Prior to the linguistic reorganization of states in independent India, Kerala was constituted of the princely states of Travancore and Cochin and the region of Malabar. Malabar was part of the Madras presidency. The caste system in the form of social organization in India was known for its extreme rigidity in Kerala.\footnote{Balakrishnan, P.K. Jathivyavasthayum Keralacharitravum (Mal.), p.349, DC Books, Kottayam, 2008.} The caste system in Kerala was much more oppressive than in other parts of the country.\footnote{Dhanagare, D.N, Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950, p.57, Oxford Universty Press, New Delhi, 1994.} The economic basis of this rigid caste system has been the complex hierarchical system of land tenure in which upper castes were also the upper classes.\footnote{Ibid. p.57.} Before the formation of the state of Kerala, the tenurial conditions that prevailed were different in the three regions; however the tenurial insecurity and
deprivation were uniform throughout Kerala. The ruling king made grants of land to the Brahmins for the maintenance of temples and religious institutions. They had made land allotments to Rajas and Nair Chieftains who had a military obligation to the king to protect his territory with their retainers.⁴

The lands thus originally granted by the kings to the Brahmins constituted the Janmam right (the birth right). But it has been noted that prior to the British there was no concept of private ownership in the absolute European sense. Thus prior to the British, Jenmis, the land owning class were not considered as having absolute ownership over their land.⁵ Before the advent of British, the Jenmis did not have the power for arbitrary evictions and rack renting. It has been pointed out that even Charles Turner the British official accepted this fact that there was some form of right to occupancy in Malabar.⁶

The second type of landownership next in hierarchy was Kanam. According to Logan, the word Kanam was derived from the Malayalam word ‘Kanuka’ meaning ‘to see.’⁷ Thus according to him initially the Kanamdars were supervisors who collected the revenue for Jenmis. In practice, Kanam was a tenure whereby the tenant offered a sum to the Jenmis either as security or as advance rent, in return for the land leased out for a specific period. Only very few of the Kanamdars cultivated the land with family labour. Most of them either used

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to sublet the land to *Verumpattomdars* or they used to hire labourers to cultivate the land.\(^8\) There were different types of Kanam like *Kuzhikkanam Pattam, Kuzhikkanam, Kanam Kuzhikkanam* and *Kuttikkanam*. *Kuzhikkanam* was intended for bringing improvements and bringing waste land into cultivation.\(^9\)

But there was also a practice called *Melkanam* or *Melcharthu*, which referred to the issuing of second *Kanam* in favour of the first *Kanamdar* or a third person when the *Jenmi* wanted to raise the money collected as the security for the land.\(^10\) Travancore Melkanam turned out to be a wide spread measure of oppression as every Melcharthu resulted in an upward revision of rent which affected the already penurious peasant.\(^11\)

But the most numerous among the land owners were the Verumpattomdars who held the land as a simple lease from the Kanamdars without any advance of money.\(^12\) It usually ran for not more than a single year. The Verumpattomdars paid the whole estimated net produce to the landlord deducting the bare cost of seed and cultivation, forcing him into a hand to mouth


\(^10\) Ibid, p.7.


existence. Even within Malabar, the land tenure system had regional differences. In case of Verumpattom, the Verumpattomdars of Northern Malabar occupied land for Kezhupattom. It extended for a longer period of time like 5 to 12 years, than the Verumpattom of Southern Malabar. Verumpattomdars occupied the lowest position in the hierarchy of land tenure system and they constituted the majority of the tenants.

**Caste-Class Linkages in the Land Tenurial System.**

The Jenmis who were in possession of land let the land out for cultivation to Kanamdars who in turn transferred it to the Verumpattomdars. Jenmis were invariably upper caste and the Kanamdars belonged to either of the middle castes or upper castes. The lower castes mainly Pulas and Cherumas were reduced to the status of semi-agrestic slaves and they constituted the labour force, on which the agrarian economy of Kerala survived. They had to lead a very miserable life with the caste oppression, slavery and surplus extraction rendering them oppressed in multiple ways. These castes were tied to the land with no rights to freely exchange the labour. The Slavery Abolition Act of November 1843 brought about some changes in the conditions of these section of the society.

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16 Dhanagare, D. N. “Agrarian Conflict, Religion and Politics: The Moplah Rebellions in Malabar in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Past and Present*, No. 74, (Feb., 1977), pp. 112-141 Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of The Past and Present Society.
History has it that this system prevailed in Kerala society in 1930s also.\textsuperscript{17} What prevailed was the \textit{Jati Jenmi Naduvazhi Medhavittam}, (caste landlord-chieftainship), as pointed out by EMS. It was the domination of Upper caste and landowning feudal chieftains. According to him, the social domination by upper castes through the hierarchical caste system, the economic domination by the upper classes through the Jenmi system and the political control enjoyed by the upper castes through the \textit{Naduvazhitham} and the combination of these systems represented the \textit{Jati Jenmi Naduvazhi Medhavitham}.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{The Agrarian Conditions in Malabar.}

This land tenure system survived for a long time across Kerala with more or less the same pattern. But Travancore and Cochin witnessed tenancy reforms like legislations guaranteeing right to occupancy by 1850s. Malabar as part of the Madras presidency, was under the rule of the British, and had to bear the brunt of brutal colonial exploitation. According to the social customs prevalent at that time the \textit{Jenmis} were not supposed to depart with the \textit{Janmam} right over land. It was held as sacrosanct and it was not supposed to be sold in the market. The land relations were mainly guided by the force of customs than by the legal enforcement. But as time passed these relations have changed to the extent that just before Mysorean invasion, janmam right was freely available as a

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\textsuperscript{17} Prabhatham, 14\textsuperscript{th} November 1938.
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commodity to be sold and bought in the land market.\textsuperscript{19} The first shocks to this system in Malabar came from the Mysorean invasion\textsuperscript{20} which brought some large scale changes in the social structure of the then society and consequently on the land tenure system.

The Mysorean rulers introduced a land tax which as noted by historians, encroached upon the customary shares of the \textit{Jenmis} and \textit{Kanamdars}, leaving the share of \textit{Verumpattomdars} intact.\textsuperscript{21} At the time of the Mysorean invasion, many of the landowners belonging to the upper castes mainly Nambuthiris and Nairs had to flee from the area to the princely states of Cochin and Travancore.\textsuperscript{22} The flight of the landlords made the position of \textit{Kanakkars} relatively better as they started to enjoy rights over the lands earlier under the ownership of the \textit{Jenmis}. The Mysorean rulers were forced to settle the tax directly with \textit{Kanamdars} who were mainly Mappilas as the land owning class fled the area.\textsuperscript{23} Yet it has been noted that the consciousness that the land belongs to the one who works on it had not developed among the \textit{Kanakkars} as they have never claimed \textit{Janmam} (ownership) rights over the land.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{19} Dhanagare, D. N. Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950, p.59, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994.


\textsuperscript{21} Dhanagare, D. N. Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950, p.60, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994.

\textsuperscript{22} Kunhikrishnan, V.V. Tenancy Legislation in Malabar (1880-1970), p.3, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 1993.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
Sreerangapattanam agreement, Tippu Sultan had to cede the province of Malabar to the British in the year of 1792.\textsuperscript{25} The British dominance in Malabar brought big changes to the prevailing situation as the former Jenmis started to return with the intention of reasserting their lost Janmam rights.\textsuperscript{26}

The East India Company which had received the help of the Hindu aristocracy in fighting Tippu decided in favour of the Jenmis who wanted to reclaim their possessions. Only incursions by Kanamdars before 11 September 1787 were approved.\textsuperscript{27} This generated apprehensions in the minds of Kanamdars who were mainly Mappilas. The East India Company was eager in settling the disputes as the situation on the ground was deteriorating and was getting more chaotic. They also required the help of the Hindu chieftains and aristocrats in the third Anglo Mysore war. So the East India Company decided to accept the Jenmis as the absolute owners of land.\textsuperscript{28} This had profound implications as far as the land relations in Malabar were concerned. The Ernad Taluk witnessed Mappila peasants’ unrest as early as 1800.\textsuperscript{29}

The period 1836-1919, witnessed a series of rebellious outbreaks among the Mappilas of Malabar. These rebellious outbreaks could not take an organized form and they were easily curbed by the British forces. Most of these outbreaks

\textsuperscript{25} Panikkar, K.N. Malabar Kalapam Prabhuthvathinum Rajavazhchaykkunmehire(Mal.), p.18, D C Books, Kottayam, 2006.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. p.19.


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, p.108.
were in the form of Mappila peasants forming bands, killing landlords and looting their homes. It should be noted that the main participants in the struggle were the Mappilas who were Kanamdars and Verumpattomdars.\textsuperscript{30} The fixation of landownership as absolute and giving Jenmi sole right over the Janmam land resulted in the peasantry getting more and more impoverished. The defeat of Tippu and the subsequent British land settlement policies in Malabar, leading to the restoration of the social and economic position of the dominant castes, severely affected the position of the Mappilas in South Malabar.\textsuperscript{31} In order to comprehend the land tenure system in Malabar, there is a need to look at the efforts by the British authorities to understand the tenurial system of Malabar.

The Jenmis reasserted their rights over the land and started a tightened process of extraction of surplus with the full backing of the coercive instruments of the state. The first such outbreak occurred in 1836 and between 1836 and 1854; there were more than 22 outbreaks. These outbreaks usually had a similar pattern. It involved a group of Mappila peasants attacking a Brahmin Jenmi or a Nair official, and looting the properties and destroying and defiling temples. All these riots were suppressed with iron fist as all the rebels who used to take refuge in some mosque or temple were shot dead by the police.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Panikkar, K.N. Malabar Kalapam Prabhuthvathinum Rajavazhchaykkunmethire (Mal.), p.102, D C Books, Kottayam, 2006.


\textsuperscript{32} Dhanagare, D. N. Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950, p.61, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994.
After several outbreaks, the government of Madras appointed T L Strange, a special commissioner to inquire into the causes of the Mappila disturbances and the role played by the Thangal of Thirurangadi. The officer was also to examine the relation between land lords and tenants and finally to suggest whether any redefinition of the land rights is required in 1852. But the commissioner's enquiry could not identify the problems suffered by the peasantry. On the other hand, it identified, 'the Mappila tenantry's proneness to evade their obligation and to resort to false and litigious pleas.' The commissioner observed that the legal provision of eviction was being abused; but concluded that the 'growing networks of the religious priests and mosques had fomented the evil and was the root cause of the Mappila outbreaks.' The report recommended further oppression of the Mappilas.

In 1875, after receiving an anonymous petition from the name of Mappila youths, Thiyyas and other communities, the govt. of Madras responded by appointing William Logan, the then District Magistrate of Malabar, to enquire into the question of land tenure and tenant’s rights. The government of Madras in the year 1881 appointed William Logan, a special commission, to report upon: (1)

33 Kunhikrishnan, V.V. Tenancy Legislation in Malabar (1880-1970), p.17, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 1993
35 Dhanagare, D. N. Agrarian Conflict, Religion and Politics: The Moplah Rebellions in Malabar in the Nineteenth, and Early Twentieth Centuries, Past and Present, No. 74, (Feb., 1977), pp. 112-141 Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of The Past and Present Society.
The question of the tenure of the land and of tenant rights in Malabar and the alleged insufficiency of compensation offered by landlords and award for improvement made by the tenants; (2) The question of sites for mosques and burial grounds with suggestions for a measure of rendering the grant of such sites compulsory under certain conditions. For Logan, Janmam right was originally a political office which enjoyed a definite customary share of produce. He interpreted “Kanam” as the right to supervise and protect and receive a share of the net produce of the soil for this duty. According to Logan, the Kanakaran enjoyed a stable right as the Jenmi. The Jenmi could not evict him at his will. Logan criticized the theory that the Kanamdars were simple mortgagors and the Jenmi had absolute right over land.

Logan found that the renewal system resulted in the Verumpattomdars being rack rented and reduced to impoverishment. Logan stated that the “cultivating class is rapidly degenerating into a state of insolvent Cottierism.” Logan was extremely critical of the judicial practice of transforming the Verumpattom into a mere lease hold running for a single year. The Sadar court judgement in 1856, ruled that at the end year the land lord had the liberty either to renew the lease or let the land to another tenant. In the same vein, a judgment from the district court of South Malabar in 1878 held that a tenant had no right to

40 Ibid. p.21.
claim remission of payment to the landlord.\textsuperscript{41} William Logan through his enquiry revealed the life of penury and misery led by the peasantry. The peasantry who were a low status group lived under constant suppression by the landlord who wielded extra constitutional powers like excommunication if they ever revolted against his authoritarian exercise of power. Logan made a strong plea for ensuring security of tenure to the actual cultivator to reduce the insecurity and misery suffered by the Kanakkars and Verumpattomdars. He was also indignant at the growing number of eviction suits. He emphasized the need for adequate compensation for the evicted tenants.

The sensible recommendations of Logan were safely buried by the government as it appointed another Malabar Land tenure Committee in 1885 with some non-official members to represent the interest of Jenmi land lords, the Kanamdars and also Verumpattomdars.\textsuperscript{42} The committee arrived at a vague consensus regarding draft legislation for compensation on eviction for the improvement of the land by the tenants. The Mappila cultivators were struggling to make both ends meet. The British land policy implemented hastily and without making a proper analysis of the ground realities, seriously affected the agrarian social structure of Malabar.\textsuperscript{43} By 1910, the population and pressure of land increased further and evictions, rack renting, excessive lease renewal fees

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\textsuperscript{41} Kunhikrishnan, V.V. Tenancy Legislation in Malabar (1880-1970), p.17, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 1993.

\textsuperscript{42} Dhanagare, D. N. “Agrarian Conflict, Religion and Politics: The Moplah Rebellions in Malabar in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” Past and Present, No. 74, (Feb., 1977), pp. 112-141, Oxford University Press on behalf of The Past and Present Society.

\textsuperscript{43} Dhanagare, D. N. Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950, p61, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994
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and poor compensation for tenant’s improvements reached its acme and left the peasantry in a penurious condition. The Mappilas of southern Taluks were worst hit by the oppression of Jenmi land lords.\textsuperscript{44}

The Indian National Congress started establishing its link in Malabar around 1915. It was the Home Rule movement which first generated political activism in Malabar\textsuperscript{45} which was followed by the first Malabar district conference, in May 1916 held at Palghat.\textsuperscript{46} But the Congress was dominated by Jenmis and their lawyers. The conference never bothered to address the issues of tenants.\textsuperscript{47} It was noted that there was a constant re-iteration of the proprietary claims of the Malabar landlords to the virtual exclusion of even reference to the tenantry. The conference, could not estimate the peasant unrest and it was unable to sympathize with the cause of the peasants as it chose to blatantly condemn, the isolated incidents of revolts.\textsuperscript{48}

There were some attempts to organize the tenants by the new generation of tenants who got the benefit of modern education. Malabar Kudiyan Sangham, (Tenants Association) formed in 1920 was one among them.\textsuperscript{49} What the Kudiyan

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\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. p.75.  \\
\textsuperscript{45} Menon, K.P. Kesava. Kazhinjakaalam(.Mal.), p.58, Mathrubhumi, Calicut, 2009.  \\
\textsuperscript{46} Dhanagare, D. N. Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950, p.78, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994.  \\
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid. p.77.  \\
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.  \\
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Sangham wanted was a comprehensive legislation giving the right of occupancy and fair rent to tenants, abolishing Melcharthu and granting the right to purchase homesteads.\(^{50}\) Their organizations were mainly led by the rich tenants whose interests were at variance with the Verumpattomdars and agricultural labourers. With all the avenues closed, it was natural for their anger to flow out and Khilafat/Non Co-operation movement provided the outlet.\(^{51}\) The Moplah peasants were forced to revolt because of the exploitative tax system of the British. The oppressive activities of the *Jenmis* majority of whom were Hindus, under the seal of British authority also resulted in arousing the anguish of the Moplah peasants.\(^{52}\) The officials of the system wanted an excessive revenue tax from the tenants. Majority of the peasants were unable to meet the huge tax demand. Then the *Jenmis* and the colonial administrators used police and courts to intimidate the poor peasants.

**The Malabar Peasant Revolts -1921**

The Khilafat movement found strong support among the Mappilas and their overwhelming support to the agitation could be ascribed to nothing but the overwhelming nature of oppression they were subjected to.\(^{53}\) As the movement

\(^{50}\) Kunhikrishnan, V.V. Tenancy Legislation in Malabar (1880-1970), p.55, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 1993

\(^{51}\) Dhanagare, D. N. Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950, p78, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994.


acquired momentum, the government banned Khilafat meetings and arrested the leaders. This made the Mappilas grow more defiant. The leadership of the movement was shifted to the grassroots and the movement turned into violent insurrection against the administration and landlord. The peasants wanted to put an end to the exploitation by the landlords and colonial officials. The non cooperation and Khilafat movement gave a spark to the peasantry and that led to the rebellion Known as Malabar rebellion or Mappila rebellion. The early attitude of Congress leaders was changed and they criticized the participants of this rebellion. These created a gulf between the national movement and Mappila peasants in Malabar.54

After a major event in Pookkottoor village, the rebellion started in earnest in 1921 August, when there was a wide spread rumour that army had raided Mambrath Mosque when in fact it had gone to arrest the leaders of agitation. There were clashes between the police and protesters and police opened fire, which set off a spiral of violence resulting in looting, arson, burning of government buildings, railway lines and post offices. By the end of August, the whole interior of southern Malabar was under the control of rebels. The rebellion could be suppressed only by the end of December 1921. According to official sources, 2,337 rebels had been killed and 1,652 were wounded and 45,404 surrendered. But the unofficial sources say that there was a death toll of more

than 10,000 ordinary people.\textsuperscript{55} There it was clearly not an act of fanatics as alleged by the colonial establishment and official historians of the time.\textsuperscript{56} The vast majority of the rebels were poor peasants prompted by their plight to fight for their rights. The religious turn which it took, helped the landlords and administration to disregard it as fanaticism as rebels had the Khilafat as the immediate reason for agitation.

As K.N. Panikkar states, “The Pattern of rebel proceedings underlined a consciousness primarily rooted in an opposition to the landlords and the colonial state. The evolution of this consciousness was a process in 1830s which had begun in the early years of British rule and developed through the experience of a series of conflicts in the 19th century. The memory of these conflicts, transmitted through a powerful oral tradition was a vital element in the growth of peasant consciousness expressed finally and powerfully in the rebellion of 1921 against Lord and State.”\textsuperscript{57} Dhanagare notes that, “the ardour for a cause as expressed by the willingness to kill or be killed does not suffice to make a successful peasant revolution.”\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{56} Panikkar, K.N. Malabar Kalapam Prabhuthvathinum Rajavazhchaykkunmethire (Mal.), p.103, D C Books, Kottayam, 2006.

\textsuperscript{57} Panikkar, K.N. Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprising in Malabar, 1836-1921, p.199, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989.

\textsuperscript{58} Dhanagare, D. N. Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950, p.82, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994.
After the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation movement and Khilafat, the province of the Malabar fell into political doldrums for around 10 years. The brutal suppression of the movements, by the British authorities, the complete lack of initiative on the part of the INC led to the political activism being at its low end. The Mappila rebellion failed to achieve its goals and invited suppression by the state machinery in the absence of a class consciousness transcending the barriers of caste and religion. At some point, it took the form of attack against other religions and religious institutions. Though landlordism and oppression was the central point, the movement could not take up any comprehensive fight against landlordism or could not achieve a unity of the whole tenants, Kanamdars, Verumpattomdars and agricultural labourers.

**Congress Socialist Party and Karshaka Sangham**

From the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the ideas of socialism and Marxism began to make their appearance in Kerala, Swadeshabhimani Ramkrishnapillai, the pioneering journalist, wrote a biography of Marx in 1912.\textsuperscript{59} After the great October Revolution, Kerala Society witnessed the spread of socialist ideology. The national movement for freedom struggle could also not remain free from the influence of socialist ideas. An increasingly larger number of Congress activists started to acquire socialist leanings and they were not happy with the pace and the path through which the national movement advanced. The withdrawal of Non Cooperation movement led to the disillusionment of many left leaning congress activists and many of them started exploring alternative ways to

liberate the country from colonial shackles. This was not an isolated experience of Kerala, but part of the larger experience of national movement across the country. The contacts which developed between the political activists like EMS Namboodiripad who were imprisoned in the Vellore jail for Civil Disobedience movement with the accused of the Lahore conspiracy helped in the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness in them.

The suspension of Civil Disobedience movement had resulted in widespread disillusionment in the minds of the left leaning congress activists of Malabar. Many of them who spent their life in prison came into contact with revolutionaries from North India who were inmates of the prisons in which they were imprisoned. After coming out of the prison they started working actively towards the spread of socialist ideas. In 1931 Communist League was started by a group of young nationalists like NC Sekhar in Travancore. They started active deliberations about the possibility and the necessity of organizing peasants and agricultural labourers to fight against landlordism and colonialism. In 1933 itself Valluvanadu Nikuthi Dayaka Sangham was formed. In 1934, at Pattambi there was a meeting of the peasants where NG Ranga also participated. Shortly thereafter, a Kerala Karshaka Sangham was formed with EMS as the President and C K Govindan Nair as secretary. In the same year Communist Party of India was banned and the newspapers and literature of the communists were

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seized by Colonial government due to the report of the Statesman on the
activities of the CPI.\textsuperscript{62}

Congress socialist party was formed in Patna with Jayaprakash Narayan
as its Secretary and EMS joint Secretary.\textsuperscript{63} The first conference of the Party was
conducted in Bombay which made reverberation in the political scenario of
Kerala.\textsuperscript{64} Before this, in May 1934 CSP was formed in Kerala.\textsuperscript{65} A meeting was
held in Calicut for this purpose with K Kelappan in the chair and a committee of
seven was appointed for propaganda and to draw up a programme. P Krishna
Pillai was chosen as secretary and C K Govindan Nair as president.\textsuperscript{66} The
formation of Congress Socialist Party was a significant milestone which brought a
paradigm shift in the Kerala society. The congress socialist party had decided to
organize the people through mobilizing them into various mass organisations.

Under the auspices of the Congress Socialist Party, a conference was
held at Calicut in 1935. K A Keraleeyan presented a comprehensive programme
of work and it was accepted by all members. The important aspects of the
conference was its emphasis on the struggle for increase in workers' wages and
reduction in working hours along with propaganda among workers on the nature


\textsuperscript{63} Pillai, P. Krishna. ‘Kerala Congress Socialist Party’, Prabhatam, 10 April, 1939.

\textsuperscript{64} Nambuthiripad, E.M.S. Kerala Society and Politics, p.146, National Book Centre, New Delhi, 1984.

\textsuperscript{65} The Hindu, 14\textsuperscript{th} May 1934.

(Sep., 1976), pp. 30-44.
of capitalist-state collaboration and repression. The congress socialists started organizing the working class and the workers of the various factories and fields.

The conference also decided to initiate the setting up of Yuvajana sanghs (youth leagues) and clubs and propagating through them the idea of full independence and the course of struggle to achieve it. Even before this conference, there were youth movements organised in various parts of Malabar like the Abhinav Bharath Yuva Sangh by AV Kunhambu at Karivellur in April 13, 1934. AV Kunjmbu, encouraged by P Krishnapillai started a Samyukta Karshaka sangham at Karivellor on September 1935. AV Kunhambu took special care to use the energy of Abhinav Bharata Yuvak Sangh to the promotion of Karshaka Sangham.67

The Bala Bharatha Sangham of Karivellur gave a lot of assistance to the Karshaka Sangham. It was a movement of the children. The organisation helped the Karshaka Sangham in spreading the information regarding the activities of the Sangham across the village.68 The children organised Deshiya Balasangham under the leadership of EK Nayanar at Kallyassery. The students were also getting into the mode of agitation and organisation. The Travancore student association was formed in 1937 and the Calicut student's union was also started at the same time. The first attempt to bring all the students of Kerala under the banner of an all India student movement, the All India Students’ Federation(AISF), which was formed in 1936 was initiated. With this aim the first


68 Prabhatham, 19th December 1938.
all Kerala student conference was held at Calicut in Samoothiri College in the year 1937. The conference also decided to work for removing ministerialists and other moderates and making Congress into a real people's organization. Opposing imperialist-inspired wars and making all efforts to strengthen the anti-imperialist struggle to gain independence was another declared aim of the conference.

The most significant decision taken by the Conference of 1935 was the launching of a movement of peasants based on demands for abolition of landlordism, removal of indebtedness and for the improvement of the working conditions of agricultural labourers. It has been observed that the conditions of peasantry in Malabar were comparatively much worse than those of Travancore. As KKN Kurup notes, “In Travancore and Cochin, the native feudalistic governments introduced certain agrarian legislations in the second half of the nineteenth century to fulfill the requirements of fixity of tenure, fair rent and free transfer and thereby facilitate capital investments in coffee and tea plantations by the European capitalists and joint stock companies. These legislations and their amendments and the subsequent legislations like the Nair Regulations against the matrilineal system, a feudal institution, in the long-run weakened the traditional feudal class and landlordism.” But Malabar presented a contrasting

picture with ryots still struggling to make both ends meet. The Great Economic Depression made things worse. Compounded with Great Economic Depression, the scarcity of essential commodities made the situation explosive.

The *Adimathozhilali Sanghatana*\(^{72}\) (The Association of Agrestic Slaves) was formed at the instance of Karshaka sangham in Chirakkal taluk. A public meeting was held on 1\(^{st}\) November 1938 at Kakkara presided by M Kunjiraman Nambiar. The agrestic slaves from Prappoil, Tirumeni, Chorappova, Njarampa, Eriyam participated in the conference. The meeting asserted the need for the agrestic slaves to come together and work towards the emancipation to achieve the right to work. All the agrestic slave laborers joined the organisation and a working committee was formed.\(^{73}\) The Beedi workers of Malabar also started organizing themselves demanding higher emoluments.\(^{74}\)

It was decided to organize Karshakasangham in every village in the district to safeguard the interests of the agriculturists and bring their hardship to the notice of the government. A committee was formed for the purpose. K A Keraleeyan, a young political activist was deputed by CSP to form an organization of the peasants as they were not properly mobilized. In the words of Vishnu Bharatheeyan: “After completing our jail terms we all came out of our homes after initial rest of one or two weeks. Two decisions had already been

\(^{72}\) The agrestic slaves were those who were sold by Jenmis to others for forced labour and they generally belonged to castes like Vettuvar, Maavilar and Karimpalar. See Prabhatham, 1938, November 14, Pustakam 1, lakkam 31

\(^{73}\) Prabhatham, 14\(^{th}\) November, 1938.

\(^{74}\) Prabhatham, 2\(^{nd}\) January, 1939.
taken at the jail itself. One among them was to go to the houses of the isolated unorganized peasantry to bring them into a larger movement.”

According to Bharatheeyan “the first meeting of the Karshaka Sangham took place in his own home at Kolachery in Kannur and it was attended by 28 persons and a 11 member working committee was elected. The meeting elected KA Keraleeyan as the Secretary and Vishnu Bharatheeyan as the President.” It was the first attempt of its kind to form peasant organisations and the Kolachery Karshaka Sangham became the pioneer in the organisation of the peasantry. The movement had twin enemies to fight, landlordism and colonialism assisting each other.

The formation of All India Kisan Sabha added a new vigour to the movement. As early as 1936, April 11, Kisan organization of different provinces of India had participated in a convention which adopted a resolution to fight for securing complete economic emancipation of the peasantry and the achievement of full economic and political power for the peasants and workers and all other exploited classes. The All India Kisan Congress stood for the abolition of

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75 Bharatheeyan, Vishnu. Adimakalengane Udamakalaye (Mal.), p.72, Prabhatham, Thiruvananthapuram, 1980.

76 Ibid. p.81.


various types of landlordisms like Zamindari, Talukdari, Malguzari, Estemardari, Khote, Jenmi and Inamdari\textsuperscript{80} that prevailed across the country.

But there were a lot of problems which had to be overcome. The Karshaka Sangham had to adopt techniques to drive home the idea of social transformation through political action to the hearts of peasantry. There was widespread fear in the background of the reign of terror after the Malabar rebellions. The farmers, bound by customs and conventions, were hesitant to challenge the land lords. To mobilize the peasantry and energize them, the Jathas or processions were organized by the leaders of Karshaka Sanghams. Marching songs trumpeting radical slogans became the captivating force of the Jathas which has helped the ryots develop a strong sense of collectivity and togetherness. These Jathas performed many functions other than simply articulating the immediate interests of the peasants. The class consciousness which is inherent in the industrial working class is lesser in the peasantry. These demonstrations will help to make them aware of their interests.\textsuperscript{81} The songs were also of great help in simplifying to a certain extent the political messages which the Sangham wanted to drive home.

\textit{Prabhatham}

The year 1935 witnessed the Congress Socialist Party starting the

\textsuperscript{80} Rasul, M.A. A History of the All India Kisan Sabha, p.6, National Book Agency Private Ltd, Kolkata, 1989.

\textsuperscript{81} Prabhatam, 31\textsuperscript{st} October 1938.
publication of *Prabhatham*, the official organ of Congress Socialist Party, published as a weekly, under the editorship of EMS Namboodiripad from Shorannur on 9 January 1935. At that time, Congress Socialist was the central organ of the CSP in all India level. Prabhatham stood against the injustice and atrocities by the feudal oppressors and had therefore to bear the brunt of persecution. As it also spread the ideology of socialism it had to face the strict scrutiny by the government. The editor, EMS, was summoned and warned because of an article appeared in the Paper. After these events the Government fined the paper for the publication of a poem, ‘Athmanadam’ (voice of the soul) written by Chovvara Parameswaran and this fine was beyond the power of the management of Prabhatham to remit. Therefore the first face of the pathfinder of the socialist journalism, Prabatham, came to an end.

In September 1937, *Prabhatham* started publication again, when the earlier order passed on it was withdrawn. *Prabhatham* was not only a Newspaper but also an organizer. The ideology of Congress Socialist Party was introduced through the *Prabhatham*. The articles of National Leaders were translated and published in this paper. It proved to be an agitator as well as an organizer of CSP. In the real sense, *Prabhatham* is the forerunner of left wing

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85 Baskaran, C. Indiayile Communist Pathrangal(Mal.), p.69, Chintha, Thiruvananthapuram, 2002.
political journalism in Kerala. The issues from all part of the world were reported in the paper with the aim of political education to the left wing activists.\(^{86}\)

**Protests for Amendment of Tenancy Act.**

A widespread agitation was organised by Karshaka Sangham demanding the amendment of Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930.\(^{87}\) It observed 6 November 1938 as the Malabar Tenancy amendment Day’ throughout Malabar and on that day at various places uniform resolution demanding tenancy amendments was passed. The All Malabar Karshaka Sangham appointed a committee to enquire into the tenurial problems and its recommendations were endorsed by the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee.\(^{88}\) In December 1938, under the auspices of the Sangham, two *Jathas* were organised. The members of the Jathas started from Karivellur in the north and Kanjicode in the south. Chandroth Kunhiraman Nair was the leader of the Karivellur Jathas. The Kanjicode Jatha was led by E.P.Gopalan. Both met at Chevayur in Calicut where the Karshaka Sangham held its second conference.\(^{89}\) Analyzing the role of Sangham, EMS stated that what the peasants of Malabar required was not an abstract political programme

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\(^{86}\) Karunakaran, P. “60 Years of Deshabhimani,” People’s Democracy, Vol. Xxvi. No. 35, 8th September 2002


\(^{88}\) Ibid.

\(^{89}\) *Mathrubhumi*, 21st December 1938.
or rhetoric but an association which can put up fights against the feudal oppression.\textsuperscript{90}

**Kuttikrishna Menon Report and the Dissenting Notes.**

In response to popular pressure, T.Prakasam, Revenue Minister of the Madras government paid a visit to Malabar to acquaint himself with tenant problems.\textsuperscript{91} The agrarian situation of the time was so tense that the Rajaji government was compelled to set up a Tenancy Committee headed by K. Kuttikrishna Menon to enquire into the entire tenancy problems. Three left wing leaders of the Congress were included in it.\textsuperscript{92} Karshaka Sangham was dissatisfied over the composition of the committee as no representation was given to the peasant organization. But it took the responsibility to mobilize the peasants and to give evidence before the committee.\textsuperscript{93} The Committee submitted the report in December 1940. The three leftist members submitted dissenting notes. Though the committee could not come to any unanimous decision, they felt the necessity of controlling the monopoly of land enjoyed by the landlords and the urgent need for tenancy legislation. The majority report of the committee recommended that (1), the fixity of tenure need not be granted to pepper cultivators; (2) fixity of tenure be given to Verumpattakkara of dry and garden


\textsuperscript{91} The Sangham forwarded to him a copy of the Memorandum sent to the collector of Malabar. See Mathrubhumi, 29th December 1938.

\textsuperscript{92} Members of the committee were mainly Congress leaders E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Muhammed Abdul Rahman Sahib and E. Kannan were the left wing leaders of the Congress.

\textsuperscript{93} Mathrubhumi, 8 July 1939.
lands; 3) failure to pay the whole or part of the rent should continue to be a
ground of eviction for Verumpattkkars; 4) fair rent should be fixed for
Verumpattakkars; and 5) renewal fee should be reduced and divided into 12 equal
installments in the case of Kanakkars.94

What is noteworthy regarding the report is the dissenting note of E.M.S.
Namboodiripad who opposed the recommendations of the majority. In his
dissenting report EMS highlighted the evils of landlordism and demanded
abolition of landlordism as a precondition to economic planning. According to
him, the appropriation by the land lords of Malabar as a class of Rs.2.5 crores
out of the annual agricultural production of the country without making any
sufficient return to the society was the core of rural backwardness.95 In his
detailed dissenting note EMS thoroughly analyzed all chapters of the report. He
wrote in his note “My colleagues have confirmed themselves to the problems of
immediate importance but have avoided the basic question of land tenure.
Whether land lordism as institutions serves any useful social function or whether
it is parasitic in nature, whether its continuance is a necessity for society at large,
or whether it should be ended with or without compensations, these basic
questions of land tenure have been omitted.”96

Formation of the Communist Party

94 Kunhikrishnan, V. V. Tenancy legislation in Malabar (1880- 1970), p.100, Northern Book Centre, New
Delhi, 1993.

95 Namboodiripad, E.M.S. History Society and Land and Relations, Selected Essays, p.154, Left Word, New
Delhi, 2010.

96 Ibid. p.150.
Early in 1937, four young left wingers – P Krishna Pillai, K Damodaran, N.C. Sekhar, and E.M.S had secretly formed the Communist Party of India and had begun working to bring the entire Congress Socialist Party into the CPI. The rightists formed a separate organisation under the leadership of K Kelappan namely Kerala Gandhi Seva Sangham. The tenth Kerala state conference held at Bakkalam in May 1939 witnessed open differences between the right and left wings of KPCC. Following such developments, the leftists of the KPCC organised a secret meeting at Pinarayi in Tellicherry. All the prominent workers of CSP attended this meeting held in December 1939, and declared themselves as the members of the Communist Party in Kerala. Thus all the state branches of the Congress Socialist Party got itself transformed into the Communist Party.

**Anti-repression Day and Subsequent Struggles**

The KPCC had decided to observe 15 September, 1940 as 'Anti-repression Day throughout Malabar. Karshaka Sangham too decided to conduct protest marches and meetings. The KPCC meeting held at Chalappuram decided to observe 15th of September as a protest day to oppose the declaration


98 Mathrubhumi, 14th May 1939


100 Namboodiripad, E.M.S. Souvenir of the 4th Congress of Communist Party of India. 1956.

of Viceroy Linlithgow. As soon as this decision came out, the collector of Malabar, Williams issued prohibitory orders. KPCC secretary K Damodaran exhorted the people to defy this prohibitory order. There were protests across the Malabar against these prohibitory orders. At most places the police attempted to disperse the mob through the use of force.\textsuperscript{102} There were police firings at various places like Thalassery, Mattannur and Morazha.

It was decided that in Keechery there will be a meeting of the Karshaka Sangham too. The police perceived it as an attempt to evade the prohibitory orders and they decided to counter it. There was a long procession with the participation of the workers of Aaron mill and peasants of the area. All these processions were centered at Keechery.\textsuperscript{103} The Sub inspector Kuttikrishna Menon handed out the prohibitory orders to the leadership. Then the leadership decided to shift the venue to Anchampeedika. But they had to face the similar reaction from the police even at that place. But the people were not ready to disperse. There was a brutal lathi charge by the police and clash with the crowd ensued which resulted in the death of two policemen.\textsuperscript{104} The police registered a case with 38 accused. KPR Gopalan was condemned to death after prosecution which resulted in widespread protests across the country.

There were widespread police atrocities in almost all strongholds of Kisan movement. But the newspapers were not ready to report these incidents. The

\textsuperscript{102} Mohandas, P. Morazha (Mal.), p.47, Cultural Centre, Morazha, 1993.


\textsuperscript{104} Mohandas, P. Morazha (Mal.), p.48, Cultural Centre, Morazha, 1993
attempts of P Krishnapillai resulted in Mathrubhumi publishing a small item about the repression unleashed by the police. Though the correspondent was immediately reprimanded by the administration, the publication of the news helped bring a bit of relief to police brutality.\(^{105}\) But very soon brutal repression was unleashed by the police in places like Morazha, Mattannur and Thalassery.

In Thalasseri of police repression resulted in the death of two peasant activists Abu and Chathukkutty. Though seen as protest against the prohibitory orders, the violent clashes with the police had a larger social context and causes underlying them. The fact that the administration could not address these burning issues only meant that Morazha, Thalassery and Mattannur were just the beginning of the larger struggles ahead.

**Kayyur**

It has been already observed that the Karshaka Sangham achieved its mass base through combining its struggle for the abolition of landlordism throughout Malabar with the building up localized resistance against the *Jenmis* of a particular area.\(^{106}\) The perils of Second World War aggravated the plight of the peasants which prompted them to come out more and more openly against the colonial and landlordist combine. Neeleswaram raja of Chirakkal was one of the prominent *Jenmis* of the Hosdurg Taluk.\(^{107}\) The peasants under the

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\(^{105}\) Ibid. p.55.

\(^{106}\) Kunhabu, V.V. Kayyoor Samaracharithram (Mal), p.43, Chintha Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1983.

\(^{107}\) Kunhabu, V.V. Kayyoor Samaracharithram (Mal), p.61, Chintha Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1983.
leadership of VV Kunhambu, NG Kamamath, K Madhavan, and M K Kuttan made preparations to have a long march to the residence of the Neeleswaram raja and submit a memorandum to him demanding the termination of revenue collection practices like Vechukaanal, Nuri, Mukkal and Seelakaasu. Neeleswaram Raja reported to the authorities that the Karshaka Sangham activists were going to loot his property.\(^{108}\) The police was directed to Kayyur. The leaders of the Karshaka Sangham VV Kunhambu and TV Kunhiraman were arrested. K P Vellunga, Choorikkadan Krishnan Nair, Koithattil Chirukandan and Valappil Raman had arrest warrants issued against them according to Defense of India Rules.\(^{109}\)

March 28, 1941 witnessed strong protest rallies against the arrest of the leaders. It was organized by the local Communist cell. The demonstrators shouted slogans against British Rule and landlordism. They raised slogans in favour of the Soviet Union.\(^{110}\) Further these peasants demanded the release of remanded peasants and activists in the Morazha and Mattannur cases.\(^{111}\) A police constable who was said to be a leading figure in the police repression appeared in an intoxicated condition before the rallies. The peasants insisted him to hold the red flag and walk in front of the march. He ran off and jumped into a


\(^{110}\) Madhavan, K. Oru Gandhiyan Communistinte Ormakal (Mal.), P.128-130, Creative Arts and Cultural Society, Thiruvananthapuram, 2002.

river where he was drowned to death. The establishment was enraged by the death of its personnel and they registered a case for murder against the peasant leaders. Four of them, Madathil Appu, Koithattil Chirukandan, Aboobakkar and Podora Kunhambu Nair were condemned to death.\textsuperscript{112}

MLAs and MLCs of Malabar submitted a clemency petition on behalf the accused to Madras government. But the government did not relent. Despite the attempts of the Indian Communist Party and even the British Parliamentarians who were the members of the British Communist Party, the establishment insisted on hanging them to death.\textsuperscript{113} On 29th March 1943, the four peasant leaders of Kayyur were sent to the gallows.\textsuperscript{114} Their sacrifice invoked great admiration from all parts of the country. The All India Kisan Conference which met at Bhokna decided to observe March 29 as All India Kisan Day.\textsuperscript{115} The Kayyur events marked the beginning of the spirited fight of the Indian Peasantry against the landlordism and colonialism. It differed from all the previous agitations in its open resistance it offered to imperialism and landlordism.\textsuperscript{116}

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\textsuperscript{112} Kunhanbu, V.V. Kayyoor Samaracharithram (Mal), p.106, Chinth Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1983
\textsuperscript{113} Deshabimani, 28\textsuperscript{th} March 1943.
\textsuperscript{114} Madhavan, K. Oru Gandhiyan Communistinte Ormakal (Mal.), Creative Arts and Cultural Co-op.Society,TVM,2002.
\textsuperscript{115} Deshabimani, 18\textsuperscript{th} April 1943
\textsuperscript{116} Deshabimani, 14\textsuperscript{th} March 1943.
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Koothali

In Koothali the peasants raised the slogan *Chathalum Chethum Koothali* (*we will cultivate the land at any cost*).\footnote{Kurup, K.K.N. *Keralathile Karshika Kalapagal* (Mal.), p.120, Mathrubumi Books, Kozhikode, 2008.} The 30,000 acre hilly tract spread across the three Panchyaths of Changaroth, Chakkittappara and Koorachundu. Out of these 6000 acres were dense forest and the rest of it was suitable for agriculture.\footnote{Kunhiraman, K.V. (Ed.), *Chathalum Chethum Koothali* (Mal.) in *Keralam Poratathinte Kanalchinthukalliloo*te, p.63, Purogamana Prasadaka Samithi, Perambra, 2000.} The land was under the ownership of Koothali Mooppil Nair and it used to be given out on lease. By employing the doctrine of lapse, the Madras government captured the land and the area was called Koothali estate brought under the control of Malabar District Collector.\footnote{Deshabimani 25th February, 1947.} To the great dismay of the peasants, the practice giving the land on lease came to an end. In 1941 the Karshakasangham decided to take up this problem actively.\footnote{Pothuval, A.K. *Keralathile Karshakasamarangal* (Mal.), p.51, Prabatham, Thiruvananthapuram, 2010.} They have designed a scheme for growing more food keeping the social good in perspective. The Karshaka Sangham decided to take up lands which were lying barren and cultivate them and the produce will be distributed through food committees and the cost of cultivation will be collected from the public. In order to implement this scheme, the Karshaka Sangham activists entered the Koothali area in small units and started cultivating the area. But the authorities employed a huge police force and the Karshaka Sangham was forced to withdraw. Again the struggle started in 1946 and there was symbolic success as the activists...
were able to escape from the constant vigil of police and occupy the forest region.\textsuperscript{121} Deshabhimani of 25\textsuperscript{th} Feb. 1947 carried a detailed report on this issue.

The struggle getting the land became stronger in 1954 when there was prolonged struggle in front of the collectorate and this struggle extended for 66 days at the end of which the government reached an agreement with the peasants according to which 1200 acres of land was handed over to the peasants on lease.\textsuperscript{122} The fourth stage of the struggle started in the year 1962. But the government did not take a favorable attitude towards the protesters. In 1967, during the time of the second EMS ministry, majority of the peasants of Koothali got ownership rights over their land.\textsuperscript{123}

\textit{Deshabhimani}

With the decision of the Communist party to participate in the war effort, the British government lifted the ban on the party.\textsuperscript{124} CPI began to publish \textit{Deshabhimani}, as a weekly, the first issue was published in 6\textsuperscript{th} September 1942.\textsuperscript{125} After the end of \textit{Prabatham} there the vaccum created by the closing down of \textit{Prabhatam} in left journalism was filled by \textit{Deshabhimani}. Communist Party collected money from the people to meet the expenses of its

\textsuperscript{\text{121}} Kunhiraman, K.V.Chathalum Chethum Koothali(Mal.) in Keralam PorathathinteKanalchinthukaliloote. \textit{P.63, Purogamana Prasadhaka Vedi, Perambra, 2000}}
\textsuperscript{\text{122}} Pothuval, A.K. Keralathile Karshakasamarangal(Mal.), \textit{p.51, Prabatham, Thiruvananthapuram, 2010}}
\textsuperscript{\text{123}} K.V.Kunhiraman, Chathalum Chethum Koothali(Mal.) in Keralam PorathathinteKanalchinthukaliloote. \textit{P.63, Purogamana Prasadhaka Vedi, Perambra, 2000}}
\textsuperscript{\text{124}} Kurup, M.N. AV.Kunjjanbu(Mal.), \textit{p.172, Prathiba Books, Mavelikara, 2000}}
\textsuperscript{\text{125}} Baskaran, C. Indiayile Communist Pathrangal(Mal.), \textit{p.71, Chintha, Thiruvananthapuram, 2002}
publication. Often Deshabhimani was banned and faced cruel repression from the colonial rulers. Deshabhimani’s editorial “The call of Gallows” saluted the Kayyur Martyrs which provoked the British imperialists. The Madras government took Vindicative measures and ordered the paper to deposit a security of Rs.1000/- . But Deshabhimani easily collected this money from the people. from 18th January 1946 onwards Deshabhimani was published as a daily. After the independence also Deshabhimani faced brutal repression from the rulers because of the pro peasant and workers stand.

Karivellur and Kavumbai

Once the Second World War was over, the communist party decided to launch a determined struggle against imperialism. According to a resolution dated 5th August 1946, the communists were striving hard to organize the peasants and workers against imperialism. The pauperized ryots and agricultural labourers of Malabar, decided on a programme to prevent black marketing and hoarding and to cultivate barren land for resolving the food crisis. The Karshaka Sanghams of Malabar involved themselves in searching out the hoarded grain stocks and cultivation of barren lands.

127 Deshabimani, 30th January 1994.
The period of Second World War brought unprecedented misery to the peasants of Malabar. The spread of famine and cholera led to the death of hundreds of people.\textsuperscript{130} While the peasants were on a path of agitation. The Second World War came to a close. The people welcomed the news of the end of the war with a sigh of relief. At the same time famine inflation, food scarcity, hoarding and black-marketing plagued the land. Sangham decided to bring an end to these evils. It decided to open co-operative societies to collect surplus crops.

The activists of Karshaka Sangham took initiative in providing relief to the people. Black marketing and hoarding were widespread in the region which aggravated the crisis.\textsuperscript{131} The Karshaka Sangham decided to lead the agitations for capturing the surplus grains captured by the landlords.\textsuperscript{132} This increased the popularity and acceptability of the Karshaka Sangham among the masses.

A meeting attended by the activists of Karshaka Sangham, Communist party and trade unions held at Kozhikode in November 1946 declared the need for producing more food by cultivating the barren land. The meeting also exhorted the peasants to ensure that the grains paid as \textit{Vaaram} should be measured at the stores before being sent to the granaries of \textit{Jenmis}. A strong movement emerged against the corrupt practices of the land lords. On 16\textsuperscript{th}


\textsuperscript{132} AV Kunhabu, Kariveloorinte Katha, Published in Porattangalude Ormakal, Patiam Gopalan Padana Gavesana Kendram, Kannur, 2008.
December 1946, the workers and peasants and other sections of the population held a meeting to discuss these matters. The meeting declared that the grains will not be allowed to be transferred away from Karivellur.133 The activists guarded the routes through which paddy was to be transported. The landlords assisted by MSP tried to transfer the paddy and the farmers under the leadership of A V Kunhambu resisted and the police firing resulted in the death of Thiteel Kannan and Keeneri Kunhambu. A Case was filed with 141 persons as accused. 66 persons were convicted.134

The events at Karivellur activated the peasants of the whole of Malabar. The peasants of Irikkoor faced similar problems. The Karshaka Sangham activists of Irikkoor requested the permission of land lord, Janmi, to cultivate the land of Kavumbai.135 But the Jenmi was in no mood to oblige. Then they gave the number of petitions to the ministers and officials of Madras government. After these, the peasants under the leadership of Karshaka Sangham decided to occupy the area and cultivate even if they had to face the police. The police cordoned off the area and assaulted the activists of the Sangham. Thengil Appa Nambiar, P Kumaran, Alirambilkandi Krishnan, Pulukool Kunjiraman and Manjeri Govindan lost their lives in the police firing.136 In Neeleswaram, peasants were

133 AV Kunhabu, Kariveloorinte Katha, Published in Porattangalude Ormakal, Patiam Gopalan PadanaGavesana Kendram, Kannur, 2008


denied their traditional right to collect firewood and green manure from the forests. The peasant activists including women strongly protested and the agitation ended in the victory of the peasants.

**Punnapra Vayalar Struggles**

In the year 1938, October 21 the coir factory workers of Alleppey started an indefinite labour strike demanding rise in wages, release of national leaders and the need to have a responsible government. The third day of the labour strike witnessed fierce police brutality against peaceful meetings of the workers.\(^{137}\) Next morning the workers carried out a march to protest this and the police fired at the march which resulted in the death of two workers. But none of these brutalities could prevent the working class from striving for its rights. The strike extended for 23 days and the labourers could get a hike in wages.\(^{138}\) These struggles combined with activism of the socialist movement created a strong worker peasant alliance in Alleppey.

The year 1946 witnessed the Dewan of Travancore sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer declaring the ‘American Model’ according to which Travancore would remain an independent state.\(^{139}\) The trade unions and communist party\(^{140}\) raised the slogan, “Into the Arabian sea with the American model”. They also decided to

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organize agitations to ensure the merger of the princely states with Indian Union.\textsuperscript{141} Therefore, the workers and peasants of Alappuzha decided to oppose the American Model and fight the police.\textsuperscript{142} On 24\textsuperscript{th} October 1946 the workers and the peasants fought with the army which tried to curb the movement. Firing took place at Punnapra sea shore and hundreds of workers and peasants lost their lives.\textsuperscript{143} The following days there were fierce fight between the army and the people and more than thousand workers lost their lives.\textsuperscript{144} This created a new political awareness across the country. There was a relief committee formed to help the victims of these struggles in Malabar. The Punnapra Vayalar struggles served the cause of strengthening the peasant worker unity in the struggle for agrarian reforms and labour rights. The Punnapra Vayalar struggles gave inspiration to the workers and peasants of Malabar to carry forward their combined fight against imperialism and landlordism.

**Korom, Onchiyam, Munayamkunnu, Thilenkery and Padikunnu**

After the party congress of communist party of India held Calcutta came out with the Calcutta thesis,\textsuperscript{145} the communist party was subjected to state repression. At this juncture, most of the comrades had to go underground.\textsuperscript{146}


\textsuperscript{142} Namboodiripad, E.M.S. The Communist Party in Kerala: Six Decades of Struggle and Advance, pp.96-97, National Book Centre, New Delhi, 1984.

\textsuperscript{143} George, K.C. Punapravayalar(Mal.), pp.11-1120, Prabhasham, Thiruvananthapuram, 2007.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid. pp.161-174.

\textsuperscript{145} Thirumumb, T.S. Smaranakal Kavithakal(Mal.), p.95, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Trichur, 1989.

\textsuperscript{146} Madhavan, K. Oru Gandhiyan Communistinte Ormakal (Mal.), pp.207-209, Creative Arts and Cultural Society, Thiruvananthapuram, 2002
The communist party decided to organize the workers and peasants for an immediate struggle achieving socialism. Congress governments resorted to the suppression of the communist movement at any cost. Several places in Kerala witnessed the attempts by the state machinery to curb the growth of the communist movement. But the Karshaka Sangham could maintain its strong presence as it had the solid support of the peasants and agricultural labourers.

On 1948 April 10, the Karshaka Sangham at Korom decided to capture the surplus paddy stocks at the granaries of Mavila Kunhambu Nambiar. On April 12, 1948 they captured the paddy stocks and distributed it to the common people. The police arrested the leaders of the agitation and there was fierce resistance from the people. The MSP fired at the crowd and one of the agitators B. Pokkan lost his life on the spot. People demanded food grains in fair price and they confiscated food materials from the granaries of the Jenmis in Payam village. Police arrested the peasant leaders and tortured them brutally. In Thillankeri also people boycotted the traditional ritualistic presentations and organised march to the Jenmi’s house. Police fired upon the peasants. Five peasant activists died on the spot. At Pazhassi two peasant activists were killed by the police and the Jenmi goons.

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In 29th April 1948 a secret meeting of the communist party held at Onchiyam was tipped off and the very next day MSP searched for the leaders who were attending the meeting.\textsuperscript{151} The people tried to resist the arrest of the activists which resulted in police firing in which eight persons lost their lives.\textsuperscript{152} The police brutality inside the lock ups took the lives of two more people. Thus the Onchiyam struggle resulted in the death of 10 people.\textsuperscript{153} The communists decided to strike back and they assembled at Munayankunnu with weapons. The police got information and they attacked the 42 leaders who were inside the shelter on 1st May 1948.\textsuperscript{154} The police firing resulted in the death of 6 peasant leaders.\textsuperscript{155}

In September 1949, the Communist Party was banned. But it succeeded in mobilizing tenant cultivators and agricultural labourers behind it. They determined to fight against landlordism.\textsuperscript{156} Kandakkai \textit{Adhikari}, the feudal chieftain prevented Oorada Kannan nair from harvesting his crop. Oorada Kannan Nair was a prominent worker of the Karshaka Sangham. The activists of the Karshaka Sangham determined to disobey the landlord and they harvested

\textsuperscript{152} Pothuval, A.K. Keralaithile Karshakasamarangal(Mal.), p.75, Prabatham, Thiruvananthapuram, 2010.
\textsuperscript{153} MK. Kelu, Onchiyam Raktasaksikal(Mal.) in Poratangalude Ormakal, P.38, Patyam Patana Gaveshana Kendran, Kannur, 2008.
\textsuperscript{154} Pothuval, A.K. Keralaithile Karshakasamarangal(Mal.), p.78, Prabatham, Thiruvananthapuram, 2010.
\textsuperscript{155} P.Kannan Nair, Munayankunu Vetivepum Athinte Paschatalavum, P.32, in Poratangalude Ormakal, Kannur, 2008.
\textsuperscript{156} Kurup, K.K.N. Keralaithile Karsheeka Kalapagal, p.110, Mathrubhumi, Kozhikode, 2008.
the paddy. The event infuriated the Jenmi who unleashed oppression with the help of the police. A case was registered and the accused were arrested. They were taken to police station and sent them to the Police camp. One activist from the police camp and two leaders from jail were brought to Padikkunnu and killed by the police.¹⁵⁷

India got political independence from the United Kingdom in 1947. But the struggles of the peasants and agricultural workers continued with the same intensity. There were a lot of struggles launched by the peasants who were suffering from the oppression of feudalism. The new government chose to suppress these struggles mercilessly. There were police firings and many people lost their lives. The political independence achieved by the Indian Union brought a sea change as far as the composition and the nature of the agrarian struggles were concerned. The composition of the support base of the mass movements became limited to the peasants and agricultural labourers. Communist movement came to have exclusive leadership of these struggles.

Sooranadu

Oppression was unleashed wherever the communist party became strong. In Travancore Sooranadu became a stronghold of the Communist movement. The peasants of the area were largely the tenants of the Thennala family.¹⁵⁸ The


increasing strength of the Communist movement and the unity of the peasants and workers alarmed the feudal chieftains. There was a public fishing pond which was used by the agricultural laborers in the lean months. The Jenmis had this pond taken in auction to prevent the peasants from using it. The Janadhipatya Yuvajana Vedi and the Communist Party decided to catch fish from the pond. Police repression followed and the clashes resulted in the death of five police personnel including a Sub Inspector.\textsuperscript{159} The police unleashed unprecedented reign of terror in the area with people being tortured and killed indiscriminately. Many people lost their lives in the Sooranadu incident. \textsuperscript{160}

**Salem Police Firing**

Some of the leaders imprisoned in connection with the peasant struggles of 1946 were shot at Salem on 11 February, 1950.\textsuperscript{161} There were 220 peasant workers and communist party activists in Jail. Twenty two peasant activists died in the police firing.\textsuperscript{162} The Madras government instructed the Malabar Special police to root out the Communist and Kisan workers movements.

**Kerala Karshaka Sangham.**

In 1956, Malabar Kisan Sangham was reorganized and renamed as


\textsuperscript{162} Pothuval, A.K. Keralathile Karshaka Samarangal(Mal.), p.84, Prabhatham, Thiruvananthapuram, 2010.
Kerala Karshaka Sangham. The Kerala Karshaka Sangham had its first state convention at Shorannur in December 1956, soon after the linguistic reorganization of the state of Kerala.\(^{163}\) Kerala Karshaka Sangham adopted several resolutions in December 1956 which demanded ceiling on land holdings, distribution of waste lands to the landless, stoppage of all evictions and writing off of all agricultural debts.\(^{164}\)

**Krishikkaran**

*Krishikkaran* was the mouthpiece of Malabar Karshaka Sangham with KA Keraleeyan as its editor. Later this weekly became the organ of Kerala Karshaka Sangham. *Krishikkaran* was in publication from 1952 to 1970\(^{165}\) and it served as a tool of communication for the activists of Karshakasangham, giving them information regarding the activities of the Sangham and the developments in the land reform and the various measures taken by the government.

**Agricultural Workers**

The agricultural workers in Kerala faced various difficulties including caste oppression. Majority of them hailed from the casteless communities. A movement for agricultural workers took birth and functioned as part of the peasant movement of Kerala in the initial stages. The story was similar in other parts of the country as well. In Malabar, the agricultural workers movement came up at a


later period than in Travancore. The most significant development in the history of agricultural worker’s movement in Kuttanad is the origin and growth of agricultural workers’ union at Kuttanad.\textsuperscript{166} The high investment which was required to cultivate in the Kayal fields of Kuttanad, produced a class of capitalist agriculturists and the paid wage labourers. This particular agrarian relations and the contact with the militant trade union activists of Alappuzha led to the early formation of a strong agricultural workers movement in this region.\textsuperscript{167}

\textbf{Against Eviction}

The Kisan Sabha units all over the country valiantly fought against eviction drive. They organised signature campaigns against eviction in different parts of India including Malabar. In Malabar area a Kisan Jatha was organised in 1954, which toured all the Taluk centres collecting signatures finally reached Madras hundreds of miles away to present a petition. In Travancore and Cochin State also a Jatha was conducted in 1955 which lasted for 17 days, covering 200 miles. The first general elections of 1957 saw the Communist Party of India acquiring power in the state of Kerala. The government rode on the back of the popular demand for agrarian reforms.\textsuperscript{168} The Karshaka Sangham played a very crucial part in bringing this government to power. The new government of the Communist Party started its day in the office by the promulgation of Stay of


Eviction Ordinance\textsuperscript{169}. In fact it was one of the first official documents to be signed by the Chief Minister. The Benefit of the ordinance was enjoyed by all the tenants who were in the shadow of eviction by the \textit{Jenmis} who were anticipating radical reform in the land relations. The hutment dwellers were also the beneficiaries of this act. They could keep in possession the piece of land on which they were staying for years. This was a unique and courageous step adopted by the government. It helped the tenants to be aware of their rights and they strongly resisted the attempts of \textit{Jenmis} to evict them.

\textbf{Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill 1957}

The KARB contained the following provisions which were epoch making. The ceiling of land was fixed at 15 acres per family. It granted fixity of tenure to all types of land. There were provisions restricting the resumption of land by owners\textsuperscript{170}. The tenants were given the right to purchase the lands cultivated by them subject to ceiling limits, by paying 16 times of the fair rent fixed under the Bill or 12 times of the contract rent 16 annual installments\textsuperscript{171}. The bill evoked widespread protests among the elite land owning sections of the society. The upper castes, the church and all vested interest groups fiercely opposed the bill. The Karshaka Sangham welcomed the long awaited legislation, but the


\textsuperscript{170} K.A.R.B, 1957, Kerala secretariat.

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.

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reactionary elements started an agitation which they called Liberation Struggle against the Government.\textsuperscript{172}

Supporting this bill in the assembly, the peasant leader KPR Gopalan stated, “We should remember that we are involved in the enactment of a bill which will be written in golden letters in the history of India. We have found the Faispur resolution and Karachi resolution of Congress on Paper. But nothing has been implemented… If any state ruled by congress took any initiative in this regard, the Chief Minister of that particular state has lost his chief minister ship”.\textsuperscript{173}

**Struggle against Land Reforms**

It is not surprising that the same fate was awaiting the communist government as well. The government had to face opposition from all vested interests who launched a collective attack against its progressive policies like land reforms\textsuperscript{174}, attempts to bring social control in education etc.\textsuperscript{175} The entire media and the reactionary elements of the state politics combined with some left forces like RSP and PSP launched a concerted struggle on 12 June, 1959 to remove the EMS ministry from power so that these interventions can be

\textsuperscript{172} Deshabhimani, 1\textsuperscript{st} November 1958.

\textsuperscript{173} Minutes of the legislative assembli, Kerala, December, 1957.


\textsuperscript{175} Dashabimani, 25\textsuperscript{th} July 1959.
nullified.176 The Congress government at the centre dismissed the EMS ministry citing law and order problems and breakdown of constitutional machinery.177

**Dilution through Legislature**

The Congress and PSP coalition came to power after the EMS government passed the Kerala Agrarian Relations Act 1960.178 It eroded what was progressive in the KARB. In the amended bill there was no provision for the rehabilitation of tenants who were evicted after the formation of Kerala. This legalized the evictions by the land lords. There was no ceiling for plantation sector and the agricultural land contiguous with the plantations were also given exemption and Kudikidappu rights were specifically prohibited in plantation areas.179 Lands belonging to the charitable institutions and temples were excluded from ceiling limits. The act faced so many legal hurdles as it was declared null and void by the courts for most of the area under the Ryotwari system. The operationalisation of the act thus got terminated. After this, Kerala Land Reforms Act was formulated; but here also the government did not show genuine interest to implement the Kerala Land Reforms Act for the benefit of the peasants.


177 Deshabimani, 1st August 1959.

178 Kerala Agrarian Relation Act, 1960, Kerala Secretariat.

179 Deshabimani, 20th October 1960, also see Deshabimani 10th January 1961.
Amaravati Agitation 1961

The settlers in Udumpanchola who encroached forest land belonging to the hydro electric project of Idukki were evicted from the area and they were asked to move to the Amaravati forests lying near Kumili, Idukki. The Karshaka Sangham under the leadership of A K Gopalan started a successful agitation to rehabilitate the people. Father Vadakkan also participated in the movement.

The eviction from Ayyappankovil started from may 2nd 1961. A police station and a magistrate court were set up for the purpose. The policemen demolished the hutments and burned them down. Within two weeks, more than 1500 families were evicted from Ayyappan kovil. The area extended for around 8000 acres with more than 10000 residents. A.K. Gopalan, the leader of Karshaka Sangham declared that he would start his indefinite hunger strike at Amaravati from 6th June 1961. The Indefinite hunger strike by A.K. Gopalan attracted the attention of all sections of the people across the country. Leaders including K. Kelappan, took favourable attitude towards A.K. Gopalan. The government of the times which had initially taken a squarely negative attitude to the struggle had to change its approach. The government conceded to the demand of allotting 3 acres of land to each family. Distribution of certain amount of rice freely through the ration shops, replacement of the barren land by fertile one, a temporary loan of 100 rupees and the free text books for children were some of the demands which were conceded by the government. The hegemony

180 Deshabimani, 4th may 1961.
181 Deshabimani, 8 June 1961.
of Karshaka Sangham and its effectiveness in addressing peasant problems was clear once again.

**Kottiyoor, Churuli-Keerithode Anti-eviction Struggles.**

The Kottiyoor Devaswam land was taken on lease by Mannathu Padmanabhan through a Melcharthu for 99 years. The government declared that the government had no objection to the eviction of encroachers on the Devaswam land. This stance alarmed the peasants of Kottiyoor. Peasants started agitations against this. Many leaders including AK Gopalan were arrested for the participation in the movement. The peasants under the leadership of AK Gopalan put up a heroic resistance and the peasants won the struggle.\(^{182}\)

November–December of 1963 witnessed the Churuli Keerithode agitations when 4000 people were evicted in the name of forest conservation. A.K. Gopalan started a hunger strike.\(^{183}\) The newspapers of Kerala who favoured the government stance wrote editorials about the need for preservation of forests. It is necessary to protect the forests but for whom? asked A.K. Gopalan who was the leader of the agitation. “As I have stated earlier even newspapers were not allowed to enter the area. Once the news about the strike came out there were protest movements in various parts of Kottayam”,\(^{184}\) A.K. Gopalan says. The Government tried to defeat the struggle through various means. The masses


\(^{183}\) Ibid. p.80.

\(^{184}\) Ibid.
particularly the evictees resisted. A.K. Gopalan withdrew the agitation at the instance of E.M.S on behalf of the CPI (M). The Communist Government which came to power in 1967 finally addressed the grievances of the evictees.

**Abolition of Landlordism**

The widespread demand for agrarian reforms forced the government to bring another legislation dealing with land reforms. But the bill which was passed an extremely diluted version of the former legislations. It gave no respite to the tenant and permanently affected the process of land reforms. Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1969 included the provision for abolition of both landlordism and tenancy in Kerala. It provided hutment dwellers the option to purchase his homestead from the land owners on easy terms and conferred the ownership of land under tenancy to the cultivating tenants. It limited ceiling to 20 acres per family.

A conference which was held at Alappuzha on Dec.14, 1969 with the participation of peasants and agricultural labourers declared that the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1969 passed by the United front government will be deemed as (emphasis added) being passed on 1st January 1970 and declared that the rights over the land will be forcibly acquired. As part of this, large

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187 Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1969, Kerala Secretariat.

scale propaganda was unleashed by the leadership of Kerala Karshaka Sangham and Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union.\textsuperscript{189} From 1\textsuperscript{st} January 1970 tenants started to occupy land that duly belonged to them and they stopped paying the rent. This direct struggle launched by Karshaka Sangham and Karshaka Thozhilali union was a notable event in the history of peasant and agricultural workers movement.

The Government that came to power after the resignation of the United Front government tried to dilute the provisions of the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1969, with some provisions in favour of the land owners.\textsuperscript{190} The 9\textsuperscript{th} state conference of the Kerala Karshaka Sangham took place at Kozhikode and this conference exhorted 15\textsuperscript{th} September to be observed as Anti Eviction Day. In October 1970, the conference of Agricultural workers union was held at Alappuzha. The conference demanded the representation of agricultural labourers in the Surplus Land Committees. The Excess Land Grab Agitation was initiated on 25\textsuperscript{th} March 1972 for the strict implementation of ceiling measures in the state by capturing the surplus land in selected locations.\textsuperscript{191} The land grabs agitation aroused great interest among the landless peasants. The agitation served as an accelerator in the implementation of the act.

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\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Deshabhimani}, 1\textsuperscript{st} January 1970.
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Thus after a long drawn out struggle, the peasant movement of Kerala was successful in the legal abolition of landlordism and they were able to launch struggle to enforce the implementation of this legal provisions. This has brought a sea change not only in the agrarian relations of Kerala but also in the life of the Kerala society as a whole. It accentuated the democratisation of the society and helped advance the struggle against social and economic injustices. As we have seen in this chapter, the struggle of the peasantry could succeed as it touched every sphere of life in the Kerala society. Media and literature played a crucial part in this struggle for change and social justice. The following chapters will be examining that role in more detail.