CHAPTER I

TRAVANCORE LABOUR ASSOCIATION

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

Changing Class Relations

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

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

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

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


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

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

---

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

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

6. The Subhasini, 10 December 1925, Press Cuttings, D.Dis./1945/C.S.
Malayali Memorial, the Brahmins and their supporters submitted another memorial in 1891 itself refuting the arguments and allegations of their antagonists. The Government of Travancore won over the Nairs by giving some concessions. Disappointed at this turn of events, the Ezhavas under the guidance of Dr. Palpu submitted a separate memorial called 'the Ezhava Memorial' to the Maharajah of Travancore with 13,176 signatures on 3 September 1896. All these memorials gave expression to the political awakening of the people of Travancore. It was out of this awakening that the first form of the modern democratic movement took its origin in Kerala.

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

7. Dr. Palpu was the first Ezhava to secure a medical degree, but denied a job in Travancore for being a low caste man. He was one of the organisers of the Malayali Memorial.
loan policy. Many of the low caste Ezhavas or taddy tappers were profited by the growth of exports towards the end of the nineteenth century and became prosperous. Land was transferred from the once prosperous Nair families to Christians and low caste men.9

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


20. Ibid., p.514.
change, leaving a vast majority of land from the caste Hindus to the lower caste people. By this time the Nair Youth of Travancore had awakened to revolutionise the family system. Through his novel *Induleka* (1889) O. Chandu Menon condemned the social doctrines and introduced an ideological revolution. The Nair Samajam had accepted the principle of partition of tarawads and asked for a law. Thus the courts of justice had systematically proposed partition as the only remedy for the troubles of overgrown tarawads. On 31 October 1914 Mannathu Padmanabhan and a group of Nairs founded the Nair Service Society (N.S.S.) at Perunna in Changanacherry. The N.S.S. had contributed much to change the Marumakkattayam system into Makkattayam or patrilineal system. With the introduction of the Nair and the Ezhava Regulations of 1935 A.D., the law of partition had assumed considerable importance in the state. The joint family properties were deteriorating among the sharing of the same house by absolutely strangers. Partition became a matter of common occurrence in Travancore. The economic pressures, changing values and rigorous legal system, which were the concomitant of the new resources, seriously weakened

---


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

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

Landlordism and Agricultural Labour

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


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


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

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

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


30. Fifty paras of paddy in the cooly para was equal to thirty five paras of paddy in the standard para. (Report of the Economic Depression Enquiry Committee, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1931, p. 10.)
The labour of the previously enslaved castes, which had hitherto been almost valueless, was remunerated only by a few measures of rice daily, the lowest possible rate consistent with keeping life.

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

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

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

As a result of the introduction of capitalist form of cultivation in Travancore, a section of agricultural wage labourers began to emerge. Earlier, the workers, especially attached workers, were entitled to wages mainly in kind. Now they were entitled to wages in cash. In Travancore the capitalist form of agriculture penetrated at the earliest because the Travancore Government controlled the major parts of land which the tenants got at their disposal. Travancore had the highest percentage of area under cashcrops in 1920-1921. Thus a large number of agricultural workers migrated from the adjoining areas towards the newly cultivated areas. This was in addition to the seasonal flow of workers during the time of agricultural operations. However the socio-economic changes, the improvement in agriculture and the increase of production did not benefit the workers. There was no fixed hours of work


34. Varghese, T.C., op.cit., p.110.
and the works involved was of an arduous nature. The workers had to work eleven to thirteen hours a day even after long hours of journey to reach the working spot. Starvation was the only alternative on days without work. After tolerating all these social discriminations and economic degradations, the workers had to address the landowners with titles of honour like thampuran or Lord.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Growth of Industries

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

arose. And the Government of Travancore passed Regulation I of 1888 A.D. to enable the promotion of Joint Stock enterprises. Since the passing of the Regulation the number of Corporations had steadily increased. Immediately after the First World War, a number of companies and individual enterprises sprang up, without adequate capital, proper organisation, knowledge of business and management. The number of Joint Stock Companies rose from 84 in 1918 to 221 in 1922.\textsuperscript{46} Many of these companies and enterprises naturally disappeared with whatever they had acquired as soon as recession started. There has been a gradual decline in the new registration of companies. While there were 101 new registration during 1919-1920, the fresh registration for 1923-1924 was as low as eighty only.\textsuperscript{47} This depression and the reduction in the number of working companies was not permanent.

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

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

\textsuperscript{47} Report on the working of the Companies Regulation I of 1917 for the year ending 15 August 1920, G.O.266/1908/Judicial.
to exercise great influence in financing agriculture. They carried on their money transactions mostly in the agricultural centres of Nanjinad and Kuttanad. In fact seventy five per cent financing of agriculture in Kuttanad was in the hands of the Brahmin moneylenders of Mankompu. In addition the Hundi merchants issued loans for agriculture, internal trade and for small industrial concerns. Yet the Joint Stock Companies, in the time of economic depression in Travancore, could not respond to the increasing pressure upon their resources. Nevertheless, emergence of the Joint Stock Companies denotes the development of capitalist economy in Travancore. By Joint ventures the individual capitalists accumulated wealth. The Travancore Government also legalised it. As a result the condition of ordinary people with a low income was without any other source or living.

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

49. The Hundi merchants were originally Tinnevelli Brahmins who claimed to be intermediaries in the trade relations of Travancore. (Velupillai, T.K., op.cit., Vol.III, p.651.)
British colonialists hindered the development of productive forces in the state by investing more in plantation industries. The Planning Directory for 1925 records seventy five planting companies of which only fourteen were Indian. In fact plantations provided only seasonal work to the agricultural labourers. Moreover the Travancore Factories Regulation V of 1914, for its labour welfare provisions, did not include the plantations under the list of 'Factories'. Factory industries in Travancore were only gradually coming into prominence. The proportion of the population supported by industries was higher in Travancore than in the whole of India. The industrial population was steadily increasing during the beginning of the century. In 1911 the number of persons employed in the various industries was only 2,88,947. In 1921 the number increased to 3,28,092. During the same period the processing of cashewnuts in the state also emerged as an industry organised on a factory basis. In the early years Harijan women constituted about ninety per cent of the workers in cashew factories.

The more important of the factory industries was the coir industry. James Darragh, an Irish American Catholic, began a small factory for coir mats at Alleppy in 1859. The entire production was by manual labour. There was a large supply of experienced labour.

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

During the First World War, the loss of markets in Europe as well as the shortage of shipping resulted in a drop in the value of yarn exports to an average of nearly fifty lakhs of rupees annually. Thus the boom created by the World War did not benefit Travancore. But this decline in coir export acted as an incentive to increased manufacture of coir goods in Travancore. By 1918-1919 there was coir export for rupees 18,12 lakhs which was seventeen per cent higher than in the best pre-war year of 1911-1912. Until the close of the


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


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

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

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

60. Ibid., p.277.
advances. In the Alleppy port, the port officers had to provide early tea and bidis from their private purse to the workers in order to induce them to carry on and complete the work in time.\textsuperscript{61} This brief prosperity for the workers produced a cruel irony in the late 1920's. Once employed, the workers realised the security of regular employment and regular wage payments and developed loyalty to their employers. Thus the agricultural labourers, tempted by industrial labour, moved to Alleppy and the nearby factories. Outside the gates of factories, one could see large number of workmen waiting every morning, with the hope of being taken in atleast as substitutes or for part-time work. In fact, the supply of labour was far in excess.\textsuperscript{62} The effects of world economic depression had reduced the price for coir goods. Still the demand for coir goods at a lower price continued to remain. \textsuperscript{41} In fact, so long as the price of coir goods remained low, the demand remained high. Moreover both the quantity and value of mats and matting increased during the time of depression. To meet the increase in production, the number of workers in the industry also increased. Many of the factories started to give rotation of work so as to ensure that as many workers as possible could obtain atleast part-time work.\textsuperscript{63} However, the number of people employed in factories rose even during the depression.


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
The vast supply of labour became detrimental to their own welfare. During the depression, workers who had known the pre-depression wage-rates felt that they now received less money for the same work. There was considerable reduction in the money wages for workers. When the market for cheap coir products remained good, small coir factories and the number of jobs increased. Labour was available at the village side at cheap cost. This led to the production of low-cost products in some local factories than the English factories in Alleppy. Workers with experience in European factories got immediate appointment in these local factories. They were provided with advance money which was not deducted from the wages. But in European factories the advance money was strictly recollected. The small coir factories were located in the countryside within the radius of about thirty miles of Alleppy. With the spread of the small factories, they exposed large numbers of people to factory conditions with the offer of seasonal work. There was, at all times, a floating labour population in the Alleppy Municipal area. The proximity to Alleppy town which had become the centre of industrial activity was a stimulus to the peasants of Kuttanad. Many kith and kin of Kuttanad agricultural workers, who were involved in trade union activities in Alleppy and nearby areas, conveyed the favourable results of their experi-

65. George Committee Report, op.cit., p. 82.
ments to them. Thus the country factories not only imparted the skills of the industry but introduced workers to the realities and grievances of factory labour.

Working Conditions of Factory Labour

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

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


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

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

69. Ibid., p.293.
Regulation to impose compulsory labour in factories. However, the workers had no alternative but to work in factories under these conditions. On the other hand skilled workers were given advances for their work in the factories.

Wages varied from factory to factory. In the contract labour system, the management had no supervision or control. The management paid lumpsum to the contractors who disbursed it to workers after retaining a handsome amount as commission. Sometimes the contractors disbursed wages even outside the factory premises. The George Enquiry Committee had recorded its doubt whether the workers actually received any wage at all. 71 Throughout the mats and matting industry, wages were paid on a piece-work basis. Many times the factory owners reduced the wages with a threat of reduction in the number of workers. There was considerable reduction in labour in the tile factories in Quilon with a wage-cut. When the alternative was between closing down of factories and wage-reductions, the workers in Alleppy agreed to accept lower wages. 72 The labour memorandum submitted to the George Committee had also stated that wage-rates were reduced by fifty to seventy five per cent during the period from 1915 to 1939. 73

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

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

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

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

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

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

77. Ibid., p.353.
Loaded with these illegal and inhuman exactions, the workers were asked to work for the Moopan in the factory and at home. Personal service to the Moopans became almost part of factory work. For a slight fault in work, the Moopans collected even one week salary of the workers as fines. Neat and decent dress was an unnecessary decoration for a worker. It was a very common practice that the Moopans claimed contributions from the workers on special occasions such as his daughter's marriage and charged the labour for religious ceremonies in churches and in temples nearby. In the case of drama or boxing shows in the nearby areas, the Moopans imposed tickets and collected money from workers. Above all when the amount of wages was calculated and counted as rupee, chackram and kasu, the Moopan's little son used to come and take away some cash. In fact no good looking woman could safeguard her chastity from the Moopan, Yard Superintendent and Pillais. The factory owner selected the more beautiful one.

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


79. Govindan, K.C., "Labour Assosyeshante Charitram", op.cit., p.179. Yard Superintendent was in charge of each section. The Pillai assisted the Yard Superintendent.
pleasant. Often the Moopans were the trusted servants of the employer and complaints against them were viewed in favour of the Moopans. Thus the workers submitted to the exactions of the Moopans without complaint. With steady work hard to find, reduced money wages and inhuman practices in factory premises, the workers had reason for dissatisfaction. When the very existence of the working people became extremely difficult, they began to organise.

Awakening Among the Workers

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

80. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.3.
organised in Travancore after the Ottapalam conference of 1921. A number of workers in the Alleppy area took four anna membership in the Congress. The situation in the country was most serious in 1921 when no fewer than 396 stoppages of work occurred involving over six lakhs of workers. The unrest, as indicated by the countryside strikes, attracted leaders and organisers from the intelligentsia into the labour movement.

During this period, the attitude of British Government in respect of labour problems was one of non-interference. They stepped in only to keep law and order. Travancore, from the point of view of popular education, was far in advance of British India. It is interesting to note that popular education in Travancore began to be organised in 1801. Owing to the spread of education people came to understand international developments. The news of the developments abroad reached the people in no time. Moreover the word 'socialism' began to gain currency among the workers. All these international developments influenced the elite of Alleppy area. In the commercial town of Alleppy, the working people have now begun to appear as

82. Jeyadevadas, D., op.cit., p.132.
85. Kerala Kaumudi, 6 June 1937, Press Cutting, D.Dis.1500/1937/CS.
an active and independent factor in gathering mass revolts. There was always a strong feeling of hatred and indignation which found expression here and there in individual attacks on the employers and spontaneous oppositions and protests.

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

88. A well known lyric poet and an Ezhava member of the Travancore Sri Mulam Popular Assembly.
Within the S.N.D.P. movement, K. Ayyappan initiated a movement against the exploitation of workers by factory owners. He started a tri-weekly paper Velakkaran (Worker) and propagated the ideas of Marx and Lenin and the success of the Russian Revolution. Through his editorial notes in Sahodaran, Ayyappan awakened the readers to help the workers of Alleppy.\(^9^0\) K. Ayyappan rejected the relation between caste and occupation. Meanwhile the Travancore Mahajana Sabha, established in June 1918 with its headquarters at Trivandrum, aimed to promote the welfare of the people of Travancore without distinction of caste or creed.\(^9^1\) Without giving any consideration for caste or religion, equal rights and economic freedom became the common slogan of the working people. So it is no wonder that the active Christian missionaries had succeeded in dragging to their fold several thousands of the depressed classes.

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

\(^9^0\) Vivekodayam, op.cit., p.66.
\(^9^1\) File No.46/1920/Political, Government of Travancore, Secretariat, Trivandrum.
their new experiences of exploitation into the countryside, the floating population of workers created around themselves a sympathetic rural buffer as a source of support. Since ideas of class consciousness did not have to be learned completely in the factories, more people could learn them. 

As a result of this class consciousness of the working people, some sporadic ideas of union began to materialise in different parts of the state. The agricultural labourers began to make representations to the higher authorities more efficiently than previously. On 9 March 1914 the inhabitants of Munanbam sent a petition to the Dewan of Travancore forecasting that the agricultural labour remained under great disadvantage in respect of the land tenure since 1870 A.D. 

The first labour strike occurred in Quilon when a labour union for the workers in various factories there, the Quilon Thozhilali Sangam, was formed in 1915 with Karunakara Menon as President and T.K. Narayanan as the General Secretary. The real object of the labour association at Quilon was to organise the labourers and to improve the condition of the labourers. At its inception, the union contented with petitions. The emergence of labour


94. Political report to the Dewan of Travancore, No.26, 24 June 1933, D.Dis.746/1933/CS.
unions had received such attention of the factory owners that the Alleppy Chamber of Commerce commented these organisations as 'strike unions'.

However the first organised protest of labour force occurred in the Darah Smail Company in Alleppy. The working schedule in this factory was about twelve hours a day. Thus a section of workers in the factory had represented their grievances to the management, with great fear. But the response of the European management was very rude and these workers were driven away from the factory premises. The fact that even in the absence of a proper union or leadership, the coir workers of Darah Smail Company held a successful strike in 1917. In consequence, the management yielded to talk to the workers and agreed to reduce the working schedule from twelve hours to ten and a half hours a day. The workers of Alleppy thus felt the immediate necessity of a union. The Travancore Labour Association merging all these institutional and ideological changes, did forecast the emergence of an organised working class movement in the state.

The Labour Association

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

---


97. Ibid., p. 36.
the first and strongest of workers unions in Native States. 98
A section of manufacturers actively supported the formation of a labour association in the coir industry, perceiving in it a possible instrument to decrease labour turnover and to instil a sense of discipline among workers. On the other hand the workers were deeply involved in the anti-savarna caste movement. The organising leader of the Labour Association, Vadappuram P.K. Bhava, was an Ezhava from Alleppy. 99 Although he came from the poorest of backgrounds, Bhava was literate in Malayalam like majority of coir workers. Converted briefly to Islam and then back to Hinduism, he was an ordinary worker in a coir factory. He became the Head Cooly in the Empire Coir Works in Alleppy and by the early 1920's had advanced to Yard Superintendent and Moopan on a salary of rupees 125 a month and with power over 300 employees. K.M. Cherian, Managing Director of the South Indian Coir Factory Limited, who had gained the knowledge of developments abroad, encouraged Bhava to form a labour organisation. And Bhava had obtained the permission of Abu Salt or Khatar Kinji, owner of the Alleppy Empire Coir Works, to form a labour organisation in his factory. 100


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

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

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

---

103. Robin Jeffrey, op.cit., p.1161.
N. Krishnan, Manager of T.P.I. Company, suggested the name 'Travancore Labour Association' which was accepted by all. And the early plan to call the organisation as Labour Union was changed into the Travancore Labour Association with nearly 200 members.¹⁰⁵

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


¹⁰⁶ Political Report to the Dewan of Travancore, op.cit.
four annas by collecting one anna a week which was less than one per cent of even an ordinary workers' wages. The first act of the association was to establish a funeral benefit fund. The workers and their families appreciated the benefit and began to contribute more willingly to the association.

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


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


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

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., p.297.