

### CHAPTER 3

## THE POLITICAL PAST

Presumably Chengannur belonged to the Ay Chiefdom in the early few centuries of the Christian era, it having been located South of River Pampa and South of Thiruvalla, attributes of the land of Ays ascribed to by travellers and historians. However, it can be said with certainty that subsequently Chengannur belonged to the country of the Kulasekharas (Cheraman Perumals) usually described as ‘the second Chera empire’, an expression not unchallenged. This period was from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century. These were the early phases of state formation in Kerala.

‘Keralolpathi’ identifies a pre-kulasekhara phase of direct oligarchic rule representing the 64 Brahmanical settlements. Subsequently came governance by four gramams in which Chengannur gramam was one, the others being Payyannur, Peruchellur and Parappur.<sup>1</sup> The territory under the purview of Chengannur comprised of the grammas south of Chengannur upto Kanyakumari. Even with the appointment of Rakshapuruksas and Kazhakams the system of governance was not effective. The system of governance by enthroning the Perumals each one ruling for a period of twelve years, although was stable for a long time, gave way to the rule by independent monarchies. The story bereft of its mythological elements and the ‘foreignness’ attributed to the Perumals and its chronological inconsistency in certain respects has been

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<sup>1</sup> K.P.Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, Edited by T.K.Krishna Menon, New Delhi, 1982, P.251.

accepted by the historians generally as a useful source of information on the past of Kerala. There is also near consensus on the Brahmanical supremacy asserting itself during this period on the political, social, economic and religious spheres of Kerala. During the Kulasekhara age there was stratification of the state for administrative purposes into 'nadu' under a feudatory chief 'naduvazhi' controlled by local assemblies of Munnuttuvar (Three Hundreds), Arunnuttuvar (Six Hundreds) etc. The 'nadu' was further divided into 'desams' under a Desavazhi controlled by local "Koottams". The lowest unit was 'Kara administered through the 'Panchayat'. There were several officials at different strata for enabling proper administration. The 'nadu' in the age of the Kulaskharas enjoyed autonomy even as they were part of a unified larger entity. In the above pattern Chengannur Desam was in Odanadu which had an assembly of Munnuttuvar. (It is remembered here that the above Chengannur Desam did not conform territorially to today's Chengannur Taluk and in fact was more extensive than it).

One of the features of the governance during the time of the Kulasekharas identified by historians is the steady ascendancy of Brahmanical control either in the form of a Brahmanical political control or symbiotic relationship between the Brahmins and the rulers. It appears that even after the disintegration of the Kulasekharas into numerous principalities under separate monarchical rulers the overriding presence of Brahmanical hold over governance continued. One of the areas where this control was total was the area of administration of the temples and its properties. In this the temples enjoyed independent status and full autonomy.

When after the Kulasekhara age monarchies rose up in independent separate principalities Chengannur continued to be in Odanadu.<sup>2</sup> The capital of Odanadu was at first Kandyur in Mavelikara where the first structured temple of Kerala came up in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Later the capital was shifted to Eruva near Kayamkulam and thereafter the principality came to be known as Kayamkulam. However, during those days a portion of today's Chengannur taluk belonged to the Kingdom of Panthalam. The kings of Panthalam were of Pandyan heritage and had suzerainty over territories on either side of the Sahyadri including Sabarimala. The royal family first lived in Konniyur and later migrated to Panthalam in 1170 A.D. This royal family is also known as Chempazhannur Swarupam.

When King Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma (1729-1758) expanded Venad into Thiruvithamcore the Kingdom of Kayamkulam fell to him after a long drawn battle. In 1742 a treaty was signed at Mannar<sup>3</sup> whereby Kayamkulam became an integral part of Thiruvithamcore. After the war Mannar where the final battle was waged came to be known also as Padanilam which literally means battleground, a name familiar to everyone in and around the place even today. Mannar is part of today's Chengannur taluk.

The King of Panthalam gave support to Marthandavarma in his war with Kayamkulam and in gratitude Marthandavarma spared Panthalam from annexation in his northward march and the King of Panthalam became a subordinate king to the king of Thiruvithamcore. During the reign of Dharma

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<sup>2</sup> Kalloor Narayana Pilla, *Chengannur Kshetramahatmyam*, Trivandrum, 1911, P.51.

<sup>3</sup> Sreedhara Menon A, *A Survey of Kerala History*, Trivandrum, 1967, P.255.

Raja who was the immediate successor of Marthandavarma, money was demanded from all the subordinate kings in order to meet the expenses of the war with Tipu. A payment of two lakhs rupees was assigned to the King of Panthalam who fulfilled it through a borrowing of two lakhs rupees from Muralidas Krishnadas, a money lender of Madras after pledging the kingdom to him. Another twenty thousand rupees was availed from Mathoo Tharakan. The loans were unsettled and in his helplessness the King of Panthalam opted to leave his kingdom to the King of Thiruvithamcore which he did in 1821 and thereafter remained a pensioner of the state of Thiruvithamcore.

A relevant point not to be missed in respect of the system of governance relates to the 'Nattukkootams'. In the early periods some localities were under the governance of the Nattukkootams. They enjoyed full autonomy without any control from outside. They were like fully autonomous republics and it is held that such republics were existing throughout Kerala in the early times. The Nattukkootam is characterized as an early instance of decentralized governance. In such localities the area under the temple was known as 'Mukkalvattam'. Puliur in Chengannur has been identified as a Mukkal Vattam. (Puliur Grama Panchayat Souvenir, 2002,p.19)

Turning to the Desavazhi of Chengannur our concrete information starts from the date of the Mampally Plate of Sri Vallabhan Kotha of Venad inscribed in 149 Kollam Era (974 A.D.).<sup>4</sup> From this plate it is understood that the Mampally family was the ruling family in Chengannur at that time. The

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<sup>4</sup> *Travancore Archaeological Series*, Vol.IV, Trivandrum, 1999, P.5.

Vanjipuzha Chief was holding the title Uzhuthiru-Uzhuthiru. There is no record to trace their antiquity before 974 A.D. In later times the Desavazhi of Chengannur was known by the name Vanjipuzha family. Vanjipuzha Chief was in fact a chief of several Deshavazhis and other institutionalized authorities.

It is found that Edavana Madham enjoyed special privileges in the whole set up. Edavana Potti was the Desasreshta. There existed certain arrangements by which he was privileged to certain revenue collection. This seems to be what is indicated by one of the accounts of the Old Syrian Church. In the list of expenses of the church one item is about a payment due to Edavana Madham, the entry in Malayalam is “Edavana Madhathilekku Atukkuvathu” (Remittance to Edavana Madham) (See Appendix I). The church is located at Perisseri in Ala Panchayat where Edavana Madham along with others had jurisdiction of control. In the ‘Samagra Vikasana Rekha’ of Ala Panchayat it is stated “This region ruled by the King of Travancore was under the local control of Edavana Madham, Edappalli Madham, Vazhoor Madham and Vanjipuzha Madham.” This is supportive of the above mentioned right to certain revenue collection. It is not clear whether the sharing of the rights was area based or item based.

Extensive property was wielded by the Vanjipuzha Chief. He was the feudal<sup>\*</sup> chief or the chief of the Madampi regime. Privileges were shared among several others both Brahmin and Nair families. The right of revenue collection was shared by five Pandarathil Brahmin families. They were: Vanjipuzha Madham, Uooru Madham, Edavana Madham, Muthedathu Madham, and

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\*The word ‘feudal’ is used in the absence of a suitable alternative in English.

Punnirittu Madham. The Mampally Plate also indicates the handing over of the Kingdom of Venad to the attention of Thiru Chengannur Poduval who was in charge of Thiru Chengannur temple.

Vanjipuzha Brahmins were Pandarathil Brahmins and were Potties. Their original abode has been identified as Attingal. They are termed as Vak-Vanjipuzha of Attingal. It is also said around that they were husbands of the 'Ranis' of Venad.<sup>5</sup> A few instances relating them to the royal family of Venad are available. One version tells of their relationship with the Attingal royal family which has been regarded as the mother house of the Kings of Travancore, and goes into the antecedents of the Venad royal family. The disappearance of the Ays as a major political power in the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. synchronized with the emergence of the rulers of Venad. The elder member of the Kizhperur Swarupam led the administration with Kollam as the headquarters. The second in succession was in charge of Devaswom Brahmaswom matters. Kizhperur was an inner village in Attingal. The Thripalkkadal temple of Kizhperur was the reigning temple of Venad rulers. The members of the Venad royal family got the name Kupaka as they belonged to the Ay family of Kizhperur. The 'Uranma' of the Palkadal temple were constituted by six councillors of the sabha Viz. Parur, Muzhikulam, Iranikulam, Iranjalikuda, Peruvanna and Chengannur.<sup>6</sup> It was they who joined together and gave the Kulasekhara Pattam to Venad Kings. The version also tells that the Venad Kings were raised to the position of 'Perumal' in their capacity as

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<sup>5</sup> K.Sivasaankaran Nair, *Keralathinte Rashtriya Charithram*, Kottayam, 1998, P.213.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.72.

advisers of the Kupakas who had become the administrators of Kerala at certain stage as they were connected to Kota Ravi, Chera Pandyan of Venad who was the brother in law of Jada Varman who had rebelled against the Chola power and kept the Chola attack at bay for some time. However, the Chola King of the changed political situation that the six Brahman Councilors (uranma) approved the Kupakas as the rulers of Kerala. The version also holds that the same six councilors (uranma) helped to place the Venaders as the sole proprietors of Mamamkam. After 1220 A.D. as the Hoysala kings established suzerainty over the Cholas and the Pandyas the same authority was established over Malanadu also. Thus Venadu Kings lost their identity. The women of Kizhperur family came to be married by the Mdampi Brahmins. The names of these Madampi Brahmins are obtained in the Kilimanur records.<sup>7</sup> Madampi Brahmins of Vanjipuzha Madham was one among them. The Nampoothiri Brahmins of Mampally Madham, a branch of the Vanjipuzha family were the chief ministers of Venadu. In Chengannur the Mampalli Madham was located at Mundenkavu in what is known as Vadakekkara on the northern banks of River Achenkovil. On the southern lands of the river was located the Ennakkattu royal family which came from the royal family of Kolathunadu and took their refuge here during the 'Padayottam' (war rampage) of Tippu Sultan. The family had some of its buildings on the northern bank of the river as well.

While the above version can be accepted with caution only and may not be the whole story, the fact remains that the Vanjipuzha family had close

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<sup>7</sup> *Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.IV, P.66.*

relationship with the royal family of Travancore and enjoyed extensive power, wealth and esteem in the heydays of the Madampi regime in Kerala. The Vanjipuzha Madham continued to hold the chieftaincy of Chengannur as long as the sort of feudal system remained in Kerala. They had property extensively both in Chengannur and outside which included paddy fields, coconut groves, plantations and forests. It is interesting to note that Veluthampi Dalawa in his failed resistance to Macaulay the British Resident chose his hiding in a building at Adoor owned by the Vanjipuzha Madham before he proceeded to Mannadi. Marthanda Varma gave the rights enjoyed by the King of Kayamkulam on Chengannur to the Vanjipuzha Chief who was his friend and had helped him on several occasions of his fight with enemies. The wealth of the Vanjipuzha Madham might have accrued to them over several generations. The palace structures of Vanjipuzha were very close to the Trichitat temple. There was a ground palace for entertainment and enjoyment on the banks of River Pampa. A bungalow which is now the headquarters of the Viswakarmajas once belonged to Vanjipuzha palace structures. The Vanjipuzha Chief used to rest here during the day time.

Outside the present Chengannur Taluk Vanjipuzha Chief not only had property ownership extensively, but also held administrative powers over several villages and temples. For instance, the Peruvanthanam village of old Peerumedu Taluk, and Cheruvally and Chirakkadavu Villages of Chenganacherry taluk were under the direct administration of Vanjipuzha



Principality.<sup>8</sup> The administration was looked after by a village officer, a clerk and two persons deputed by the Principality. The Vanjipuzha Principality had ownership of extensive paddy fields in Niranam which is now part of Thiruvalla Taluk. They had vast landed property in places like Vallamkulam. The Vanjipuzha 'Madampi' also controlled the majority of areas included in the forest ranges of the now Pathanamthitta district.<sup>9</sup> They got such a large amount of income from the forest produce itself that they did not resort to clearing the forests for cultivation. They were Protectors of the temples at Vaikom and Chengannur following decisions by the respective temple councils facilitated by the King of Venad on the request of the councils. The important festivals of Chengannur Mahadevar temple was conducted in the presence of Vanjipuzha Chief. The political power in Chengannur and the economic, social and religious esteem and the kind of feudal power and sway over Chengannur of Vanjipuzha Madham continued to be intact throughout the colonial period uninterrupted. However, when in the post-independence situation the feudal framework was eliminated in Kerala through the land reforms Vanjipuzha family also disappeared from the scene. They sold their property and gave away their privileges to others.

That takes us to the political history of the modern period --- the pre-independence and post-independence periods of Chengannur. We focus on four political events which were interlinked and interfaced. These were (i) the freedom movement which was part of the national movement, (ii) the

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<sup>8</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, Kottayam, 2004, October, 27, P.3.

<sup>9</sup> K.N.Ganesh, *Keralathinte Innalakal*, Thiruvananthapuram, 1997.P.54.

movements for rights (iii) the agitation against Sir C P Ramaswamy Iyer and against some of the policies he championed and steered, and (iv) the communist movement in the early phases as part of the societal transformation. These were the most conspicuous events that are remembered and recognized as the most important components of the modern political history of Kerala.

Of the above, information on movements for rights in Chengannur was limited. However, the agitations and political activities including the various memorials in the pre-independence and immediate post-independence periods were all centred around the various rights to be secured by the different sections of the people. Sometimes they came up as movements for the rights of the specific communities and at other times as agitations of universal relevance. 'Thokka Samaram' (described in Chapter 6) was a reaction against social discrimination, religious estrangement and caste hegemony. The agitations for introducing adult franchise replacing the system of allowing voting right on the basis of tax paid to the government was a noteworthy step in the efforts for securing the rights. The agitation at Ennakkattu for adult franchise was a noted event in this respect. So also were the agitations against untouchability and right of lower castes to use the streets near the temples.

Perhaps the best way to recount the history of Chengannur related to the freedom movement is to describe the relevant excerpts from the lives of some of the freedom fighters of those days. The details available about the activities of the freedom fighters in Chengannur are limited. Whatever are available throw some light on the activities that took place and the role played by the activists in them. It is understood that several of them had made significant contributions to

the movement although very little is known about them. As for instance, it is learnt that Kalloor Narayana Pilla made significant contributions to the organization of activities related to the freedom struggle in Chengannur. However, no account of them is available now. In this respect the book of “Gandhidarsanam” written by Kadassanattu Madhavan Pilla also known as ‘Gandhian Pilla’ is a very useful source of account on many of the freedom fighters of Kerala.

One of the earliest features of the freedom struggle in Chengannur and for that matter in Kerala was the efforts to spread the Gandhian ideals. M.N.Govindan Nair, a later phase freedom fighter in Kerala, still later a forefront communist revolutionary and a member of the first communist ministry in Kerala remembers that during his schooldays in Chengannur the Gandhians employed several ways to communicate the Gandhian ideals to the people. He recalls a festival occasion in the Chengannur temple. The activists had assembled in a building near the temple and were propagating the Gandhian ideas through the traditional art performances which were staged without much artistic merit. The traditional percussion of ‘Chendamelam’ was done without rhythm and rules. Yet throughout the performance people gave rapt attention and enthusiastic response to it. They did not hoot or howl in derision even as the youth went beyond the limits in their chaotic performance on the drums. The prominent among the performers were leaders of the Indian National Congress like Barrister A.K Pilla, K.Kumar and Chittedath Sankuppilla. In the morning and evening they conducted processions holding aloft ‘Charka and Thakli’ and rendering aloud songs on Gandhiji interspersed with speeches. M.N.Govindan

Nair recalls that in those days Chengannur was one of the very few regions in Travancore where the national freedom movement had reckonable influence. He remembers how the entry of Barrister George Joseph in the Congress and the freedom struggle and how his ascendancy on the Indian political scene became a stirring event and a source of inspiration to the youth of Chengannur belonging to both Christian and Nair communities, the two prominent factions of society in Chengannur, for joining the freedom movement.

Several Gandhians from other parts of the state had come to Chengannur and spread the ideals of Gandhiji. One pioneering effort was that of K.K.Kuruvilla (Kurichiyath Kunju) who was born in Niranam. He was a pious theologian who was very popular among the Christians of Central Travancore and held in high esteem by other communities. He was later elected to the Srimulam Popular Assembly from the Mavelikkara – Pathanamthitta - Thiruvalla constituency of which Chengannur was a part in those times. Gandhiji stayed with him at Kottayam during one of his visits to Travancore. He was a close friend of C.F.Andrews. He was known as the ‘Kerala Deenabandhu.’ He started the Kerala Bhooshanam daily from Kottayam which stood for responsible government in Travancore. He was a social worker and educationist as well. His speeches and ways of living were a source of inspiration for many who joined the freedom movement. He was in political activity for a while after independence,<sup>10</sup> but soon left it and confined himself to religious, educational and social activities.

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<sup>10</sup> In an election campaign for a candidate K.K.Kuruvilla and R.M.Manakkalath, a socialist leader of the times,were to speak. However,both were locked up in a room by the group of people of the rival candidate.The instance was told by Eapen.K.Thomas son of K.C.Thomas

The other early activists in the freedom struggle in Chengannur who are remembered today and about whom some information is available include Kainikara Padmanabha Pilla and Kainikara Kumara Pilla (Kainikara Brothers), T.Titus, C.M.Ninan, Kottukunnel Nilakantan and K.C.Thomas. All of them were active in the propagation of Gandhian ideals and they were participants in the Vaikom Sathyagraha, a social movement of great historical reckoning in Kerala. It is likely that the names of a good number of freedom fighters have gone unrecorded and unremembered.

Barrister George Joseph, a great freedom fighter and social activist, was born in Chengannur.<sup>11</sup> While practising as a lawyer in the Madras Presidency he was attracted to the Home Rule Movement led by Annie Besant. In 1918 he was in the three team member which was deputed to Britain for the spread of the message of the Home Rule Movement. But as per the decision of the war cabinet of Britain they were stopped at Gibraltar and sent back. In 1919 he came into personal contact with Gandhiji who persuaded him to join the freedom movement. His field of activity shifted to North India and for about four years in a critical period of the freedom movement he worked on par with some of the eminent freedom fighters of India. He was made editor of Motilal Nehru's 'Independent' a daily from Allahabad. Before long he was imprisoned and his jail mates were the then top leaders of the Indian National Congress including Jawaharlal Nehru. Later he became the editor of 'Young India' of Gandhiji.

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<sup>11</sup> V.Radhakrishnan et.al. , *Barristor George Joseph : Kathayum Kalavum*, Rainbow, 2008 (Malayalam translation of George Geevarghese Joseph's *George Joseph: The Life and Times of a Kerala Christian Nationalist*, Orient Longman, 2008).

Then came different turns in Congress politics. George Joseph returned to Kerala both on personal reasons and on account of his differing views on the approach to freedom struggle which was an issue within the Congress. In Kerala he soon became a leader in the Vaikom Satyagraha and at one stage it was his efforts that took the agitation to decisive turns. However, he had to withdraw from active role in the movement as Gandhiji advised him to do so on the ground that it was a cause which the Hindus themselves had to fight for. He participated in the agitation led by the State Congress and presided over the meeting in Kozhencherry in which C.Kesavan made his famous speech against Sir C.P.Ramaswamy Iyer, the then Diwan of Travancore. He was arrested and imprisoned along with others. After this he shifted to Madhurai and started his practice as an advocate and lent support to the efforts of Kama Raj Nadar in Tamil Nadu and C.Kesavan in Travancore in securing the rights of the socially deprived. He argued for C.Kesavan in the case charged against him. Subramania Bharathi, the great poet, was his friend.

The poet penned In 1935 he returned to Indian National Congress. In 1937 he was elected as a member in the Simla Central Legislature. In 1938 he passed away at the age of 50. George Joseph stood for keeping out religion from politics and opposed violent methods to achieve the ends, particularly political ends. He stood vehemently for secularism in thought and deed.

Chittedath Sankuppilla on whom many details are available was, in fact, a martyr of the Vaikom Sathyagraha and therefore had a short period of participation in the freedom struggle. But his services during the few years of his participation as a leader of the freedom struggle and social agitation were

very precious. At one time hefty and physically strong 'Madampi' but possessed of righteous outlook and confined to the activism within his own Nair Community Chittadath chose to be a Gandhian and to stay in Sabarmathy Ashram with Gandhiji. His name appears in the list kept at the Asramam of the earliest groups of its inmates. As a freedom fighter his two domains of activity were the Gandhian work in Chengannur and its hinder lands, and the Vaikom Satyagraha.

Organizing of the early phase of the Indian National Congress in Chengannur effectively and efficiently owed to leaders like Chittadath Sankuppilla.<sup>12</sup> The Congress organization in Travancore came into being fortunately when at the national level a decision was taken to enroll members in the states. Pradesh Secretary at the state level and jilla secretaries at the district level were appointed for the organization. The first state level meeting of Congress in Travancore started in 1922 and it was held in Chengannur. This also was for the reason that Chengannur had a strong band of committed and efficient workers with leaders like Chittedath Sankuppilla shouldering many of its tough responsibilities. Every detail of the meeting was well thought of and arranged. Gopalan Nair of Padinjare Madham had the charge of supply of food. The volunteer group of the conference included the two well known Gandhians, the Kainikkara teacher brothers --- Kainikkara Padmanabha Pilla and Kainikkara Kumara pilla and people like Pandavat Sankara Pilla, K.G.Sankar and C.Kuttan Nair who were members of an informed team for nationalist

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<sup>12</sup> Thelliyoor Gopalakrishnan, *Chittedath Sankupilla: Adya Rashtreeya Rakthasakshiyude Katha*, Kottayam, 2007, p.127.

activities. It consisted of friends and senior students. Kumara Pilla remembers of two congress conferences in Chengannur in 1923-24 periods. However, more details of the other conferences is not available.

Mahatma Gandhi during his visit in 1925 to the Vaikom Satyagraha Ashramam came to the Mills Maithan in Chengannur for addressing the people. He had known from T.K.Madhavan a forefront leader of Vaikom Satyagraha about the passing away of Chittedath Sankuppilla. While addressing the gathering he was seated on a table. He held with him Chandrasekharan the elder child of Sankuppilla throughout his speech. His wife and younger son Prabhakaran were present on the dias all along. C.M.Ninan, a freedom fighter of the early period remembers Sankuppilla as one of the earliest propagators of Khadi in Thiruvithamcore.<sup>13</sup> Another freedom fighter who was inspired by Chittadath was T.Titus. He was an inmate of Sabarmathi and when in 1937, the year following the temple entry proclamation, Gandhiji came to Aranmula Parthasarathy temple to take part in the programme of entry into the temple along with the harijans he chose to visit the house of Titus in Maramon to greet his parents. Titus was one of the four Keralites who participated in the Dandi March along with Gandhiji. The others were Raghavan, Krishnan Nair and Sankaran.

Kottukkunnel Nilakantan was one of the earliest Congress workers in Central Travancore. It was he who introduced Chittadath Sankuppilla to T.K.

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<sup>13</sup> C.M.Ninan, *Swathanthrianthinte Katha (The Story of Freedom)*, D.C.Books, Vol.7.P.62-71.



Madhavan. After his studies in Calcutta he returned to Kerala and entered into a life of social service.

Bhaje Bharatham Mathunni, a very active freedom fighter and friend of Chittadath Sankupilla, was known so for the reason that he ran a periodical 'Bhaje Bharatham'. Its office was situated adjacent to the Mills Maithan (present day K.S.R.T.C bus stand). Advocate C.K Sankara Pilla participated in the publication of Bhaje Bharatham. Changareth Kunjan Pilla was his elder brother. Both were known as Changareth Brothers. They were followers of Mahatma Gandhi.

Elanthur K. Kumarji who was also popularly called Kuzhikkala Kumaraji jumped into the freedom struggle in response to Gandhiji's urge to the people to join the movement. He completed his studies in Chengannur and Mannar. He was a teacher for a short while. It was during his higher studies in Madras Presidency College that he joined the band of Gandhian activities. For some time he organized social works following the Gandhian path. He became the secretary of the Congress committee in Chengannur and worked with Chittadath and Bhaje Bharatham Mathunni. He participated in the Vaikom Sathyagraha and Payyannur Salt Satyagraha and courted arrest. For sometime he functioned as the publisher of 'Swadeshabhimani' which was restarted in commemoration of 'Swadeshabhimani' Ramakrishna Pilla who was the editor of the famous daily of the same name owned by Vakkom Maulavi. It was through the pages of Swadeshabhimani that Ramakrishna Pilla waged his battle against the misrule in Thiruvithamcore which brought him persecution and exile. Kumaraji had also functioned as the organizer of the Kerala Sakha of

Gandhiji's Harijana Seva Sangh. In later times he left politics and led a quiet life.

M.R.Madhava Varier another freedom fighter from Chengannur was born in 1893<sup>14</sup> and had education in Madras and Bombay. In Bombay he had worked in the paper 'Kesari' run by Bala Gangadhara Tilak. While practising at Quilon as a lawyer he was elected first as a Municipal Councillor and later as a member of the Legislative Council in Travancore. He refused offers of coveted government jobs that came from Diwan Raghavayya as he felt that a government job will seal his freedom of speech. Madhava Varier shifted to Thiruvananthapuram for practice at the High Court Branch there. In Thiruvananthapuram he was led to political activity and he participated in the formation of the Thiruvithamcore State Congress along with Pattam Thanu Pilla, T.M.Varghese and C.Kesavan. He was elected as the first Treasurer of it.

It was during this time that Madhava Varier presided over the famous 1938 meeting at the Mills Maithan in Chengannur. He too suffered severe injuries in the lathi charge by the police. As the editor of the daily 'Malayali' Madhava Varier constantly disturbed the peace of mind of the Diwan of Travancore Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer. The Diwan tried to pacify Varier in several ways and even offered him the post of High Court Judge which he promptly refused.

Madhava Varier was a member of the Travancore Legislative Council from 1922-25 and represented the constituency of Chengannur --

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<sup>14</sup> *Platinum Jubilee Souvenir*, Government Lower Primary School, Chengannur, P.57.

Pathanamthitta (general-rural) and actively participated in the evolution of the Standing Committees of the Legislative Council. Already there were moves from the side of the government to form adhoc committees for investigation into certain issues and making reports on them. Again the practice of formulation of select committees to study specific legislative bills started right from the second session of the first Legislative council of Travancore. However, it had to wait for the formation of standing committees to deal with matters relating to specific governmental departments. It was in this context that on November 23, 1922 Madhava Variar moved a resolution in the Legislative Council requesting the government to form Standing Committees of non- official members of the council to advise and help important Government Departments. The following was his resolution:

*That this Council recommends to government that Standing Committees of non official members of this Council be appointed to advise and help important departments of the state. I move this resolution with a view to making the reform of the Council more effective and to realize the noble expectation of our mighty sovereign contained in the memorable message to the Council at the inauguration.<sup>15</sup>*

After emphasizing the benefits of the standing committees Madhava Variar said that the object of appointing Standing Committees of the members of the house aimed at studying the working of various departments and thereby

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<sup>15</sup> *Hundred Years of Legislative Bodies in Kerala (1888 - 1988)*, Kerala Legislature Secretariate, Thiruvananthapuram, 1990.

realizing the inaccuracies and difficulties of administration so that the non official members might approach administrative questions with an amount of information and responsibility. He dwelt at length on the need to have proper understanding between the officials and non-officials and said that in its absence, there will be no confidence or sympathy between the two sides of the Legislative Council and there will be functions of the two in opposite directions to the detriment of the state.

The government agreed to form Standing Committees on a limited scale and on 12 January 1923 an order was passed saying that possibly soon after the commencement of each official year, a Standing Finance Committee of the Legislative Council would be constituted. Subsequently other Standing Committees were also constituted for various purposes. That was the beginning of the system of Standing Committees in the legislative functioning of Travancore. The idea was first moved by M.R.Madhava Varier and he did it most effectively in the Legislative Council.

By profession Kannara Gopala Panikkar (1901-1976) was a lawyer. Public life in Chengannur benefited from his services.<sup>16</sup> He started his career as a school teacher and later became a pleader in the courts of Chengannur and Thiruvalla. He participated in the freedom struggle. He became a member of the Srimulam Assembly in 1937. He participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1937 and he was jailed three times. He was active in the

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<sup>16</sup> *SNDP Souvenir*, Chengannur, 1979, P.21.

agitations for 'Responsible Government' which was a slogan of the political movement in Kerala in the days when there was widespread opposition to the proposals of Independent Travancore and 'American Model Government' championed on behalf of the government, and dictatorially so by Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer. Kannara was the President of the Jilla Committee of the State congress in Central Travancore. Sir C.P. in his moves to disarray the State Congress arrested Kannara (President) and K.C. Thomas (Secretary) on September 21, 1938. This created a deadlock in governance in Chengannur for a week. There was a hartal in Chengannur in protest against the arrest. The police of Sir C.P. arrested about 200 persons and filed suit against them in Kollam District Court. This has been described by Puthupally Raghavan in his book "Viplava Smaranakal" (Reminiscences of the Revolution). He had also participated in Vaikom Satyagraha, Guruvayur Satyagraha and Nivarthana Prakshobhanam. He was active in the field of social work as well and was the founder Manager of several educational institutions. He was the secretary of the Bar Association of Chengannur, founder President of the Chengannur -- Thiruvalla S.N.D.P. Union, member of the S.N.D.P. Yogam. Director Board and Trust Board, General Secretary of S.N.D.P. Yogam, and Municipal Councilor. Kannara was elected to the Travancore State Legislature in 1948 and it was during this tenure of the Legislature that the signature campaign among the Congress MLAs under the leadership of Kannara took place which toppled the ministry headed by Pattam Thanu Pilla. The house of Kannara in Chengannur was a meeting place of Congress workers in Chengannur.

K.C. Thomas (1901-1976) was born in Kallorayyam House in Chengannur.<sup>17</sup> He was a noted freedom fighter of this area. At one time he was the President of the Nivarthana Prasthanam. He was in the thick of the agitations against Sir C.P'S rule in Travancore. He was the secretary of the Jilla Committee of the State Congress and he was arrested and jailed on September 21, 1938 while he was the secretary. Kannara Gopala Panikkar who was then the President of the Jilla Committee of the State Congress was also arrested and jailed along with him. The arrests were made to prevent their organizing the agitations and to disarray the agitators. However, the action was counter-productive. The arrests of these two popular office bearers of the State Congress invited wide protests. The agitators created a situation which led to a virtual deadlock in governance in Chengannur for about a week. Finally it erupted into the 'Mills Maithan Event' on 28 September 1938 which, after a mammoth marching of the people, involved many arrests, much bloodshed and a martyrdom.

The fervour of K.C.Thomas in public life got bequeathed to two of his sons -- Eapen K Thomas and Cherian Thomas - but in diverse directions. Eapen Thomas became a staunch communist and Cherian Thomas involved himself in the Bhoodan Movement. In fact, Cherian Thomas was close to Vinoba Bhavae. Jawaharlal Nehru had tried vigorously to persuade him to join the ministry. But Cherian Thomas did not accept it and instead joined the Bhoodan Movement. In later times a letter from him to Sakir Hussain, the then President of India, was a

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with his son Eapen K. Thomas.

much talked about item in Chengannur. It was a letter of stinging commentary on the state of affairs in India. It is This and few other details could be yielded through some personal interviews, particularly the one with Shri Sivasankara Panikkar an aged Nadaswara Vidwan (expert in Nadaswaram a musical instrument).

An event that has appeared several times in the previous sections is the ‘Mills Maithanam Incident ‘(Mills Maithana Sambhavam). It happened in the ground where the Chengannur K.S.R.T.C Bus garage is located now which was formerly known as Mills Maithan. The ground, a private one owned by Paralpeedikayil Pappy, got the name from the rice mill that was housed in it. It was available for public meetings of the people in those days. It took place on 29 september 1938.<sup>18</sup> A very large gathering of people from all over Central Travancore were present at the Mills Maithan in Chengannur in response to a notification circulated by the State Congress. A number of policemen armed with lathis had come there. People thronged wherever they found space. The spread of the crowd reached two furlongs east and west of the Maithan, the road and side lanes, adjacent residential plots, on trees and even on the roof of the houses. The police van moved in and took its position. Sub Inspector Ramachandra Iyer, Head Constable Kuttan Pilla and Constable Vempayam Krishna Pilla asked the people through the mike to leave the ground. At about 3.30 P.M. Sri C. Kesavan came to the venue and climbed on to the stage. Soon the criminals pre-arranged by the police, started fomenting trouble in a bid to

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<sup>18</sup> Edamaruk T. C. Joseph, *Keralasamskaram*, Kottayam,1971,p.217.

create chaos and disruption. The police resorted to lathicharge to disperse the people but in vain. At 4'0 clock leaders like T.M.Varughese, G.Ramachandran, E.John Philipose, T.K.Narayana Pilla, Kannara Gopala Panikkar and K.C.Thomas came in a procession and started the meeting. The rowdies created confusion and the police lathi charged again. The police chased and beat up the people who ran in all directions. They ran with wounded noses, broken foreheads, split heads and bathed in blood. The police entered the nearby houses and beat the people. A very tragic turn of the event was the death of Kutilil George in police firing. His martyrdom is recorded in local writings. No written record gives the exact circumstances under which he became a prey to the bullets. However, Siva Sankara Panikkar's recollection could give more details on this event.

The event happened when Sivasankara Panikkar was fourteen years old.<sup>19</sup> A few (four or five) criminals were brought from the jail and were released into the midst of the crowd. Panikkar remembers that of them Valliyil Kunju was familiar to him and his friends. The police asked the criminals to chase away the people westwards. The people fled and reached Perissery, 2kms. away from the Maithan. A wooden bridge at Thadikkuzhiyil was dismantled by the people to prevent the criminals and the police from reaching them. They also cut down trees and created blocks on the road. Many more things happened on that chaotic evening.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Shri.Siva Sankara Panikkar.



Those who ran eastwards reached the spot where the post office was situated. (Today the Engineering College is located here). The people gathered up in a private compound west of the present college building.

Sivasankara Panikkar and boys of his age took seats on the compound wall. Then a SubInspector asked the boys to leave the place. A few continued to stay on the wall. Among them were the boy Kutilil George belonging to Perissery. George did not show any sign of relenting. So the warning came again from the Sub Inspector. George threw stones at the Sub Inspector although it did not hit the officer. The Sub Inspector asked him to stop the pelting. But George repeated the pelting. Enraged the Sub Inspector pulled the trigger. George died in the firing. A criminal case was registered against several people at that time. Sivasankara Panikkar does not remember all the names of the respondents. However, he remembers the names of Thayyil Padmanabha Pilla from Aranmula who was the first respondent, Otivelil Pappy and Uzhathil Chacko. (All of them were recipients of freedom pension). The case for the respondents was argued by Changarathu Sankara Pilla who was the M.L.C. and Kannara Gopala Panikkar. Sivasankara Panikkar remembers that T.R.Velayudhan Pilla a former M.L.C. was a supporter of Sir C.P. Rama Swamy. Sivasankara Panikkar recounted a few names of the boys who sat on the wall along with him. Apart from George they were: Valiakottarathil Bhasi, Kalariyil Gopala Krishnan Nair, his elder brother Sivasankaran Nair and Kottarathil Gopala Krishnan Nair. A few other names that could be collected from the 'Samagra Vikasana Regha' of Ala Panchayat (p12) are the following: Pennukkara Kuzhuvantherayil John Yohannan, Mattatheh Kizhakethil Kurian

Chacko, Mattatheh Kizhakethil Dominic Varghese, Thamanacheril Yohannan, Mathai Chacko, Poykayil Thomas, Malayil Mammen and Vyalippuarath John Cherian. There is one view that those who were jailed and sued were helped in getting the release not only by arguing the case in the court, but also through the influence of Judge K.K.Chacko had with the Travancore palace.

The story of the Chengannur freedom movement will not be complete without considering the I.N.A element. Only limited information is available on this. Two names that surfaced during the enquiry are that of Shri Damodara Kurup and Shri K.Chakrapani. Of them no information was available on Damodara Kurup than that he was active in the I.N.A. However, information related to Chakrapani could be collected. And that information is not merely about Chakrapani. It speaks of one of the dramatic scenes in the armed struggle for the freedom of India.

Ninety years old Chakrapani now lives in Thottakad near Thirumulapuram which is the border area of Chengannur with the Thiruvalla Taluk. The following account is on the basis of an interview with him.<sup>20</sup> Chakrapani had joined the military sometime in 1941 at Bangalore. It was in the thick of the Second World War. He left the home at a stage of financial stress in his family. The family was living at Peringara. He had five brothers and three sisters. Those were the times when 100 coconuts fetched a total price of Rs.2/- and therefore the little piece of land the family had leased from P.N.Nampoothiri could not earn them a living. He was aged 21 then. Even at his

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<sup>20</sup> Authors's Interview with Chakrapani.

advanced age he remembers every moment of his life in those days. He joined the army as Havildar. Training was at Ambala. After four months the group was shifted to Ferozpur. He sent Rs. 200/- to his father out of Rs220/- he got. Then came his turn to go to the war front. He was one of the 2000 persons who boarded S.S Rajula which set sail from Bombay. After 10 days they reached the Singapore Naval Base. It was the time when the Japanese were bombarding Singapore. Along with many he too had escaped on many occasions by lying close to the ground and getting into trenches. Chakrapani was in charge of the Supply Department of the war front. The ration for the Indian soldiers consisted of ten items including rice, salt, chilly, tea and a few other essentials. Each one was given an additional seventy rupees. After 6 months they were on a journey through road to the Adam camp Fourth Mile Mukijimaro Johur. After a month they were shifted to another place and put to the ongoing work of Singapore -- Bangkok Railway line.

However, on the way the Japanese overpowered them and the group had to surrender themselves and all their arms possessions. They became the prisoners of Japan. They were assigned the task of clearing the bombs. They had also to work in the construction of the Suchikan Airport in an area surrendered by three hills. They had the task of spreading big rubble pieces on the ground and laying pipes. They were to complete a particular concrete work every day. The high ranking officers were put to hard manual work. It was sheer slave labour. Master and worker roles were to be performed in turn by every one. One day Chakrapani was the master and others were slaves under

him. On that day he even had to give orders to his earlier high ranking officers and he felt pity of it.

One day they were taken by surprise by an event which marked a great turning point in their lives. This was the dramatic appearance of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose in Singapore and his speech there. He shored up secretly in a Japanese submarine and went straight to the Municipal Pavilion. With him were General Tojo, the first Japanese Premier, and Yama Shetha the then Japanese Commander in Chief. Chakrapani claimed that each word in the speech of Netaji is indelibly recorded in his memory. The following is a translation of an unedited version of Chakrapani's extempore recounting in Malayalam of the speech of Netaji Bose: "I who escaped from the jail of Great Britain which rules over seven seas and described as the lords of the empire where the sun never sets and went to Russia, entered into a treaty with Stalin and from there proceeded to Germany and made a treaty with Hitler and came before you through a Japanese submarine can, if need be, go to India any time. The Britishers have imprisoned our leaders. If Britain wins this war they will never give us freedom. I will not set my foot on an India which is not free. We will never get freedom without the help of other countries. The Japanese government has promised us all help. Everything has its own price. Freedom has its own price. In one way or other the blood of many people will have to flow out like a river. That is the price of freedom. So what I demand from you is that you should be with me without expecting any personal gains. I need your sweat, tears and finally your blood. Only such people need be with me. Others may

continue as prisoners. Those who volunteer, come this side, others go to that side.” He disappeared in the submarine with the same swiftness as he came.

Netaji formed a Provincial Government of India in accordance with the prevailed international law which states that subjugated subjects of a country have a right to form a provincial government outside their mother country and fight for the freedom of the country. Netaji assumed charge as Chief and Commander GOC. And then he declared war against the British Government.

Chakrapani heeded to the clarion call by Netaji and started his INA life. He was drafted to the supply department first and in 1942 or 1943 was promoted as Sixth Guerrilla Regiment Sub Officer.

When America bombed Japanese towns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki Chakrapani was in the trench and spent several days without food and water. The war turned against the allied powers and Japan surrendered after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Tojo was hanged to death by a decree of the International Council. At this stage Netaji disbanded the INA. After that Chakrapani joined the relief camp organized after the visit of Jwaharlal Nehru to Malasia. The Relief camp was set by an organization named Indian Relief Committee in Malaya. Its fund consisted of donations. Servants of India Society provided cloths. In 1953 Chakrapani came home and got married. He went back to Malaya and joined Malayan Service. On retirement he returned to Kerala in 1963.

Another development of long standing political significance to Kerala which had taken place during the freedom struggle and the agitation against Sri C.P. was the origin and growth of the Communist movement. It was an all India

political phenomenon and every aspect of its growth is well known history. It is not the intention to go into these aspects. The attention is here confined to the specifics related to Chengannur. The event has special significance as it contributed in a decisive way in altering the social relations.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were efforts by all groups of people in Travancore to get organized and struggle for their rights. Various social and political organizations came into being each with its own aims and guiding philosophy or ideology. Indian National Congress which was led by the Gandhian ideology and which enlisted a vast section of people kept a low for a while in Travancore and its place was assumed by the State Congress. Other political groups also came into being principally the Samyukta Rashtriya Sabha and the socialists particularly the Communist faction. Many who were in these groups were originally in the Indian National Congress but drifted away from it subsequently. During the Dewanship of Sir C.P.Ramaswamy Iyer, apart from their own ideological goals they had by and large, a common agenda viz. the fight against some of the government policies like independent Travancore and 'American Model' of Government.<sup>21</sup> All the political parties in Kerala were against these policies and most of the agitations had these as their focus. Among the various political groups one group viz. the communists had its own avowed ideological motives. Chengannur had its share in the ascendancy of the Communist movement.

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<sup>21</sup> A.Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, Kottayam, 1967, P.360.

In the early stages of the Communist party in Kerala there were several activists from Chengannur. K.C.George was one of the founding members of the party in Kerala. He was born in Kizhakkathalakkal House, Puthenkavu, near the town of Chengannur. R.Sankara Narayanan Thampi represented Chengannur in the first Kerala Assembly and became its Speaker. He and his brother Rajasekharan Thampi who were communist activists from the very early days belonged to the Ennakkattu Palace in the border area of the historical region of Chengannur.

The history of the growth of the Communist Party in Chengannur may be traced here briefly. Chengannur had been, throughout history, by proximity and contact, linked to Alappuzha town where the labourers of its coir factories rallied into organized agitations first through the heroic efforts of a single man Vadappuram Bava. Subsequently came the organized efforts from various political groups of which the most prominent effort came from the Communist Party. The movement spread to the agricultural labourers of Kuttanad bordering Chengannur. In fact Chengannur too had a few 'Padasekharams' (extensive paddy fields) which came under the category of Upper Kuttanad. Apart from this spread effect Chengannur had its own share in the genesis and growth of the communist movement.

The most inspiring event for the communist movement in Chengannur was the outbreak of the Punnapra Vayalar struggle during the Dewanship of Sir C.P. It was a nearby event. Already a prohibition was there on all organizations. However, after independence, the ban was lifted in 1948 and the communists benefited from it. In the immediate post independence period the role of the

Communist Party was in line with its ideology and clearly a bi-polar division of the people and leadership between communists and non communists characterized the political scene of Kerala. In the elections to the state assemblies in Travancore and Cochin the communists had put up a few candidates but all of them were defeated. In Chengannur which had both the reservation and the selective seats Pullan Narayanan and Kannara Gopala Panikkar of the Congress Party won the first elections of the Travancore State Assembly in the post independence period. In the first election to the State Assembly of Kerala in 1957 Sankara Narayanan Thampi was the candidate of the party in Chengannur. He won the election and became the first Speaker of the Kerala State Legislative Assembly. In Central Travancore the party was very active and the hub of its organizational activity was in the buildings belonging to the Panthalam Palace situated on either side of River Achenkovil which flows touching the southern villages of the historical region of Chengannur. Following the Suranad murder in which a police officer was killed several members of the Communist Party were jailed and several had to go underground. Under these conditions came the 1952 elections. The party did not put up candidates in many of the constituencies. At that time the communist party did not have properly organized units in many localities. Chengannur was one such place. In fact the Communist Party did not have any worth mentionable influence in the whole of the Thiruvalla Taluk which comprised of the later Chengannur Taluk, Mallappally Taluk, Ayroor, Aranmula, Elavumthitta, Mezhuveli and Kulanada. However, in those days these places gave birth to a number of communist leaders. The names of K.C.George,



Sankara Narayanan Thampi and Rajasekharan Thampi, were already mentioned. A.K Thampi was another person from Puthenkavu.<sup>22</sup> A.K Thampi grew in public life through Akhila Kerala Vidyarthi Prasthanam (All Kerala Students Movement) while he was a student at the Union Christian College, Alwaye, in the 1940's. He chose to become a communist. He peered with A.K.Gopalan, P.Govindapilla, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, P.K.Vasudevan Nair, and J.Chitharnjan who, except A.K.Gopalan, were students at the Union Christian College. He was not only a leader of the rationalists. He was in the wanted list of police for his anti governmental and revolutionary activities. So he had to go underground for several years. (However, in the post-independence period he was a transformed person. He resigned from the party in 1950. He became a member of the Christian Peace Cor and took Ph.D. in Theology.) Sankara Narayanan Thampi who was the speaker of the first Kerala Assembly, and his brother Rajasekharan Thampi both of whom belonged to Ennakkattu palace and P.T.Punnoose who was the state secretary of the party in Travancore from early times were actively involved in the party work in Chengannur. P.T Punnoose who had gone underground to avoid police arrest was the party candidate in 1952 elections from both Thiruvalla Assembly and the Alappuzha Parliamentary Constituency. The party lost in Thiruvalla and won in Alappuzha. Thereafter the party started the task of organizational build up. Leaders and workers from other regions also camped in Chengannur and participated in this effort. One organization which is credited to have engaged itself in the

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with G. Ayurukuzhy.

propaganda of revolutionary ideas was the Progressive Cultural Federation (P.C.F.) which had Chengannur as its centre of activity. In 1952 the election in Chengannur was invalidated. In the by election the Communist Party contested in the Reservation seat. In the general seat it supported the candidate of the Praja Socialist Party (P.S.P.). The candidate of the Communist Party for the reservation seat was P.K.Kunjachen who was jailed earlier and badly beaten up by the police was not in good health. Although in the election the party failed, it considerably strengthened the party base in Chengannur both organizationally and ideologically. Thereafter P.K.Kunjachen became a resident of Chengannur and carried on the work of the party.<sup>23</sup> P.K.Chandranadan stayed at Aranmula and worked towards strengthening the party. In the 1954 election both the general and reservation seats were won by the alliance the party forged. P.K.Kunjachen was instrumental in strengthening the Communist Party in Chengannur. His role in organizing the agricultural labourers into a union was great. He became the secretary of the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union and later first general secretary of the national level union of the agricultural labourers. He was elected to the Kerala legislature several times and twice he was elected as member of the Rajya Sabha. His union work had extended to other states and he was member of several committees that were concerned with the welfare of the farm labourers.

And so grew the local unit of the Communist Party in Chengannur. In the pre and immediate post independence periods the communists did face

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<sup>23</sup> *P.K.Kunjachen Smaranika*, Kottayam, 2003,P.80.

persecution but the situation changed in the course of time. It became an integral part of parliamentary democracy in Kerala. And after the first elections in the newly formed state of Kerala the Communist Party secured the majority to form the ministry in 1957. During their times a fairly comprehensive Agrarian Relations bill was introduced. It may be remembered that an Agrarian bill with provision for ceiling on land holding was got passed in the legislation during the term of this government. However, the bill had to get over many hurdles before it became law. Meanwhile the ministry was dismissed following the “liberation struggle”. The bill subsequently amended became law only later.

The bill envisaged the fulfilment of the goals enshrined in the Indian Constitution and started in several policy declarations. All the political parties contributed to the shaping of the bill at various times as well as its implementation. The implementation of this legislative measure transformed several social and economic relations in Kerala as a whole and as part of it in Chengannur too. The main change in the land relations was the disappearance of the Janmitham (feudal) institutional framework. Many families who were holding land, wealth and power extensively were eased of these. The exit of Vanjipuzha Chief and his family from Chengannur was part of this process.