

## INFLUENCE OF TRADE UNIONS ON AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN KUTTANAD

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### ABSTRACT

*The main occupation in Kuttanad was agriculture and still paddy is the main crop. Majority of population depended on this activity. The condition of agricultural labourers in Kuttanad was deprivable. In early times landlords had almost treated them as slaves. Later agricultural labour movements and their unionization became extremely strong in Kuttanad. It helped the labourers to demand for reduction in working hours, abolition of attached labour system, payment of wages in terms of money and higher wages for their work. Due to the increase in wages, cost of paddy cultivation increased, which resulted in farmers quitting agriculture. This in turn led to reduction in employment opportunities for agricultural labourers. Thereby agricultural labourers moved from agricultural sector to other areas for their livelihood. In harvesting season there has been severe scarcity of labourers. This paved the way for the entry of machines for conducting farming operations. Even though the trade unions initially were against machines, they later welcomed machines. This led to an increase in area under cultivation. The remaining agricultural labourers could get employed in the paddy land. Now they can do both agricultural and non agricultural activities with the help of machines. Thereby their income and standard of living got improved. In all these developments the proper functioning of organized trade unions has a role. This paper describes the trade unions' influence on agricultural labourers in Kuttanad, Kerala.*

### Keywords

Agriculture, Paddy cultivation, Land Lords, Agricultural labourers, Trade unions

### INTRODUCTION

Kuttanad is a low-lying land area. Rice fields are situated below the mean sea level. (P.G. Padmanabhan, N.C.Narayanan and G.Padmakumar, 2001). Soil in these areas has vast organic deposit and it is one of the most

fertile regions of the world (Sreejith K. A., 2013). So this land is highly suited to rice cultivation (GOK, 1974). According to 2011 census Kuttanad has the largest number of agricultural workers in Alappuzha District (37 per cent). The major occupation in Kuttanad has been farming. Rice is the important agricultural product in Kuttanad. So it is known as the "The Rice Bowl of Kerala" (Simon Santhosh and Jacob K Paulose Jacob, 2012).

### AGRARIAN RELATIONS IN KUTTANAD

In Kuttanad there existed a three-layered system of land holdings (Nair K. Ramachandran, 1982). The first layer consisted of upper caste Brahmin and Namboodiri jennies (landlords), who owned major portion of land. The second layer consisted of upper caste Nair and Ezhava tenants who leased land from the jennies. The third layer comprised of inferior tenants who were the actual cultivators of the land. They belonged to harijan caste of Pulaya –Parayas. (K. M. George, 2010). Later Syrian Christians appeared in Kuttanad. They purchased land from the Brahmins and Nairs. The harijans worked as attached labour or *kudikidappukars*<sup>1</sup> land owners (Nair K. Ramachandran, 1982 and Tharamangalam Joseph, 1981).

The life of agricultural labourers in Kuttanad was miserable (Oommen M.A., 1972; Dr. Gopalakrishnan P. K., 1972; Jose A. V, 1976; Mukundan M., 2005). They suffered a lot of hardships. The working hours were not fixed. The landlords paid the labourers as decided by the former and the labourers were expected to accept them without complaint. They lived in mud huts ravaged by poverty. Low caste women were permitted to wear only stone ornaments. They could not cover the upper part of their body with clothes. (Nair K. Ramachandran, 2006; Tharamangalam Joseph, 1981; N. K. Kamalasanan, 1991 and George Jose 1984).

<sup>1</sup>The labourers were allowed to live in the land of the landlords by building huts. All members of the family had to do all work in the land lords house and fields. they were not allowed to do other jobs

## EMERGENCE OF TRADE UNION

Alleppey has been famous as a marketing centre from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with its flourishing coir and oil extraction industries (Edayady A. C. Mathew, 2002). But during the 1930's the coir industry began to show the signs of recession. It led to the thought of an organized movement among agricultural workers (Jose George, 1992 and T. M. Thomas Isaac, 1992 and others). Formation of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), *Pulaya Maha Sabha* (PMS) and agitations like *Vaikom Satyagraha*, *Guruvayoor Satyagraham*, *Moplah Revolt* in Malabar boosted the formation of trade unions (Sukomal Sen, 2013 and R.K Suresh Kumar, 2000).

The fact that Kuttanad was near to the Alleppey town, an industrial hub, coir workers migrated to Kuttanad for work. It had its influence on the agricultural workers (Dr. Prakash Pillai R, 2015). Retrenchment of factory workers and cut in wages led to discontent among factory workers. (Jose 1976). Later the trade unions got strengthened through recruiting agricultural labourers from the adjacent villages. At the time of strikes and lockout at factories, the workers sought employment in the nearby villages to work in paddy fields (Thomas P.M., 2002). The interaction of such workers with the agricultural labourers led to rapid spread of communist ideology among agricultural labourers (Edayady A. C. Mathew, 2002). These strikes were successful and the agricultural workers realized that their sufferings could be solved through united actions and collective movements. This was the main cause for the formation of trade unions among workers (P. Krishnapillai, 1979, George 1984 and Tharamangalam Joseph, 1981).

The communist party was successful in organizing the labourers to form trade unions (Nair K. Ramachandran, 1982). The notable event in this regard was the formation of the *Thiruvithancoor Karshaka Thozhilali Union* (TKTU) under the communist party of India in 1940. (George 1984, Tharamangalam 1981 and. Thomas P.M, 2002). Varghese Vaidyan founded this union and C.K. Das was its secretary (Nair K. Ramachandran, 2006). The first major successful organized struggle of the TKTU was in 1943 (George Jose, 1984). Its initial major demand was to re-establish the old mode of paying wages in kind.

## THE ROLE OF LABOUR MOVEMENTS IN KUTTANAD

In its infancy many labourers were reluctant to join the trade union as they were very much loyal to the landlords under whom they worked. Even if the labourers tried to join trade unions they were physically and mentally punished by the landlords (Nair K. Ramachandran ,2006; George Jose 1984; Tharamangalam Joseph ,1981; Kamalasanan N. K.,1991). The landlords filed false charges and influenced the police to arrest the agitating workers. The communist leaders of Kuttanad during that period were Mattappally Daniel, Truman Oudha, Franchu, Silva, Thoppichira Scaria, T. K. Varghese Vaidyan, S. K. Das and the like. These people worked as leaders and sympathizers of communist party at a time when the very mention of communist party was feared by the common people (Edayady A. C. Mathew, 2002)

The Government introduced the food rationing system during the Second World War period. During this time the condition of agricultural labourers in Kuttanad became worse (K. Ramachandran Nair, 1982). The agricultural labourers were denied ration cards simply because they received their wages in terms of paddy. Farmers tried to make payments in cash because of the high price of paddy (Jose A. V, 1976). This again strengthened the unionization of farm labourers (Nair K. Ramachandran, 1982). This resulted in a series of conflicts between landlords and labourers. A remarkable event was the violent *Punnappra Vayalr*<sup>2</sup> agitation of 1946. This was one of the important turning points in the evolution of labour movements in Kuttanad. The struggle was mainly against the anti people policies of Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the Diwan of the State. (Nair K. Ramachandran, 2006 and Dr. Prakash Pillai R,2015). Government authorities mostly sided with the landlords.

The major demands of the workforce in Kuttanad were (1) restrict the tendency to lower wages, (2) wages should be paid in cash, (3) wages should be paid weekly, (4) frame the rules to limit working hours. Agricultural labourers worked fourteen hours per day, they were not paid in cash and the wages were not paid weekly. People had to face

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<sup>2</sup>Punnappra and Vayalar are two villages situated in the Southern and Northern side of Alappuzha town respectively. The Punnappra-Vayalar uprising (October, 1946) was a communist movement in the Princely State of Travancore against Diwan Sir C. P. Ramaswami Iyer and the state. Communist Party members were killed by the army of the Diwan . The total loss of life in this uprising is estimated to be more than thousand.

lot of hardships. So they decided to go for a token strike (P. Krishnapillai, 1979).

Sir CP Ramaswami Iyer proposed constitutional reforms making Travancore an independent country. He proposed an 'American model' for Travancore. The Communists in Travancore opposed this move with the slogan *American model Arabikadalil*. The struggle began in 1939. In March 1946, Travancore Police cracked down on the members of ATTUC (All Travancore Trade Union Congress) in Alappuzha. In response, communist party workers attacked police stations all across Alappuzha. The communist cadres in Alappuzha were given military training by ex-servicemen who had returned home from the World War front. The communist cadres were armed with country weapons (P. Krishnapillai, 1979).

On 25 October 1946, the Birthday of Travancore Maharaja, the new Travancore constitution was to be implemented, making Travancore an independent country. The communists in Vayalar retaliated this move which led to attacks and deaths of Travancore police officials and government officials in that region. In response, the Diwan declared martial law in Alleppey on 25 October 1946. The Travancore army moved from their camp and surrounded the communists at Vayalar by 27 October. The Travancore navy supported the army in isolating Vayalar, which is surrounded by water on three sides. Once the blockade was in place, the army moved in. A brutal killing took place, and over 470 communists were massacred (Richard W. Franke and Barbara H. Chasin, 1992). In a brutal hand to hand combat 40 Travancore soldiers were killed (Nair K. Ramachandran, 2006 and P. Krishnapillai, 1979). The killings of communist comrades turned the Communists and even many non-communists against Sir CP. In retaliation an assassination attempt was made on C. P. by K.C.S. Mani during a concert commemorating the anniversary of Swathi Thirunal. At the end the labourers won the struggle (Tharamangalam Joseph, 1981).

Considering the often demanded revision of wages by trade unions, the Government appointed the Minimum Wage Committee for employment in agriculture in 1953. The committee submitted its report after three years (Thomas P.M., 2002, Isaac T. M. Thomas and others, 1992). As suggested by the committee a tripartite body called the Kuttanad Industrial Relations Committee (KIRC) consisting of the representatives of farmers, trade union leaders and Government nominees was set up in 1957 for settlement of labour disputes. Before the

formation of the communist ministry in Kerala, the Government authorities had been following a policy of police interventions especially in labour struggles in Kuttanad area. As against this the Communist Government adopted a new policy of non- interference in labour disputes (Nair V. Rajendran, 2000) and at the same time they encouraged the trade unions to attain their goals through trade union power. During mechanization in the agricultural sector the labourers did not allow tractors to enter the fields. Due to demand from unions it was decided to employ ploughman for two hours at least twice a day before each cultivation (Tharamangalam Joseph, 1981) to protect the interests of traditional ploughmen.

A number of agitations were carried out by the trade unions. Government convened meetings of landlords and labourers. The Government maintained a harmonious relationship in the agricultural setup. But the trade unions and agricultural farmers were always against each other. The first agitation related to "*teerpu*"<sup>3</sup> took place in 1952-53 between farm labourers and landlords including the then ex- cabinet minister K. M. Kora. The second agitation related to *kudikidappu* took place in the fields of E. John Jacob/ Niranam Baby. This agitation failed due to lack of organization among the labourers. (George Jose, 1984; Tharamangalam Joseph, 1981).

Agricultural Relation Bill was introduced by the Communist Government in 1957 (Venugopalan S. and George M.V., 1975). The Land Reforms Act was devised and passed in 1963. The Kerala Karshaka Federation (KKF) was formed during this period. This further intensified the differences between farmers and labourers. The workers were strong in number. The unions sponsored by the CPM demanded higher wages. The Minimum Wages Advisory Board recommended in 1956 the improvement of wage rate and was accepted by the Government in 1957 (George Jose, 1984).

The functioning of the Kuttanad Industrial Relation Committee was not effective till the first Communist ministry. It was dismissed in 1960 consequent on a mass revolt called *Vimochana Samaram*.<sup>4</sup> (Philip Cherian,

<sup>3</sup>One of the components of harvesting wages. It was given as one- fourth of 'Patham'. Pathem means one eight of the produce at the time of harvest.

<sup>4</sup>The Vimochana Samaram (1958-59) was an anti-Communist struggle against the first elected state-government in Kerala, India, headed by E. M. S. Namboodiripad of the Communist Party of India. It was

1984). The Committee continued till 1961. (Oommen (1985) and Prakash Pillai R, 2015, Pillai V.R. and Panikar P.G.K., 1965).

When the communist party was split in 1964 many labour unions came under the control of CPI (M) and leadership shifted from the upper caste leaders to the economically poor lower caste people. A new organization called the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU) was formed in 1968 and it was supported by CPI (M). The CPI formed the Kuttanad Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KKTU). In 1973 the Congress party formed the Deshiya Karshaka Thozhilali Federation (DKTU). The RSP also formed a union called the Upper Kuttanad Karshaka Thozhilali Union in 1969 (Thomas T.A., 2010, Pillai V.R. and Panikar P.G.K., 1965).

The CPI (M) was highly interested in the creation of a politically oriented and committed set of workers completely aiming at uprooting capitalism at the village level. When a coalition Government headed by CPI (M) came to power in 1967, IRC and similar bodies set up for the mediation of industrial disputes were looked upon with suspicion. The trade unions at that time formed their own unions in Kuttanad to bring their grievances before the concerned authorities. Some such unions are Akhila Kuttanad Karshaka Sangom, Deshiya Karshaka Sangom, Kuttanad Karshaka Sangom, North Kuttanad Agriculturalist Association and Karinila Karshaka Sangom. Originally the farmers association followed a peaceful method to protect their interest. But later they adopted violent measures to attain their goal.

The workers movement gained speed with the support of LDF ministry in 1967. The wage rates and working hours were fixed during this period. A mass movement was carried out by KSKTU for implementation of land reforms bill. The bill was passed in 1969 (Dr.Kurup K.K.N.,1999). The Government reclaimed large tracts of land from landlords. The agrarian relations in Kuttanad changed from a system of caste relationship to a class relationship. And again a system from attached labour to a new system

led by the Catholic Church in Kerala, the Nair Service Society and the Indian Union Muslim League. It received support from India's ruling Indian National Congress Party. The campaign was largely peaceful, taking the form of statewide meetings and public demonstrations. In June 1959, Kerala was rocked by mass protests calling for the resignation of the communist ministry and ultimately the government fell.

of wage labour. It resulted in more freedom to farm workers and mobility of labourers. They were free to work under any farmer. The most important problems faced by the agricultural labourers were long working hours and low wages. Their work was not considered to be a dignified one (Nair K. Ramachandran, 1982).

## VARIOUS TYPES OF TRADE UNIONS IN KUTTANAD

The concept of agriculture may not be simply farming of paddy fields alone. Agriculture is comprised of cultivation of different crops and allied activities like fishing, duck rearing, animal husbandry, toddy tapping, many small industries especially agro based industries like coir, power mill for rice processing, rice bran oil. In all such activities there exist different types of trade unions. The major trade unions functioning in Kuttanad are the following.

**Table 1. Different Trade Unions in Kuttanad**

S. No.	Name of the party	Registered
1	The Travencore Karshaka Thozhilali Union (TKTU)	1940- INTUC
2	The Thiru-Cochi Thozhilali Sangham (ALLEPPEY)	1954- ,,
3	The Thiru-Cochi Karshaka Thozhilali Sangham	1954- ,,
4	The Karthikappally Taluk Karshaka Thozhilali Union	1955-All India Trade Union Congress
5	Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU)	1968-CPM
6	Kuttanad Karshaka Thozhilali Union	1968-CPI
7	Upper Kuttanad Karshaka Thozhilali Union- not a successful effort	1969-Revolutionary Socialist Party/RSP
8	Deseeya Karshaka Thozhilali Federation (DKTF)	1973-Indian National Congress

## AFTER EFFECTS

The number of agricultural labourers increased from 17 per cent in 1961 to almost 30 per cent in 1981 (Eapen Mridul, 1994), without increase in area under cultivation or intensity of cropping (Kumar V.Santha, 2010). This created competition between workers and cultivators. Sometimes it took a violent turn. The 1960's and 70's the

farmers had to take permission from union offices for harvesting. The rush of farm labourers for harvesting work was restricted with entry pass. Police force was relied upon by the farmers to ensure a peaceful harvest. All these triggered physical confrontations. In those days strikes, hartals and police actions were frequent (Cherian Philip, 1984).

Trade unions did raise the wages through collective bargaining. They could control and even reduce the supply of labour to zero by calling out a strike. Thereby the

farmers were forced to pay higher wages. Such wages were much above the marginal productivity of labour, which incurred heavy loss to the farmers. Due to the increase in wages for labourers, implementation of land reforms, increase in the cost of production of paddy, all resulted in farmers quitting agriculture (Balachandran Pillai.G, 2004 and Kumar V.Santha, 2010). This resulted in reduction in employment opportunities for agricultural labourers. Majority of them met with poverty (Schenk H., 1986 and George K.M., 2010).

**Table 2. State Wise Average Agricultural Wage Rate for Agricultural Labour**

State	2005-06		2007-08		2009-10		2011-12		2013-14		2014-15	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Andhra Pradesh	62	44	85	62	128	95	194	141	245	179	277	195
Karnataka	68	60	78	74	115	111	171	152	224	202	279	235
Kerala	163	108	201	138	264	193	364	283	486	375	535	405
Tamil Nadu	76	39	93	45	129	68	196	97	253	123	303	130
Uttar Pradesh	70	NA	88	78	104	98	151	131	203	180	226	191
All India Average	74	59	91	71	124	95	183	138	229	178	268	201

\*Source: Directorate of Economics and Statistics Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare, Government of India.

Due to increased labour cost, some farmers introduced machines in their land for agricultural activities. Due to protest from trade unions and labour organizations a number of machines were destroyed (Balachandran Pillai.G, 2004). In such a situation many farmers wanted to quit the agricultural sector itself. But there were a few instances that could be pointed out such that some cultivators remained in farming. The story of N T Joseph in this regard was the best example. He witnessed the first ‘*vettinirathal samaram*<sup>5</sup>’ in Kuttanad. Karshaka Thozhilali Union conducted the first ever *vettinirathal samaram* in Alappuzha in 5 acres of land owned by N T Joseph at Pooppally. Banana cultivation and coconut trees were destroyed in the *vettinirathal samaram*. After 25 years, land under cultivation owned by N T Joseph<sup>6</sup> increased to

50 acres merely because of the determination he showed to defeat the *vettinirathal samaram*.

Now- a-days there is high scarcity of farm labour in Kuttanad. Compared to other states in India, the wage rate and working conditions of agricultural labourers are far better in Kerala, especially in Kuttanad (M.A.Oommen, 1993) and there is continuous upward trend in wage rates (Patrick Martin,2005). This can be illustrated through the following table. A major reason for this was the functioning of the trade unions. There is no other state in India where agricultural labourers were organized as in Kerala (Venu K.,2010 and Dr. Sivadasan S., 1999).

Table 2 shows the state wise wage rate for agricultural labourers during 10 years from 2005-2006 to 2014-2015.

Table 3 shows the wage rate for male and female agricultural labourers for different agricultural activities.

<sup>5</sup>This struggle was carried out in 1992. It was an anti reclamation stir under the left initiative. This was widely known as *vettinirathal*. In order to protect paddy land trade union members entered into paddy fields having other crop cultivation and destroyed other crops.

<sup>6</sup> Malayala Manorama Report, 2018 March 6, Tuesday.

**Table 3. Wages of Agricultural Labourers in Kuttanad**

Table showing the wage rates of agricultural laborers in different works										
Year		2006	2008	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Category of work										
Land preparation	M	200	250	350	500	600	650	700	750	750
Transplanting	M	200	250	250	400	500	650	660	700	700
	F	72	125	150	250	260	300	330	350	400
Weeding	M	200	250	250	400	500	650	660	700	700
	F	72	125	150	250	260	300	330	350	400
Fertilizing	M	200	250	350	500	600	650	700	750	800

\*Source: Primary Survey

The above two tables reveal that the wages for male and female workers in Kerala and Kuttanad are increasing steadily. This is mainly due to the continued influence of trade unions.

In earlier days workers were prohibited from education, because only high caste family alone possessed education (Mukundan M., 2005). Education is a major factor for attaining a better life for everyone (George K.M., 2010). Now our Government gives free and compulsory education to all children and also gives different schemes for attracting children to the schools. So farm labourers started giving education to their children and thereby they got good jobs (C.R.Neelakandan,2004). The labourers and their family migrated to other areas for attaining a better economic and social life ( Prakash Pillai R, 2015 and K.M.George, 2010). Majority of population thought that agricultural employment did not have any dignity in their life and also they were interested in white collar jobs (Maniyosai R., Kuruvilla Antony, 2018). Considering the scarcity of labour in the farm sector, farming in Kuttanad now- a-days has become highly mechanized and this has been even welcomed by trade unions (Venu K.,2010).

During the days of the formation of trade unions they feared loss of employment on mechanization. Therefore, in the initial period the interest of the trade unions was against the use of machines in the agricultural sector (Balachandran Pillai.G, 2004). A simple example can be noted in such a case. With the introduction of tractor for ploughing the fields, farmers engaged in tilling the soil with oxen and plough feared that their employment would be lost and thereby could not get a living. But historical evidence proves that all such fears are not real. Mechanization itself will generate employment. And it would reduce the physical strain on agricultural labourers and give them higher earnings (Isaac T. M. Thomas, and others, 1992).

By personal investigation among the farmers in Kuttanad a very important and notable thing observed is that the farmers consider the presence of trade unionism is of great help to them. If the trade unions are very strong farmers need to make payments to the labourers as fixed by the trade unions. But if the trade unions are not relevant as the case may be in Pulinkunnu many group leaders from among the trade unions bargain for extra ordinary wages without considering the work done by labourers`

## CONCLUSION

Considering the present global context of globalization, liberalization, and privatization, agriculture too is on the verge of a liberalized market oriented, privately promoted sector fully competent in the market and promoted by the Government through subsidies and support price system. In the present global context it is interesting to note that trade unionism is also showing its weakness in every field. Now -a -days trade unions are not competent enough with the market system to bargain for higher wages. Most of the strikes called by the present day trade unions come to a halt all of a sudden without any real gain. The role of trade unions and the role of Government are being reduced in the globalized economy.

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