

**POLITICISATION OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS
IN KERALA : A STUDY OF KUTTANAD**

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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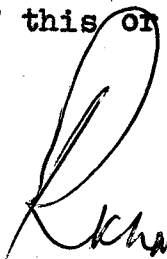
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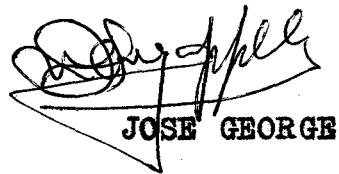
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CONTENTS

	Page(s)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	
CHAPTER - I	
Introduction, Review of Literature and Scope of the Study	1 - 37
CHAPTER - II	
Agrarian Structure and Socio-Economic Background of the Movement	38 - 56
CHAPTER - III	
Formative Years of Agricultural Workers' Union	57 - 71
CHAPTER - IV	
History of the Struggles of Agri- cultural Workers Since 1950	72 - 117
CHAPTER - V	
Economic, Social and Political Impacts of the Movement	118 - 150
CHAPTER - VI	
Summary and Conclusion	150 - 163
Location Maps	164 - 166
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	167 - 176

CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION, REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Agriculture is considered to be the pivot of the national economy. The continued and planned growth of agriculture is not only essential for meeting the food requirements of the country, but also for meeting the growing requirements of raw materials for our developing industries. In the case of Kerala more than fifty per cent of the state's income is from the agricultural sector.

Just as investment of finance and inputs and applications of technology are important for the sustained growth of agriculture, meeting the requirements of human force involved in agriculture is also equally important. Agricultural workers form a major part of work force, and the improvement in their living and working conditions is directly connected with development in agriculture. It also helps them to improve their productivity and their material well-being and cultural life. But it is a matter of regret that in India the benefit of the increased production has mainly gone to the landlords and rich peasants and the real wages of agricultural workers have declined.

INTRODUCTION

Irrespective of very many drawbacks, Kerala is one state where the wages, working conditions and social status of the agricultural workers have improved and the land reform measures are being implemented. The better condition of the agricultural workers is an accomplished fact in areas like Kuttanad in Kerala where the presence of a militant agricultural workers union is felt strongly. There is no doubt about the need to organise the agricultural workers. Benefits of such organisation include not only material advantages to the workers but also a more healthy relationship between the employers and the employees, increase in production, implementation of reforms in agriculture, agrarian relations to the mutual satisfaction of both parties, etc. The Planning Commission's Committee on Agrarian Relations has itself recommended a certain degree of politicisation of the poor peasantry and agricultural workers on militant lines in order that legislative and administrative actions undertaken by the Government can be effectively implemented towards conferring rights and privileges on these classes.¹

1. Government of India, Planning Commission, Report of the Task Force on Agrarian Relations, New Delhi; 1973, p. 25.

The purpose of this study is to examine how far this connection between organisation and attaining benefits is true in actual cases. The method adopted here is the case study method, the area being limited to the Kuttanad region in Kerala. This particular area is chosen because Kerala is a state where agricultural workers unions have made an early beginning and have attained higher levels of organisation than the other states.

In Kerala, the most obvious choice for a student of agricultural workers would be the Kuttanad region spread over Alleppey and Kottayam districts. This is because the plight of the workers vis-a-vis the landlords has been very glaring here from early times. Also, the stages by which the situation changed are much more explicit here than any where else in the state. It is also significant by the number of unions and the size of their membership. The terrain methods of cultivation and agrarian relations in Kuttanad are, in a general sense, typical of the rest of Kerala also and hence generalization made after a study of this area can be accepted as applicable to the rest of the state too.

A Profile of the Kuttanad Region *

Kuttanad, the principle rice bowl in the state of Kerala, lies between latitude 9°8' and 9°52' and longitude 76°19' and 76°44'. It is a low lying area

* See pages 164, 165 & 166 for location maps.

extending over 874 sq. km. distributed over 79 villages, spread over three Taluks in Kottayam district and seven Taluks in Alleppey district. Of the total area 304 sq. km. are garden lands with an average elevation of one metre above sea level. The area below sea level is annually subjected to severe flooding during both the monsoon periods by water flown by four rivers - Meenachil, Pamba, Manimala and Achencoil. About 80 sq. km. comprises the Vembanad lake and various water courses including rivers and man made canals and the rest of the area are paddy fields.

Kuttanad has a population of 1.46 million according to 1971 census, with the density of 1128 persons per sq. km. against the average of 549 for Kerala and 182 for India. Kuttanad has a literacy rate of 72 per cent against 60 per cent of Kerala and 29 per cent of India. Nearly one third of the working population are agricultural workers.

Kuttanad Taluk: The study mainly focuses attention on Kuttanad Taluk in Alleppey district, since it possesses all the characteristics of the Kuttanad region and it has established its premier position due to the high level of social and political consciousness of its agricultural workers which enabled the poor to organise and secure many trade union rights. Kuttanad Taluk is purely a rural area composed of 12 villages with an area of 265.9 sq. km. (65712.6 acres). Paddy fields, mostly

a single crop area, account for 80.27 per cent of this area covering a total of 56878 acres. It has a population of 1.88 lakhs according to the 1971 census of which 60 per cent of the working population are agricultural workers against an all Kerala average of 30.69 per cent. Again this area has a literacy rate of 75.03 against the all Kerala average of 60.4 per cent.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The agricultural workers movement in India has made much headway in the short span of last three decades. Considering their numerical strength and potentiality, so far ignored basic sections of the society, the impacts they can make once they are organised in a national level will be tremendous. Kerala is the state and in Kerala itself Kuttanad region is the area where agricultural unions have made an early beginning, and is unique with its struggle and achievements. Naturally it has been an area of attraction for academicians and sociologists.

There are several studies on agricultural workers and their related subjects. This chapter is an attempt to review certain literature so far published. For the convenience of study the available materials are divided into five groups, according to the stress given

on different aspects of the problem.

The classification is made as follows:

- (i) Unionisation and politicisation of agricultural workers,
- (ii) Enquiries made and studies conducted on the agrarian structure in Kuttanad area,
- (iii) The role of peasantry and agricultural labourers in the implementation of land reforms and other institutional reforms,
- (iv) Agrarian unrest and change in agrarian relations, and
- (v) Various struggle conducted and achievements obtained.

1. Unionisation and politicisation of agricultural workers

In this section the studies deal with the formation of the unions, their growth, the rate of political awareness they could inculcate through the unity and strength of the movement etc.

A.V. Jose, in his study of the agricultural workers movement in Kuttanad, explains the history of the movement, the resultant impacts it has made in the Kuttanad region.² In his study he draws an analogy of the movement

2. Jose, A.V., "The Origin of Trade Unionism Among the Agricultural Labourers in Kerala", Social Scientist, (Trivandrum), vol. 5, no. 12, July 1977, pp.24-34.

In Palghat and Kuttanad region of Kerala and explains the material conditions prevailing in both the area. He substantiates his points by offering the similarities of objective situations that prevailed in Kuttanad and Palghat, the two rice bowls of Kerala, where the agricultural workers movement started. Up to the end of the 19th century there was a three tier landed interest. At the top were the Brahmins and the Nair Chieftains who possessed dominium rights, in the middle were tenants who leased in land from the dominant groups and the lowest category was the agrestic slaves of the landlords who were the actual tillers of the soil. The traditional system began to change in Travancore area in the early part of the 20th century by the reforms initiated by the monarchy which was determined to control the feudal lords, and as a result ownership rights were conferred to the tenants. The tenants who retained the lands, initiated the transition to capital intensive cultivation and work was done by the same agricultural workers. The agricultural workers did not get the benefit of increased production from the intensive cultivation which led to the polarisation of class forces in agriculture. The labour saving devices and the ever swelling number of agricultural workers led to the breakdown of the attached labour system. These objective factors coupled with active campaigning by the left parties and activists from other trade unions led to the growth of unionism.

The article written by S.K. Das on the origin and growth of the movement is highly informative.³ Since the author himself was involved in the agricultural workers movement in Kuttanad, his observation of the state of affairs carries more weight. He brings to notice the social and economic situation that existed before the formation of the unions, the many hardships they were faced with in the early days of organizing the workers, the different struggles led by them upto 1972 and their achievements. This is a narration of events picked from his own personal experience and helps us greatly to understand the situation as it existed then.

The comparative study of the agricultural workers' movement in three south Indian states made by K.C. Alexander requires special attention.⁴ He has selected three areas where paddy is the principle crop which requires the service of a large labour force. The areas are Kuttanad region of Alleppey district in Kerala, Thiruthoraipundi taluk of East Tanjore district in Tamil Nadu and Mandya and Maddur Taluks of Mandya district of Karnataka. It is a descriptive account of the unions

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3. Das S.K., "Agricultural Workers Movement in Kuttanad", Golden Jubilee Souvenir of Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union (Alleppey) 1972, pp. 131 - 138.
 4. Alexander K.C., Agricultural Labour Unions - A study of South Indian States, (Hyderabad; National Institute of Rural Development, 1978).

and their impact on traditional social relationship in comparison with areas where the agricultural workers' union did not exist.

Details of the activities, achievements and organisational structure of different labour unions, etc., are given in this study from information gathered mainly through an interview schedule administered to a sample of respondents and through interviews with the leaders of the unions. For our study, the references concerned with Kuttanad in Alleppey district are helpful. First part of the book deals with geographical features, cultivation pattern, socio-economic background, agrarian relations, political and union affiliations etc, of Kuttanad. In the second part a brief account of the three unions working in Kuttanad region is given.

The dominant union is the Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali (agricultural workers) Union (TKTU) which is now affiliated to KSKTU, and is sponsored by the CPI (M). K.C. Alexander, traces the history of this union, to the history of the Communist Party in rural areas of Alleppey. The initiative taken by the party, difficulties faced in the formative years, different struggles undergone, especially those of 1952, 1953 and 1955, the new moral boost

achieved by the formation of the communist ministry in 1957, achievement of the different struggles culminating in the passing of the Agricultural Workers Act, 1974 etc., are mentioned in detail. He also seeks to explain the short and long term objectives of this union. First, the day to day struggle over economic issues; second, leading the workers from elementary trade union consciousness to a higher revolutionary consciousness as the objective put forward by the Communist Party.

The different aspects of the Kerala Karshaka Thozhilali (agricultural workers) Federation, sponsored by the CPI and Deseeya Karshaka Thozhilali Union (National Agricultural ~~Workers~~ Workers) sponsored by the Congress Party are also explained in detail. As a conclusion to the comparative study he is of the opinion that where the agricultural workers remained organised as in Kuttanad, they have achieved higher wages, stipulated hours of work, better social status, etc. He also suggests that homogeneity in terms of caste helps unionsation, which may be an understimation of the role played by the castes in rural areas. The politicisation and social awareness of the agricultural workers, which they have acquired through struggles, cultural activities and study classes are not properly projected.

The study made by Ashraf Mohd. Siddiq,⁵ on the socio-political consciousness among workers of an industrial centre is helpful to measure the quantum of the political consciousness and political participation, attitude towards political parties, relationship with the economic security etc., and finds that a substantial number of workers have a high degree of consciousness. Even though his study is not directly connected with the present study the method and analysis made by him will be helpful for the study of agricultural workers due to the manifold similarities of both the sections of the workers involved in it. More than that the present study is also giving emphasis to the politicisation of the workers as given by Siddiq in his study.

By social and political consciousness Siddiq means a sense of identification, involvement and understanding of political issues involving the Government and agencies such as the municipal corporation, trade unions, political parties and voluntary welfare societies. Thus a worker who is active and well informed of the nature and functions of various social and political institutions which concern him

5. Siddiq, Ashraf Mohd., "Socio-Political Consciousness Among Industrial Workers: An Area Study", Indian Journal of Industrial Relations (New Delhi), vol.2, no. 1, July 1975.

as a worker and citizen can be said to be conscious.

After a thorough study of his samples the author comes to certain conclusions. The study was conducted in the year 1966-67, based on the response of 400 industrial workers from Kanpur. He found that a substantial per centage of workers exercise their right to franchise. This itself he mentioned as the proof of a higher political consciousness. Workers who are comparatively more secure with permanent employment and better wages exhibited a higher level of consciousness. He concludes that greater the degree of socio-political consciousness, more the workers aspire for political affiliation and greater participation in political activities.

2. Enquiries made and studies conducted on the Agrarian Structure in Kuttanad

Irrespective of all the developments that took place in Kuttanad, certain problems are cropping up in Kuttanad agriculture sector. It has affected both the landowners and the workers in the field. Official and non-official agencies had made certain attempts to look into this matter. They also have given certain suggestions to get the problems solved. In this respect the report brought out by the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission in 1971, is important.⁶ The commission was appointed in response

6. Government of Kerala: Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, (Trivandrum, November 1971).

to the memorandum submitted by the Akhila Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham (All Kuttanad Cultivators Association) to the Government on 22-2-'71. The Commission was directed to look into the cost of cultivation in Kuttanad in comparison with areas like Palghat, prevailing wage rates of agricultural workers in comparison to the paddy prices and allied matters including measures for the reduction of the cost of cultivation.

The commission gathered information by a sample survey and interview with cultivators and workers. The first two chapters of the report deal with geographical features and cultivation patterns of Kuttanad. The fourth chapter deals with the problems of agricultural workers, like the size and volume of under employment, emergence of trade unions and the objective conditions which paved way for it, and the role played by the Industrial Relations Committee (IRC). Certain conclusions are also reached after analysing the cost of cultivation and wage rates.

The main conclusions reached concern the question of how to increase production. Adoption of scientific methods and labour-saving devices are recommended. The need for the maintenance of peace in the agriculture sector through conciliation methods

is also highlighted. However, a close perusal of the report, shows that the methods of collecting information and even the conclusions reached are completely biased in favour of the cultivators. In this connection, the dissenting note made by P.G.K. Panikkar to the report is important. Panikkar's study ^{shows} that, if 1930 is taken as the base year, by 1971 the paddy price had increased about twenty times, whereas the cost of production has increased only fifteen times. Panikkar calculated that the average cost of production of one Para (a measurement of about thirteen litres) of paddy in 1971 was only Rs.4.80, whereas the price of paddy then was Rs.7/-, at least yielding a profit of Rs.2.20 per Para.⁷ So the argument that the cultivators cannot afford to pay higher wages does not hold good.

Panikkar advocates unionisation as the only bulwark against employers attempts to drive wages further below the subsistence level at a time when the real wages of workers are continually declining. He is very optimistic about the union's ability to further organise and politicise. As an alternative proposal to capitalist farming, he suggests 'peasant farming' in the strict sense of the term. By 'peasant farming' he means that the cultivators should be allowed to retain that much area of land which

7. *ibid.*, p. 35.

he and his family members can cultivate. The surplus land should be distributed to landless labourers. Irrespective of certain drawbacks, the Commission report is useful to have an insight into the problems of agriculture in Kuttanad.

Among the non-official agencies which looked into the problems of Kuttanad, the study made by the Sastra Sahitya Parishat is important.⁸ An expert committee appointed by the Parishad after probing into different matters of Kuttanad agriculture has given certain valid suggestions for the consideration of the Government and the public. Defective planning and progress at a snail's pace resulted in a near failure of the three development measures - Thottappalli Spill Way, Thannirmukkom Regulator and the Alleppey-Changanacherry road undertaken by the Government to aid the Kuttanad region towards progress. This study was conducted by a group of experts in the field making it an authoritative report.

T.K. Oommen has made an enquiry into the functioning of peasant organisations in Alleppey district. It is important since his investigation covers the institutionalised frame work functioning in the agrarian

8. Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, Problems of Kuttanad, (Mal) (Report of the Study Team on Kuttanad) (Trivandrum, October 1978).

sector.⁹ It is an exploratory and descriptive study even though attempts are made to analyse the forces working in the agrarian sector. He deals with different types of peasant organisations like Co-operative societies sponsored by Government, rich peasants' associations, agricultural workers' unions etc., based on the socio-economic background of the members, their sponsorship and orientation.

The study of agricultural workers, which is our concern is dealt with in the second chapter. Gommen characterises the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU) sponsored by CPI (M) as a militant union and the other unions sponsored by CPI (KSKTF), Congress (DKTU), and RSP (KKTU) as reformist unions, considering their approach to the problems.

After going into the details of the origin, growth, functioning, socio-economic background of the members, struggles conducted and the achievements of different agricultural workers unions, he has given certain concluding comments on them. The author attributes two faces to the unions, as in appearance

9. Gommen T.K., FAO Survey on Peasant Organisations in India: The Case of Alleppey (Kerala), (Mimeograph, Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 1974).

they stand for the economic welfare of its members, but in reality they are playing second fiddle to the parties by which they are sponsored by, mobilising the rural poor in their favour.¹⁰ However, KSKTU, sponsored by CPI(M) is still maintaining its dominant position.

Another thing highlighted by Oommen is that the composition of the members and the leadership, the fight with landlords, allegiance to political parties etc., are mainly interplays of caste and communal combinations.¹¹ The basic assumption of the author through out the book is that agricultural workers succeeded in having a militant movement in Kuttanad not on class terms, but by the manipulation of caste and communal politics. He has tried to buttress this argument with a detailed analysis of membership pattern, nature of leadership, need of homogeneity among union members, existence of primordialities etc. It is true, no doubt, that the militant unions like KSKTU drew massive support from the scheduled castes and Ezhavas in the agrarian sector, but unless it is linked to the rural class structure where the overwhelming majority of these castes are the landless workers and poor peasants, fighting against landlord exploitation,

10. *ibid.*, p. 118.

11. *ibid.*, p. 119.

(mostly upper caste) the reasons for radical mobilisation are totally missed.

3. The Role of Peasantry and Agricultural Workers in the Implementation of Land Reforms and Other Institutional Reforms.

by
Studies conducted by different authors have made an attempt to understand the role played by the organised peasantry in the implementation of the progressive measures like land reforms. Attention is also focused on how the institutionalised frame work of peasant organisations and their attempt to settle issues through conciliations etc, have helped to ease the tensions in agrarian sector.

In an article Krishnaji explains the agrarian structure in Kerala associated with developing capitalist ~~xxx~~ relations and its reflections in the formation of family.¹² He divides present agrarian structure into the following: (i) agricultural labourers, (ii) poor peasants, (iii) middle peasants, (iv) rich peasants and (v) landlords.

Samuel P. Huntington in his book emphasises the need for a powerful peasant organisation for the effective implementation of land reforms.¹³ He states that the

12. Krishnaji N, "Agrarian Structure and Family Formation", (Working paper no. 85, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, 1979).

13. Huntington Samuel P., Political Order in Changing Societies, (Bombay, VFS (Pvt.) Ltd., 1968).

mobilisation of peasants is not necessary to start land reforms; but to be successful, land reforms must stimulate the mobilisation and organisation of peasants. Land reforms laws will become effective only when they are institutionalised by organisations committed to make them effective and effective organisations will come with effective political parties.

Another important study emphasises the need for peasant organisations is that of V.C. Koshy¹⁴ pointing out the historical experience, Koshy states that the strength of the peasant organisations not only effects the implementation of the land reform enactments, but also it is powerful enough to determine the politics of the state. To this day the politics of Kerala was determined by the interplay of the class forces for and against the land reform measures. Koshy proves it through a close scrutiny of the interaction between the political process, peasant movement, agrarian reforms and its socio-economic impact on the masses. He endorses the fact that it is the force of the peasants and agricultural workers' movement which made the land reforms an accomplished fact, in comparison with other states in India.

14. Koshy V.C., "The Politics of Land Reforms in Kerala" (Ph.D. thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 1976).

He explains in detail the agrarian structure which has become the background for the peasant movement in Kerala. The interaction between the struggle of class forces at the national level, the legislative process at the state level and the implementation of land reforms in villages are explained with utmost care. The first two chapters of the study deals with the economic and political foundation and agrarian structure of Kerala. Third chapter deals with land reform legislations and the fourth the role of peasant movements. The last chapter explains the socio-economic impact of these developments. This study brings to light the forces at work at various stages of land reforms.

T.K. Oommen in his another study brings out the positive aspects of the institutionalised framework.¹⁵ He tries to refute the widely acclaimed theory regarding the demise of a movement by institutionalisation, or through the natural history of life cycle approach study of the agricultural workers' unions in Kuttanad region of Kerala. He argues that the mobilisation and institutionalisation can not only co-exist but it can also open new vistas of mobilisation. He

15. Oommen T.K., "From mobilisation to Institutionalisation : The Life Cycle of an Agrarian Labour Movement in Kerala". In S.C. Malik ed., Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilisation, (Simla, Institute of Advanced Studies, 1977).

equates institutionalisation to a societally prescribed system of behaviour based on relatively stable interaction pattern hinged on socially accepted values, norms, rules and procedures.¹⁶ Oommen considers the formative years of agricultural worker's unions as mobilisation at the pre-institutionalisation phase. In this respect the author explains in detail the formation of agricultural workers' unions and their growth, facing many kinds of repression at the hands of Landlords and police and different struggles conducted by the Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union which is the forerunner of the present KSKTU. The process of institutionalisation starts with the coming of the communist ministry in 1957, by fixing up minimum wages, stipulation of time of work and setting up of Industrial Relation Committee etc., to settle disputes in peaceful manner. The Agricultural Workers Act passed in 1974, is another step in the process of institutionalisation.

4. Agrarian Unrest and Changes in Agrarian Relations

Unrest is always an expression of suppressed feelings. This was true in the case of Kuttanad agricultural workers. The absence of adequate employment and

16. *ibid.*, p. 288.



TH-571.

the low wages affected the daily living of the workers there. On the otherhand the fall in paddy price and the alarming rate of price hike in inputs like fertilisers, pesticides etc., deeply affected the peasants too. The expression of unrest as a result of discontentment had a reflection in the agrarian relations also. Following are the few studies made on this aspect of the problem especially which is concerned with the present area of study.

In an article published in the Economic and Political Weekly¹⁷, K.C. Alexander attributes the change in the agrarian relations from the master-slave relationship to the employer-employee relationship in the agricultural sector to the growing tendency of fight back by the agricultural workers as an outlet for their growing discontentment and unrest. He also describes the changes that have occurred in the farmer-labour relations in Kuttanad and identifies the different factors which contributed to these changes as the inbuilt political and economic pressure made by the left politics and the functioning of powerful trade unions in Kerala.

17. Alexander K.C., "Emerging Farmer-Labour Relations in Kuttanad". Economic and Political Weekly (Bombay) vol. 3, no. 34, 25 August, 1973, pp. 1551 - 60.

K.C. Alexander has made another exploratory study into the nature and background of agrarian unrest in the Kuttanad region¹⁸. On the basis of his data and discussions with local leaders of labour and farmers the author concludes that agrarian unrest in Kuttanad is basically a manifestation of class conflict. According to him, the belief of the workers in a radical ideology on the one hand and the conservative ideology of farmers and their inability to appreciate workers' demands and the zeal to safeguard their own interest on the other hand are the root causes of agrarian unrest in this area. Therefore, he doubts how far the mere granting of higher wages to agricultural labour can purchase lasting peace in agrarian relations in Kuttanad.

The study made by Joan P. Mencher brings out in detail the rate of unrest in Kuttanad and Palghat agriculture sectors and its reflections in agrarian relations¹⁹. Her intention was to examine the forces

18. Alexander K.C., "Nature and Background of Agrarian Unrest in Kuttanad". In Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, (New Delhi) July 1975, vol.2, no.1, pp. 65 - 81.

19. Mencher Joan P., "Agrarian Relations in Two Rice Regions of Kerala". Economic & Political Weekly, (Bombay), vol. XII, nos. 6 and 7, February, 1978, Annual series, pp. 349 - 66.

interfering with production and to examine the class relations that impede a more equitable distribution of food and other commodities.

The paper describes some of the striking contrasts between Palghat and Kuttanad areas. The feudal type of land relations existed in Palghat till as late as the middle of the 20th century, as against its decline in Kuttanad at the end of the 19th century. The capitalist penetration and unionisation of workers in agriculture happened in Kuttanad much earlier than in Palghat. The main struggles in Palghat were led by the tenants, while in Kuttanad they were by the agricultural workers. The polarisation of class forces was more clear in Kuttanad than in Palghat.

From interviews she had with landowners, workers, trade union leaders, Government employees etc., many problems they face becomes apparant. The farmers highlighted increasing wage rates, growing case of indiscipline among workers, fall in paddy price, rise of fertilisers ~~market~~ and pesticides' price etc. The workers and trade union leaders brought out different tactics adopted by the landowners to extract more work for less pay and to keep the worker under their control. The Government employees explained how successfully the

assistance given by the Government is better utilised by rich peasants and landlords. She explains the historical background of agricultural and geographical features of both the regions. The role played by the left parties are also explained in detail.

Mencher criticises the CPI (M) and the labour union sponsored by it for the lenient attitude towards the rich peasants and cultivators. She also feels that, the movement is also affected by the lack of issues. Now their main attempt is to fight against the efforts made by the cultivators to lower the wages under one pretext or other. She admits that even though Kerala has the highest literacy rate and a highly politicised agricultural labourers their conditions still remains deplorable due to reduced employment opportunities, rising prices etc. Yet she is optimistic that if all the avenues in the agricultural sector are utilised, Kerala can become selfsufficient in food production and increase it's employment opportunities. She also, has a complaint that the leadership is not taking up the issues in a proper manner. But she is fully confident that the highly intelligent, educated and efficient agricultural labour force can overcome the present difficulties. She also admits that the problems of the agricultural workers cannot be solved to a great extent

without having a radical transformation in the social relations of production.

Even though the labour leaders appreciate the apprehensions put forward by the author and her ^{ra} impatience at the deteriorating situation, they have opined that it is very easy for the academicians to put forward any theory or argument. But it is very much more difficult for the people who have experience from the field and are aware of practical difficulties to put these theories into practice.

N. Krishnaji in one of his articles tries to analyse the latest trends in the left movement in the light of the substantial changes that have taken place in the agrarian relations²⁰. The article is divided into two parts, the first of which deals with some aspects of the strategies of the CPI (M), the strongest representative of the left, on agrarian issues. He gives it the credit for the strength of the left movement in the successful implementation of the land reform measures and the improved status of the agricultural workers, rather than to the legislative measures undertaken for this purpose.

20. Krishnaji N., "Agrarian Relations and Left Movement in Kerala - A note on recent Trends", Economic & Political Weekly, vol. 15, no. 9, 3 March 1979. Also working paper no. 85, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum.

In the second part he discusses the strategy of the CPI(M) in its all India character. The 1973 Muzaffarpur Central Committee resolution on Agrarian Issues was the result of an assessment by the party of the programme of work set out in an earlier resolution passed in 1966 and takes into account the differences which have cropped up with in the party in the intervening period. In an explanatory note to the 1973 resolution on agrarian issues by the CPI(M), the then General Secretary P. Sundarayya explained that: "No legislation, however, limited, under the present ruling classes and corrupt bureaucratic set up gets implemented ... unless powerful mass movements are developed".²¹

Krishnaji states that in spite of the powerful movement by CPI(M), it could not prevent the landlords from exceeding the ceilings. He criticises the CPI(M) for still not being in a position to take a tough stand against the rich peasants due to its concern for preserving its electoral base and due to the party's middle class orientation. He is of the opinion that the party has to change its stand drastically in favour of the rural poor.

21. CPI (M), Central Committee Resolution, On Certain Agrarian Issues and an Explanatory Note, by P. Sundarayya (Calcutta: 1973), p. 4.

5. Struggles Conducted and Achievements Obtained

The struggle conducted by the agricultural workers in Kerala is a history by itself. Even though not much chronological description of struggles was available there are few studies giving emphasis for the struggles conducted and the achievements made by the agricultural workers in all over the country. Few of that studies are very important for the purpose of the present study.

The study about peasant organisations in India by A.N. Seth analyses the functioning of peasant organisations all over India²². It was a study sponsored by FAO of United Nations Organisation, and the intention of FAO was to appraise the existing peasant organisations and to recommend the possibility of starting peasant organisations where they are non-existent. Another reference was to propose the ways and means by which they could be linked into viable national and regional units. The study was mainly conducted to unearth the possibilities referred to by the FAO. For the writing of his book the author gathered informations from Government officials,

22. Seth A.N., Peasant Organisations in India (A Survey) (mimeograph, Ghaziabad, Centre for Agrarian Research Training and Education, September 1978).

economists, sociologists and leaders of trade unions and peasant organisations. The role of the caste, religion and such primordialities are brought to light in his study.

The necessity for organisations in agrarian sector are emphasised. Different patterns of organisations, the functioning of different peasant organisations at the grassroot level etc., are dealt with in detail. The role played by the leadership and political parties are appreciated in his study. He suggests that the problems of peasant organisations should be seen in an all India context and so serious attempts should be made to organise the workers and peasants.

In the second part of the book the major findings of researchers in different regions are explained. The analysis made in the context of Kerala and particularly Kuttanad is remarkable. The different socio-economic and political aspects which led to the unionisation of peasants and particularly, the agricultural workers of Kuttanad is explained in detail. An annexure is also added to give light to the methodological frame work followed by the author.

By the end, Seth stresses the role to be played by the intelligentsia, political parties, non-gazetted officers and the press and mass media to rouse the consciousness of the rural poor. The lessons from victories achieved in certain areas should be transmitted to others. Even though certain attempts to have an insight into the problems are made by the author, he failed to reflect the deeprooted socio-economic and historical aspects of the rural problems. His suggestion to solve the problems through certain reformation tactics and increasing the bargaining strength of the peasant organisations is an example for it. All attempts to solve the crisis, without having a total reconstruction of the production relations will be short-lived and will be a futile attempt in a long term perspective.

In his second article on agricultural workers movement, A.V. Jose explains in detail the different struggles led by the workers and the outcome of that.²³ He divides the paper into three parts. The first part, the period from 1940 to 1955, covers the development of trade unions. The second part (1955-

23. Jose A.V., "Trade Union Movement Among Agricultural Labourers in Kerala: The case of Kuttanad Region". Working Paper no. 93, (Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, July 1979).

1975) deals with the struggle conducted by the unions and the gains of organised bargaining. In the third part, the author analyses the factors that led to the growth of the agricultural workers movement in Kuttanad. In the first phase the cultivators unleashed organised repression on the workers. In the second stage when these measures proved ineffective, the farmers resorted to ~~organise~~ negotiations and conciliatory methods through the Industrial Relations Committee and other such agents.

The author categorically states that, when there was no chance for proportionate sharing of the benefits of improved cultivation through redistribution of lands etc., the only alternative before the left movement was to politicise the labourers and organise them to struggle for greater economic benefits within the system of wage employment.²⁴ Now due to the decline in employment opportunities and other objective situations the main thrust of their struggle is to prevent any further decline in income and employment of the agricultural workers. However through a united workers movement in Kuttanad they have gone a long way in achieving their aims. In this study the author is giving a clear cut

24. *ibid.*, p. 25.

analysis of the different factors working within the agricultural workers movement. He is not undermining any positive contributions gained by the organised struggle by the workers.

In another article A.V. Jose gives a comparative picture of the wage rates in the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme (IADP) Districts in various states between 1962 - 63 and 1967 - 68. The study records maximum percentage of increase in wage rates in the Alleppey and Palghat Districts of Kerala, although the growth of production associated with the green revolution has been much less here than in the IADP districts of other states like Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat.²⁵

The conclusion of the author is that even though there was a substantial increase in cash wages, through the mobilisation and politicisation of agricultural workers in Kerala, in reality it helped only to stop further deterioration in real wages. By this he highlights the need for further organised struggles by the agricultural workers for improving their condition and the necessity for being prepared for a

25. Jose A.V., "Wage Rates of Agricultural Labourers in Kerala", Economic and Political Weekly, vol.8, nos. 4, 5, and 6, February, 1973. Annual.

prolonged fight.

The working reports of the agricultural workers unions, published during their annual conference are very useful.²⁶ It is very much informative since the contents include the activities, programmes, struggles conducted and different courses of action adopted during the yeaster/year and the plan for future programmes to be undertaken. The Working Report of KSKTU which is the dominant union, requires special attention. More detailed information regarding the workers movement in Kuttanad can be got from the working reports of Alleppey district. In all the reports the international situation, national situation and state and district situation etc. are explained in brief. Other than the struggles and achievements the need for further consolidation of strength etc, are included in every issue.

The KSKTF which is affiliated to BKMU (Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union), a CPI sponsored union, also publishes²⁷ its working reports almost in the same

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26. KSKTU, Working reports of the annual Conferences.
2nd conference dated 1-3 October, 1971, Alleppey.
3rd conference dated 21-24 December 1973, Calicut.
4th conference dated 21-23 February 1975, Quilon.
5th conference dated 12-14 August 1977, Trichur.
6th conference dated 25-27 August 1978, Alleppey.
27. KSKTF 5th conference dated 2-4 March 1979, Alleppey.

pattern as that of the KSKTU. Again some information can be gathered from the leaflets issued by other unions like that of Congress, RSP, Kerala Congress etc.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The studies reviewed here are mainly concerned with workers movements in general and the area under study. The development of the class forces in Kuttanad during this definite span of history was the subject of study for many academicians and sociologists. Although each of these studies is significant in its own way, there are certain areas to which adequate attention has not been given. So far the studies have been confined mainly to socio-economic aspect or to mobilisation and institutionalisation of agricultural workers. Even though occasionally certain references to unionisation and politicisation of workers and farmers are made, there is no exclusive study on the politicisation of agricultural workers.

Certain authors highlighted the need for organising the agricultural workers all over India, utilising the wealthy experience gathered by workers in Kuttanad. But no concrete suggestions are made by them. Agriculture in Kuttanad is now undergoing a period of crisis and as a result the workers movements also are facing a period

of stagnancy there. Again these authors have not fully succeeded in explaining how the slogan of unity and struggle attracted the attention of workers in Kuttanad so early, irrespective of the fact that the same objective conditions were prevailing in many other areas also. The role of left politics and the need of the unity of agricultural workers with the poor and middle peasants are not projected adequately.

So this study is an attempt to look into all these problems and to understand the gravity of politicisation of the agricultural workers of Kuttanad in the last four decades of growth. The methods and media utilised for the development of political consciousness, the socio-economic changes that have taken place as a result of it etc., are also analysed.

There are certain advantages of choosing Kuttanad as the study area. Kuttanad has the highest concentration of agricultural workers in Kerala, thanks to the pauperisation of a large percentage of middle and poor peasants due to the advent of capitalism in agriculture in the early period itself. To counter the workers' unions and to fight back 'excesses' committed by them, the farmers also formed their own 'associations' in a militant fashion. As a result of all these factors we see a clear-cut polarisation of the two class forces in Kuttanad.

Sources from which data is collected are published materials like books journals, documents and working report of agricultural workers, Kisan Sabhas, Government Notifications, news paper reports etc.. Information is also gathered from agricultural workers, their leaders and from the leaders of farmers' associations.

The study covers from the formation of the unions in 1940 to the present day. It begins with a brief discussion of the historical background of the land structure and agrarian relations in Kerala. The gradual transformation of land from the feudal chieftains to the individual landowners is explained. The conditions of agricultural workers before and after the penetration of capitalism in agriculture, which led to the unionisation of workers is also dealt with.

We also examine the formative years of the union, i.e. the period from 1940 to 1950. The pioneer attempt of the trade union leaders from Alleppey to organise the workers, and their success in establishing a firm base for the building up of a powerful movement facing all sorts of opposition from landed gentry are explained in detail. We also see the history of the

struggles led by the unions and the resultant achievements. Socio-economic impacts and political changes due to powerful movements are examined followed by summary of findings.

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CHAPTER - II

AGRARIAN STRUCTURE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE MOVEMENT

The agrarian structure which existed in Kuttanad prior to the beginning of the agricultural workers movement, i.e. before 1940, had evolved over a period of time. The history and development of this phenomenon will help us to understand the subject in a systematic way.

In pre-Aryan days, the area that is today Kerala was a part of the Chera Empire, which was one of the three empires that flourished in South India in those days.¹ The hegemony of the First Chera Empire lasted till around 600 A.D. The Second Chera Empire or the Empire of Perumals, was a loosely tied up political structure comprised of different Chieftaincies and it ended by the first quarter of the eleventh century.

The Foundations

Brahmins occupied a dominant position in society by exploiting the instability and weakness of the Perumal Empire. Historians are of the general opinion

1. Namboodiripad E.M.S., The National Question in Kerala, (Bombay; People's Publishing House, 1952), p. 5.

that the Brahmins who are called Namboodiris in Kerala are the migrants from other states. But some other historians are of the opinion that, a section of the Brahmins might have migrated from other parts of the country and settled in Kerala. However, Brahmins established their control over the Chieftains and systematically acquired the lands in their favour on the pretext of acquiring land for the temples, by spreading the myth that the whole land of Kerala was given to them by Lord Parasurama. This development paved the way for a new form of feudal land relationship in these numerous municipalities. The Brahmins who acquired large areas of land were not able to cultivate or supervise the land due to their claim of superiority. The Brahminical scheme of division of society into high and low castes, was a sheer necessity. The Kanam rights on land, a customary tenure with the characteristics of lease and mortgage, were conferred to other lower castes, mostly Nairs. The Nairs further leased land on Patton (rent) and other inferior kinds of tenure to other lower strata of society like Christians, Muslims and Ezhavas. The actual cultivation was done by the lower caste agrestic slaves. In this way generally a three tier system of land tenure came into existence. The highest layer known as Janmi (landlord) represented

by Namboodiri Brahmins, second Kanamdar - holder of a higher level tenancy rights by the Nairs, and a holder of Verumpattom (simple lease) represented by Ezhavas. In areas like Kuttanad in Travancore² Syrian Christians often were both Kanamdars and Verumpattom tenants.

With the advent of British East India Company the agrarian system and the economy of Kerala, especially of Travancore had undergone a tremendous change. The development in Travancore to a large extent was different from those of Malabar and Cochin even though Travancore accepted British suzerainty as early as 1788. With the help of the British East India Company, Travancore became a powerful state. In the process of its expansion upto the border of Cochin, especially under Marthandavarma, the Raja of Travancore in the 18th century, defeated the Chieftains, annexed and converted their land to state-owned sircar lands.

The Land Tenures

The land tenures which developed in Travancore area by this time can be divided into three as Janmom lands,

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2. Kerala comprises Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Travancore and Cochin were princely states and Malabar was a part of British Indian province of Madras prior to Independence. These three were integrated to form Kerala in 1956.

Pandaravaka lands and other types.³ The Janmom lands originally, referred to tax free lands enjoyed from very early times by Devaswoms (temples), Brahmins and upper class non-Brahmin Jammies. The holders of Janmom lands created several types of subordinate tenures under them. Most important among them was the Kanapattom, which is a combination of a simple lease and mortgage by which the Kudiyam (tenant) had to pay rent and certain customary payments to the Janmi. Other important tenures related with Janmom property were Verumpattom (tenancy-at-will), Kuzhikanam (lease of waste land in favour of cultivators who were to make improvements in the land), and Otti (usufructury mortgage of land).

The Pandaravaka or Sircar lands were the lands which the rulers owned or acquired and on which certain tenures arose. The main tenures under Pandaravaka lands were Pandarapattom, Inam, Viruthi and special tenures. Pandarapattom was non-favourable tenure of Government lands on which full rate of land-revenue was charged. Inam was land granted free of land-revenue to persons holding particular office or performing services as a mark of royal favour. Viruthi was also a special type of Inam, offered in return for the services rendered to

3. Oommen M.A., A Study of Land Reforms in Kerala, (New Delhi; Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. 1975), p. 8.

the temples and the Sovereign. There were also many other special tenures offered.

There are certain other tenures different from Janmom and Pandaravaka lands like Edavakai, Sree Pandaravakai, Kandukrishi, Sree Padam Vaka, Thiruppuvaram etc. The Edavakai refers to four free hold estates given over to four chiefs, which were free from assessment. The Sree Pandaravaka lands belonged to the deity of Sree Padmanabha Swami temple at Trivandrum. The Kandukrishi lands were the farms of Travancore Sovereigns. Sreepadom belonged to a branch of ruling family of the Travancore state. Thiruppuvaram was an assessment, in favour of a third party, of a specific portion of land revenue payable to Government by holders of a specified land.

Even though the land tenures which existed in Cochin and Malabar had certain differences in details and local peculiarities from that which existed in Travancore, they had many common characteristics. Thus the land tenure which existed in Kerala just before the twentieth century was very complex and unique in comparison with other parts of India. Kuttanad region which is our area of study consists of sircar lands only. Most part of Kuttanad lands were wet lands which were leased out. The wet lands with its tenurial characteristic

of peasant proprietorship are the result of recent developments, where as Janmom lands are heritages of the past.⁴

Another peculiar feature connected with Travancore cultivation is that by the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century the tenants had become very powerful. Certain historical facts are connected with it. As we have seen early the acquired strength of Travancore monarchy was closely connected with the weakening of Chieftains and the land lords (Janmies). By the 'Patton Proclamation' of June 2, 1865 full ownership rights to the tenant-cultivators of sircar land were assured by the Government. Again it had strengthened the cause of the tenants by stipulating that they were supposed to give rent directly to the state only and allowed unrestricted transfer of their properties. In 1922, the difference between Pandaravaka and sircar Devaswomvaka was abolished by the Devaswom proclamation. Further, by the Janmi-Kudiyan (Amendment) Act of 1939, all the Kanam tenants of Janmom lands were converted into proprietors of such land (to be known as Kudiyan thereafter), under the obligation of payment of

4. Varghese T.C., Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences (New Delhi; Allied Publishers, 1970), p. 154.

Janmikaram (rent due to Janmi) and that also through the state. All these factors helped the birth of powerful tenants in Travancore and especially in Kuttanad, and thus an independent peasantry emerged.

Cultivator - Attached Labour System

The development of attached labour system⁵ was related to the system of cultivation in Kuttanad. Kuttanad's paddy fields can be divided into three types : Karappadam, Kayal and Karinilam. The Karappadam is old reclaimed area extending over more than one lakh acres. Kayal is newly reclaimed area which lies ten to twenty feet below sea-level and is divided into Padasekharams bounded by canals and rivers. Karinilam is field near to village settlement and comparatively dry field. The main system of cultivation is known as Punja which takes place between October and March. Since it is an after monsoon cultivation and due to the low lying nature of land, bounding and dewatering, before

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5. Attached Labour System is a sort of work attached with feudal landlordism. By this method the whole family of the agricultural workers will undertake a contract to work for the landlord by receiving the wage in advance. Since they cannot pay back the loan they have taken, practically they were forced to work for the landlord permanently. They will get lesser wage compared to other workers, but they will get a lumpsum amount of paddy after harvest.

the fields are recovered for cultivation is essential.

Since paddy is a labour ⁱⁿtensive cultivation it requires large number of workers especially at the time of sowing and harvesting. Further, the cultivation in Kuttanad is risky and a constant vigil over the paddy fields to prevent the ring bunds from breaching is necessary. So by the development of attached labour system, the cultivators ensured the service of an adequate number of workers by attaching them to their households, by offering them certain pecuniary benefits. Again the arduous job in unhealthy and unhygienic situation also made the cultivators keep away from physically participating in the cultivation. The work was mostly in the slushy fields often in knee-deep water far away from their homes without any protection from sun or rain. So from early days the workers were drawn from the lowest stratum of society, the scheduled castes.⁶

The cultivator-attached labour system was semi-feudal in nature. The whole family of the worker was involved in cultivation and its allied works. Again,

6. Pillai V.R. and Panikkar P.G.K., Land Reclamation in Kerala (New Delhi; Asia Publishing House, 1965), p. 119.

the worker's family was provided with a plot for homestead, thus the employer made sure round-the-clock presence of the worker. As an acknowledgement for giving a plot of land to live and cultivate the tenant-cum-worker was obliged to pay certain festival gifts occasionally from his farm produce. On the other hand the general protection and welfare of the worker was the responsibility of the landlord. There was a personal bond of allegiance to the landlord and his family which was passed down in a hereditary manner from one generation to another. The landlord was generous enough to extend some loans to a worker in his time of difficulty, even though through this the landlord indirectly assured further indebtedness of the worker. This commitment binds these families so strongly to their masters, that it was difficult for them to extricate themselves from the bond. Though slavery was abolished in Travancore by 1885, the lower caste workers, continued to work as dependent labourers to the land lords and cultivators. Custom and tradition held such an unshakable sway over the scheme of things that a 'disloyal' worker could not hope to get employment any where. But the terms offered to the attached workers were not at all commensurate with the arduousness of their job and the responsibility they had to shoulder.

Introduction of Capitalist Form of Agriculture

Even though reclamation-cum-farming developed in Kuttanad against a predominantly feudal background, the emerging independent, enterprising peasants adopted the capitalist form of cultivation in the course of time. Certain characteristic differences are brought out by capitalist farming as against the feudal or semi-feudal background. The first development was the employment of wage labour. Through this the development of direct exchange relations between money and agricultural labour power as a free commodity emerged.⁷ In the earlier times the workers, especially the attached workers, were entitled for wages mainly in kind. Now they were entitled to cash wages and this led to the monetisation of the rural economy. This part of Travancore was also not free from the specific features of the development of Indian agrarian situation, that is the development of capitalist features when the old feudal condition still persisted. This was the reason for the disintegration of the peasantry, that is the emergence of the agricultural wage-labour at one pole and that of rich peasants mainly employing wage labour for cultivation at the other.

7. Sen, Bhowani, Evolution of Agrarian Relations in India. (New Delhi; Peoples Publishing House, 1962), p. 166.

There are certain reasons for the penetration of capitalist forms of agriculture, very much earlier in Travancore than in Cochin and Malabar. Since major parts of land were vested with the state it was easy for the tenants to get it at their disposal. The availability of better transport and communication facility in Travancore and the encouragement from the Government inspired the tenants, especially the Syrian Christians in Kuttanad to take a look at land reclamation, which required large capital investments. The Agricultural Loans Act, enacted by the Travancore state in 1891, to provide loans for needy agriculturists was again a helping hand for the pioneers to meet the large capital investment needs. Taking advantage of the paddy price hike during and after the First World War, the tenant-turned-capitalist entrepreneurs reclaimed most of the area from the shallow backwaters in Kuttanad and made it the important rice bowl of Kerala.

The expansion of cultivation compelled changes in the existing land-labour ratio. Since the attached workers were inadequate for the requirement of land reclamation and 'back-water cultivation'⁸, migration of agricultural labour families took place in large numbers from the adjoining areas towards the newly cultivated tracts. This was in addition to the seasonal flow of

8. Varghese, n. 4, p. 120.

workers during the time of agricultural operations.

Conditions of Agricultural Workers After the Capitalist Penetration in Agriculture

The improvement of land tenure and the increased production did not benefit the agricultural workers. Instead it aggravated the situation. The inability of the attached labour system to meet the increased labour requirement, and the inflow of workers from neighbouring areas, initiated the employment of casual labour. But this development did not reflect in the conditions of work, wage, hours of work, etc., of the workers. On the otherhand it deprived the workers of certain benefits they might have got in the attached labour system like homestead to live in, credit facilities, etc. Despite the tremendous socio-economic changes, the lot of the agricultural workers remained almost the same. The loans extended by the landlords proved to be a bondage, since they could not repay it from their meagre income. There was no fixed hours of work and the work involved was of an arous^{du} nature, to be carried out in the most unhygenic conditions with considerable risk even to life.⁹ They were forced to work eleven to

9. Government of Kerala, Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, November, 1971, p. 22.

thirteen hours a day even after long hours of journey to reach the working spot in Kayal, with no protection from rain and sun during working hours.

The wage given to the worker was not adequate enough to support his family even for bare subsistence. Fulledged starvation was the only alternative on days without work. Of course, the attached labour was getting less wages than the casual labourers. Even the measure used for giving wages in kind was of a substandard size. The farmers were keeping a separate measure size for giving wage which was known as Coolipara (bushel for wage). The standard Para (bushel) was of 7.5 Edangazhi (one Edangazhi is approximately 1.33 litre), and the Coolipara was of six Edangazhi and the given wage was considered as given according to the standard measure.¹⁰ Before 1940, the cash given to a male worker was five Chakra (then money coin), which is equivalent to present day twenty paise, and for females 2.5 Chakra equivalent to ten paise. Even employers were reluctant to pay these meagre wage regularly.

Other than the lower wage and defective working conditions, the social discrimination and humiliation which the workers, mainly drawn from lower castes

10. Achutanandan V.S., Information got in an interview with him on 24-6-1979, who was the then President of Kerala State Agricultural Workers' Union(KSKTU).

suffered, was beyond imagination. The workers had to address farmers with honorific titles like Thampuran (Lord) and on the other hand the cultivators generally addressed the workers in degrading terms or in third person irrespective of age and other relational considerations. The degraded status of the worker was reflected even in dress. The workers, even woman, were not supposed to cover their body above the waist, and they had to stand in a bent posture in front of them. Workers could not keep moustache and good dresses.¹¹ They also used a subserviant language, only meant for them, to express the ideas of food, money, wage in kind etc. Agricultural workers were supposed to keep away from public roads, and to clear the way for an upper caste landlord. The landlords entourage often made a "Hoi Hoi" sound to warn their vassals of their approach. All these social customs and servile attitude were kept as a 'divine law' by which the employer had the right to punish offenders. The sinners are subjected to physical torture and whipping, eviction from homestead charging with false cases etc. Nobody dared enough to question or oppose the employer because the understanding was that

11. Joseph K.P., "Agricultural Workers Movement in Kuttanad" in Karshaka Thozhilali monthly, (Mal) (Alleppey), vol. 1, no. 1, September 1973, pp. 9 - 10.

an act against the landlord was an act against God, and would invite the wrath of the God.¹² The suffering which the workers were subjected to was inexplicable during the seasonal floods. Generally their huts were in low-lying area of bunds and when they submerged in monsoon floods they were forced to run from one bund to another with their domestic goods and utensils, facing the torrential rain. Some times they had to stand on their roof tops for days together. Due to exposure to nature's attacks and inadequate medical care for diseases, many succumbed to immature death.

In all these ways the suffering of the agricultural workers reached such an alarming heights that they were ready to retaliate, and give vent to their oppressed feelings at the earliest opportune moment. The economic crisis which engulfed the capitalist world during 1929-33 and the price hike and unemployment created by the second World War further aggravated the condition of agricultural workers.

Formation of Agricultural Labourers Unions

After examining the historical background and different levels of the development of agrarian relations,

12. Das S.K., "Agricultural Workers Movement in Kuttanad", Golden Jubilee Souvenir of Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, (Mal) (Alleppey), 1972, p. 133.

it will be useful to examine the factors or the immediate causes which led to the formation of unions to protect their interests. By the early part of this century very many social and political changes had taken place in Travancore, especially in the Kuttanad region. Through the expansion of formal education and informal education through newspapers and journals the lower stratum of society hitherto characteristised as untouchables became more conscious. They also came to understand that they had to fight tooth and nail to remove the social discrimination against the lower castes. The leaders of lower castes like Pulayas and Ezhavas decided to launch struggles through their organisations since there was severe resistance from the upper castes against the changes. For that purpose the pulaya Maha Sabha was formed by the ~~the~~ Pulayas and the ~~the~~ Sree Narayana Dharma Pparipalana Sangham (SNDP) by the Ezhavas, to conduct these struggles. Certain powerful social movements were coming to other parts of Kerala. The widely misinterpreted Moplah revolt in 1921 was an agrarian revolt by the poor Muslim peasants against the upper caste landlords. Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924 and Guruvayoor temple entry movement in 1931, were powerful social movements which culminated in the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, by which all castes in the Hindu religion were allowed to enter and worship in temples.

Since illiteracy was one of the main reason for the perpetuation of the social and political discrimination, there was a great enthusiasm among the people to get educated in the early decades of this century in Travancore. The talented SNDP leader Mahakavi Kumaran Asan's writings were a challenge to the upper caste domination, which aroused the consciousness of the people. Before the beginning of the agricultural workers movement in Kuttanad a wave of peasant movement was blowing up in other parts of Kerala, especially in Malabar. The enthusiasm and momentum gathered by the peasant struggles made tremendous impact upon the Kuttanad workers and made them aware of the need for organised fighting.

The proximity to Alleppey town which had become the centre of industrial activity, was another stimulus to the people of Kuttanad. The trade union activity had started in Alleppey as early as 1922, and the success of the struggle of the coir factory workers in 1938 taught them the need for a strong union and the achievements which can be made through collective bargaining. Again many kith and kin of the Kuttanad agricultural workers, who were involved in trade union activities in Alleppey conveyed the favourable results of their experiments to them.

As we have seen earlier, with the expansion of cultivation in Kuttanad in the early part of this century there was a massive increase in the demand for labour, which resulted in the inflow of a large army of workers from neighbouring areas to the Kuttanad region. Again the crisis in traditional industries like coir and fish industries threw out many unemployed who joined the agricultural operation.¹³ A vast army of casual workers with their roots in their far of places and loyalties to none questioned the feudal set of relations and effected a dent in the unquestioned loyalty of attached workers to their masters.

During 1930's the leftist parties, especially the Congress Socialist Party which was recognised as the radical wing of the Congress Party with a socialist ideology intensified their activities among workers and peasantry. They conceived the need for mass organisation of agricultural workers, to act as transmission channels for bringing about revolutionary Consciousness among the working class.

13. Mencher, Joan P., "Agrarian Relations in Two Rice regions of Kerala" Economic and Political Weekly (Bombay), vol. 13, no. 6 and 7, annual 1978, p. 358.

The immediate cause for the formation of agricultural workers' union was the deepening economic difficulties and acute food shortage caused by the second world war in Travancore at the end of the 1930's.¹⁴ In order to face this situation the Government resorted to compulsory procurement of paddy from the farmers and retaining of food materials. Since agricultural workers were receiving their wages in kind, they were excluded from the purview of rationing. In order to exploit the situation caused by the increase in the price of paddy, farmers switched to payment of wages in cash instead of in kind. This proved to be the last straw for the agricultural workers, who were subjected to age old suffering at the hands of the landed gentry. The enhanced political consciousness of the workers coupled with the ripened socio-economic background necessitated the need for a union among them. In the next chapter we will see the formation of the agricultural workers' union and the earlier attempts to consolidate their strength.

14. Alexander K.C., Agricultural Labour Unions : A Study in Three South Indian States. National Institute of Rural Development (Hyderabad: 1978), p. 13.

CHAPTER III

FORMATIVE YEARS OF THE AGRICULTURAL WORKERS' UNION

The impact of the Second World War came to prove the severity of the already crippled existence of the agricultural workers. To aggravate the situation, the cultivators started giving wages in cash, hitherto given in kind as paddy, since the employers thought they could reap high profit utilising the unprecedented paddy price hike. Due to all these factors a spark of discontent was smouldering among the agricultural workers. The successful ending of the Coir factory workers strike in 1938 was a moral booster for the workers of Kuttanad; from these experiences they came to know that collective bargaining and united fight was the only panacea to extract for themselves minimum human existence they deserved.

It was a time of tremendous political changes in Kerala. The ideological struggle within Congress party already renowned as the strong hold of a radical group known as the Congress Socialist Party, resulted in the formation of a definite communist nucleus in Kerala by 1937 which included some of the topmost provincial leaders

of the party. The work of this group in the years 1938-39, together with the clash of communist and socialist policies following the outbreak of the second World War, resulted in the wholesale transformation in 1940 of the Congress Socialist Party in Kerala into the Communist Party.¹ It was a time when the communist movement was increasingly beginning to understand the need of organising the agricultural workers and rural peasantry for the effective struggle against imperialism and capitalism. In accordance with the call of the Communist Party, the trade union activists, from the neighbouring Alleppey, the flourishing industrial centre in Kerala at that time, took up the task of organising the agricultural workers of Kuttanad. Facing the immense resistance from the landed gentry, the trade union activists travelled the length and breadth of Kuttanad paddy fields with the message of ~~mutual~~ unionisation. The brewing discontentment of the agricultural workers was given an outlet by the trade union activists. The response from the agricultural workers was tremendous.

1. Namboodiripad, E.M.S., The National Question in Kerala (Bombay: Peoples Publishing House, 1952) p. 149.

Formation of the union

Although the writers are of different opinions² regarding the exact origin of the agricultural workers union, there is an agreement among them that, it was formed and registered as a trade union in 1940. Thus the first agricultural workers union - Thiruvithamcore Karshaka Thozhilali (Travancore Agricultural Workers) Union - TKTU - came into effect with headquarters at Mancombu in Kuttanad Taluk. In the early days, the union activities were conducted openly only as a separate trade union activity since CPI was under ban.

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2. Das, S.K., "Agricultural Workers Union in Kuttanad", (in Malayalam), in Golden Jubilee Souvenir, Travancore Coir Factor Workers Union, (Alleppey), 1972, p. 134.

According to Das, a prominent labour leader, the top leaders of the coir factory workers induced him to start organisational work among Kuttanad agricultural workers at Pallathurthy near Alleppey in September, 1939 where a committee with him as convener was elected, and thus the Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union (Agricultural Workers' Union) was born.

Joseph K.P., "Kuttanad Agricultural Workers Union" (in Malayalam) in Karshaka Thozhilali monthly, (Alleppey) vol. 1, no.1, Sept. 1973, p. 10. Joseph K.P., one of the organisers of union in Kuttanad, explains the origin of the union in another way. "In 1940, at the house of one Panakkachira Thankappan, an agricultural worker, a group of people started a discussion to form an organisation for the agricultural workers. The consequent meetings followed at Kainakkari Kuttamangalam and Chirackal, the areas in Kuttanad region and helped to form the 'Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union' (TKTU), in Kuttanad as centre and extending both Kottayam and Alleppey Districts of Travancore in 1940."

The pioneer trade union activists who had come from Alleppey were S.K. Das, K.P. Joseph, V.S. Achutanandan, Varghese Vaidyan, K.M. George, Damodran, etc., who played important roles in organising Kuttanad workers.

The tenancy system which existed in Kuttanad helped the acceleration of the polarisation of forces in Kuttanad agriculture. The decline of land lords and vestige of lands in Government ownership facilitated the tenant-turned cultivators to keep the land with them, making them liable only to the Government. Even they were enjoying the same plot of land when they were tenants. Earlier each tenant happened to keep generally big plots of land to support themselves, since they were made to give the lion's share of the produce to the landlords, in the share cropping pattern of cultivation. The tenants themselves had control over the lands they tilled and these were large in area. In a feudal set up, the agricultural workers, mainly drawn from the lower castes, were outside the perview of land possession. But even in the era of capitalist development too they were alienated from the land, and many of the small farmers and marginal peasants were subject to pauperisation. So the land tenure structure which existed in Kuttanad at that time helped the process of polarisation of land owning classes and agricultural workers.

The enterprising cultivators got tremendous encouragement by way of loans and subsidies for the development of cultivation. The high price of paddy during the Second World War encouraged them to improve the production of paddy to acquire maximum profits. Due to this reason they turned to new techniques of production through irrigation, better quality seeds, fertilizers and mechanisation in agriculture. The benefit of the increased production generated was disproportionately reaped by the big cultivators.³ The attempt made by the cultivators to switch over from wages as paddy, to wages in cash as that was more profitable, worsened the condition of agricultural workers. Even the attached workers were deprived of their benefit which they used to get in earlier times, since attached labour system started breaking up. The advance of mechanisation gradually gave place to casual workers for money wages because the labour saving devices proved the uselessness of keeping a reserved army of labour round the clock vigilant. In this condition the only alternative left with the workers to better their condition or at least to fight back to retain their

3. Jose A.V., "Trade Union Movement Among Agricultural Labourers in Kerala: The Case of Kuttanad", (Working Paper no. 93, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, June, 1979), p.2.

position was organised struggle. The communist party and its leadership, properly understood this situation and rose up to the occasion. The able trade union activists from industrial areas, properly utilising the situation, succeeded to rally round large section of agricultural workers under the banner of TKTU.

The TKTU and the organised struggle in early 1940s

The union conducted the first struggle⁴ in 1941. The main demands that time were the fixation of working hours, use of standard measures for paying wages in kind, and a brief interval at lunch time. The cultivators were compelled to concede the last demand since the workers facing the onslaught of landlords resorted to strike action. Even though the workers got only half-an-hour break during noon time, this effort was a heavy moral booster to agricultural workers, which encouraged them to rally round the newly emerged TKTU in large numbers.

The first successful organised struggle after the formation of Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali (Agricultural Workers) Union (TKTU), was in 1943. This struggle was

4. Alexander K.C., Agricultural Labour Unions - A study of Three South Indian States (Hyderabad: National Institute of Rural Development, 1978), p. 14.

against one Thevarkattu Thomman, who was a powerful landlord and the owner of an extensive field known as 'Mangalam Kayal'.⁵ He was mainly depending on the attached workers, and never used to give wages in full and in time, and also used to cheat the workers, by forging their account. Again he used to give some paddy as loan after the harvest, and by that ensured their obligation to work in his field next year. All the requests and warnings made by the workers failed to have any impact on him, the TKTU had to give a call for total strike in his field in 1943. The response from the workers was tremendous and they stopped working in his field. The main demands raised by them were (i) an enhancement in the annual payment of paddy after the harvest from 25 Paras to 100 Paras, and (ii) full payment of the arrears of wages. The strike went on for seventeen days. All the attempts to disrupt the workers action failed. The landlord conceded both the demands. The success of this first struggle was a moral boost to the workers. Through this they came to know that by a united and determined struggle they can humble even the most powerful landlords. Another positive outcome of the struggle was that more and more attached workers belonging to the Harijan community were attracted to the TKTU, and participated in union activities.

5. Achutanandan, V.S., "Achievements Through A Class Organisation" in Karshaka Thozhilali monthly (Malayalam) (Alleppey) vol. 5, no. 5, 1979, p. 15.

The early 1940's was a time when the farmers also were increasingly getting organised. They understood the danger of workers getting organised and the 1941 strike was a lesson for them. Even though the cultivators' association, mainly composed of the rich farmers came into existence⁶ in 1932, by the name Kuttanad Karshka Sangham (KKS), it gathered its momentum only when the workers started organising themselves. That was a time when the farmers were very powerful. If any worker happened to disobey or not show respect expected of them they used to beat the workers, evict them from places of residence, and harass them in many other ways. So the farmers did their best to prevent the activity of trade union leaders. As they could not do it effectively they tried to stop the workers under them to be weaned away by their leaders. Those days even to participate in union activities was considered a crime against the farmers. To be identified as a union activist was a great sacrifice, since the concerned worker was subject to all sorts of harassment at the hands of the landed gentry.

The devotion and determined effort made by the pioneers in the context of the resistance is worth mentioning. A radical ideology and specific programme

6. Oommen T.K., "FAO Survey on Peasant Organisations In India: The case of Alleppey (Kerala)" (Mimeograph, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, New Delhi, 1974), p. 122.

to uplift the downtrodden, gave the early activists courage and vigour to overcome the test of the time. The selfless effort and devotion given by the early leadership inspired the newcomers with necessary courage and commitment to withstand any type of oppression. They successfully conducted many struggles in this spirit. So the credit for building up a strong union can be attributed to the able and committed leadership coupled with an organisation based on radical ideologies.

Bewildered by the emerging workers unions, the caste and communal leadership tried to organise the workers on such basis. The leaders of castes like Ezhavas and Pulayas tried to organise the workers through their respective organisations like Sri Narayana Dharma Parpalana Yogam (SNDP) and Pulaya Maha Sabha.⁷ This was nothing but an attempt to disrupt the unity of the workers exploiting their narrow caste and communal feelings. But the unity shown by the workers through joint struggle under the banner of Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union (TKTU), defeated such attempts and even the attempts made by different political parties like Congress for years, to wean away a certain section of workers in their fold met with failure. By uniting the large number of workers in the day to day struggle against the rich farmers,

7. Alexander, n. 4, p. 12.

the middle of 1940's witnessed a powerful union in Kuttanad region.

Attempt to politicise the workers

Other than waging struggle against their employers the workers union also tried their best to make the workers politically and socially more conscious. The activities were aimed at making the workers conscious of their lot and to bring about a change in the agrarian relations. Conducting of study classes, distribution of printed literature, drama, poetry, public meeting etc., were the media used to bring about radical change in the ideological orientation. Folk songs were the other media to inculcate class consciousness among them. The traditional folk song in praise of kings and mythological figures were replaced by revolutionary songs which they used to sing in a group during cultivation operation.⁸ The media of cultural activities used by the union was aimed at certain immediate and long term perspectives. The immediate aim was to keep the workers nearer to

8. Das S.K., "Agricultural Workers Union in Kuttanad" (in Malayalam) in Golden Jubilee Souvenir, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, (Alleppey), 1972, p. 132.

the union by inculcating political education to them. It was very necessary at that time since the workers were subject to inducement and intimidation by the farmers and the caste and communal elements. The second aim was to increase the confidence in workers, so that they could fight with their employers with increased vigour and determination facing all sorts of hardships. Another purpose was to give them informal education so as to create more and more social and political awareness in them. The role played by the progressive writers through their books was tremendous. They had established a dominant position by that time in Malayalam literature. Hundreds of short stories and scores of novels of that period served to spread an attitude of revolt among the under privileged.⁹ Among them Shri Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's novel Randu Edangazhi , (Two measures of grain) which was published in 1949, was epochmaking by itself. In his handling of the story in this novel Thakazhy is able to create an awakened class consciousness¹⁰. This way the writers of Kerala were responsible in a large measure for the spread of class awareness among the agricultural workers.

9) George K.M., "Protest voices of creative writers of Kerala" in S.C. Malik ed. Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilization. (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), p. 365.

10. The story of the novel "Two Measures of Grain" takes place in Kuttanad and the main characters belong to the most underprivileged section of agricultural workers, the Pariah community. The main character of the novel Koran organises agricultural workers (cont.)

The TKTU was primarily designed as an instrument to fight for the demands of agricultural workers. It was also an agency for the mobilisation of rural poor against the British. Since the TKTU union was, by and large, an organisation of Communist Party, it had certain specific and immediate, general and distant objectives as envisaged by the party. The immediate aims were the protection of economic social and political rights of agricultural workers. Distant objective was to raise the revolutionary consciousness of workers to challenge the prevalent system as a whole and to establish their own hegemony.

The problem for the early leaders was to keep the worker loyal and committed. All sorts of initial difficulties were there. All the existing social structure and power structure was pitted against the workers and it imposed all sorts of hardships on those workers who were brave enough to join the organisation. To make the workers more committed the members were given regular training in the ideology of the organisation as well as of the party which sponsored the organisation. The day today struggles and the experiences gathered by the

Cont. Previous Foot note:

union against the landlords, which resulted in actual confrontation between the two classes. Things reached a climax when Chacko, the son of his own landlord, tries to molest his young wife Chiruta. Koran kills Chacko and is sent to prison for six years.

workers were also useful to increase their consciousness. It was the proper media by which the landlords and their anti-worker attitude could be exposed among the public. The spread of education to the length and breadth of the state was a prerequisite to eliminate the caste and communal prejudices that the workers themselves suffered from; it was also necessary to bring about the unity of workers of all sects and castes to fight for their causes under the same banner. A lot of care was taken by the union to build up a disciplined and strong union and this goal was increasingly achieved by mid nineteen forties. They fully understood the depth of the exploitation by the landed gentry with the connivance of the state authority.

Punnapra-Vayalar Upheaval and aftermath

The years from 1940 to 1950 witnessed the emergence and growth of agricultural workers unions all over Kuttanad. The agricultural workers were ready to go to any extent to express their anger against the prevailing system which was responsible for their sufferings. The Punnapra-Vayalar uprising of October-November, 1946, was the best opportunity to protest against their grievances. It was a violent upheaval of poor people in two outlying villages of Kuttanad.¹¹ Even though it was organised by

11. George, K.C., Immortal Punnapra-Vayalar, (Trivandrum; Prabhat Book House, 1972).

the Communist Party large number of union members and agricultural workers participated in it. The struggle was mainly aimed against the anti-people policies of the Travancore Diwan Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer and for a responsible government. The Police fired at the highly spirited demonstrators and killed about 700, and hundreds were wounded and jailed. This incident had far reaching repercussions in agricultural workers and their unions. The TKTU union was banned by the government along with the communist party. In order to avoid prosecution workers leaders were forced to go underground. The registration of the union was cancelled, its offices were sealed and its records were seized and destroyed. To avoid the confiscation by the police, the activists themselves destroyed number of documents. All the movements, especially of the agricultural workers, were ruthlessly suppressed by the government. During these period the trade union activity was very little and utilising this particular context the government and the landlords tried to do their best to undo the gains achieved by the workers. The period of official repression continued upto 1950. Utilising this situation the congress and the Praja Socialist Party tried to organise and penetrate the agricultural workers.

But their attempts were seriously resisted by the TKTU which was still the strongest agricultural workers union. Unlike the expectation of the government, the Punnapra-Vayalar repression and the ban of the organisation proved to be a moral booster for the workers. By 1950, poems, novels and short stories were written about the struggle and the martyrs, which were of great value in political mobilization of agricultural workers.¹²

The history of agricultural workers movement untill this period was a sporadic and intermittant attempt to mobilise workers against the landed interests. By this way the union was established with deep root in Kuttanad, based on certain firm ideologies, and for which the contribution made by the pioneers in the field from 1940 to 1950 was immense. The effects of the net work of agricultural workers union all over Kuttanad can be seen from further impact made by it in later days through struggles.

12. Oommen T.K., "From Mobilisation to Institutionalisation. The Life Cycle of An Agrarian Labour Movement in Kerala" in S.C. Malik ed. Dissent Protest and Reform in Indian Civilisation (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1977) p. 291.

CHAPTER IV

HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS' SINCE 1950

After having examined the historical background of the agrarian structure, and the formation of agricultural workers movement in Kuttanad it is necessary to examine the role played by the agricultural workers in bringing about changes in the agrarian relations. In this respect, the attempts made by landed gentry to resist the challenge posed by the organised agricultural workers, to protect their interests also have to be considered. For the realisation of their conflicting interests the agricultural workers and land-owners formed their respective organisations. These organisations were sponsored by different political parties, as a better means to promote their aims and objectives. The numerically strong agricultural workers tried to improve their position through militant struggles against the landlords for their economic gains and putting pressure on the Government to enact laws and regulations in their favour. On the other hand the economically, socially and politically strong landlords tried to resist these attempts mainly by influencing the administrative machinery and at times, through organised physical resistance.

The ideological orientation and efficient leadership provided by the leftist movement helped the agricultural workers to make effective use of their organised strength and militancy without leading to terrorist tactics which might have endangered the causes for which they struggled for. Since both agricultural workers and landlords were organised the conflicts between them were not rare. The history of Alleppey district and particularly of Kuttanad region since nineteen forties, is the history of unending confrontation between the landlord on the one hand and the agricultural workers on the other.

The militant activities of the agricultural workers' union was hampered due to the ban imposed after the Punnapra-Vayalar upheaval. Faced with repression the workers demonstrated their insubmissive attitude as far as they could. The massive demonstration held in Kottayam town by the agricultural workers in 1950 was very significant in that context. The demonstration started from Erupathinalayiram Kayal, situated in the northern part of Kuttanad region, holding sickle in their hands.¹ The purpose of the rally was to

1. Joseph K.P., "Agricultural Workers Movement in Kuttanad" in Karshaka Thozhilali monthly (Mal.), (Alleppey), vol. 1, no. 2, October 1973, p. 11.

protest the atrocities committed by landlords and to highlight the workers demand for better wages and conditions of work. The ban on the Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union was lifted in 1951, resumed its activity in 1952 and was re-registered in 1953 affiliating the TKTU to All India Trade Union Congress.² The subsequent history of the union shows that heavy repression suffered at the hands of the Government has had a counter effect since it witnessed the emergence of a powerful union with regained strength and determination.

The representatives of the agricultural workers of Alleppey and Kottayam held a meeting at Kovalam on September 1951, to discuss their problem. After a thorough discussion they framed a charter of demands with forty four urgent issues.³ The main demands were a two-fold increase in the wage for harvesting from one-twelfth to one-tenth of the produce. To press these demands the workers started a strike all over Kuttanad. As an outcome of that strike a tripartite meeting was held, which decided to enhance the daily

2. Alexander K.C., Agricultural Labour Unions - A Study in Three South Indian States, (Hyderabad: National Institute of Rural Development, 1978), p. 14.

3. Joseph, n.1, p. 12.

wages of women from two and a half measures (Edangazhis) to three measures of paddy, and a little time break for lunch. Due to the reluctant attitude of certain powerful landlords in Kuttanad the agreement was never implemented. So again a strike was declared in the fields of Poopally Kutty and Akkarakalathil Appachan at Nedumudy in Kuttanad. Arrest, imprisonment and brutal treatment at the hands of the landlords were not strong enough to break the morale of the workers.

1953 struggle: The workers union again declared a strike during harvesting time of 1953. Following this on December 4, 1953, a tripartite meeting was held, at the initiative of the labour Commissioner the agreement was reached, as -

- (i) The wages of Women labourers would be three standard measures of paddy,
- (ii) working hours in Kayal would be seven hours and in Karinilam eight hours,
- (iii) there would be half-an-hour rest at noon.

It was also agreed that farmers and workers would solve their disputes through mutual consultations.⁴

Struggles in 1954: Even though a tripartite agreement was reached at in 1953, many of the influential landlords

4. Alexander, n. 1, p. 5.

were not ready to implement those decisions. To press that settlement, TKTU gave a call for a strike which was wholeheartedly supported by the workers. The major struggle was held in the field of Thomas Joseph Murikkan, a farmer with the largest holding in Alleppey District. During the period of agricultural operations in 1954, the union declared strike in Murikkan's field along with a satyagraha in front of his house. The satyagraha was conducted by a selected, hundred volunteers from a flotilla formed with country boats, as the police did not allow the workers to squat on the land in front of his house.⁵ After 18 days prolonged struggle Murikkan agreed to give the rates recommended by the tripartite committee. In 1954, the workers also participated the struggle for land reforms and prevention of eviction of hutment dwellers, and also extended its support to the striking transport employees and participated in the agitations of the people against the anti-people policy adopted by the Pattom ministry of the then Travancore-Cochin Government.⁶

5. Das S.K., "Agricultural Labour Union in Kuttanad" (in Mal.) in Golden Jubilee Souvenir, Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, 1972, (Alleppey), 1972, p. 137.

6. Joseph, n.1, p. 10.

1955 Struggle: During harvest season of 1955 workers demanded the "Theerpu"*. K.M. Kora, a progressive cultivator and till then the minister for agriculture⁷ in state cabinet vehemently opposed it. The workers union chose to hit hard first at the stronger enemy, hence declared strike in his field, along with the picketting of workers who wanted to work.⁷ Utilising his economic strength and political influence Kora managed to deploy large number of police to arrest, beat and put behind the bars the erring workers, on one pretext or other. After few days strike since Kora realised the fact that the workers could not be humbled through terror and intimidation he agreed to give the demanded 'theerpu'.

Due to the constant demands and representations from the trade unions, a minimum wages committee was appointed in 1953. The committee submitted its report in 1956. The minimum wages advisory board, after taking into consideration the suggestions of the committee, recommended an enhancement of the wage rates, for ordinary operations, and for harvesting.⁸ However no final notification was made in that year.

* Theerpu: is the sheaf given as maintenance allowance to workers, between harvest and threshing and final cleaning of paddy.

7. Das, n. 5, p. 38.

8. Government of Kerala, Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, (Trivandrum, November 1971), p. 22.

Struggles After the Formation of Kerala

The united Kerala state was formed in November 1956, composed of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. It was the result of a powerful struggle launched by the people, in which the agricultural workers and other sections of the rural masses participated in a big way. All these movements taught the workers the basic lessons that they had to fight for their causes unitedly. Once they became aware of their strength they could challenge the traditionally powerful and influential propertied class in the state. It was the work of these agricultural workers along with other mass organisations which brought about the Communist Government to power in Kerala as early as in the year 1957.⁹

The formation of the Communist Ministry was a moral boost for the agricultural workers movement all over the state. They began to assert their rights and privileges with a new strength and confidence when their own Government was administering the state. This favourable situation was reflected in Kuttanad also.

9. Koshy V.C., Politics of Land Reforms in Kerala (Ph.D. thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 1976), p. 212.

In the eastern part of Kuttanad the existing wage for harvesting (Pathom) was one eleventh of the harvested paddy. The union demanded for an increase in the wage for harvest (Pathom) to one-nineth of the produce. The union declared a strike to put pressure on the land-owners to accept their demand. This policy of the workers was vehemently opposed by the farmers and it led to large-scale conflict in Kuttanad. The deteriorating situation in the agricultural sector was brought to the notice of the government. The minimum wages Advisory Board recommended in 1956 for the enhancement of the wage rates and it was accepted by the government in 1957. A final notification in 1957 fixed the following minimum wage rates:¹⁰

- (i) Wages for male workers for ordinary operations. - Rs.1.50 per day.
- (ii) Wages for female worker for ordinary operations. - Rs.1.00 per day.
- (iii) For harvesting and threshing pathom. - 1/9 of produce.
- (iv) For harvesting and threshing Theerpu. - 1/4 of pathom.
- (v) In the upper Kuttanad area, there was no 'theerpu', then the 'Pathom' to be 1/8 of the produce.

10. Pillai V.R. and Panikkar P.G.K., Land Reclamation in Kerala (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1965) p. 132.

The period from 1950 to 1958 witnessed a continuous turmoil in the labour scene of Kuttanad. Numerous disputes, many of them on issues of higher wages ~~arose~~ arose in different parts of Kuttanad. "The total number of labour disputes during the 1950's came to as many as 2,279. Of these 1,258 were in respect of wages, 752 in respect of hours of work and 269 on other issues. Of the above disputes 1,853 were settled by mediation, 1,643 settled by conciliation, 252 settled by tripartite conference of representatives of unions, employers and the government and the remaining are pending disposal. But most of these disputes arose before the fixing of minimum wages in 1957."¹¹

The installation of Communist Ministry in 1957, was an important turning point in the history of agricultural workers movement. In the early phase the farmers in Kuttanad relied more on unleashing organised repression on workers using various social and economic sanctions against them. When these measures proved ineffective, especially due to the labour policy of the Communist Government, the farmers concentrated more on negotiations and conciliatory methods for

11. *ibid.*, p. 129.

containing the tension in the agrarian front. T.K. Oommen characterises these turning point in the agricultural workers phase into two as prior to 1957 as the phase of mobilisation and post 1957 as the phase of institutionalisation.¹² Government through statutory provisions, enactments and policy decisions tried to maintain harmonious situation in the agrarian field and encouraged the workers and farmers to settle their disputes amicably through conciliation. Certain policy decisions and enactments of the government directly benefitted the agricultural workers and important among these decisions were,

- (i) hutment dwelling right : by that no land-owner can evict an agricultural worker from his homestead arbitrarily,
- (ii) declaration of minimum wages : by proper implementation of this act, the agricultural workers all over the state were assured of a minimum rate,
- (iii) Prevention of eviction Act: by this the landlord could not evict his tenant from the land he used to cultivate,
- (iv) Shift in the labour policy: directed the police force not to interfere in any employer-employee dispute. In early time the landlords used to get the help of police to suppress the workers movement in the pretext of law and order problems. By the new policy of the government the numerically strong workers could put more pressure on employers and to get more concessions from them without outside interference.

12. Oommen T.K., "From Mobilisation to Institutionalisation-The legacy of an Agrarian Labour Movement" in S.C. Malik, ed., Dissent Protest and Reform in Indian Civilisation (Simla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1977), p. 293.

Another initiative taken by the government was the formation of the Industrial Relations Committee (IRC) in agriculture to give a platform for the workers to have a say in their affairs and also to avoid unnecessary tension and conflict in the agrarian field. Industrial Relations Committee in Kuttanad, agriculture was a tripartite committee which was formed as early as in 1957, constituted with representatives of cultivators, labourers and Government.¹³ It was originally meant for district committees, but in areas of endemic labour problems, taluk committees have also been constituted. The first tripartite committee constituted in 1957 to promote proper employer-employee relationship, was headed by the Labour Commissioner who acted as the convenor. This continued till 1961, when the Industrial Relations Committee (IRC) for Kuttanad was formed.¹⁴ The Deputy Labour Commissioner was the chairman of this committee having eight representatives each from cultivators and agricultural workers. The IRC was reconstituted¹⁵ in 1970, with the Labour Commissioner as chairman. It is a matter of credit to IRC that the agricultural workers

13. As per Government Order, L1/10878/57/L&LAD.

14. As per Government Order, Rt.4721/61/H&LD dated 29.1.'61.

15. As per Government Order, Rt.716/70/LSWD dated 14.5.'70.

in Kuttanad were able to win over certain concessions for workers through this body and both workers and employer could settle some of the major disputes relating to wages, hours and conditions of work etc., amicably.

Making use of the favourable situation, the agricultural workers union in 1958 demanded an enhancement of wages and reduction of working hours in Kuttanad. The farmers agreed to an increase in wages as Rs.2.50 and Rs.1/- per male and female workers respectively. But they did not agree with union's demand to reduce the working time from eight to six hours. But the union unilaterally decided that working hours would be between 9 a.m. to 12 noon and from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. The union also appointed its agents in different parts of Kuttanad to show red flags so that workers could start and stop work at the fixed hours.¹⁶ Even though farmers opposed the showing of red flags in their fields, soon it became a common symbol in Kuttanad.

As mentioned earlier the workers arena of agitation (other than paddy field) extended also to legally constituted bodies like the IRC. They also pressurised the Government for the speedy implementation of enactments and decisions in their favour in alliance with other

16. Alexander, n. 2, p. 16.

mass organisations. In other words, from the phase of mobilisation the agitation crossed over to institutionalisation phase. The workers attention was also drawn to wider social problems such as a more equitable distribution of wealth and redressel of various other social and economic grievances.

Fight Against Mechanisation in Agriculture

Other than the demand for better wages, the workers' union consistently tried to preserve the existing volume of employment available to agricultural workers in the Kuttanad region. In the late 1950's, there were attempts by farmers to introduce tractors in the fields of Kuttanad. The workers union decided to resist this attempt at mechanisation at any cost. They immediately brought it to the notice of the IRC. In the IRC meetings the union leaders tried to get better terms and conditions for the workers. On the other hand the farmers constantly resisted it on the plea that the agricultural sector was not capable of meeting the workers demands. In order to yield more favourable results from the negotiations, the workers also resorted to agitations outside the IRC meeting simultaneously.

After much deliberations in 1962, the IRC decided to allow the tractor owners to plough their own land with their own tractors. But considering the benefits of ploughing with animals and the employment it provides to workers, the committee suggested that the use of tractors should be avoided. The committee also directed the ploughers to plough the land properly and on this expectation it was decided to discourage the introduction of tractors in Kuttanad.¹⁷

The farmers representatives again took up the issue of tractor introduction in 1964, on the plea of shortage of animals and deteriorating quality of ploughing with animals. The workers started militant resistance responding to the call given by Kuttanad Uzhavu Thozhilali Union (ploughers union), which operates as a wing of the KSKTU. When the big landlords introduced tractors the agricultural workers picketed them. In certain instances the workers even resorted to violent activities like burning the tractors, when the workers were consistently provoked by the landlords. Subsequently the matter was brought to the IRC's consideration. After prolonged negotiations, due to the firm stand taken by workers representatives

17. *ibid.*, p. 17.

inside "finally, the cultivators had to agree that they will employ ploughmen to plough their land at least twice before the cultivation of each crop, whether or not they use tractors".¹⁸ Even after this green signal was given in 1964, for farmers to do the first ploughing with tractors they could not make much headway due to the stiff resistance from workers. The landowners also tried to introduce other labour saving devices like thresher, weedicide, transplanting machine etc. Even though the farmers could make some use of these devices in areas where the agricultural labour unions were not so strong in other areas where the unions were strong enough, they could scarcely succeed.

The TKTU organised another strike at Kainakari in Kuttanad in 1961 for enhancement in wages.¹⁹ The agitation prolonged for 20 days, involving about one lakh workers. Finally it was settled in favour of the demands of the workers.

18. Oommen T.K., "FAO Survey On Peasant Organisations in India : The Case of Alleppey (Kerala)" (mimeographed) (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Centre for the Study of Social System, New Delhi, 1974), p. 92.

19. Pillai, n. 10. p. 128.

Agitation for Land Reform Measures

Another progressive measure initiated by the Communist Government during 1957-59 in favour of agricultural workers and poor peasantry was the Agrarian Relations Bill (A.R. Bill). The Bill was introduced in the Assembly on 18th December, 1957 and circulated for eliciting public opinion. Provisions were included in the Bill for a ceiling on land holdings, for preventing eviction of tenants by landlords, for confiscation and distribution of land to the landless agricultural workers by the Government, etc. After examining the public reactions suggestions and representations made by different sections, the Bill was referred to a select committee on 30th March, 1958. As soon as the legislative measures were made known, the landlords began to organise for the protection of their interests. "An organised attempt was made by the property owners as a class, to either get the legislation completely suppressed or if that was not possible to get it amended in their favour"²⁰ The agricultural workers and peasants strongly reacted against these manipulations of the landlords. However, the Bill was passed by the Assembly on 10 June, 1958 and sent for the president's assent.

20. Koshy, n. 9, p. 210.

A 'liberation' struggle was started by the vested interests uniting all caste, communal and political forces for the ouster of the communist ministry which introduced progressive measures like Land Reforms Bill and Education Bill.²¹ Finally they succeeded in getting the Kerala Government dismissed by the Congress Government at the Centre on 31 July, 1959. Later they engineered the installation of a Government in Kerala of the parties who organised the 'liberation' struggle. The Agrarian Relations Bill was left hanging in the air. The President of India delayed the implementation of the Bill by keeping it in with him for a long time and on 27 July, 1960, it was returned to the state Assembly for reconsideration and modification. In the meanwhile, the agricultural workers union with the cooperation of other like minded organisations started agitations for the speedy implementation of the Bill. Irrespective of the fact that the new Kerala Government was headed by the forces who ousted the Government which introduced the Bill in 1959, the efforts of a powerful left movement prevented them from altering the Agrarian Relations Bill substantially although many minor changes were made. Certain provisions of the diluted Bill adopted by the Congress led Legislative Assembly was

21. *ibid.*, p. 222.

declared unconstitutional by the Kerala High Court. The peasants and agricultural workers agitation for getting the Bill included in the IX Schedule of the Indian Constitution so as to make it immune from the judicial process was not successful. However, a thoroughly revised Land Reforms Act was passed in 1963. Utilising the time lag between 1959 and 1963 and even after that the landlords consolidated their strength in different ways. The culmination was the formation of a rich farmer dominated organisation namely, Kerala Karshaka Federation with its main root in Kuttanad region, sponsored by the Kerala Congress Party, a break away section of the National Congress.

The Kerala Karshaka Federation formed a "trained cadre" to give physical resistance to the "excess" committed by the agricultural workers. After that the class division in Kuttanad became crystal clear, and many times even it led to physical confrontation between these two sections. The agricultural workers union realised the need of the hour, and seriousness of the challenges made by the upper strata of society. The agricultural workers further strengthened and consolidated their position. Days that followed proved how

numerically superior agricultural workers could humble the economically and politically superior landlords in their own stronghold itself.²²

Attempts were made by other political parties in Kuttanad region to organise the agricultural workers and to create a dent in the hold of communist party among agricultural workers. As early as in 1954, the Congress Party organised the Thiru-Cochi Karshaka Thozhilali Sangham with its head quarters at Mancombu and formally affiliated to the INTUC. Under cover of the 'liberation struggle' further attempts were made to split the union, but were not very successful. In 1959 - 60 the Congress sponsored agricultural workers union had twenty four branches in Kuttanad²³ with a total membership of only 4182.

Split in the Communist Party and After

The split in the Communist Party in 1964 was a big blow to the agricultural workers movement in Kerala, and to the left movement in particular, even though the CPI(M) managed to retain the bulk of TKTU. The TKTU was the main agrarian organisation in the Travancore area

22. Gopalan A.K., For the Soil (Mal) (Trivandrum : Chinta Publications, Trivandrum, 1975), p. 62.

23. As per records kept in the INTUC Office at Alleppey.

yet it was functioning as a wing of the Kerala Karshaka Sanghan (Peasants Organisation). The main stay from the Malabar area, for the Kerala Karshaka Sangham was the well organised small and marginal peasants. Since the agricultural workers could not benefit from the development measures such as the "Package deal"²⁴, the leadership of TKTU realised the need of a separate class organisation for the agricultural workers. The newly tenant-turned cultivators developed a sort of uneasiness in functioning with agricultural workers. This led to the formation of an organisation called the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (Agricultural Workers Union) - KSKTU, in 1968, with headquarters at Alleppey. Later the KSKTU stream lined the functioning of the union by dividing its work between Taluk committees and village level committees.

24. "package Deal", other wise known as IADP (Intensive Agricultural District Programme) is a co-operative endeavour, by the Ford Foundation, the Government of India, the State Governments and the Technical Co-operation Mission. The aim of the "Package Deal" was to solve the food problem in India by having a 'Green Revolution' in selected districts, with high potentialities with favourable situation for cultivation. In Kerala in Alleppey and Palghat Districts this programme was launched since 1962. See, Pillai, n. 10, pp. 149 - 154, for further details.

After the split in 1964 CPI seriously thought about re-organising the agricultural workers in its favour. In 1968 CPI formed the Kuttanad Karshaka Thozhilali Union with headquarters at Mancombu and another at Alleppey called the Aryad-Ambalapuzha Block Karshaka Thozhilali Union.²⁵ The ~~Aryad~~ party attached these local units to the state level Kerala state Karshaka Thozhilali Federation (Agricultural Workers Federation) which was formed in the same year. Then it was affiliated to the Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union (BKMU), an all India organisation for agricultural workers formed in 1968. The Congress Party's attempt to consolidate the agricultural workers in their favour met with limited success when they could form the Desseeya Karshaka Thozhilali Federation (National Agricultural Workers Federation) DKTF, in 1973, at the state level. The Revolutionary Socialist Party also organised a union for Kuttanad agricultural workers in 1969, called the upper Kuttanad Karshaka Thozhilali Union with headquarters at payyipad. However, they could muster the support of a limited number of workers.

25. As per record of the Labour Commissioner Office, Trivandrum.

MOVEMENT AFTER 1967

With the formation of Left and Democratic Front Ministry in 1967, headed by CPI(M), the agricultural workers movement got further momentum. The comprehensive Land Reforms (Amendment) Bill 1969, envisaged many provisions for the betterment of agricultural workers. Chief among them were the tenancy and Kudikidappu (homestead) right for tenants and agricultural workers and the take over and distribution of surplus land among landless of the lands taken over by the Government after fixing a ceiling on agricultural holdings. The Communist Parties and its mass organisations had learned from their experience that land reforms legislations, however, radical they may be do not get implemented unless a powerful movement for implementation is built outside. So along with other mass organisations agricultural workers unions also started mobilising the masses for the speedy implementation of the Land Reforms Bill.

Struggle for minimum wages

As we have seen earlier, another rallying point for the agricultural workers struggle was the occasional demand for enhancement of minimum wages and the speedy implementation of the minimum wages. The first minimum

wages declaration was made in 1957 with a wage rate of Rs.1.50 for male worker and Rs.1/- for the female worker. After much pressure from the agricultural workers union, the Government revised the minimum wages in 1963, stipulating Rs.1.80 and Rs.1.25, for male and female workers respectively.²⁶

In 1968, after a thorough examination of the whole problems regarding wages and working hours in agricultural fields, the Government revised the minimum wages of agricultural workers.²⁷ The following were the rates prescribed and other provisions contained therein:

- | | | | |
|-------|--|---|-----------------|
| (i) | Wages for male labour for ordinary operations. | - | Rs.4.50 per day |
| (ii) | Wages for female labour for ordinary operations. | - | Rs.3.00 per day |
| (iii) | Wages for ploughing with workers Bullocks for 4 hours working day. | - | Rs.7.00 per day |
| (iv) | Ploughing with cultivators Bullocks for 4 hours working day. | - | Rs.5.00 per day |

The working time stipulated was 5 hours a day for 'Kayal' areas and six hours for other areas. The

26. Achutanandan V.S., "Agricultural Workers Minimum Wages: Reality Behind Publicity" (Mal) in Karshaka Thozhilali (Alleppey) October 1975, p.2.

27. Government Order No.28178/HL/68/SW.
Dated 27.12.1968.

hours of work fixed were hours of actual work, that is, proceeding to work spot and returning, rest periods etc. It is ascertained that the customary shares such as Pathom, Theerpu, "Vellamkudy"* etc., shall continue to be paid wherever they were in vogue. The workers were entitled to get an extra remuneration at the rate of one 'Katta' (Sheaf) for every 81 hectares of paddy fields for carrying Katta to the threshing ground, if the threshing ground was far from the fields. By early '70's considerable disagreement had arisen between the cultivators and labourers with regard to the wages for different agricultural operations, working hours etc. To remove the confusion, the Government issued a press release during the first week of August 1971, declaring the wage rates and working hours prevailing in the different regions of Kuttanad as follows.²⁸

* "Vellamkudy": Provisions meant for refreshment (often alcoholic).

28. Government of Kerala, Report of Kuttanad Enquiry Commission (Trivandrum: November 1971), pp. 23 - 24.

Zone	Area comprising of	Work- ing Hours	Labour Wages		Wage for harvest	
			women	men	Path- on	Thee- rpu
I	Kayal area except Vechoor and Pandarakulam.	5	3.75	6.00	1/8	1/4
II	Pandarakalam and Vechoor Kayal Padasekharam com- prising in Kuttanad Taluk (with the exception of Talavady, Kozhimukku, and Mutter where the wages are Rs.3.00 to 3.75 for female workers and Rs.5.50 to Rs.6/- for male workers. The harvest wages in these villages are as in zone III and the whole of Ambalapuzha Taluk and Thiruvārppu and Kumarakam in Kottayam Taluks.	6	3.75	6.00	1/8	1/4
III	All other areas which are not included in Zone I & II above.	7	3.50	5.50	1/8.5	1/4

In 1969, the Government headed by E.M.S. Namboodripad decided to enhance the wages of agricultural workers, in state farms and also decided to increase 10 paise for every 10 points increase in the cost of living index.

Accordingly by 1975 the state farm workers were getting Rs.11.50 for workers and Rs.10.60 for female workers. This serves to highlight the disparity in wage for workers doing the same work with in the same state.²⁹ Considering this the unions demanded that wages to all workers must be on par with workers in state owned farms. Even though the Government agreed in principle with this demand it was never implemented. During early 1970's the workers unions, made several representations, demonstrations and struggles for the revision of minimum wages declared in 1968. The Government agreed to revise the minimum wage rate with effect from 15th September, 1975, as follows:³⁰

- | | | |
|-------|--|-----------------------------|
| (i) | For male workers for the ordinary agricultural operations. | - Rs.8.00 |
| (ii) | For female workers for the ordinary agricultural operations. | - Rs.6.00 |
| (iii) | For ploughing with workers Bullocks.- | Rs.15.00 |
| (iv) | For ploughing with Cultivators Bullocks. | - Rs.9.00 |
| (v) | Coconut climbing for 100 trees. | - Rs.16.00 plus 8 coconuts. |
| (vi) | Pathom (in Palghat area). | - 1/7 of produce |
| (vii) | Other places. | - the existing rate. |

29. Achutanandan V.S., "Agricultural Workers Minimum Wages" (Karshaka Thozhilali, (Mal) (Alleppey) vol.2 no.6, October 1975, p.2.

30. Kunjachan P.K., in Karshaka Thozhilali monthly, (Mal) (Alleppey), vol. 12, no. 6, October 1975, p. 12.

But the Union leaders were of opinion that agricultural workers of Kuttanad were not benefitted by the declaration of minimum wages in 1975, since they were already getting better wage as follows.³¹

		Working hours		Wage
		Kayal	other	
(i)	Male workers for ordinary agricultural operations.	5	6	Rs.10/-
(ii)	Female workers for ordinary agricultural operations.	5	6	Rs.7/-
(iii)	For harvest - 1/7 of produce as <u>Pathom</u> and 1/4 of Pathom as <u>Theerpu</u> .			

Often wherever the agricultural workers union were strong they got more than the prescribed minimum wage. The declaration of minimum wage might have helped the workers of those areas, where the wages were below the minimum prescribed. However at no time were the Kuttanad workers benefitted by the declaration of minimum wages. As happened many times the landlords could very well object to the need for higher wages with the argument that they were already paying more than the minimum wages prescribed.

After 1975, there was no increase in the minimum wages. The unions were reluctant to take up the issue

31. *ibid.*, p. 12.

and the cultivators were not willing to give more than the prevailing wages due to the sharp fall in the price of paddy. Recently the workers are coming up with demands for higher wages. With the formation of a new left and democratic front ministry in Kerala the agricultural workers unions are pressurising the Government to take up the issue.

Struggle for implementation of land reforms

When the CPI (M) led left ministry was replaced by a 'mini-front' in 1969 supported by the Congress and Kerala Congress the agricultural workers union felt the danger of losing the favours they had received from the earlier ministry. Since they were very much aware of how successfully the landlords circumvented the implementation of the 1959 Agrarian Relations Bill, they were very cautious not to have the same fate to befall Land Reforms (Amendment) Bill 1969. So to chalk out future course of action the Kerala State Karshaka Thozilali Union (KSKTU), organised a convention of agricultural workers hutment dwellers and peasants with the help of the all left parties then in the opposition. The convention was attended by over 2,000 delegates. After two days of deliberations a declaration was drafted in the convention asserting their rights on land which was endorsed before a massive rally of five Lakh people on 14th December, 1969.³²

32. All India Kisan Sabha, "Agrarian Crisis and Struggle of Peasants and Agricultural Workers in India" Documents of the 21st session held from Sept. 23-26, 1971. Calcutta: 1971, p. 47.

At that Rally in Alleppey town, they declared that "Whether the Land Reforms (Amendment) Bill, 1969 gets the assent of the President or not the agricultural workers and peasants of the state will consider it as having come into force from First January 1970, and the hutment dwellers will defacto assert their rights on land as conferred by the Bill".³³

The Bill received the assent of the President on 16th December, 1969 and the state Government immediately announced that all provisions of the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, would come into force with effect from January 1, 1970. For the implementation of the main provisions of the Act, the agricultural workers in Kerala along with the peasantry and landless people staged continuous struggle during the whole of the seventies. This struggle forms the major activity of the agricultural workers movement in recent years. If the ceiling for land at ten standard acres per family was implemented strictly, the Government estimated that, it could have taken over surplus land amounting to four lakhs of acres. But the slow process of implementation of the provision made the workers more sceptical about the sincerity of the Government.

33. Joseph, n.1, p. 15.

The Kerala Government under pressure from KSKTU and other leftist forces had taken over three big farms called Rani, Chithira and Marthandam of Murikkan, one of the wealthiest land owner-cum-businessman in Kuttanad area. The Government established state-run farms in these lands renamed "Q.S.T. Kayal" comprising about 1,600 acres. This setting up of state farms was done without the kind of commitment that might have come from the workers, had it been run as a co-operative with the workers and not Government bureaucrats³⁴ in decision making positions. Further more political considerations dominated choosing of labour^{er}s in each of the state farms. Since they were also being run as capitalist business obviously their first consideration was profit.

Another spectacular struggle staged by the Kudikidappukar (hutment dwellers) made headlines during 1970 and 1971. Most of the Kudikidappukars got defacto rights to their huts and ownership of ten cents of surrounding land as a result of their united fight rather than that of the provisions in the

34. Joan P. Mencher, "Agrarian Relations in Two Rice Regions of Kerala" Economic and Political Weekly vol. 13, nos. 6 & 7, February 1978, p. 360.

Acts. For the implementation of the provisions in the Kerala Land Reforms Act, the peasants and agricultural workers conducted various struggles. The first stage of the struggle was for the enforcement of the Kudikidappu rights and tenancy rights, which was most effective and of longest duration. It was estimated that during their prolonged agitation about two lakhs Kudikidappukars asserted their rights on the homestead lands, despite the repressive methods used by the landlords and the state police force. Thirty two persons were killed and fifty thousand arrested in the struggle.³⁵ The agricultural workers now in a comparatively better position with a piece of land and homestead to live in became a better fighter, aware that he was capable enough to withstand any onslaught which can come from the propertied class.³⁶

Struggle in 1970's

The struggles for improved wages and better working conditions, initiated by the workers during 1970's was an important event. In 1970, the unions

35. Koshy, n. 9, p. 248.

36. Krishnaji, N., "Agrarian Relations and Left Movement", Economic and Political Weekly, March 3, 1979.

put the demand for Rs.4/- and Rs.7/- for female and male workers respectively. On the question of wage for harvest the unions demanded 1/7 of the produce as Pathom and 1/4 of pathom as theerpu. Both the demands met with stiff opposition, especially from big landlords. The strike started in Murikkan's field and when he tried to do work using the faithful workers, the union activists picketed them. Murikkan utilising his influential position, deployed large number of CRP and Police to give protection to his faithful workers, and the police. Actual clash took place between workers and cultivators in Edavanakkattu, a village in Kuttanad, and about ten persons were injured in the clash.

By then the landlords were also familiar with every tactic of the labour unions. They were equally organised, having the advantage of economic and political influence at their disposal. They could make use of their kinship ties to boycott the unions, which was especially true with the Christian landowners. Those were the times when the relationship between the cultivators and agricultural workers in Kuttanad had become extremely strained. The early representations at the ministry level failed to have any impact, especially due to the insistence of the spokesmen of the landlord interest in the ministry.

On 31 December, 1970 one day state wide strike call was given by the KSKTU and in that successful strike five lakh agricultural workers participated.³⁷ Finally the cultivators agreed to give the demanded increases in the wages for harvest and Rs.0.25 and Rs.0.50 ~~enhance-~~ment for female and male workers respectively.

Land grab agitations: Another movement which shook the agricultural sector during the seventies was the land-grab agitations initiated by the KSKTU. It was launched by the agricultural workers unions at the peak of fierce struggle by the Kudikidappukars in 1970. It was concerned more with unearthing surplus land (above ceiling) and bringing to the notice of the government rather than its forcible occupation, although in some cases the agitators entered and temporarily occupied such land. KSKTU held the earlier agitations in co-operation with the Kerala Karshaka Sangham to make sure the achievements made by the E.M.S. ministry, by way of land reforms and concessions to agricultural workers.

37. KSKTU working Report of the 2nd Annual State Conference; held on 1 - 3 October, 1971, Alleppey, p. 15.

The decision to start struggle was taken in a declaration made in May 1972 at the Earnakulam meeting. The actual agitation started on May 26, 1972 which lasted for 80 days. In spite of police repression, imprisonment and black mailing, thousands of workers and peasants participated in it. The false claim of the Government regarding the absence of surplus land was foiled when they brought to light 1,75,000 acres of land. The struggle helped to force the Government to give protection of the IX Schedule of the Constitution for the land reforms Act to avoid unnecessary delay in implementation, through long drawn out judicial proceedings.

The immediate aim of the land-grab agitation was to put pressure on the Government to expedite the implementation of the land reforms. It was also meant to expose the government's policy of acquiescing to the pressures of the propertied class interest and to inculcate a social awareness in the masses about the seriousness of the issue. The long term perspective was to deal a death blow to the existing productive relations based on status quo maintenance which remains a stumbling block to overhauling the relations of production which

should be tilted in favour of tillers of the soil.³⁸

During the period of 1970-75, KSKTU conducted several struggles spread-over six stages, for the take over and distribution of the surplus land held by the landlords. Even though the state committee of the KSKTU decided to start the seventh stage of the agitation from 21 July, 1975 it did not materialise due to the declaration of internal emergency in June 1975. After massive preparations the agricultural workers started the seventh stage of land-grab agitation in January 1979. It was a matter of credit to the organised strength of the agricultural workers that, that time the KSKTU single handedly spearheaded the agitation. This struggle can be marked as the most organised and biggest ever struggle held all over the state in the history of agricultural workers. This was the result to which the passive attitude taken by the Kerala Government towards the nine point charter of demands made by KSKTU, as it was passed in the 6th annual conference of the KSKTU held in August 1978. Extensive campaigns were conducted to pressurise the Government in the succeeding months. The struggle started on seventh January, 1979, and went on for a

38. Kumaran A.V., "Land Grab Agitation - 7th stage" in Karshaka Thozhilali (Mal), vol. 2, no. 14, June 1975, p. 15.

month. To project the cause of the twenty two lakh strong agricultural workers all over Kerala, about fifty thousand volunteers entered the surplus lands and about twelve thousand workers were arrested and imprisoned up to a period of one month.³⁹ Even though in the beginning the government had taken an adamant attitude towards the agitation, the massive response it got from the general public and the support and wide coverage given by the leading newspapers, forced the Government to have talks with the workers' representatives. After prolonged discussions an agreement was reached upon. The union decided to postpone the agitation on 27th January 1979, taking into consideration the following decisions and assurances from the Government:⁴⁰

- (i) Implementation of land ceiling with immediate effect;
- (ii) Land Board Officers were empowered to examine the cases of evasion of land ceilings;
- (iii) Constitution of a Land Reforms Review Board;
- (iv) Acquisition of ten thousand hectares of forest land by March 1979 and the constitution of an advisory board including representatives of agricultural workers for the distribution of those lands;
- (v) Convening an all party conference to carry forward the 1975 Act for Scheduled Tribes;

39. In Karshaka Thozhilali; (Mal) vol. 5, no. 5, February 5, 1979, p. 10.

40. ibid., p. 12.

- (vi) Registration of names of agricultural workers with the local administrative bodies;
- (vii) Convening a meeting by the Labour Commissioner, of the concerned parties for the revision of minimum wages.

However, the union took serious note, of the reluctance on the part of the Government to consider the following four demands:

- (i) Scrapping of land gift deed;
- (ii) Implementation of the sections relating to Provident Fund in the Agricultural Workers Act 1974;
- (iii) Reduction of compensation to be paid by hutment dwellers; and
- (iv) Scrapping of loans up to Rs.2500/- borrowed by Harijans.

Overall, the struggle was an expression of the increased strength of the agricultural workers movement in Kerala as a whole, and Kuttanad in particular. In spite of the assurances given by the Government many of the measures were not implemented. Again, the Government's attempt to water down the provisions of land reforms, by way of 'Gift Deed', enactment in 1979 made the union to consider the need for another massive and united struggle by the agricultural workers. As an acknowledgement of the agricultural workers' unions demand the ministry headed by Nayanar scrapped the main provisions of the 'Gift Deed'

through a recent amendment.

Agricultural Workers Act, 1974

The struggles of the Agricultural Workers were not confined only to improvement of working conditions and land reforms. They also demanded an enactment providing for a certain amount of social and economic security for agricultural workers. After the statutory fixation of minimum wages in 1968, the agricultural workers union was continuously demanding a permanent enactment to protect the interests of the agricultural workers. As a response to this demand, a Bill was introduced in the Kerala Assembly in 1970.⁴¹ But as pointed out by the worker's union there were several provisions in it which were detrimental to the interests of the agricultural workers. So the workers unions intensified the agitations demanding withdrawal of the Bill and introduction of a comprehensive Bill. Due to the pressure from different sections of the public the Government was forced to withdraw the Bill. As a result of the struggles a modified legislation was introduced in the Assembly 17th November, 1972 called the "Kerala Agricultural workers Act".⁴² The Bill was referred

41. Kunjachan P.K., "Urgent problems Faced by Agricultural Workers" in Karshaka Thozhilali (Mal.) vol. 2, no. 6, October 1975, p. 13.

42. Koshy, n. 9, p. 260.

to a select committee which took evidence from organisations, associations and other interested parties and considered the provision of the Bill and submitted their report to the Legislative Assembly. The period between the introduction of the Bill and enactment of the Bill on 14th March, 1974 and the final assent given to it by the Union President on 31st July, 1974 was a period of hectic mobilisation of agricultural workers on the one hand and the landlords on the other.

The Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Federation, which is affiliated to Bharat Khet Mazdoor Union (BKMU) gave a call for immediate enactment of the Act and the mobilisation of common masses in favour of it. Further, the KSKTU in its 3rd Annual Conference which was held in December, 1973 decided to intensify the agitation for the modification of the provisions in the Bill in favour of agricultural workers and the speedy enactment of the legislation.⁴³ In accordance with the decision of the conference KSKTU volunteers picketed all the collectorates and the Secretariate in the state, raising the issue and courted arrest on January 21, 1974.

43. Karshaka Thozhilali, (Mal) vol. 1, no.5, January, 1974, pp. 30 - 31.

Altogether about thirteen thousand volunteers participated in the picketing. Again they held a massive demonstration in front of the state Legislative Assembly, participated by about fifteen thousand workers, demanding the deletion of anti-worker clauses in the Bill and its speedy enactment.⁴⁴

Landlords also were not idle during the different stages of legislation. They put pressure on the Government through different measures like representations, raising the issue in Legislative Assembly, negotiations with Government representatives etc, for getting more concessions in the Bill. Attempt of the landlord lobby was not futile when they succeeded in pressurising the Government to limit the operation of the Act from one acre as originally proposed to one hectare. They also managed to limit the operation of the Act in very limited areas as notified by the State Government from time to time.

Before the implementation of the Agricultural Workers Act, which came into effect on October 2, 1975, the only significant legislative measure so far adopted in the country was the inclusion of

44. KSKTU - Special Conference Working Report, February, 1975, p. 19.

agricultural labour in the Schedule appended to the Minimum Wages Act enacted in 1948. The jobs included in the above mentioned Schedule were given protection of minimum wages. But the implementation of this legislation has suffered a great deal from its inherent inadequacies.

Described as the "Magna Carta" of the toiling masses", the salient provisions of the Bill as passed by the Legislative Assembly are explained below:⁴⁵

- (i) Chapter III of the Act makes provision for security of employment and welfare of agricultural workers.
- (ii) The extension of provident fund benefit for agricultural workers by providing for the establishment of the agricultural workers provident fund.
- (iii) Chapter IV of the Act provides for hours and limitations of the employment and wages.
- (iv) Section 20, provides for the enforcement of payment of prescribed wages envisaged in the Act harmonises the concept of sustenance wage with living wage.
- (v) Chapter V provides for the setting up of proper machinery for the settlement of disputes. Conciliation officers have been appointed and tribunals set up in each district for the settlement of disputes.

45. Government of Kerala, Department of Public Relations, New Deal to Farm Labour, 1976, p.3.

- (vi) Clause 35 of the Act provides that the executive authority of every local body shall prepare a register of agricultural workers, residing within the jurisdiction of that local authority.

Except for provisions relating to the Provident Fund Scheme, the Act came into force with effect from 2nd October, 1975. It is said that the scheme was shelved because of stiff opposition from the Kerala Congress, one of the then Constituents of the Six-party ruling front. As a party determined to protect the landowners interest, they described it as more populist than pragmatic.⁴⁶

Again the different parties and unions like KSKTU are of opinion that the Government failed to implement the provisions of the act with sincerity, except the issuing of certain notifications for its implementation. Between 1975 and 1979, the agricultural workers unions made several representations and agitations for the effective implementation, of the Act, in its totality. Under pressure from the unions and other mass organisations, the Kerala Government launched the provident fund scheme with effect from August 9, 1979, in Palghat district, it is expected to benefit 2.5 lakhs of workers in the

46. The Statesman (New Delhi) 11 August, 1979, p.8.

first stage.⁴⁷ The benefit of the Agricultural workers Act have not yet materialised for large sections of workers and now they expect the new left and democratic front Government installed in January 1980, to consider their case more sympathetically.

Internal Emergency and After

The emergency rule from 1975 June to February 1977, adversely affected the growth of agricultural workers movement in Kerala, like the other working class movements all over India. The organised strength, dedication and fearless attitude of the agricultural workers, enabled them to withstand the onslaught made on them during the emergency. There were Satyagrahas demanding the restoration of civil liberties and many a battle was fought despite repression for the defence of the rights of the agricultural workers and other sections of the peasantry. Under the garb of emergency the landlords tried their best to humble the workers under one pretext or other. They tried to reduce the wages given to the workers, pin pointing the fall in paddy price. Instances of attempt to deny work were also numerous. Endangering the employment opportunity of workers and thwarting the Industrial Relations

47. *ibid*, p. 8.

Committee decisions, the employers tried to introduce tractors, weedicide and even transplanting and threshing machines. Even though the workers were faced with temporary reverses, they resisted the anti-worker machinations of the landlords. Kuttanad may be the only place where the workers went on strike to resist the anti-worker attitude taken by the landlords and the Government during the emergency.

Ignoring the threat from the Government the KSKTU, successfully held its 4th annual Conference in Palghat on April 3, and 4th of August, 1976 (during emergency).⁴⁸ The union conducted 'vehicle propagandas' highlighting their demands in all the districts during June-July 1976. In accordance with the decision of the Palghat conference the KSKTU observed a "Demands Day" on July 1, 1976 all over the state for implementation of their urgent demands with demonstrations and meetings. Hundreds of union leaders and activists were arrested and put behind bars, under DIR & MISA during emergency. A number of union activists were subjected to police torture and attacks by landlord.

48. KSKTU - Working Report, 5th Annual Conference, August 12 - 14, 1977, At Trichur, p. 1.

In 1976 in Kuttanad the workers unions again resorted to strikes and demonstrations to resist the attempt of the landlords to reduce the wages. Strikes continued for upto 15 days at times and the KSKTU could mobilise all other unions to plunge into action.⁴⁹ So the united resistance made by agricultural workers in Kuttanad was another landmark in the history of agricultural workers movement.

The post-emergency period witnessed a tremendous growth in the agricultural workers movement and it was reflected in the massive agitations held by it and the growth of membership of different unions. Among the unions KSKTU has the largest following⁵⁰ and is the most organised among the agricultural workers unions operating in Kuttanad. Kerala Karshaka Thozhilali Federation comes next, followed by DKTU and R.S.P. sponsored Upper Kuttanad Karshaka Thozhilali Union.

49. *ibid.*, p. 36.

50. KSKTU working Report of the Alleppey District 6th Annual Conference. p. 33. According to the table given in that the KSKTU membership in Alleppey District in the year 1976 was 24256 and of Kuttanad Taluk was 6732. In 1977 it increased to 35581 and 10982 respectively. The amount of KSKTU influence is clear if it is compared with the total agricultural workers population in the district and Kuttanad Taluk according to the 1971 Census. (*ibid.*, p. 17) It was 183000 and 37000 respectively.

In the process of expansion of union activities lasting over a period of about three decades Kuttanad came to have a large number of agricultural workers organisations. "By 1974, it was found that there were fourteen such registered trade unions which together formed about forty per cent of the total number of agricultural labourers' organisations in the whole state".⁵¹ Still the unions are optimistic to bring more workers into its fold. In next chapter we will see the achievements and shortcomings of the unions.

51. Jose A.V., "Trade Union Movement among Agricultural Labours' in Kerala: The case of Kuttanad Region" (Working paper no. 93, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, June 1979), p. 13.

CHAPTER V

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACTS OF THE MOVEMENT

The unionisation and politicisation of the agricultural workers and the struggles conducted by them in Kerala in general and Kuttanad region in particular brought about several radical changes in agrarian relations. The traditional norms based on master-slave relationship are no more practised. The four decade old militant movement of the agricultural workers had made far reaching impacts on the economic, social and political aspects of their life. Although the achievements can also be attributed to the interplay of other economic and political factors, the role played by the agricultural workers in that direction is tremendous.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

As of today the highest wage-rate for agricultural workers in India exists in Kerala with the Kuttanad region being in the forefront.¹ This is so

1. Oommen T.K., FAO Survey on Peasant Organisations in India: The Case of Alleppey, Kerala, (mimeograph) (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, New Delhi, 1974), p. 94.

inspite of the fact that the 'Green Revolution' did not succeed in Alleppey district to the extent that it did in other parts of the country like Punjab. These achievements are not due to any coincidence of events but a result of protracted struggles waged by the agricultural workers against the landlords and the Government. In the early periods the workers' struggles met with severe repression, eviction from homestead denial of work, etc. However, the determined effort of the agricultural workers, and the help extended by the powerful left movement resulted in the workers getting better wages and working conditions. After the year 1950 which marked a turning point in the history of agricultural workers' movements in Kerala, every struggle of their's met with some measure of success. Needless to mention, the rise in wages was the most congnozable of them.

The period from 1950 to 1957 witnessed a wave of agitations and struggles in Kuttanad and the landlords came to realise that they could no longer control the workers as easily as they used to. The installation of the communist ministry in 1957, marked another

turning point. Now the agricultural workers' unions could pressurise the Government to declare stipulated minimum wages all over the state. The unions also succeeded in making the Government to undertake periodic revisions in these minimum wages whenever they became incompatible with the price rise and inflation. The minimum wages were made applicable also in the case of harvesting and other works connected with agriculture. The details of minimum wages declared from time to time ^{are} given below.

Table V-1

Particulars (1)	Years			
	1957 (2)	1963 (3)	1968 (4)	1975 (5)
	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.
(i) Wages for male labourer for ordinary operations.	1.50	1.80	4.50	8.00
(ii) Wages for female labourer for ordinary operations.	1.00	1.25	3.00	6.50
(iii) For harvesting and threshing 'Pathom' as the share of produce.	1/9	-	1/8	1/7
(iv) 'Theerpu' as the share of 'Pathom' for harvesting.	1/4	-	1/4	1/4
(v) Wages for ploughing with labourer's bullocks for a four hour working day.	-	-	7.50	15.00

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(vi) Ploughing with cultivators bullocks for four hours working day.	-	-	5.00	9.00
(vii) Wage for cocunut climbing for 100 trees.	-	-	-	Rs.16/- plus eight cocunuts.

Source: Col. 2 : Pillai V.R. and Panikkar P.G.K., Land Reclamation in Kerala (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1965), p. 132.

Col. 3: Achutanandan V.S. "Agricultural Workers' minimum Wages: Reality Behind Publicity" in Karshaka Thozhilali monthly, Alleppey (Mal) October, 1975, p. 2.

Col. 4 : Government Order No.28/178/HL/68/LSW, Dated 27.12.1968.

Col. 5: Kunjachan P.K., in Karshaka Thozhilali monthly (Mal) October 1975, p. 12.

The above table clearly indicates the fact that there was a significant increase in the declared minimum wages from time to time.

It was a matter of credit to the organised strength of the agricultural workers in Kuttanad that, the wages and conditions of employment gained through collective bargaining were always markedly higher than that of the declared minimum wages. For example the male workers of Kuttanad in 1971 were getting an amount of

Rs.6/- against the declared Rs.4.50. Likewise the female labourers used to get Rs.3.75 against the declared Rs.3/- . In 1975 the male and female workers used to get Rs.10/- and Rs.7/- respectively against the declared wage of Rs.8/- and Rs.6.50. ~~And~~ Also the stipulated time of work since 1971 was five hours in 'Kayal' areas and six hours in other areas in contrast to high variations in other parts of Kerala.

The following table (V-2), shows the benefits of bilateral bargaining and the resulting wages in Kuttanad as against wage rates elsewhere. The comparison in Table V-2 clearly establishes the fact that wage increases in Kuttanad was higher than the corresponding increase in other parts of Kerala.

The trends in agricultural wage rates in Kuttanad in relation to the escalation of Consumer Price Index (ACPI) in Kerala is clear from the Table V-3. It is a fact that the workers could not get the wage increase in proportion to the rate of growth in cost of living index. But this is significant in at least one respect since in almost all other parts of India

Table V-2

Agricultural Wage Rates for Male Workers since
1960 - 61

Year	Kuttanad	Kerala
	Rs.	Rs.
1960 - 61	1.75	1.65
1961 - 62	---	1.93
1962 - 63	2.00	2.25
1963 - 64	2.00	---
1964 - 65	2.50	2.46
1965 - 66	2.75	---
1966 - 67	3.50	3.33
1967 - 68	5.00	4.09
1968 - 69	5.00	4.36
1969 - 70	6.00	4.46
1970 - 71	6.00	4.89
1971 - 72	6.00	4.90
1972 - 73	6.40	---
1973 - 74	7.20	---

Source: Jose A.V., Trends in Real Wage Rates of Agricultural Labourers", in Economic & Political Weekly, March 30, 1974.

there was a decline in the real wages while in Kuttanad it was maintained.

From the Table V-3 it follows that in Kuttanad there has been more than 300 per cent increase in money wage rates during the period 1960 - 61 to 1973 - 74. The Table also shows that the real wage rates increased by more than fifty per cent and that the rise was noticeably sharp during the years after 1965.

A study made by P.G.K. Panikkar based on the paddy equivalent of the average daily wage in different years brings out another conclusion.² According to him the paddy equivalent of the daily wage of male workers in Kuttanad which was 5.7 kilo grams in 1944-45 came down to 3.0 kilograms in 1967-68. However, there is a reversing trend due to the steep fall of paddy price after 1969.

The point to note here is not whether the condition of agricultural workers has improved or not, but whether it would have been possible to maintain

2. See Government of Kerala: Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, November, 1971, (in the Minute of Dissent by P.G.K. Panikkar).

Table V-3

Index Numbers of Money Wage Rates and Real
Wage Rates (Deflated by the ACPI of Agri-
cultural Labourers in
Kuttanad)

(Base 1960-61 = 100)

Year	Money Wage Rates		Real Wage Rates	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1960 - 61	100	100	100	100
1961 - 62	-	-	-	-
1962 - 63	114	111	107	104
1963 - 64	114	111	104	103
1964 - 65	143	134	108	102
1965 - 66	157	156	105	104
1966 - 67	200	223	124	138
1967 - 68	286	268	166	155
1968 - 69	286	268	146	137
1969 - 70	343	304	170	150
1970 - 71	343	335	160	156
1971 - 72	343	335	162	159
1972 - 73	366	357	165	161
1973 - 74	411	429	149	155

Source: Jose A.V., "The Trade Union Movement Among Agricultural Labourers in Kerala: The Case of Kuttanad Region", (Working Paper No.93, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, 1979), p. 18.

even the existing level of wage rates without the militant struggles of the workers. The experience of steep fall of real wages of workers in other parts of the country where the unions are not strong, points towards this conclusion. Seen thus, it is definitely an achievement of the organised workers in Kuttanad that they could resist further decline in real wages even while being faced with the difficulty of shrinking employment opportunities due to the swelling number of agricultural workers and calculated attempts of the landlords to introduce labour saving devices like tractors.

Due to the consistent effort made by labour unions, the duration of work for ordinary agricultural operations, which used to range from twelve to fourteen hours a day in the 40's has been brought down to five hours in 'Kayal' areas and six in other areas.

From early days of unionisation itself the landlords used to victimise workers who took part in unions which were not of their liking. The polarisation of the political forces in Kuttanad made it common for the employer and employee to be members of parties which are opposed to each other. The landlords were also insistent on their right to select their own

workers. However, the worker's unions consistently resisted this privilege of the landlords because if they were allowed to pick and choose workers according to their own the militant and organised labour force would face the peril of unemployment. So, firstly the unions pressed for the right of the agricultural workers belonging to the vicinity to be employed in the nearby fields. Secondly, the unions demanded that preference should be given to workers who were employed in the previous year or the previous cultivation operations. These rights are now widely recognised by the cultivators. To avoid clashes between local and immigrant workers especially during harvesting time the unions insisted that a system of identity cards be introduced so as to regulate the entry of workers to Paddy fields during harvesting seasons.³ In certain villages where the unions were strong this was successfully introduced and thereby the right to harvest paddy was made the privilege of those who worked in the fields throughout the cultivating season. The unions also tried to get this right enforced through referring it to the Industrial Relation Committee (IRC). In the specific context of Kuttanad, characterised by the preponderance of

3. Oommen, n. 1, p. 118.

casual labour and a constantly increasing labour force, the main thrust of their struggle was to prevent any further decline in income and employment of agricultural labourers.

The landlords efforts to introduce labour saving devices were resisted by the unions, along with attempts to keep available employment opportunities and to reduce working hours. The unions unitedly resisted introduction of tractors at all costs, and often it resulted in open confrontation with the Karshaka Federations. At least in areas where the unions were strong this was done effectively.

Another major achievement of the agricultural workers in Kuttanad was the legitimisation of hutment Rights. In the early 1970's they spearheaded a movement for this right. During prolonged agitations about 2 lakhs Kudikidappukars@ asserted their rights on the homestead lands despite the stiff opposition from landlords and the police.

In Alleppey district about 30 per cent of the population were Kudikidappukars. Through the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1969, all hutment

@ Kudikidappukars - means landless agricultural workers who are allowed by their landlord masters to put up a thatched hut for their residence.

dwellers become entitled to 10 cents of land provided they conformed to certain legal prescription. Substantial number of the Kudikidappukars (Around 650,00 in Alleppey district) formed unions of their own. Instead of waiting for legal formalities they forcibly occupied land and started asserting their rights. This movement accelerated the process of the transfer of actual ownership to the landless. The struggle clearly brought home the fact that if the workers were united, they could withstand counter pressures of property owners and the official machinery could be compelled to implement the enacted legislations more effectively.⁴

By the end of the 50's the Government set up a committee composed of representatives of the agricultural workers, cultivators, and the Government to settle disputes more amicably and to ease the tension on the agrarian front. All the efforts of the landlords to suppress the unions having proved ineffective they reconciled themselves to accepting negotiations as a better method of solving the problem. This committee was called the IRC.⁵

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4. Koshy V.C., "Politics of Land Reforms in Kerala" (Ph.D. Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 1976), p. 248.
 5. Jose A.V., "The Trade Union Movement Among Agricultural Labourers in Kerala: The case of Kuttanad Region". (Working Paper no. 93, Centre for Development Studies Trivandrum, June, 1979), p. 13.

Many of the major disputes in Kuttanad since 1957 have been settled through mediations in the committee. The unions sponsored by the Congress Party and the CPI were also anxious to utilise such formal machinery to settle disputes. Thus the unions in Kuttanad were progressively getting recognised by the Government as well as the landlords as the true voice of the working class there.

Development Programmes

Representations and demands made by the agricultural workers unions along with other sections of the society led to the initiation of many programmes for the improvement of cultivation, and the all round development of Kuttanad. The three major measures initiated by the Government are the Thottappally Spillway, Thanneermukkom bund and the Alleppey-Chenganacherry road.⁶ The Thottappally Spill Way was meant to be a permanent solution to the flood problem in Kuttanad. This was to be done by cutting an artificial outlet to the sea from the Vembanad Lake. The Thanneermukkom salt-water barrier was to mitigate

6. Government of Kerala, Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, (Trivandrum, November, 1971), p.13.

the influx of saline water, harmful to agriculture. The flow of saline water into the lake was prevented by closing the sluices in the regulator during high tide. The two projects were completed and started functioning, even though they could not achieve the expected results due to certain errors in planning and construction. The third project, the Alleppey-Chenganacherry road, would quicken the growth of Kuttanad tremendously. Even though work started in mid 1950's it is not yet completed due to lack of financial resources.

These three projects would, in addition to improving agriculture, also provide employment opportunities to the labourers. But the optimism of the workers of the region has dampened after environmentalists and scientists have demonstrated that these projects produced adverse ecological imbalances.⁷ One of the side effects of the development project is the extraordinary rapid spread of 'African Payal'* mainly

7. Kannan K.P., "Socio-Economic And Ecological consequences of water control Projects: The Case of Kuttanad in Kerala (India)" (Working Paper no. 87, (Mimeographed), Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, 1979), p. 36.

* 'African Payal' is the local terminology used for a water hyacinth, a free floating bulbous plant with dark green leaves and blue flowers. A native of Asia minor, it has found its way to west coast. It multiplies at a terrific pace and spreads all over water surface in a vast expanse of azure extravagance. It has made the navigation in Kuttanad difficult and the water unhygienic, and agricultural operation difficult.

due to the absence of saline water during summer time since it is regulated through the Thanneermukkom salt-water barrier. The rapid spread of this African Payal is making the life of people in Kuttanad difficult affecting agricultural operations and water navigation. The unions are demanding effective measures from the Government to save Kuttanad from the menace and they have also attracted the attention of the public to this matter.

In accordance with constant demands from the agricultural workers and other sections of the people in Kuttanad area certain measures were taken up by the Government for the development of the area. The proposed scheme in the second stage of the Kuttanad Development project are following.⁸

- (i) Construction of permanent bunds with appurtenant works,
- (ii) Improvement of approach channels leading to the Thottappally Spill-way,
- (iii) Protective works to the bunds of fields affected by the operation of the Spill-way gates; and
- (iv) The works connected with the diversions of Idikki tail race waters, from the Muvattupuzha River.

The work on the above said projects are in progress.

8. Kuttanad Enquiry, n. 6, p. 14.

Another development measure was the inauguration of the Intensive Agricultural District Programme, popularly known as the 'Package Programme', in the Alleppey district in 1960-61. It had paved the way for substantial progress in agriculture in Kuttanad. It was a programme ⁿ envisaged by the Ford Foundation of USA and financed by the central and the state Government. However, the workers unions are critical of this programme, since they are of the opinion that the benefit by this programme is reaped by the farmers and not by the agricultural workers.

Welfare Measures for Agricultural Workers: Another programme initiated by the Government to give some relief to the housing problems of the landless rural workers was the "One Lakh Houses Scheme", started in 1972. It was to provide permanent low cost dwellings and developed sites to the families of the landless in the villages. The scheme envisaged the construction and distribution of 100 houses in each of the 968 Panchayats, which was rounded off to one lakh. Due to the more or less effective implementation of this project the Kuttanad agricultural workers also got their share.

The enactment of the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act, 1974, and its implementation was a major achievement of the agricultural workers.⁹ This unique legislation in India provides for the security of employment fixation of wages and working hours, creation of a welfare fund and establishment of a machinery for settlement of disputes. All the provisions of the Act, except the provisions relating to the provident fund scheme came into effect on 2nd October, 1975. After a series of agitations by the unions the Kerala Government launched the scheme for Provident fund with effect from August 9, 1979 in Palghat district. The unions are putting pressures on the Government to extend the facility of the provident fund scheme to other districts, and to implement all provisions of the Act effectively.

Land Reform Measures

The enactment and implementation of land reforms legislations in Kerala was the outcome of a strong agricultural workers' and peasants' movement. The socio-economic impact of these reforms was far reaching.

9. Seth A.N., Peasant Organisation in India (A Survey) Part II, (Centre for Agrarian Research Training & Education, Ghaziabad: September, 1978), p.6.

A series of progressive agrarian legislations starting with the Agrarian Relations Bill, 1957, up to the Agricultural Workers Act, 1974, have been enacted in response to relentless pressure applied on the Government by the unions of agricultural workers and peasants. The important reform measures were,¹⁰

- (i) Abolition of intermediary rights on land;
- (ii) granting ownership rights to Kudikidappukars;
- (iii) tenancy reforms;
- (iv) ceiling on land holdings;
- (v) distribution of surplus land;
- (vi) distribution of Government Poram Pokku (waste land) and forest lands;
- (vii) rehabilitation programme;
- (viii) enhancement of wages and better working conditions to the agricultural workers; and
- (ix) preparation of the record of rights.

Another striking feature of land reforms in Kerala was that it not only enacted laws but also provided a separate administrative machinery for its implementation. The credit for proper implementation of the enacted legislations goes primarily to the agricultural workers movements. The agricultural workers unions especially the KSKTU, conducted a prolonged

10. Koshy, n. 4, p. 269.

struggle from 1970 to 1979 for the implementation of the provisions of land reforms, and to create a public opinion to that effect.

There are several drawbacks in the actual implementation of the legislative enactments. Shortcomings are there in implementing the ceiling on agricultural holdings take over and distribution of land etc. For example the estimated area of surplus land in 1957, during the introduction of Agrarian Relations Bill was 17.5 lakh acres and by 1970 it was estimated to be less than four lakhs. The short comings of actual implementation can be examined by the following Table V-4.

Table V-4

Ceiling laws

(i)	No. of returns decided	57,001
(ii)	Area ordered to be surrendered	1,14,760 Acres
(iii)	Area taken over	69,434 Acres
(iv)	Area distributed	45,302 Acres
(v)	Area reserved for Public purposes	13,927 Acres

Source: Government of Kerala: Land Revolution in Kerala, Department of Public Relations, Trivandrum, 1979, p. 14.

Irrespective of all these draw backs it is a fact that Kerala is the first state which has introduced land reforms to a certain extent, and the poor masses have been benefitted by that. Table V-5, shows the different measures taken up so far.

Table V-5

Number of beneficiaries and area covered by the reforms

	* Scheduled Castes & tribes	Total No. benefitted	Area involved (Acres)
1. Tenancy cases ..		2,397,883	19,18,306
2. Kudikidappu cases ..		260,514	20,841
3. Ceiling Laws	31,160	69,942	45,302
4. Land Assign- ment.	79,084	396,129	3,97,167
5. Arable forest land assignment	3,684	8,558	11,095
6. Vested forests assignment.	465	947	3,781
7. Miscellaneous enfrachisements:			
(i) Thiruppuvaram ..		92,138	2,683
(ii) Sree Pandaravaka..		94,000	12,630
(iii) Sree Padam ..		40,892	15,000
(iv) Edavagai Rights ..		51,376	1,23,595
(v) Pattazhi Devaswomr ..		12,376	7,805
Total		3,424,755	25,58,205

* Separate figures for Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes in respect of Tenancy and Kudikidappu cases are not available.

Source: Government of Kerala: Land Revolution in Kerala
Department of Public Relations, Trivandrum, 1979, p.15.

The fairly effective implementation of land reforms resulted in substantial reduction in the holdings of big land owners and making agricultural labourers owners of small patches of land. Even after this, glaring inequalities in the land owning categories still very much prevails in Alleppey district. The implementation of the land reforms in Kerala had its impact on all sections of the people. While the effect was adverse in the case of landlords, it benefitted all sections of the peasants agricultural workers and other rural poor. On the one hand it compelled the then dominant sections to admit reality, and on the other hand raised the status of the poor and their hopes and aspirations for a better future.

SOCIAL IMPACTS

The unionisation of agricultural workers not only resulted in better economic conditions but had effects on their social status too. The traditional master-slave relationship is increasingly being replaced by an employer-employee relationship. The attached labour system gave way to an independent free-floating casual labour system. In other words, unionisation not only led to the breakdown of traditional patron-client relationship but also

provided the requisite freedom and economic security to the worker.

During earlier times in Kuttanad the relationship between the cultivators and labourers was structured within the framework of relations between higher and lower castes. This sort of relationship was reflected in all dealings between them. For example the cultivators used to address the workers in degrading terms and on the other hand the workers used to address their masters in respectful terms. The landlords used to punish their servants in many ways. They were given food only outside the house. No where was the labourer considered an equal to his master whether it be a public place, tea shop or temples. The workers were also obliged to give customary presents to the cultivators during festivals.

K.C. Alexander analyses the extent of social changes which took place in the Alleppey district in a detailed field study.¹¹ First, he does a comparison of the socio-economic situation before

11. Alexander K.C., Agricultural Labour Unions - A Study in Three South Indian States, (Hyderabad : National Institute of Rural Development, July 1978), pp. 36 - 47.

and after the movement. He also undertakes a comparative study of the existing social relation in Alleppey district where the workers are well organised, Thiruthuraipundi and Orthanad Taluks, of Thanjaur district of Tamilnad where the unions are ~~moder~~ moderately strong, and Mandya district of Karnataka where the workers are unorganised. Alexander examines the pattern of relationships prevailing between farmers and labourers, and the extent of egalitarian relations practised by them with the help of a schedule consisting of 26 questions administered to respondents in these areas. The higher scores obtained by respondents from Alleppey, in his study indicates the practice of a more egalitarian labour-cultivator relationship there, than in the other areas.

Alexander's study of the prevailing Jajmani Relations between farmers and various service castes in the four areas with distinct levels of labour union development is another index of the extent of social change. His data show that the disintegration of Jajmani relations is of very high order in

Alleppey compared to other areas.¹²

The third index used by Alexander to understand the impact of unionisation on the social structure are the agencies through which the villagers settle their local disputes. In the past such disputes were settled within the village frame work. But the study shows that of late almost all respondents from Alleppey district preferred modern agencies ^{for} settlement of their quarrels and disputes. He shows a leaning towards traditional systems where the unions are weak.

That tremendous social changes took place in Kerala due to the unionisation of agricultural workers and the peasantry is an acknowledged fact. It led to the development of a totally new set of social relations of production, where by now there is very little attachment of individual labourers to any particular locality. Thus one now finds vast hords of workers, descending on an area during harvests and there is very little of personal ties with the land. From the

12. *ibid.*, p. 42

Given in table are the percentage of cultivators with high and low scores on disintegration of Jajmani system.

Level of score	Mandya (N=168)	Orathanad (N=131)	Thirithu- raipundi (N=58)	Alle- ppey (N=79)
Low	51	95	22	1
High	49	5	78	99
Total	100	100	100	100

days of absolute subordination within a nexus of feudal relations wage labourers in Kuttanad have come a long way. Over the years they have emerged into a freely floating labour force, increasingly educated conscious of their rights and grievances and determined to extract better terms and conditions from their employers and the Government. The emergence of communist movement as a major political force in Kerala, is a manifestation of fundamental changes taking place in its social structure.

POLITICAL IMPACTS

The organised agricultural workers in Kerala have become a powerful force to be reckoned with in the politics of the state. The experience of Kerala shows that, if the unorganised rural proletariat is activated through unions and militant struggles, they also can play a role no less effective than that of the industrial working class. It is a matter of credit to the agricultural workers in Kerala that, they have conducted struggles with popular support and could pressurise the Government to bring about radical measures in favour of the rural poor. From time to time the Government was forced to take up issues like, revision of minimum wages,

initiation of land reform measures with the aim of giving land to the tillers, take over and distribution of surplus land to the landless, initiation of welfare measures as included in the Agricultural Workers' Act, 1974, taking decisions in the IRC's in favour of the workers etc. Through its activities the unions have created an awareness among the public regarding the seriousness of the problems they face. This would help them to successfully counter the anti-worker attitude taken by the cultivators associations like the Kuttanad Karshaka Federation led by rich farmers. The measures adopted by the workers to create a favourable opinion to solve their problems were demonstrations, dharnas, picketing land-grab agitations, strikes, agitations for better wages and conditions of labour, resistance to the pace of machanisation etc.

Now the unions could claim substantial ability to mobilise a large number of agricultural workers in support of party activities too.¹³ The union leaders also could mobilise the rural poor, in favour of other sections of the working class and of struggles like those of the transport and electricity board workers

13. Oommen, n.1, p. 93

and other trade union wings of the party. The involvement of union members in frequent political activities leads to intense politicisation of agricultural workers. This in turn raises their revolutionary consciousness, their determination to put up a consistent fight. Emphasis is laid on viewing the issues from **angle of the** ~~the~~ union and the exploited classes as a whole rather than from the perspective of narrower personal or sectional interests.¹⁴

There are a number of agricultural organisations which sprang up in Kuttanad. However, division of agricultural workers under different banners had a weakening effect on their struggles. The incidents of mutual confrontation between them are also not rare. The different unions give emphasis to different aspects of union activities. For example the Karshaka Thozhilali Federation affiliated to the CPI gives emphasis to the implementation of the legislations and agreements reached upon for the welfare of the workers. Negotiations in the IRC meetings were utilised for the same purpose. But the KSKTU, connected with the CPI (M) stress on militant activities by the unions and forceful attainment of the workers demands.

14. *ibid.*, p. 94.

The DKTF formed by the Congress Party is trying to arrive at settlements with the cultivators and to guard against deterioration of the situation to the level of confrontation between the two sides. Unionisation provided the required freedom and economic security to the workers.¹⁵

The unions also improved the position of socially oppressed groups like Harijans and Adivasis. Attempts were made from different corners to organise them on caste basis. But the unions through their activities proved that the caste based organisations could only disrupt the unity of the different sections of the rural poor. Now the main chunk of the militant unions like KSKTU are drawn from the weaker sections only.

The agricultural workers are today increasingly aware of the benefits of unionisation. K.C. Alexander's study referred to above reveals the high percentage of the workers attached to the unions and their commitment to them. (See Table V-6).

Another study made by Alexander to the ideological orientation of the Kuttanad agricultural workers and cultivators, explains the adherence of the workers to

15. Oommen, T.K., *ibid.*, p. 183.

Table V-6

Opinions of Workers on Union Activities

Questions	Response				Total (N=171)
	Yes	No	No resp- nse	No un- ion	
(i) Do you think that the act- ivities of the union had benefitted you.	83%	2%	0	15%	100
(ii) Do you think that the activities are useful in promoting the interest of your class.	83	2	0	15	100
(iii) Will you be prepared to go jail to adhering to the instructions of your organisation.	78	3	4	15	100

Source: Alexander K.C., Agricultural Labour Unions - A Study in Three South Indian States. National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) Hyderabad, July 1978, p. 23.

the radical ideology of the left parties and the conservative outlook of the landowners.¹⁷

17. Alexander K.C., The Nature and the Background of the Agrarian Unrest in Kuttanad". Indian Journal of Industrial Relations. (New Delhi), vol. 11, no. 1, June 1975, p. 69.

Agricultural Workers and Elections

The increased politicisation of agricultural workers and their leaning towards a left ideology was reflected in elections to the Lok Sabha and the state Legislative Assembly, since the formation of the Kerala State in 1956. Except in 1971 and 1977, the constituency which includes the Kuttanad region (upto 1971, Ambalapuzha and the Alleppey Constituency) returned only Communist Party candidates to the Lok Sabha. In 1971 the Revolutionary Socialist Party candidate and in 1977 the Congress Party candidate were elected to the Lok Sabha with support of the CPI and certain other left parties. The wide popularity of the left politics among agricultural workers and the peasantry are clear from the elections to the state Legislative Assembly since 1957, as shown in the Table V-7.

Out of 92 MLAs who have so far represented the fourteen Assembly Constituencies in Alleppey district, about 63 were from left parties or other democratic parties supported by them. Of these the number of CPI and CPI(M) MLAs itself comes to 38. This was more true in the case of constituencies where agricultural workers movements were strong. From this it is clear that not only the weaker

Table - V-67

Assembly Elections since 1957
Alleppey District

Constituency	1957	1960	1965	1967	1970	1977	1980
1. Arur	Cong	Cong.	CPM	CPM	CPM	CPI	CPM
2. Shertalai	CPI	CPI	Ind (KC)	CPM	Cong	Cong	CPI
3. Mararikulam	CPI	CPI	CPM	CPM	CPM	RSP	RSP
4. Alleppey	CPI	Cong	Cong	CPI	CPI	CPI	CPI
5. Ambalapuzha	-	-	Cong	CPM	CPM	RSP	CPM
6. Kuttanadu	-	-	KC	RSP	SSP	KC	KC(J)
7. Harippadu	Ind	Cong	Cong	CPM	CPM	PSP	CPM
8. Kayankulam	CPI	CPI	CPM	SSP	Cong	Cong	Cong
9. Tiruvalla	CPI	Cong	KC	KC	KC	KC	Jnt
10. Kalloppa	Cong	Cong	KC	Cong	KC	KC	KC(J)
11. Aranmula	Cong	Cong	KC	SSP	Ind (CPM)	Cong	Cong(I)
12. Chengannur	CPI	Cong	Ind (KC)	CPM	CPM	Ind (NDP)	NDP
13. Mavelikara	CPI	CPI	Cong	SSP	ISP	Ind (NDP)	CPM
14. Pandalam	-	-	CPM	CPM	Cong	Cong	Cong

CPI - Communist Party of India
 Ind - Independent
 Cong - Indian National Congress
 CPM - Communist Party of India (Marxist)
 KC - Kerala Congress
 RSP - Revolutionary Socialist Party
 SSP - Samyukta Socialist Party
 ISP - Indian Socialist Party
 PSP - Praja Socialist Party
 NDP - National Democratic Party
 KC(J) - Kerala Congress (Joseph group)
 Jnt - Janata Party
 Cong(I) - Indian National Congress (Indira)

Source: Col.2 to 7 from Kerala Election Studies, Department of Politics, University of Kerala, Kariavattam, Trivandrum;

Col. 8 The Deepika, (Malayalam Daily), 24 January, 1980.

sections of society, but also the middle classes either accepted or were influenced by left ideologies.

All these factors show that the politicisation of the agricultural workers had reached a level of maturity in the Kuttanad region not comparable to any other region in Kerala. To a great extent the credit for this goes to the unionisation of agricultural workers and the militant struggles led by them. The attempt made by the union leaders to educate them from time to time also has paid rich dividends. It is a fact that in its history of three decades the agricultural workers movement became a formidable force in Kerala. Still there are problems which remain unsolved, like the shrinking employment opportunities, ever swelling army of agricultural workers due to the decline in traditional industries like coir and cashew nuts, pauperisation of middle and small peasantry etc. Without industrialisation of the state and development of Cottage Industries which would absorb the unemployed hands, this problem cannot be solved satisfactorily. Even though they are at present getting moderate wages it is nullified by the spiralling price hike and

stagnation or even decline in their total income. Even though their economic consciousness has reached a high level, their political consciousness has not developed accordingly. The workers are now more optimistic after the installation of the new left and democratic front ministry in 1980, since from their experience they have seen that, the agricultural workers movement flourished and certain favours were granted whenever a left oriented government was in the helm of affairs. The implementations of the pension scheme for Agricultural workers is an indication for that. Under the scheme, which came into force from 15th May, 1980, any of the agricultural workers above sixty years of age whose annual income is not more than Rs.3600/- will get a monthly pension of Rs.40/-. However, there is a limitation for the Government in the present set up to fulfill the aspirations of the agricultural workers. The agricultural workers movement has to go far ahead to achieve their basic goals, for which they stand.

...

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The agricultural labourers' movement in Kuttanad was one of the earlier working class movements in the country. This has attracted the attention and occupied a dominant place in the political and academic discussions. There the agricultural workers were organised by the Communist Party to fight for their rights. In this chapter, we will summarise the birth, development, and achievements of the movement, which were dealt with in the preceding chapters in detail, and draw certain conclusions therefrom.

During the close of the nineteenth century and beginning of the present century, the tenants of Kuttanad became the owners of the land that they were cultivating for generations. The cultivation of paddy and other related agricultural activities like bunding, dewatering etc., necessitated increased amount of labour which resulted in the strengthening and in the institutionalisation of 'attached labour system'. However, by early thirties the emergence of capitalist mode of production in agricultural sector in Kuttanad changed this trend. The capitalist penetration demanded large amount of labourers, mostly seasonal in nature, which the 'attached labour system' was not able to provide completely.

This resulted in the influx of seasonal workers, especially during busy season. The distinguishing feature of this labour category was that they were paid on daily basis. This aspect is important, in the sense that, it affected the then existing landlord-labour relationship in favour of workers, making them more independent and there by creating a conducive atmosphere for trade union activities.

The global economic depression of 1930's followed by the Second World War created shortage of consumption goods which let loose an inflationary spiral for food materials. In their thirst for exploiting further, the landlords replaced the 'wages in kind' by 'wages in cash' thereby worsening the very subsistence of the agricultural workers. The trade union leaders of the Communist Party who were in constant contact with the workers, felt the need for organising the discontented workers for their genuine rights. They gave a left ideological orientation and convinced them that the only way to salvage themselves from the exploitation is to put a determined fight against these landlords. The awareness of the contemporary movement in other parts of Kerala (like Malabar peasant struggles, the militant activities of trade unions in Alleppey, Temple entry

movement etc.), the spread of education through the formal schooling and through study classes (political education) provided by the trade union leaders, inspired the workers to organise themselves to fight against the landlords. This led to the formation of the Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union (TKTU) in 1940.

Ever since its formation, the history of agricultural workers movement in Kuttanad is inextricably interlinked with the activities of TKTU. Therefore a close observation of the union activities will give us a clear picture of the development of the agricultural workers' movement. In the formative periods i.e. early 1940's the struggles waged by the union were on the basis of economic demands. The success of these struggles increased the confidence of the workers on their united strength, which attracted large number of workers especially from the Harijan community who formed the major proportion of the 'attached labour system'. To counter the union the big farmers were forced to revive and activate their hitherto inactive association, namely Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham (which was formed in 1932). More over TKTU had to resist against the divisionist attempts made by political parties like Congress, caste-based organisations like SNDP, Pulaya Maha Sabha, etc. Through political education and cultural activities the

union exposed the exploitative mechanisms of landed gentry, the suppressive nature of state, the divisionist tendencies represented by the political and caste-based organisations and thereby countered all reactionary attempts to weaken the union. However, soon after the upheaval of Punnapra-Vayalar in 1946, the union along with the Communist Party was banned. The subsequent period witnessed heavy repression unleashed by the state till the ban was lifted in 1951.

In fifties the union emerged as strong and powerful force and waged different struggles in 1953, 1954 and 1955. The distinguishing feature of those struggles was that, that was based not only on economic demands but also on political demands. The union also participated in the movement outside the Kuttanad region. In 1953 the Government was forced to appoint a minimum wages Committee. The coming of communist party in to state power in 1957 helped the unions to forge its activities vigorously with the new confidence on their own Government. The Government fixed the minimum wages for the first time in the history of agricultural workers' movement, settled major disputes through Industrial Relations Committee. Another significant measure adopted by the Government for the betterment of the agricultural labourers was the Agrarian Relations Bill

of 1957. However, the ministry was dismissed in 1959, before the Bill could get the assent of the President. An amended form of the same Bill, introduced by the Congress-PSP ministry, also was not implemented because of the High Court Order. A more diluted Land Reforms Act was passed in 1963, which in essence gave enough loopholes for the big farmers to circumvent the main provisions of the Act that were favourable to the workers.

In the early sixties the union resisted the introduction of highly labour-saving devices like Tractors, etc. During the period, the rich farmers formed the Akhila Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham (All Kuttanad Farmer's Association) and affiliated to it the earlier existing Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham. It also introduced the 'trained cadres' to give physical resistance to TKTU and this led to many physical confrontations between these two groups. The polarisation of class forces became crystal clear. Though the left movement was weakened with the split of Communist Party in 1964, the agricultural workers in Kuttanad were relatively less affected, because the workers continued their allegiance to TKTU, which was later identified with CPI(M). With the coming of the United Front Government headed by CPI(M) in 1967, the union intensified its struggle. The Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU), an all Kerala union for agricultural workers, was formed in

1968 and TKTU was affiliated to it in the same year.

In Kuttanad, KSKTU led the famous land-grab agitation launched in 1970's which brought to the notice of the Government thousands of acres of surplus land illegally occupied by the landlords. As a result of the prolonged demand for various welfare measures, the Agricultural Workers' Act was passed in 1974. Under the garb of emergency (1975-77) the landlords attempted to reduce wage rates and to increase the hours of work. The workers resorted to strike and successfully resisted these very attempts. Again during this period, different unions tried to wean away a section of workers from KSKTU which did not cut much ice. After emergency the unions consolidated their position further through a series of struggles. The 1979 January struggle known as the land-grab agitation was an epoch by itself. The unions are determined to utilise the favourable political atmosphere created by the installation of Left and Democratic Front ministry in 1980.

The important conclusions emerging from the present study are the following. The most striking lesson that one obviously has to derive, when analysing agricultural workers' movement in Kuttanad, is the inevitability of an organised movement for achieving

and safeguarding the legitimate rights of the working class. This becomes clear, when we compare the relative rights and freedoms now enjoyed by the workers in organised areas with that in other parts (unorganised) of the country.

From its success, the movement provides answers to many of the controversial questions. Firstly, the inevitability of a material base for the organisation and success of a movement is proved beyond doubt. If we closely observe the agricultural workers' movement in Kuttanad from its embryonic stage, it can be seen that the objective conditions that prevailed in the region exerted no less influence on its development into a strong and organised trade union. The economic oppression on the basis of religion, caste etc., the then existing relations of production based on semi-feudal relations and 'attached labour system', the impetus provided by movements in other parts of the state like Malabar peasant struggles, the trade union movement in Alleppey etc., in the early decades of the present century provided the necessary material base for the movement. Added to all these, was the growing discontent among the agricultural workers which again provided a fertile ground to organise them.

Secondly, it throws some light into the question of leadership. The answer to this question should

be made at two levels: (a) the necessity of leadership; (b) what type of leadership a movement demands. The agricultural workers' movement in Kuttanad shows beyond doubt that a strong leadership with organising capability is essential for the development of any movement. The objective factors, though a necessary condition, is not a sufficient condition to mould, formulate and carry on the strategies for organising a movement by taking advantage of the prevailing favourable conditions. But for the leadership, the objective conditions however favourable they might be need not develop themselves into an organised movement. Even if it does so, at the most it may come to the stage of a spontaneous upsurge.

Once we accept the significant role of the leadership in any movement, the question, who provides the leadership becomes complex. The pertinent issue that crops up immediately is whether the leadership should be from within or without? This is crucial to a movement because it decides its future programmes and thereby its fate itself. The answer to this depends on the concept of the movement that we visualise : whether the movement should be stagnated at the level of trade unionism or it should be blended with the revolutionary movements outside. If former is the case, a leadership from inside will suffice, otherwise outside

leadership is inevitable. As Lenin points out "The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness".¹

Kuttanad movement is not confined to 'trade union consciousness'. Its history reveals that it got proper leadership from outside, who were in close contact with the agricultural labourers. Agricultural workers' movement in Kuttanad got strong leaders who were in the midst of the revolutionary movement and as a result the movement was closely interlinked with the movements outside.

The ideology that the leadership provides for a movement is equally important as the leadership itself. "Without a ~~revolutionary~~ revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement".² The movement in Kuttanad exemplified this proposition. The leaders of the TKTU were from the Communist Party and they gave revolutionary ideological orientation and the movement was developed on the theoretical framework of Marxism-Leninism. The story of success of the

1. Lenin, V.I., What is to be Done, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), p. 31.

2. *ibid*, p. 25.

struggles waged by TKTU explains the ideological commitment matched with a determination to fight against exploitations of all kinds.

The character of any organisation is revealed by the context of its activities. Therefore, the nature of the struggles waged and the type of demands raised become important to understand a movement. If any movement resorts to the path of 'economism' it is not going to help either the movement itself or other movements outside. A trade union movement becomes fruitful only when it could attain the political maturity. "Trade union organisations not only can be of tremendous value in developing and consolidating the economic struggle, but can also become a very important auxiliary to political agitation and revolutionary organisation".³ The movement in question justifies the above statement. In the 1940's TKTU was waging struggles on the basis of economic and social welfare demands which directly affected the workers. The success of initial struggles attracted large number of labourers who were given political education and turned into revolutionaries. The struggles in fifties and sixties were to ~~realise~~ realise both economic and political demands. Moreover,

3. *ibid.*, p. 144.

it resorted to strikes to express its solidarity with other movements outside and in the later period Kuttanad ^{became} / the cradle of revolutionary activities.

This should not give us the idea that the agricultural workers' movement in Kuttanad was free from failures. But the weaknesses are to be weighed against the achievements to get a balanced picture of the movement. The main weakness of the movement was the development of different unions under the banner of different political parties who clashed each other on the ideological grounds which was also reflected in the day today activities. In other words the conflicting stands taken by different unions on particular issue reduced the organised power and bargaining strength of the workers. This disunity gave scope for manoeuvrability for the landlords and rich peasants. This was basically because many of the unions failed to raise above their political interests for the common demands.

Whenever there was realignment of political forces in the state, it had its reflections in the trade union wing also. This point is important in the specific case of Kerala because ever since its formation except in 1957 the state witnessed United Front Governments, where changes in the combination of political partners were not uncommon. These changes in the partnership had

tremendous impact on the movement in the later sixties and early seventies. In this process different groups within the movement fought among themselves, which resulted in the further weakening of the movement.

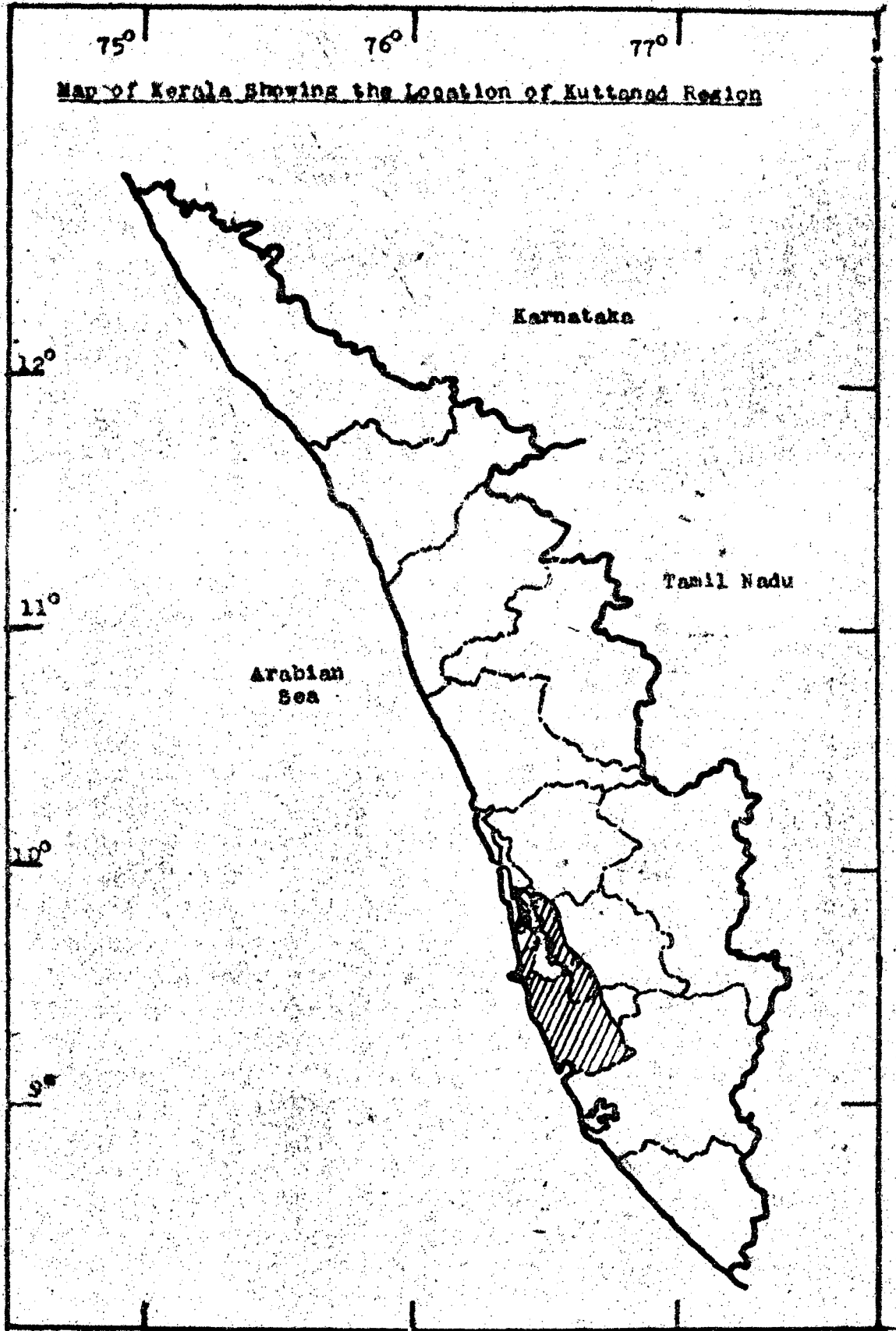
The real benefits in the economic front also cannot be exaggerated. It is a fact that, because of their united strength the agricultural workers in Kuttanad is getting the maximum wage rates. Their existing wage rates always exceed the wages fixed under the Minimum Wage Act. But the number of days of employment is perhaps the lowest. Therefore, the total wage bill, which constitutes the income of the workers, is very low. This low income of the workers is because of the large number of workers and less number of jobs and the trade unions "ration the available employment among their members on an increasingly inadequate scale".⁴ Therefore, in real terms the economic conditions of agricultural workers in Kuttanad is far from satisfactory. The Unions cannot be blamed for this. Moreover, it should be noted that, but for their united strength, they would not have been able to maintain even this level.

4. Raj, K.N., "Trends in the Indian Economy and Kerala's Development Prospects", Mainstream, vol. 18, 12 April, 1980, p.8.

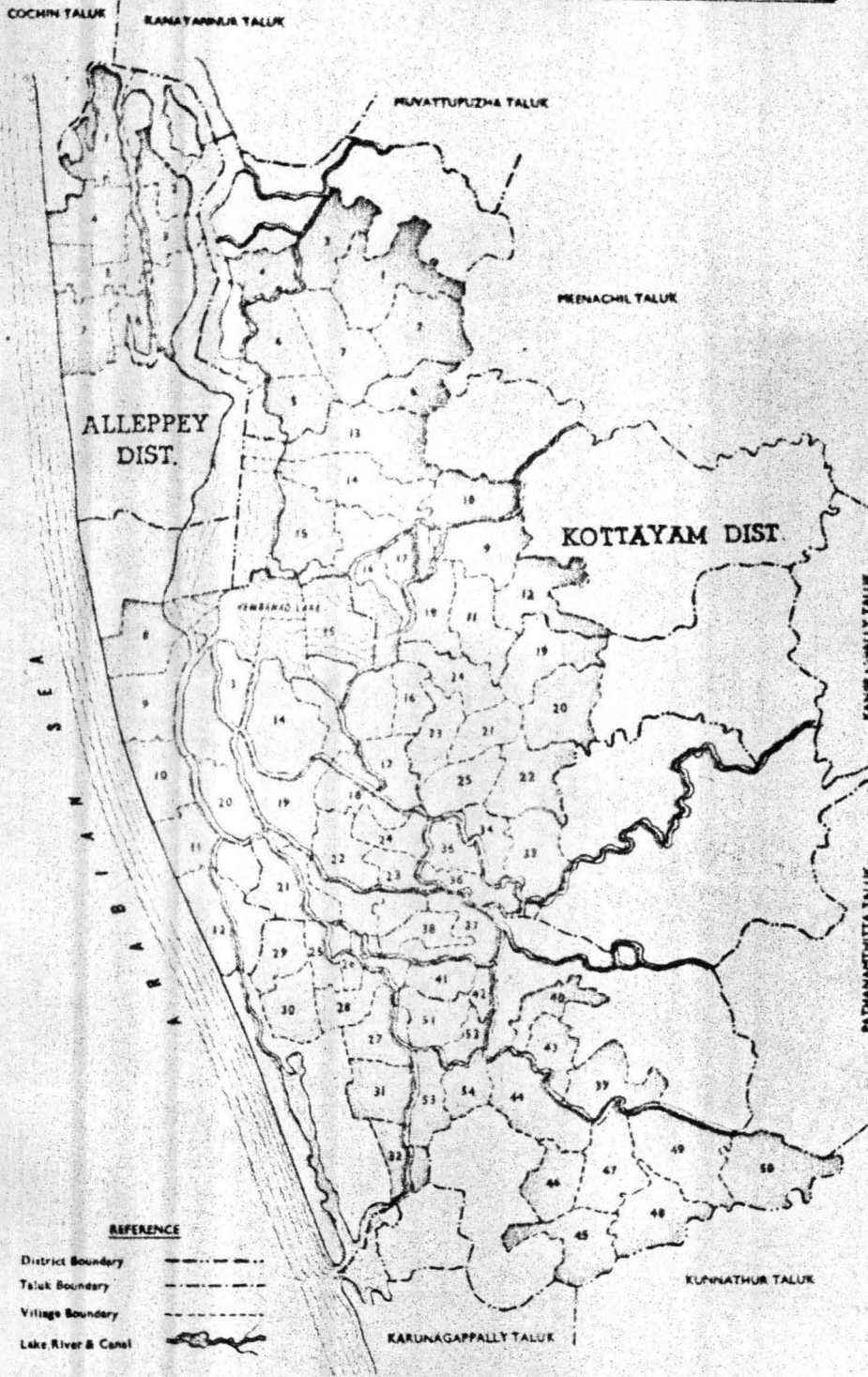
We analysed the pros and cons of the movement and in conclusion it will not be inappropriate to note the lessons that it gives to movements elsewhere. The agricultural workers movement in Kuttanad clearly shows (a) the necessity of an organised trade union which will raise above 'trade union consciousness' and will not resort to economism, (b) the inevitability of a leadership and that too a strong leadership from outside, so that the movement in question will be made an auxiliary to other movements, (c) the emerging need for a proper ideological orientation. It can be stated with considerable degree of confidence that the leadership of Kuttanad movement made use of the favourable objective conditions gave a strong leadership with a proper ideological orientation and thereby linking this movement with other movements

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Map of Kerala Showing the Location of Kuttanad Region



KUTTANAD AREA



ALLEPPEY DISTRICT

- 1 Anoor
- 2 Panavelly
- 3 Thekkattusseri
- 4 Thurasur Vadakku
- 5 Thurasur Thekku
- 6 Vayalar Kizhakku
- 7 Vayalar Makku
- 8 Aryad South
- 9 Alleppey
- 10 Punnappu
- 11 Ambalappuzha
- 12 Prekkad
- 13 Kattakary
- 14 Pullinkunnu
- 15 Chennankary
- 16 Neelamporeer
- 17 Velland
- 18 Ramankary
- 19 Champakulam
- 20 Nedumudy
- 21 Thekathy
- 22 Kochemukku
- 23 Thalayady
- 24 Mutlar
- 25 Cheruthana
- 26 Vayyapuram
- 27 Pallidam
- 28 Harpad
- 29 Karuvetta
- 30 Kumarapuram
- 31 Chappad
- 32 Pathiyoor
- 33 Thiruvalla
- 34 Kavumbhagam
- 35 Paringara
- 36 Nedumpuram
- 37 Kadappu
- 38 Kizhakkumbhagam
- 39 Vanmooy
- 40 Pulloor
- 41 Kuretticoot
- 42 Mannar
- 43 Cherland
- 44 Thekkakara
- 45 Thamarakulam
- 46 Chunnakara
- 47 Noornad
- 48 Palamal
- 49 Thunnalur
- 50 Pandalam South
- 51 Triperunthura
- 52 Chennithala
- 53 Eannamangalam
- 54 Mevalikkara

KOTTAYAM DISTRICT

- 1 Kaduthuruthy
- 2 Munjoor
- 3 Vayalar
- 4 Naduvilla
- 5 Vetchoor
- 6 Thalayasham
- 7 Kallara
- 8 Onamthuruthu
- 9 Vijayapuram
- 10 Perumpakkad
- 11 Panachickad
- 12 Puthupally
- 13 Rajiputha
- 14 Aimanam
- 15 Kamarakom
- 16 Thiruvareppu
- 17 Kattayam
- 18 Nattakam
- 19 Vaidhanam
- 20 Madappally
- 21 Vazhappally East
- 22 Thekkodithanem
- 23 Vazhappally West
- 24 Kurichy
- 25 Changanadicherry

REFERENCE

- District Boundary
- Taluk Boundary
- Village Boundary
- Lake, River & Canal

KOTTAYAM TALUK
KOTTAYAM DISTRICT

KUTTANAD TALUK

ALLEPPEY DISTRICT

S.P. 1 62360

(1 INCH = 1 MILE)



AMBALAPUZHA TALUK

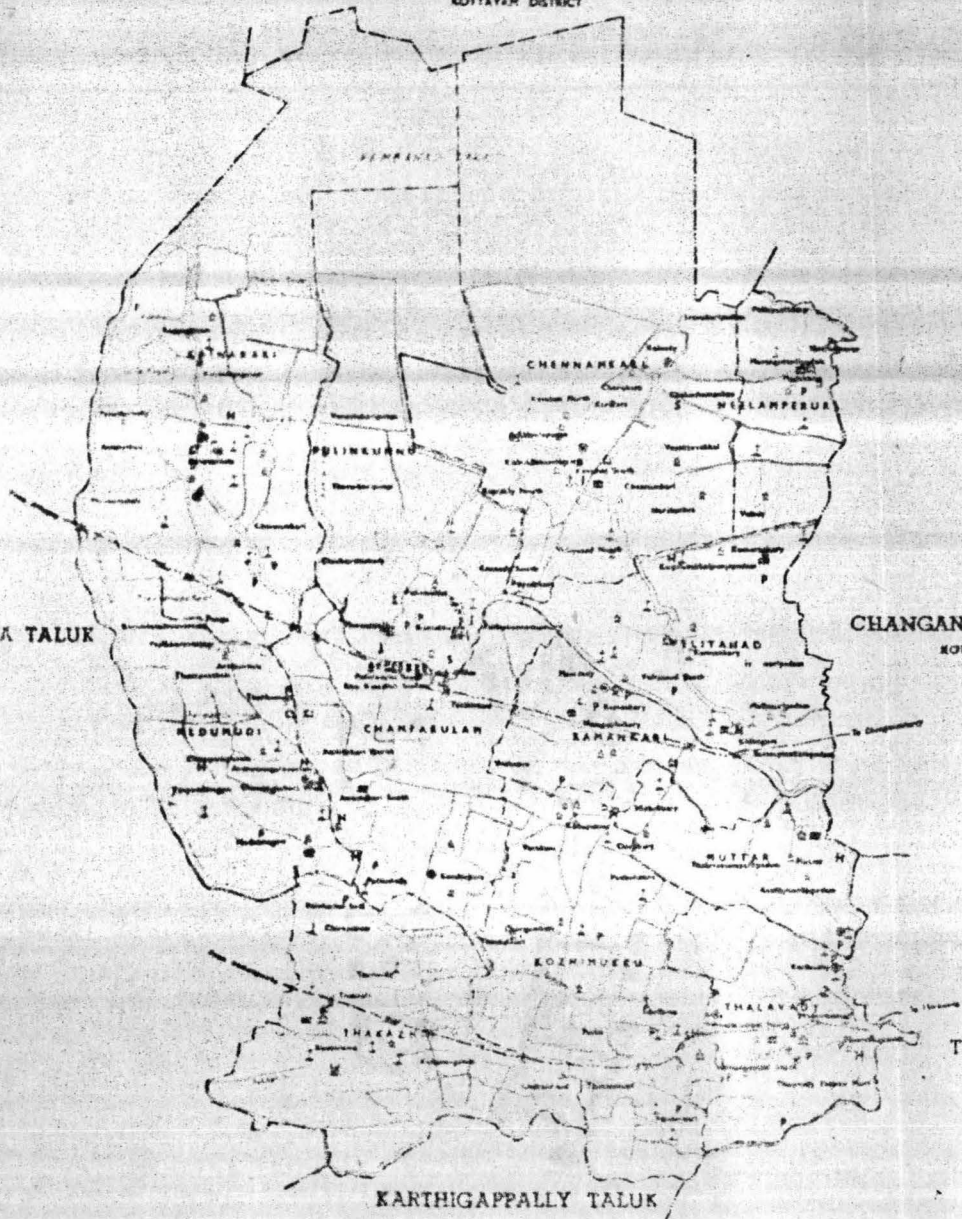
CHANGANACHERRY TALUK
KOTTAYAM DISTRICT

THIRUVALLA TALUK

KARTHIGAPPALLY TALUK

REFERENCE

District Boundary	-----
Taluk Boundary	-----
Wings Boundary	-----
State Highway	-----
Other Road	-----
Water & Drain with Bridge	~~~~~
Canal	~~~~~
Sea	~~~~~
Taluk Head Quarters	WROCCOMB
Name of Village	THAKAZHI
Temple	☉
Mosque	☪
Church	☩
Village Office	☐
Revenue Office	☐
Bank Office	☐
Post Office	☐
Police Station	☐
Other Important Institution	☐
Hospital	H
College	C
High School	S
Bus Stand	B
Bus Stop	J



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