhan, P.A.Solomon, K.R.Gowri, N.Sreekantan Nair, T.K.Diwakaran and P.T.Punnose had contested the election with the support of the Communist Party.

In a speech made at Alleppy on 15 February 1948, labour leader P.G.Padmanabhan incited the labourers to wreck vengeance against the State Congress at the election.⁴² In fact the Kerala Socialist Party had backed the State Congress in the election.⁴³ In all, the State Congress got a majority and a Council of Ministers headed by Pattom A.Thanupillai assumed office on 24 March 1948. Though defeated at the election, the Communist labour leaders had maintained that the election had helped the leftist force to grow into a political power in

41. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 15 November 1947, D.Dis.550/1947/CS.

42. Secretary to Government of Travancore, letter to P.G.Padmanabhan, Alleppy, D.Dis.33/1949/CS.

43. Confidential Note, Inspector General of Police, 19 October 1947, D.Dis.550/1947/CS.

future.⁴⁴ Indeed this claim proved true later. However, as president of All Travancore Cashewnut Factory Workers Union at Quilon and president of the Quilon Press Workers Union, M.N. Govindan Nair conducted secret Communist Party classes and induced labourers to join the Communist fold. The non-Communist labour union members were seldom assaulted.⁴⁵ The Travancore Police chief had warned the administration that 'extensive agrarian and industrial revolt was being planned under the auspices of the Communist Party of India and that intensive propaganda was being carried on within the State to this end'.⁴⁶

Nevertheless the State Congress Ministry had detained under custody all prominent labour leaders including R.Sugathan, T.V.Thomas, and M.N.Govindan Nair without trial for six months, branding them as Communists. Soon there was a joint protest by all trade unions in the state against the hostile attitude of administration towards the labour. The labourers have demanded open trial of their arrested leaders. In response P.S.Muhammed, the minister for labour, had maintained that the labour leaders were arrested and detained in custody 'for acting in a manner prejudicial to public safety and maintenance of public order'.⁴⁷ He had confirmed that the reasons for the

44. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.178.

45. Mathew, Labour Union Congress, Alleppy, 15 August 1948, telegram to Prime Minister, Travancore, D.Dis.3553/1948/Judl.

46. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 6 September 1948, D.Dis.33/1949/CS.

47. Confidential Note, Government of Travancore, 13 September 1948, D.Dis.349/1948/CS.

arrest could not be disclosed in public interest. Meanwhile the three labourers namely Sankaran Kuttappan, Damodharan and Poulouse Franchi were sentenced to death for taking part in the Punnapra Vayalar riots. The total labour force was against this capital punishment. All social and political organisations throughout the country had condemned the death sentence and demanded their release describing Punnapra-Vayalar Revolt as part of freedom movement.⁴⁸ They have remarked the attitude of the Travancore Government as the 'continuation of Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer's anti-patriotic attitude' and demanded the timely intervention of the Government of India.⁴⁹ Trade unions and public organisations of South India have warned of a people's revolution if the Punnapra-Vayalar case was not withdrawn. They have reminded the Government that the Punnapra-Vayalar struggle was not one of self interest but for the welfare of the working class, toiling peasantry and oppressed middle class so to achieve true democracy.⁵⁰

The working class in Travancore had experienced ban and arrests even after the attainment of a responsible government in the State. However the Government had appointed

48. File, Government of Travancore, R.Dis.919/1949/Judl.

49. President, Bombay Malayali Sangham, 5 October 1948, telegram to T.M.Varghese, Trivandrum, R.Dis.919/1949/Judl.

50. The Public, Chinnanpalayam village, Coimbatore district, 3 November 1948, telegram to Prime Minister, Travancore, R.Dis.919/1949/Judl.

a special magistrate to try the cases connected with the Punnapra-Vayalar Uprising.⁵¹ In fact the labour class had found the attitude of the Congress ministry as against their promise. Meanwhile in the State Legislative Assembly, A.Thanupillai had said that the time had come when employers should be willing to share profits with the employees and the employees in turn render more regular and earnest work. The government had considered that the accredited representatives of labour organisations were the best persons to represent labour interests.⁵² In 1948 the Government decided to lift the ban on twenty nine out of a total of thirty five trade unions in the State.⁵³

The coir factory workers in the state had now demanded bonus for the period from January 1946 to December 1947. But the managements were prepared to pay bonus only from June 1946. The labourers were not willing to accept this and the Coir Factory Workers Union had decided to start direct action from 27 July 1948. The District Magistrate of Quilon, immediately issued orders to the police 'to maintain peace and order and to safeguard the interests of the factory owners'.⁵⁴ Taking

51. Administrative Report, Police Department, 1947, Part III, R.Dis.2429/1948/Judl.
52. Travancore Legislative Assembly Proceedings Budget Session, Vol.11, No.1, 1948, p.41.
53. Confidential Report, Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, 30 June 1948, D.Dis.404/1948/CS.
54. District Magistrate, Quilon, 22 July 1948, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.3054/1948/Judl.

care of the labour situation in the state, trade union leaders called for a State Convention of all trade unions at Quilon. The convention demanded the declaration of Alleppy and Sherthalai as famine areas, release of all political detainees and the reopening of all industrial establishments. This conference was attended by nearly 250 trade unions and 590 labour representatives.⁵⁵

Consequently on 22 and 23 September 1948, a Tripartite Labour Conference was held in Trivandrum under the presidency of the labour minister C.Kesavan.⁵⁶ Representatives of workers, employers and the Government took part in the conference. This conference was the first major effort of conciliation in the free Travancore. At the Conference, Minister C.Kesavan had stressed the representatives to follow the resolutions of the Government of India passed at the Industrial Conference held in New Delhi in 1947. After a heated discussion among the labour representatives of the Communist and Kerala Socialist Parties, the Tripartite Labour Conference approved the resolutions.⁵⁷ The conference constituted a Standing Labour Committee, consisting of three representatives each of labour and of the

55. Ramachandran Nair, K., op.cit., p.124.

56. Labour Commissioner, 15 October 1948, letter to Minister for Labour, Trivandrum, D.Dis.411/1948/CS.

57. Jacob Naduvassery, Thozhilaliyude Chothyangal(Malayalam), Mannanam, 1956, p.92.

employers with the labour commissioner as the convener and chairman. Industrial Relations Committees had been set up in the State with a view to bring about a settlement of differences between workers and their employers in the industry concerned.⁵⁸ All industrial matters relating to wage and bonus were discussed and settled by the committees.

To be sure, the consolidated move of the workers unions in the state for achieving their political demands was successful. On 5 November 1948 the Coir Workers Union, Alleppy had submitted a memorandum of demands to the minister for labour. While demanding the release of Punnapra-Vayalar case prisoners, the labour force had asked for the end of police repression. In pursuit of a workers' government, the working class demanded the nationalisation of all key industries, including the coir industry.⁵⁹ However, the coir workers claimed for twenty five per cent bonus for the year 1948. They have asked the administration not to allow the police to interfere in the disputes that occur in the factory. The Travancore Government was slowly yielding to the demands of the working class. Consequently the labour force could rescue the three convicted workers from the death sentence.

58. Indian Labour Gazette, Vol.VIII, No.1, July 1950, pp.585-586.

59. Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, 5 November 1948, Memorandum to Minister for Labour, Trivandrum, R.Dis.919/1949/Judl.

A major development after 1947 in the growth of working class movement in Travancore was the interpretations of labour laws to the workers. Now the attention of the labour class was diverted towards agitations against anti-labour legislations. With the interference of the labour department and the introduction of adjudication system, the trade union leaders gained vast knowledge of labour laws. The Government decided in 1948 to set up a Standing Industrial Relations Committee with a view to eliminate friction between the attached agricultural labourers and the landlords.⁶⁰ Labour welfare centres have been opened under the auspices of the labour department. On the recommendations of the labour department, the Travancore Medical Department had begun to institute a temporary mobile dispensary in the Kuttanad area for giving free medical aid to the agricultural labour during harvesting season.⁶¹ The Government had started to appoint Industrial Tribunals to adjudicate disputes between the workers and the owners of coir factories in the state. In fact while recognising the labour unions and their demands, the administration had also aimed to utilise the trade unions to productivity purpose.

New provisions for the compulsory mediation in the labour laws invited the interference of the police in labour

60. Daniel and Alice Thorner, Land and Labour in India, Bombay, 1962, p.179.

61. The Labour Commissioner, 29 May 1950, letter to Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.6844/1950/Devpt.

disputes. In the beginning the Government did not recognise the Alleppy Coir Factory Workers Committee. Moreover the State had banned the Travancore Estate Workers Union, affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress.⁶² Yet under the ^{other} banner of/labour organisations, the workers continued to consolidate their work. As a result, the labour commissioner and the district officers of the labour department had held periodical conferences with the Travancore Association of Planters to settle labour problems affecting the whole industry.⁶³ Meanwhile the Government had come forward to mediate with the leaders of the Alleppy Coir Factory Workers Committee. On 2 June 1948, the Government had issued orders for the registration of the All Travancore Trade Union Congress under the Trade Union Act.⁶⁴ Moreover the Government had ushered in the cooperative societies to help the labour class.⁶⁵ In the meantime the leftist labour leaders, released from jails, have resumed their activities to revive the labour and the Communist movements in the state. The Travancore Police have

62. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.198.

63. Administrative Report, Labour Department, Government of Travancore 1951-1952, Trivandrum, 1954, p.18.

64. Confidential Report of Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, 30 June 1948, D.Dis.404/1948/CS.

65. Interim report on the coir industry in the Travancore-Cochin State, 6 July 1953, D.Dis.6354/1952/Devpt.
The Coir Cooperative Societies were organised for the development of coir industry only from 1950. The Coir Special Officer was appointed in March 1950.

noted that K.R.Gowri, an influential Ezhava graduate in law, arrived immediately after her return from central jail in February 1949 and applied herself to the task of strengthening the labour unions. At Muhamma she has arranged a procession of labourers with herself leading them. This meeting was followed by the reopening of the trade union and Communist Party office at Vayalar.⁶⁶ In fact, by 1949 workers of all industrial spheres had turned their attention towards the idea of trade unionism.

In the turn of political events, the states of Travancore and Cochin were integrated on 1 July 1949 to form the united states of Travancore-Cochin. On the formation of Travancore-Cochin, the legislative assemblies of Travancore and Cochin were also integrated. However, since integration, the whole of the Travancore-Cochin State was divided into three divisions - northern, central and southern for the purpose of labour administration. Each division was put under an Assistant Labour Commissioner with headquarters at Alwaye, Alleppy and Trivandrum respectively.⁶⁷

66. Inspector of Police, Sherthalai, March 1949, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.723/1949/CS.

67. Indian Labour Gazette, Vol.VIII, No.8, February 1951, p.584.

CONCLUSION

Consolidation of the industrial and agricultural workers into a class-conscious movement in Travancore was the result of an awakening among the working people. Throughout the period of analysis, the labour force was a major challenge to the employers and the administration, in the fight for economic equality. Infact the working class, through their organised trade unions, responded to every phase of social reforms in the state. From the very beginning of the twentieth century, the unorganised and discredited labourers in the fields and factories felt the need of their organisation. Thus successfully sublimating the deep rooted caste and communal antagonism, the coir factory workers set an example to the beginning for a movement of workers in Travancore, with the inspiration of an independent class to fight against the capital. Assuming wide proportions in due course, the Travancore Labour Association had commenced a new era of economic equality in the erstwhile state of Travancore. No wonder the labour population who had been fighting with the capitalists for personal rights and pecuniary benefits have, from the 1920's, started to demand for labour legislations.

Even without registration in lines of a trade union, the organisation of coir workers had excited the workers of all other organised industries as well as the radicalised agricultural

labourers of Kuttanad. Soon the idea of labour organisation received wide currency. Inspired by the social reform movements and the consequent change in the class relations, the working population of the state had dared to question landlordism and the bad predicament in factories. The result was that there was more of trade unions. In the beginning, leadership to the labour force was mainly from the social reformers and the elite workers. However with the emergence of the congress socialists, the workers of the state fell under the new political leadership. Thereafter working class in Travancore was politicised. Especially from 1934, the workers in Travancore organised as a separate class of an anti-imperialist united front. A significant change in the history of working class movement in Travancore was the growth of Labour Unions into registered trade unions, mainly from 1938. The solidarity struggle of the labour class under the influence of the emerging leadership of congress socialists had achieved to gain the first labour legislation in the state, the Travancore Trade Unions Act of 1937, which recognised the organisation of workers.

From 1938 the workers identified themselves as a political force, urging the administration for a labour welfare policy. In fact the General Strike of 1938 was a lesson to the labour class. Realising the vacillating leadership of the State Congress and the Youth Leaguers, the labourers had determined

to proceed with the strike and slowly subjected to the radical leadership of the Travancore Communists. However, the administration of C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer was not silent. By proceedings and warnings, the Dewan was very particular to keep away the labour force from politics. Yet the awakened labour force had advanced to new steps of solidarity with the influence of radicalists. The most striking development of this period was the integration of many scattered unions into a central organisation. This is the unique feature in the growth of working class movement in Travancore.

The most important period in the history of working class movement was between 1939 and 1945. During this period of Second World War, the Travancore Communists have consolidated the working people and could establish their ascendancy on the labour. However, the vigil of the administration and the patrol of the police could not detach the labourers from the radicalists. As an evidence for their ideological unity, the All Travancore Trade Union Congress came into being in 1942, affiliating the scattered Labour Unions in the state. Thereafter the labour resolutions had wider perspectives perceiving the welfare of total labour force in the state, instead of previous perusal of individual unions. The employers made periodical attempts to retard the growth of solidarity and militancy of the Travancore Working Class. However a new phase of development in the worker-owner relationship was achieved by the formation of the Industrial Relations Board. From Factory Committees to the Industrial Relations

Committee and finally to the Industrial Relations Board the growing movement of workers led to attempts at an amicable relation between the labour and the capital. Indeed the Travancore Communist Party could claim a real role in the achievement of workers' class solidarity. It was radical leadership who prepared the working class for a revolt in pursuit of a democratic workers' government in Travancore. As a result there was growth of Communist power in the state. Actually the Communist ascendancy had helped the growth of solidarity and militancy with the Travancore working class. Interestingly the administration had spotted out many labour leaders as Communists, only because they worked against the whim of the State. And these conclusions many times led the Dewan to favour the growth of employers organisations in Travancore as a parallel move for the threat posed by the labour force for many decades. But the reluctant Dewan was finally to opt for labour welfare measures.

The movement of workers in Travancore had the influence of outside leadership at every stage of its growth. Volunteer jathas and labour leaders from neighbouring states had always inspired the workers in Travancore. The fact was that even the public and the philonthropists reacted to the death sentence imposed on the Punnapra-Vayalar prisoners. However the workers felt the Vaccilation of political leadership for the

second time, in 1941 when the attitude of the Communist Party underwent an unexpected change resolving to participate in the Second World War. Yet the labour unions in Travancore resolved to participate in the war from 1941, identifying with the Communist Party on issues related to international matters. Soon the war became a peoples war. Again in accordance with the general policy adopted by the Communist Party, the trade unions in Travancore dissociated with the Quit India Movement, forgetting the patriotic spirit behind it. Though this decision had created divisions among labour leaders, it explained the strong influence of Communists on the labour population. In fact the economic crisis created by the Second World War had done much to lead the labour population in lines with the radical communists. By the end of the war, the Communist leadership had assumed direct control over the vast majority of workers in Travancore.

The last but crucial phase of the struggle of the working class for a democratic government was in 1946, when it culminated into a violent confrontation. What was conspicuous in the struggle was the class concept. Inculcating the ideology of class, Communist leaders had prepared the labourers for an open revolt against Capitalism. The State, however, faced the aggressive labour force with repressive measures. But this had helped only to foster the militance and stamina of the working class in reaction. In fact the Punnapra-Vayalar revolt had proved the working class as an independent power. In the history of labour movement in Travancore, the workers for the first time

boldly confronted the administrative machinery. By 1946 the economic demands of the labour force had developed into a claim for political rights. The end of Dewan rule and the establishment of a responsible government in Travancore became the primary demands of the working class, which they finally achieved.

In Travancore the caste organisations have paved the way for class organisations and this class-consciousness influenced the character of labour unions. Consequently the ideology of unionism had promoted the welfare associations into trade unions. The fact was that the labour legislations in Travancore have been far advanced than that of British India. The working class had adopted various methods in their process of growth into a powerful movement. Mainly from 1938, labour strikes were systematically organised through strike committees and volunteer corps. Moreover violence was rare before 1946, when the labour force had for the first time openly confronted with the Travancore police force. Further the working class movement was not fully related to the contemporary national movement. In fact the struggle of working class was mainly aimed at the achievement of a democratic government in the state. Moreover the concentration of workers on the conception of class had exhorted them to stress on their solidarity campaign than the struggle for national freedom. Yet it can not be denied that the workers lacked political awareness. In fact most of the labour leaders were members of one or other political

parties and the labour resolutions, mainly after 1935, have included the contemporary political demands. No doubt the working people of the state have always reacted to the political changes in the country.

However the change of government in Travancore had vital effects on the labour movement. In their attempt to assert law and order, the new government had begun to conciliate with the labour force. Consequently the administration considered the organisation of the labour as part of industrial productivity. Thus in labour organisation, legislation and recognition, Travancore set an example to Indian working class.

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GLOSSARY

Adima	: Slave
Adiyan	: Or Mootha Pulayan. Supervisor of cropping operations
Anna	: One sixteenth unit of a rupee
Dharmavu	: An item of compulsory deduction from the wages of workers by the employers
Illom	: Namboodiri house
Jathas	: Political processions
Jenmis	: Hereditary owners of land
Kanamdar	: An intermediary who leased land from the hereditary owners and in turn sub-leased to tenants-at-will
Kanganies	: Or Moopans. Contractors or agents to employers
Karyasthan	: An executor or agent
Kudiyar	: A tenant
Makkattayam	: Patrilineal system of family and inheritance
Moopathy	: Woman contractor
Moopukasu	: Commission for contractors
Marumakkattayam	: Matrilineal system of family and inheritance
Naduvazhis	: Military chiefs of nadas or districts
Padam	: Agricultural field
Paniyal	: Landless agricultural attached labourer
Para	: A standard unit for measurement of paddy

Patton : Tax paid by a tenant to the
owner

Punja : Cultivation under irrigation

Sahodaran : Brother

Sambandam : Alliance of Namboodiri Brahmins
and Nair women

Tarawad : A matriarchal joint family

Thampuran : A general term for landlord

Uliyam : Service

Vaarikuntham : A bamboo spear

Verumpattom : Tenancy-at-will

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Interview

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