CHAPTER-IV

POLITICIZATION OF WOMEN OF TRAVANCORE
THROUGH TRAVANCORE STATE CONGRESS
AND COMMUNIST PARTY

Intellectual enlightenment followed by English education crystallized into a constant stubbornness to demand direct share in the administration of the state. Soon followed organized efforts for demanding political freedom by the masses. Socio-religious reform movements and Freedom Movement worked parallel and sometimes complementary.

All the socio-political events of nineteenth and twentieth century Travancore directly or indirectly influenced the history of women in Travancore. Despite warnings, threats, fines, lathi charges, firings, shorter or longer terms of imprisonment etc. women participated in freedom struggle in large numbers. There is not a separate history of women, apart from the common history of Travancore in the twentieth century.

Kerala was progressively politicized by women rather than men. The nature and extent of female participation in the nationalist movement can be categorized at three levels. First, women as a part of general mass of people who joined the satyagraha. Secondly, a small group of women who were committed to one particular aspect associated with the nationalist struggle. This would include women who took part in social reform, actively allied with Gandhian politics such as living in asrams or being involved in a campaign for khadi and village industry or with the Harijans. Third category consists of a very small number of women who gave leadership to political movements.

An industrial Proletariat and a radical working class movement emerged in Travancore with Alleppey as its centre. The leftist movements sowed their seeds in the soil ploughed by Renaissance movement. Their dictum was “Sree Narayananil Ninnu Munnottu” or ‘to move forward from where Sree Narayana
stopped\textsuperscript{1}. Thus it could be asserted that the genesis of political consciousness in Travancore was the result of popular scream boosted by equal forces.

Indian National Congress formed in 1885 attracted the attention of the people of Kerala also. A branch of Indian National Congress was formed in Kerala in the early twentieth century. In 1910 a District Congress committee came into being in Malabar. All India Home Rule League of Annie Besant also set up its branches in Kozhikode, Thalassery etc. K.P. Kesava Menon, V.K. Krishna Menon and others served as its active workers. The first District Political Conference was held in 1916 at Palakkad under the Presidency of Annie Besant. Five such conferences were held and in 1921, the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee was organized with K.Madhavan Nair as its first secretary. In 1882, three students of Maharajas College, Trivandrum, viz., G.P.Pillai, N.Raman Pillai and R.Ranga Rao were moved from the rolls, for having written articles in newspapers criticizing the policy of government in the matter of recruitment of government jobs.

On 1 January 1891, a ‘Malayali Memorial’ was submitted to the Maharaja demanding increased job opportunities for natives in public services. Another mass memorial called ‘Ezhava Memorial’ was submitted to the Maharaja on 3 September 1896, under the leadership of Dr. Palpu. It demanded that the Ezhavas be made beneficiaries of all those rights and privileges being enjoyed by their brethren who had become converts to Christianity. But the response of the government was disappointing. The agitations based on the ‘Memorials’ marked the rise of a new educated middle class as a force to be reckoned within the politics of Kerala\textsuperscript{2}. Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai criticized the administration of the Diwan P. Rajagopalachari through his articles in ‘Darpanam’, ‘Kerala Panchika’, ‘Malayali’ and ‘Swadeshabhimani’. The government exiled him from the state on 26 September 1910\textsuperscript{3}. Revolutionary terrorism also existed in Kerala. An association called ‘Bharat Mata Association’ started functioning at Shencottah, which was a part of Travancore. Vanchi Aiyar,

\begin{itemize}
\item[1.] Bhashaposhini magazine, December, 2002.
\item[3.] Ibid., p.49.
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a clerk of the Forest Office at Punalur murdered Mr. Ashe, the British Collector of Tirunelveli and shot himself to death. Chempaka Raman Pillai, a native of Trivandrum, also plunged into the revolutionary activities against the British with his base in Berlin and also had contacts with Kaiser William.

The winds of nationalism slowly penetrated through the narrow walls of rural homes and reached the minds of Indian women, with the emergence of Gandhiji on the political scene of India. His arrival to Indian politics is a romantic chronicle having deep connection with a long drawn freedom struggle which ultimately ended with the achievement of the desired target.

It was Gandhiji’s revolutionary call to women to join the freedom struggle that dawned a new era. Such a mass participation under Gandhiji’s leadership gave women a sense of equality with men, an equality which was unheard of in the tradition bound Indian society. He was the first mass mobiliser who saw the potential of women for an organized movement. It is significant that all of Gandhiji’s symbols for struggle and protest were from the feminine realm. Spinning, for instance, has traditionally been a woman’s activity.

By exhorting men to spin, he tried to include feminine virtues in them. Similarly picketing liquor shops related to the evil effects of liquor on women and household. By picking up salt as a symbol of country wide satyagraha, he brought the movement into every home and kitchen. By encouraging the women to opt for Swadeshi and discard jewellery, he was encouraging them to cultivate the habit of choosing for them, not just clothes, but a new way of life. Gandhiji believed that women were also specially suited to work in his national constructive programme of uplifting Harijans. With the coming of Gandhiji, political movement got a new aim and meaning and thus attracted the womenfolk in a special manner. The spirit of strike conflagrated to the educated, independent women of Kerala. Many brave women stepped into the arena of political agitation and courted arrest. A large number of men and women rallied under Gandhiji and rural and urban women came forward to take the role of freedom fighters.

4. Ibid., p.51.
Women responded to the Gandhian call and actively participated in the freedom struggle and constructive programmes. Gandhiji played an important role in mobilizing women for political participation. Gandhiji visited Kerala five times, in 1920, 1925, 1927, 1934 and 1937. The people of Kerala loved and adored Gandhiji as a leader, during that period. Whenever Gandhiji visited Kerala, the womenfolk gathered enmasse to see and adore him ignoring the protest of their menfolk. Women abandoned foreign clothes and other foreign articles, welcomed *khadi* and *Swadeshi* goods, discarded intoxicants, even tea and coffee, read and discussed newspapers, spun in *Charkha* and involved in constructive programmes.

Women, literate and illiterate, rural and urban, swelled the ranks of freedom fighters, took over positions of responsibility, courted imprisonment and were arrested in large numbers. The enthusiastic womenfolk all over Kerala contributed their ornaments including watches, gold buttons, bangles, necklaces, rings etc. Gandhiji was very much impressed by the simple white clothes of Travancore women. He had a meeting with the Regent Maharani and Junior Maharani in 1924 and was very much overwhelmed by their simplicity in dress and ornaments.

Kartyayani, a *Harijan* girl of Alwaye welcomed Gandhiji with a *khadi* shawl when he reached Alwaye in 1925 for receiving *Harijan* Development Fund. Gandhiji was delighted by the action of Kartyayani and gave her a seat near him. He blessed her saying thus: “My dear one, you cannot understand my language but you can understand the language of my heart and eyes.” In 1925, young Brahmin girls in foreign silk ‘saris’ presented a purse to Gandhiji at Kottarakkara. Gandhiji said, he welcomes the money but does not like their

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9. Interview with ‘Gandhi’ Kartyayani on 22-12-2012.
clothes\textsuperscript{11}. Vaikom Satyagraha, Salt Satyagraha, Civil Dis-obedience Movement, ‘Nivarthana’ Agitation, Quit India Movement, Punnapra Vayalar uprising and a large number of revolts and agitations and movements resulted in the establishment of Responsible Government in Travancore. The role of women, students, press and literature in the long struggle are worthy of mention.

The historic Vaikom Satyagraha began on 30 March 1924. It attracted the attention of the whole of India. Gandhiji and many leaders from outside Kerala also visited the Vaikom Satyagraha camp. The satyagrahis suffered severe hardships. Savarna Hindus organized a Savarna Jatha and presented a petition to Maharani Setu Lakshmi Bai\textsuperscript{12}. Extensive participation of women was witnessed for the first time in Vaikom Satyagraha. It heraladed the mass participation of women in public action\textsuperscript{13}. They supported the satyagraha by donating rice and money and by popularizing satyagraha songs. Women who participated in Vaikom Satyagraha included Mrs. Alummoottil Channar, Mrs. E.V.Ramaswami Naicker, P.K.Kalyani, Kartookunju, Lakshmi etc\textsuperscript{14}.

The women’s wing of Vaikom Satyagraha included members like Kamalammal and Lakshmi Ammal. Women volunteers of Vaikom Satyagraha from Nagercoil included Mrs. Thanumalaya Perumal Pillai, Mrs. Gandhidas Muthuswami and others\textsuperscript{15}. The Savarna Jatha was welcomed by the women of Mayyanad. A public meeting was convened and its President was N.Meenakshi. A number of Pulaya girls were also present\textsuperscript{16}. The women of Mayyanad also helped the satyagraha by sending pidiyari to the satyagraha camp\textsuperscript{17}. The pidiyari raised by the house wives of Mayyanad enabled the running of canteen for the

\textsuperscript{12} pib.nic.in/feature/feyr98
\textsuperscript{13} www.hindu.com
\textsuperscript{14} J.Devika, \textit{Kalpanayude Mattoli}, (Mal.), Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, Thrissur, 2011, p.111.
\textsuperscript{15} Lakshmi Raghunandan, \textit{At the Turn of the Tide, The Life and Times of Maharani Setu Lakshmi Bayi the Last Queen of Travancore}, Maharani Setu Lakshmi Bayi Memorial Charitable Trust, Bangalore, 1995, p.132.
\textsuperscript{17} J.Devika, \textit{op.cit.}, p.113.
satyagrahis. At a meeting of ‘Karappuram Ezhava Yuva Seva Samajam’ at Cherthala, E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker requested that women volunteers were urgently required for the successful work of Vaikom Satyagraha and one hundred volunteers were enlisted on the spot and rupees hundred was collected.

Muthukulam Parvathi Amma spoke at the ‘Hindu Mahajana’ meeting and advocated the upliftment of *avarna* women. At a public meeting at Mavelikkara, Sarada Ammal, daughter of T.K. Madhavan, also advocated the denouncement of caste system from Kerala. At Chengannoor, Mrs.George Joseph spoke in public in favour of Vaikom Satyagraha and called for volunteers and funds.

‘Kochi Depressed Class Conference’ was held on 16 May 1931 at Chengannoor and a women’s meeting was also held as a part of it. A conference of Araya women held at Alleppey in May 1931 was presided over by K.C. Narayani Amma. The meeting thanked Travancore government for nominating an Araya woman as member of ‘Sree Moolam Popular Assembly’. It also congratulated C.I. Rudrani Amma for her nomination as Secretary of ‘Araya Vamsodharini Sabha’. ‘Christian Women’s Conference’ held on 24 April 1930 at Chengannoor was presided over by Anna Chandy. The annual conference of ‘Sadhu Jana Paripalana Yogam’ was held at Trivandrum in March 1930. The presence of many well clad and respectable women was a conspicuous feature of the function and a batch of Pulaya girls sang a song about the present condition of Pulayas. Emergence of prominent, educated women in the public life was a notable feature of the period. Anna Chandy presided over the educational convention of ‘All Kerala Nair Conference’ at Chvara in April 1931 and Ammu Swaminathan presided over its women’s conference. Anandavally Amma, Swayam Prakash Yogini Amma, G.R.Thankamma and others also spoke in this conference.

Women became active in many other organizations also. Literary
meetings, teachers meetings, graduate meetings, Hindi propagation meetings etc.
were held all over Travancore under the auspices of women. In 1927, ‘Thiruvithamkoor Lady Graduate’s Association’ had been formed with the aim of putting an end to the unemployment of well qualified women. At the ‘Kerala Literary Conference’ at Quilon in December 1930, Ammukkuty Amma spoke on ‘Rural Reconstruction and Women’. ‘Kerala Women Teachers Association’ held a meeting at Ernakulam on 11 July 1930 and its President, Mrs.K.Velayudha Menon was present.

In Trivandrum, a get-together of women graduates was held in August 1930. At a public meeting in Changanassery in December 1930, Lakshmikkutty Amma spoke in favour of propagation of Hindi language. The ‘S.N.D.P. Women’s Conference’ at Trivandrum in September 1930 was inaugurated by G. Swayamprabha Amma. The ‘Women’s Indian Association’ was also active in Kerala. It ran orphanages, provided training to mid-wives and started industrial training centres for poor women.

In Travancore, Elizabeth Kuruvilla, Mrs. Pandalam K.P.Raman Pillai, Annie Mascrene and Akkamma Cherian rose to political leadership. Large number of women participation can be seen in Trade Union and Communist Movement in Travancore and the names of K.R. Gowri Amma, Rosamma Punnoose, Koothattukulam Mary and Suseela Gopalan are noteworthy.

In Kerala it was Civil Disobedience Movement that brought out a large number of women into political action. Women from aristocratic families have joined as Satyagraha volunteers. In Kerala there were many cases of the wives and daughters of prominent Congressmen becoming politically active. During the reign of Sree Moolam Thirunal Maharaja, the Indian National Congress started

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its activities in Travancore\textsuperscript{24}. In the early thirties, ‘Nivarthana Agitation’ or ‘Abstention Movement’ was started as a protest against the constitutional reforms of 1932. Ezhava, Christian and Muslim communities joined together and demanded the abolition of property qualification in elections to legislatures and introduction of adult franchise. The dissatisfied sections joined in a triple alliance and formed ‘All Travancore Samyuktha Rashtreeya Samiti’, which was later renamed as ‘Joint Political Congress’.

The most important episode connected with Nivarthana agitation was the famous speech delivered by C.Kesavan at Kozhencherry. He was arrested and jailed for two months for sedition. Eventually the government was forced to accept all the demands of the ‘Abstentionists’. The ‘Nivarthana Agitation’ also marked the end of constitutional agitations and marked the beginning of direct action in the politics of the state. In 1935 ‘All India Women’s Conference’ was held at Trivandrum under the patronage of Rani Setu Parvathi Bai. Its prominent speakers were Ammu Swaminathan, Aruna Asaf Ali, Anna Chandy, an American family planning activist Margaret Sanger and others\textsuperscript{25}.

The formation of ‘Travancore State Congress’ was formally announced on 23 February 1938 in a meeting of few leaders at Trivandrum. Prominent among these leaders were A. Narayana Pillai, C.V. Kunjuraman, Pattom Thanu Pillai, T.M. Varghese, P.S. Nataraja Pillai, Annie Mascrene, P.N. Krishna Pillai etc. The State Congress set in motion, the process of political empowerment of the people of Travancore.

Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar adopted the policy of ‘divide and rule’ to break the new organization. Meetings and processions were broken up by lathi charges. A meeting held in Chengannoor Mills \textit{maidan} on 26 June 1938 under the leadership of Pattom Thanu Pillai, T.M.Varghese and Annie Mascrene were lathi charged\textsuperscript{26}. There was also muzzling of the press. Licenses of newspapers

\textsuperscript{24} A.Sreedhara Menon, \textit{op.cit.}, p.99.
\textsuperscript{26} R. Parvathi Devi, \textit{Akkamma Cherian}, (Mal.), National Book Trust India, New Delhi, 2007, p.32.
such as ‘Malayala Manorama’ and ‘Kerala Kaumudi’ were withdrawn\textsuperscript{27}. The ‘Indian Express’ used to write editorials against Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar and ‘The Hindu’ also gave much publicity to the agitations.

Sir C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyar organised ‘Raja Bhaktha Sangham’ ‘Five Rupee Police’, ‘Reserve Police’, Simson army’, ‘C.I.D. Sangham’ etc. to oppose State Congress, to disorder State Congress meetings and to observe State Congress activities\textsuperscript{28}. The most awful rowdies, drunkards and anti-social elements were selected to form this ‘Five Rupee Police’\textsuperscript{29}.

Frequently Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar called the editors and owners of newspapers to his official residence ‘Bhakti Vilasom’ and even threatened them with dreadful penalties. A free and impartial press was impossible in Travancore\textsuperscript{30}. A large number of anonymous and pseudonymous booklets, pamphlets and leaflets started appearing. Many of them were in the form of State Congress bulletins, Communist Party letters, revolutionary songs, cartoons etc. But many of them were confiscated and destroyed before the copies could reach the readers. Postal censorship was also introduced. Postmasters were directed to check all correspondence of popular leaders like Pattom Thanu Pillai, Annie Mascrene, C.Kesavan, T.M.Varghese and others.

Annie Mascrene was the most terrible sufferer of the vengeance of Sir. C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar’s government, for being a fire brand orator\textsuperscript{31}. Her sister, a government employee, was immediately transferred to a distant place and Annie Mascrene had to live alone with her aged mother. On 5 April 1938, after accompanying A. Narayana Pillai to jail, she returned home and within half an hour, there was pelting of stones at her residence. On 29 April, she was robbed of all her possessions including her clothes, ornaments, utensils and certificates\textsuperscript{32}. A constable hit his bicycle on her body while she was walking along the public

\textsuperscript{27} A. Sreedhara Menon, \textit{op.cit.}, p.104.
\textsuperscript{28} Akkamma Cherian, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.41-42.
\textsuperscript{29} Interview with Kandathil K.E.Mammen on 20-12-2010
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid
\textsuperscript{32} Akkamma Cherian, \textit{op.cit.}, p.34.
road. Her complaint to the police did not produce any result. \textit{Rowdies} were set up to attack her again on the public road and they were following her to generate problems. She genuinely believed that the Trivandrum police were behind all those wicked acts against her and that her life and property would not be protected by those guardians of law and order.

The general body of the Travancore State Congress met on 5 May 1938 in the Congress office premise at Trivandrum and presented its sympathy towards Annie Mascarene for the cruel experience that she had to face for the services she rendered to the cause of the country. It expressed deep worry and anxiety at the state of affairs in Travancore, in which there seemed to be totally no security for person and property and respect for womanhood.

On 12 May 1938, Annie Mascarene submitted a memorandum to the Maharaja, stating the bitter experience she had to face after becoming an active member of the State Congress. After the submission of the Memorial to the Maharaja, she was subjected to regular harassment and indignities with a view to forcing her to terminate from political agitation for Responsible Government and the miscreants so behaved as to confirm the belief that they were safe from the arms of law. As each incident occurred, she communicated the matter to the authorities concerned immediately, but none of her representations led to any improvement in the situation.

Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar’s administration has been characterized by the suppression of civil liberties, which had been long enjoyed by the people of Travancore. On 15 July 1938, Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar’s police entered the Science College and brutally tortured the students. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay had been invited to Trivandrum to preside over Youth League Conference on 20 August 1938. But the Travancore government prohibited the entry of her in Travancore territory. For violating the prohibitory order, she was arrested and this fired the spirit of revolt among Travancore women. After the arrest and removal

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[33.] S. Raimon, et.al., (eds.), \textit{op.cit.}
\item[35.] Akkamma Cherian, \textit{op.cit.}, p.51.
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of Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, from the railway station, a meeting was held at Thampanoor under the auspices of All Travancore Youth League. P.N.Krishna Pillai, N.P.Kurukkal, N.Sreekantan Nair, Annie Mascrene and others spoke. The immediate reaction of the Government was rigorous action against State Congress leaders, by promulgating the ‘Criminal Law Amendment Act’ drawn upon the lines of ‘Parallel British Indian Act of 1932’. Unmoved by the warning of the Government, the State Congress organized protest meetings far and wide.

When C. Kesavan was arrested from Panmana asram, a woman’s jatha was held in protest against this arrest. This was the first political jatha by the women of Travancore. On 26 August 1938 the Maharaja passed a regulation proclaiming Travancore State Congress and Youth League as unlawful. It was called ‘The First Regulation of 1114’. The State Congress leaders were prohibited from participating and speaking in political meetings. The reserve police march and the rushing of military trucks created the impression of a reign of terror in Travancore. State Congress Working Committee was dismissed and a strike Committee was organized.

The Congress decided to start Civil Disobedience Movement. Instead of the post of Congress President, a ‘dictator’ was appointed and was given the right to nominate his successor. Twelve such ‘dictators’ were appointed including women like Elizabeth Kuruvilla, Mrs. Pandalam K.P. Raman Pillai and Akkamma Cherian. Civil Disobedience Movement started on 26 August 1938. The police captured ‘Van Ross Bungalow’, the Congress office and confiscated all the properties. Pattom Thanupillai was succeeded by N.K. Padmanabha Pillai, brother of Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai. On 30 August 1938 a large number of girl students from schools and colleges left their institutions in response to police violence in the Science College.

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38. Raimon, et.al. (eds.), *op.cit.*, p.31.
A group of girl students from various colleges of Trivandrum including the two daughters of Kottayam Peshkar M.P. Joseph, waited before Y.W.C.A. and when the Maharaja returned from the temple, they approached his car and presented their petition against the Diwan and wanted the dismissal of the Diwan due to the inhuman police action in the University College on 15 July 1938\textsuperscript{40}. The Maharaja gave no answer. The car passed away and the girl students marched to Kowdiar palace as a jatha and finally dispersed after a mass meeting. This incident revealed the fighting spirit of Travancore women of the time\textsuperscript{41}.

An incident that caused substantial embarrassment to the Government during this period was the train journey undertaken across the state by Elizabeth Kuruvilla, the fifth ‘dictator’ of the State Congress from 21 to 28 September 1938. She travelled by train from Kollam to Shencottah and from there to Trivandrum. Thousands of people cheered her on the way and the premises of the railway station were used to hold demonstrations and meetings to welcome her. As the railway track and premises were beyond the jurisdiction of the State Government, there was nothing that the State police could do. Mrs. T.M. Varghese and many labour unions garlanded and welcomed her at Quilon. She reached Trivandrum on 15 September 1938. Again she went to Kottarakara. From Kottarakara she travelled to Trivandrum in a special train. She was welcomed and garlanded at Kottarakara, Ezhukone, Kundara, Kilikolloore, Kollam and Trivandrum stations\textsuperscript{42}. On her advent at Trivandrum on 28 September 1938, thousands of people were gathered there. She was arrested and was given eighteen months imprisonment and a fine of rupees two thousand. Thus Elizabeth Kuruvilla became the first woman who courted arrest in State Congress strike\textsuperscript{43}.

The incident prompted the State government to approach the Government of India and the Government of Madras with the request that they should enforce

\textsuperscript{40} E.M. Kovoor, \textit{T.M. Varghese}, (Mal.), Sahitya Pravartha Co-operative Society Ltd, Kottayam, 1965, pp.185-186.
\textsuperscript{42} C. Narayana Pillai, \textit{Thiruvitamkoor Swatantra Samara Charithram}, (Mal.), C. Narayana Pillai Foundation, Trivandrum, 1972, p.414.
\textsuperscript{43} Akkamma Cherian, \textit{op.cit.}, p.69.
restrictions on political agitators abusing the facility of train travel and ban meetings and demonstrations in railway territory. Both the Governments of Madras and India responded to the request and gave appropriate directions in this regard. The Travancore government also took the unprecedented step of reserving all the retiring rooms in the Trivandrum Central Station. This was expected to prevent demonstrations because the retiring rooms were the only places where persons could stay without coming into Travancore territory.

On 21 September 1938, the students of Science College at Trivandrum protested police presence in their campus. A Brahmin woman student called Bhagavathi Lakshmi Ammal made a speech in the meetings held at the college hall questioning the police presence\textsuperscript{44}. On 30 September 1938, the State Congress agitators and police clashed at Kallara and Pangode. Military was called to deal with the mob and two people were killed in military action\textsuperscript{45}.

On 8 October 1938, the Trivandrum branch of ‘All India Women’s Conference’ held a meeting at Victoria Town Hall, Trivandrum under the presidency of Mrs. Kunjan Pillai, wife of Dr. Kunjan Pillai, ex-Chief Secretary\textsuperscript{46}. The meeting passed a memorandum to end the adverse situation of Travancore.

Mrs. Pandalam K.P.Raman Pillai travelled all around Travancore and wanted enquiry on the death of Sivaraja Pandyan, the leader of a popular \textit{jatha} from Madurai to Trivandrum. On 14 October 1938, she reached Trivandrum from Madurai in an express train and was arrested and put in Trivandrum Central Jail\textsuperscript{47}. She nominated Advocate Kadakkavoor N. Kunjuraman as the next ‘dictator’. On 17 October 1938, eight students of Bharananganam High School organised strikes. On 17 October 1938, Saroja and Durga Bai, two Brahmin women, entered the prohibited railway station area and were arrested and later set free in their father’s bail\textsuperscript{48}.

\textsuperscript{44} C. Narayana Pillai, \textit{op.cit.}, p.453.

\textsuperscript{45} S. Raimon, et.al., (eds.), \textit{op.cit.}, p.34.

\textsuperscript{46} C. Narayana Pillai, \textit{op.cit.}, p.461.

\textsuperscript{47} Akkamma Cherian, \textit{op.cit.}, p.73.

\textsuperscript{48} C. Narayana Pillai, \textit{op.cit.}, p.452.
The misrule of Travancore government and the police atrocities and cruelties conducted in the Science College stirred the emotions of all parts of Travancore and the foremost among them was Kanjirappally. Every Sunday, many people from places like Ponkunnam, Chirakkadavu, Manimala, Erumely, Parathodu etc. reached Kanjirappally and arranged meetings and courted arrest. The brain behind these meetings was K.V.Varkey Karikkattuparambil. Student leaders like M. Said, K.K. Kunjacko, A.P.Mariamma Anickal, Rosamma Mathew Pamboorikkal and others organized meetings and jathas at Kanjirappally.

Akkamma Cherian and her friends also actively participated in State Congress activities and collection of funds. All these activities of girl students were reported by the press and there spread the impression that women of Kanjirapally were actively participating in Civil Disobedience Movement. When V.V. Varkey, who was in charge of State Congress Strike Committee at Kanjirappally, visited State Congress leaders of Ernakulam Camp, who were in search of a woman, courageous enough to become the twelfth ‘dictator’ and to lead a jatha to Maharaja’s palace, asked him about Akkamma Cherian. Soon V.V.Varkey sent a telegraph to Akkamma Cherian’s house and the reply was positive.

Akkamma Cherian thus became the twelfth ‘dictator’ of Travancore State Congress. She resigned her post of Headmistress and went to Madurai by train accompanied by her brother K.C.Varkey, sister Rosamma Cherian and V.V.Varkey. Akkamma Cherian carried with her a memorandum, to be presented to the Maharaja. Its provisions included the following items:

- The government should officially proclaim clearly the establishment of responsible government in Travancore.
- A committee should be formed to prepare a programme for the activation of responsible government. This committee should be included State Congress nominees and representatives of labourers.

• The government should remove the prohibition on State Congress and Youth League.

• The government should abolish Criminal Law Amendment Act.

• All political prisoners should be released.

• Youth League members, Trade Union members etc. who were arrested, should be released.

• All type of fines collected in the form of cash and property from political prisoners should be returned.

• All punishments imposed upon students, teachers and managements should be repealed.

• Those who suffered the military and police atrocities should be given compensation.

• An impartial enquiry upon police atrocities should be conducted.

• The prohibition upon newspapers should be removed.

The vigour of Travancore people increased when the terror of torture increased. By October 1938 i.e., Thulam 1114, Travancore became a blast furnace of conflict and agitation. It was on this time, fell the ‘attathirunal’, i.e., the birthday of the Maharaja.

As the Travancore Government was making elaborate preparations to celebrate the Maharaja’s birthday on the day of ‘Chithira’ asterism in the month of Thulam 1114, i.e., 23 October 1938, the State Congress announced its plan to hold a huge demonstration in Trivandrum on that day under the leadership of its Acting President Akkamma Cherian. A large number of volunteers from all over Travancore began to flow towards the capital. They carried the placards ‘Maharaja Sannidhiyilekku’ or ‘To the durbar of the Maharaja’. They all were arrested at different places and were confined at jails. They were given food and
shelter by common people and merchant community. A notable name in this connection is Mariam Eapen, the sister of E.John Philipose\textsuperscript{52}.

Many women from aristocratic families such as Mrs. John Kuruvilla participated in political activity because, the sensitive emotions created by Travancore State Congress against the autocracy and haughtiness of Diwan Sir C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar heavily influenced the minds of people of Kerala\textsuperscript{53}.

On the day of Maharaja’s birthday the streets of Trivandrum were filled with volunteers wearing \textit{khadi} clothes and ‘Gandhi caps’. Slogans like ‘Bharat Mata Ki Jai’, ‘Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai’ and ‘State Congress Ki Jai’ echoed in the atmosphere of Trivandrum.

In the open car, Akkamma Cherian was escorted by K.R. Elankath, Kalady Purushothaman Nair, Nedumangad Kesavan Nair, P.K. Kunjan and others. Akkamma Cherian wore a ‘Gandhi cap’ and was clad in pure white \textit{khadi} clothes. Their car was accompanied by about fifty thousand volunteers wearing ‘Gandhi caps’ and \textit{khadi} uniforms and bearing tri colour flags and placards. The shouts of ‘Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai’ shocked the ears of Travancoreans who were familiar with \textit{Vancheesa Mangalam}\textsuperscript{54}. About two lakh people participated in the march\textsuperscript{55}.

The prisoners inside the jails made rough Congress flags out of pieces of bedsheets and coloured it with red laterite mud and vegetable juice and hoisted it proudly on firewood. Akkamma Cherian ‘sailing on a sea of white’ went to the South gate of the Fort. They stopped because the police blocked the rally and the volunteers sat on the ground. The merchants of the Chalai Bazar provided snacks to the volunteers. Armed cavalry men came and made a charge at the volunteers who were sitting on the ground. Most of the volunteers got injured when the horses kicked them from all sides\textsuperscript{56}. Some cavalry men used their lances to attack the volunteers. An ox was also sent against them. A military truck was driven at

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, p.82.
\textsuperscript{53} C. Narayana Pillai, \textit{op.cit.}, p.417.
\textsuperscript{54} Malayala Manorama, 4 May, 1991.
\textsuperscript{55} Mathrubhoomi weekly, 23 October, 1938.
\textsuperscript{56} Akkamma Cherian, \textit{op.cit.}, p.86.
full speed and the army personnel in the truck jumped out and started kicking the volunteers as good targets. Even at this point, the volunteers and the crowd remained non violent and did not resort to either retaliation or attempt to run away in fear.

Colonel Watkis came forward to ask the dictator what she required. She wanted to see the ruler to present their demands and he went inside to convey the message. Colonel Watkis returned to Akkamma Cherian to tell her that they must make an appointment with the Private Secretary to the Maharaja but she insisted on an immediate interview. Colonel Watkis in a blaze of anger put his hand to his revolver and warned her that he would have to shoot to disperse the crowd. Then she stood up in the car and replied, “These are my volunteers – shoot me first.” There after Colonel Watkis turned on his heel and went back to the palace.

The Maharaja was taken through Kaithamukku and several small lanes safely to Kowdiar palace. The Diwan also left for his safe haven at Bhakthi Vilas palace. It was a historic retreat by the rulers of Travancore at the face of a popular mass rally.

The procession returned to the railway station to await the released prisoners who arrived there very late at night. Akkamma Cherian led the crowd wearing khadi sari and ‘Gandhi cap’ and she looked like ‘Durgadevi’ who trampled down the sin. Her curly hair waved in the air like black flags shown against autocracy.

A public meeting was held at the Railway Station ground and it was addressed by the newly released leaders. The Diwan turned against the State Congress describing it as a communal organ having little popular support for it. He also did not hesitate to say that the State Congress was an illegitimate offspring of the Indian National Congress. A counter organization called

57. Mathrubhoomi weekly, 30 October, 1938.
59. Ibid., p.88.
‘Travancore National Congress’ was brought into being by opportunists, loyalists and caste Hindus as per the wishes of Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar. But it died a natural death soon. The political atmosphere was becoming tense day by day.

The Working Committee of the Travancore State Congress, after calling off the Civil Disobedience Movement on 23 October 1938 decided to concentrate its energies on strengthening the organization throughout the State. Annie Mascrene, Akkamma Cherian and others were directed to organize women volunteer corps or ‘Desasevikas’ throughout the State with branches in every taluk. As planned by the Working Committee, Annie Mascrene along with other important leaders, toured throughout the state for carrying the State Congress message even to the villages and everywhere they were received by huge and enthusiastic crowds. New branches were formed and groups of volunteers were enrolled, both men and women.

Alarmed at the popular support of Annie Mascrene, the Travancore government arrested her at midnight at Chengannoor on 13 November 1938. Akkamma Cherian and her sister Rosamma Cherian were jailed for participating in the Vattiyoorkkavu meeting. Rosamma Cherian who reached the Central Station, Trivandrum, on 24 December, to preside over a meeting scheduled to be held on that date was arrested on a charge of sedition for having printed and circulated copies of a pamphlet listing acts of violence committed by the government.

Akkamma Cherian and Rosamma Cherian were put in Trivandrum Central jail where Annie Mascrene was already residing. According to the orders of the Jail Superintendent Subramanian Pillai, a life long prisoner Kunjulekshmi used to shout at them while they were singing the National Anthem. Sometimes she attacked them with a broom. When Akkamma Cherian and Rosamma Cherian were presented before the court, they submitted a statement before the court, showing all these ill-treatment in the jail. The whole state rose in protest. Gandhiji wrote thus in Harijan:

63. Ibid., p.96.
“I have before me a letter describing the ill-treatment of Smt. Akkamma Cherian, a political prisoner. If what she declared in court is true, her treatment was surely disgraceful. She is a cultured woman. She gave up the Headmistressship of a school inorder to join the struggle for liberty. It hurts one to think that in an advanced State like Travancore which boasts of an enlightened prince, an equally enlightened Maharani, his mother and an experienced Diwan, liberty is being choked by rude repression …”64.

The students’ agitation started again, though on a lower key. The University College, Trivandrum was the main vista of the agitation. The students organized a strike everyday and a chosen few also went on hunger strike. The Diwan tried to deal with the situation by inflicting academic penalties on the student agitators. In 1946, Aruna Asaf Ali visited Travancore and Youth League presented a Mangalapatram65. The latter half of 1946 seems to have been a period when Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar plunged himself into the task of advocating vigorously the cause of independent Travancore. The great Punnapra Vayalar uprising took place in 1946. In the pitched battle between workers and police, a large number of people lost their lives in Punnapra, on 24 October 1946. Similarly, the armed police force attacked the Communist citadel at Vayalar on 27 October 1946 and massacred the workers. This event hastened the end of the autocratic rule of the Diwan and helped in the early establishment of responsible government in Travancore66.

After the end of the Second World War, Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar announced a new scheme of constitutional reforms for Travancore. According to it, the position of the Diwan in relation to the legislature and the judiciary would have been similar to that of the President of the U.S.A. The popular slogan in those days was ‘American Model Arabikkadalil’, i.e., ‘American Model in the Arabian Sea’67.

64. Harijan, 18 February, 1939.
65. Vanithamitram magazine, Book No.3, Issue 1, Chingam, 1122 M.E.
66. A.Sreedhara Menon, op.cit., p.111.
67. Ibid., p.108.
On 11 June 1947 Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar announced that Travancore would set itself up as an independent sovereign state. The Diwan’s Shashtiabdyapoorathy was celebrated in Travancore and eulogies were showered upon him.

On 25 July 1947, fell the Centenary celebrations of the great ruler and music composer Swati Thirunal. At the conclusion of the function, when Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar was proceeding to get into his car, an attempt was made on his life. Though seriously wounded, he had a narrow escape. Within a few days, Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar left Travancore. By 15 August 1947, the accession of Travancore to the Indian Dominion was notified and Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar tendered his formal resignation on 19 August 1947. Later it was established that the attack on Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar was made by K.C.S Mony, an activist of Kerala Socialist Party who was closely associated with its leader N.Sreekantan Nair.

The day after the attack on Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, leaders like Pattom Thanu Pillai, T.M.Varghese, A.J. John, C. Kesavan, Kumbalathu Sanku Pillai, P.S. Nataraja Pillai, K.P. Neelakanta Pillai and others were arrested but they were subsequently released.

After the exit of Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar from the State, the Maharaja granted full responsible Government to Travancore and it became the first State to introduce Universal Suffrage in the elections to the representative body. The first popular ministry of Travancore with Pattom Thanu Pillai as Prime Minister sworn in on 24 March 1948. Women like Akkamma Cherian, Rosamma Cherian and Annie Mascrene played a notable role in the struggle for responsible government in Travancore.

The other important stream of political activity in Travancore was under the leadership of Trade Union Movement, Congress Socialist Party and later the Communist party. The period between 1917 and 1935 marked the growth of

terrorist and revolutionary movements, spread of Socialist ideas, and unrest among the working class.

Industrialization has always been accompanied by Trade Union Movement. The growth of Trade Unions was the result of the desire of labourers to better their economic conditions through collective bargaining. It was the bitter social disabilities and the severe economic oppression experienced by the labourers which paved the way for the growth of a powerful Trade Union Movement among them. The need for unity and organization to defy the brute forces of the oppressors was increasingly felt and the labourers readily responded to the call of their radical leaders to form Trade Unions.

Trade Union Movement originated in Travancore during the reign of Sree Moolam Thirunal Maharaja. The spread of Trade Unions was accompanied by a large number of strikes. The radical Trade Union Movement received a fillip with the emergence of Communist Party. The high level of literacy helped to spread radical ideas among the workers. The Labour Unions were organized on ideas like anti-casteism, rationalism, equality, liberty, Socialism etc. Its members and leaders were mostly drawn from nineteenth century social reform movements like ‘Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam’, ‘Sahodara Movement’ etc.70. Industrial development in Travancore took place in Alleppey and Quilon and so Trade Union Movement flourished in these two centres.

The movement began with the coir factory workers. European Capitalists like Darrah Smail and Company established coir factories in Alleppey. The workers toiled from sunrise till dusk and they were inflicted harsh punishments and were imposed huge fines by work contractors called mooppans. It was in April 1922 that the first ‘Labour Union’ was formed in Travancore. Like the Trade Union movement in Britain, in which the social activities of the Methodist church played a large part, the Trade Union movement of Travancore had a religious origin.71.

71. Louis Ouwerkerk, op.cit., p.63.
P.K. Bawa or Vadappuram Bawa, an ardent supporter of the social reform movements and admirer of Sree Narayana Guru and T.K. Madhavan, was the founder of this union⁷². Its first General Secretary V.K. Velayudhan was an Ezhava lawyer. Bawa took the initiative of convening a meeting of like minded persons in the courtyard of Alummoottil Kesavan and a ‘Labour Union’ was formed. To P.K. Bawa, the formation of ‘Labour Union’ was the fulfillment of a long cherished dream⁷³. Three hundred workers from ‘Empire Coir Works’, were its first members⁷⁴. Workers from ‘South Indian Coir Works’, ‘Pierce Leslie and Company’ etc. also became its members.

The first labour meeting in Kerala convened on 31 March 1922 at Alleppey under the leadership of Vadappuram Bawa, Swami Satyavrathan, Dr. M.K. Antony, T.I. Karunakaran, B.V. Bappu Vaidyar, T.C. Kesavan Vaidyar, M.K. Kunjachan Mooppan and K.M. Cherian gave birth to the ‘Labour Union’ which, after a few months, transformed itself into the ‘Travancore Labour Association’ of which Bawa was the Secretary for quite sometime.

Vadappuram Bawa was also the mastermind behind the newspaper ‘Thozhilali’ which published in 1924 which was the first newspaper of labourers in Kerala⁷⁵.

The ‘Travancore Labour Association’ held its first annual conference in April 1924, at Bhagavati Vilasam theatre, Alleppey, two years after its formation. It was in this conference that the demand for labour representation in the Legislative Assembly was first raised. This was the period of the Vaikom Satyagraha. The Conference not only declared its support to the Satyagraha but also sent a delegation of fifty members to participate in the Satyagraha. The next day, the volunteers clad in khadi, left for Vaikom under the leadership of Swami Satyavratan.

⁷³. K. Ramachandran Nair, op.cit., p.53.
⁷⁵. Sajeev Janardhanan, op.cit., p.70.
In 1926 the association established a library and a night school for the labourers. Workers were allowed to take books home in the evening, from the library. Instruction in English, Malayalam, Arithmetic and training in public speaking were given to the workers. The ‘Labour Association’ took special interest in associating its members with the ‘Temperance Movement’ i.e., ‘Madyavarjana Prasthanam’. Mutual help schemes like ‘Death Benefit Fund’ and ‘Annual Health Care System’ were started.

A labour co-operative society was also established in 18 July 1926. Here, essential commodities were sold at a reasonable price\(^{76}\). In 1930, the Labour Association gave a warm welcome to Salt Satyagraha *jatha* moving from Trivandrum to Dandi\(^ {77}\). The ‘Travancore Labour Association’ also participated in the foreign cloth boycott agitation. P. Kesava Dev, a prominent literary figure in Malayalam was appointed as the Secretary of ‘Travancore Labour Association’ in 1933 and he gave a militant and more aggressive leadership to it. It was by 1930s Marxist philosophy made great impact on Kerala society. The ideas of class struggle, despotism of the Proletariat, contradiction between Capitalism and Socialism etc. began to ripple in Kerala’s atmosphere.

Class movements began to develop among peasants, labourers, teachers, women, youngsters and students. Marxist philosophy slowly became an important factor of Kerala philosophy. In March 1931, ‘Communist League’ was formed at Trivandrum under the leadership of N.P.Kurukkal. In August 1931, ‘All Travancore Youth League’ was formed at Trivandrum. They took the initiative to lead a Salt Satyagraha *jatha* from Trivandrum to Payyannur. In Kerala a branch of Congress Socialist Party was formed in 1934, in a meeting held under the Presidentship of K. Kelappan. Many women entered the field of Communist political activity from Ezhava social reform movements, Trade Union movements, anti-imperialistic struggles etc. A woman advocate from the Vellala community, C.O.Ponnamma, had been the Vice President of the

\(^{76}\) Andalatt, *op.cit.*, pp.89-90.

‘Travancore Labour Association’. She was nominated to the ‘Travancore Legislative Assembly’ in 1936\(^7\)

The coir industry was concentrated in the district of Alleppey and this concentration helped Alleppey to become the centre of working class movement. The coir workers organized into unions shortly after the agriculture unions were founded. The soil of Travancore was ripe for a labour movement. Literacy was higher among the factory workers of Travancore than anywhere else in India. Each literate worker read out his half anna newspaper to a group of illiterate fellow workers. The efficient organization of the ‘Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam’ had awakened social consciousness among the poor factory workers and boat crewmen, who rapidly became politically conscious also.

P.Sundarayya started relationship between Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party. In 1937 S.V. Ghat came to Kerala from Bombay and played a good role in the formation of Communist Party. He was helped by P. Krishna Pillai, K Damodharan, N C. Sekhar and E.M.S. Namboothirippad. The Congress Socialist Party of Kerala converted to Communist Party in 1939 at a meeting of C.S.P. leaders held at Pinarayi in Thalassery taluk\(^7\)

The Communist movement put forward the ideas like rationalism, anti-casteism, intercaste marriage, social justice etc. The growth of Communist Party in Kerala represented not only the rise of a new political party but also a new phase in the democratization process of Kerala\(^8\).

It was the Communists who started organized mass movements in Kerala. A large section of progressive minded people who were participating in socio religious reform movements, agrarian agitations, anti-government strikes etc. were attracted towards Communist Party. Class consciousness was created among the working class through labour meetings, night schools, inspiring speeches, pamphlets, literature etc.

In May 1937, the fifteenth annual conference of ‘Travancore Labour Association’ was held at Vani Vilasam Hall, Alleppey. The first Red Flag with sickle and hammer was hoisted here and it was designed by Simon Asan. The coir workers of Alleppey participated in the Abstention Movement. The labourers and workers of Alleppey and other areas always co-operated with all the activities of Indian National Congress.

When the Travancore State Congress launched an agitation for responsible government, the labourers under the leadership of R. Sugathan declared their support to the agitation. On 19 October 1938, a meeting attended by a large number of labourers was held at Kidangamparampu ground in Alleppey. This meeting declared 21 October 1938 as the protest day and decided to observe a strike on that day. A group of Alleppey Coir Factory workers wearing red uniforms and carrying red flags joined with Akkamma Cherian’s historic journey, when the train reached Kollam station.

On 23 October 1938, a team of red volunteers from Alleppey representing the working class, under the leadership of Kunjunni Nair, had reached Trivandrum. They raised the Red Flag there and gave a ‘guard of honour’ to Akkamma Cherian and joined her march. They marched in army style shouting slogans and also singing a marching song “Adangukilla...” which means “We would not yield...”, specially written for the occasion by M.P. Bhattathiripad who was also known as ‘Premji’. It was a symbolic proclamation of the entry of working class into the democratic political struggles in Travancore. Meanwhile on 21 October 1938, a meeting was organized at Alleppey beach according to the blueprint of P. Krishna Pillai and thousands of men and women volunteers marched to the beach.

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81. Kerala Kaumudi, 30 May, 1937.
83. Akkamma Cherian, op.cit., p.83.
84. K. Ramachandran Nair, op.cit., p.32.
85. Ibid.
This first general strike of the coir factory workers was organized by the Labour Association at Alleppey. The demands of the strike included responsible government in Travancore, minimum wages, forty hours work in a week, unemployment allowance, maternity benefits etc. Workers of Cherthala, Aroor, Ambalapuzha and Alleppey held marches, demonstrations and meetings. Trade Unions all over Travancore joined the strike.

For the first time the Alleppey town was shocked to hear the revolutionary slogans such as ‘Inquilab Zindabad’ and ‘Workers of the world unite’ from the working class. Police encountered the march with a brutal lathicharge.

Letters of the strike committees, circulars, statements etc. were dispersed through women and children who formed the foundation of the decisive communication system. Red shirt volunteers, men and women participated in the struggle. Women workers picketed the factory gates and took the vow that they would not enter the factory gates until the strike ended. The strike involved about thirty thousand workers and lasted twenty six days from 16 August to 11 September 1938. The government was forced to institute a Commission to redress the grievances of labourers and it recommended a wage increase of six and a half percent.

The immediate outcome of the strike was the grant by the employers of a sympathetic allowance of more than six percent on the basic wages and appointment of a board of conciliation. The strike compelled the government to recognize the labourers as a formidable force. There was resurgence among peasant women and middle class women against untouchability, slavery, casteism, economic exploitation etc. The successful end to the coir factory workers’ strike in 1938 was a morale booster for the workers of Kuttanad. From these experiences they came to know that collective bargaining and united fight was the only way to extract for them, the minimum human existence they deserved.

The formal transformation of ‘Travancore Labour Association’ into ‘Travancore Coir Factory Workers’ Union’ (T.C.F.W.U.) took place during this time. It was the ‘Travancore Coir Factory Workers’ Union’ that initiated the building of a women’s organisation and therefore been termed as ‘the mother of the women’s movement in Travancore’\(^89\). It was the role that women played in this strike that gave way to the Communist led ‘Travancore Coir Factory Workers’ Union’ to organize women through their own forums. The ‘Factory Committees’ and the ‘Ward Committees’ enabled women’s politicization both at the factory level and outside\(^90\).

After understanding the potential of women for strike, the ‘Travancore Coir Factory Workers’ Union’ decided to organize women through women’s ‘Factory Committees’ and a broader women’s organization outside the factory. A woman coir worker K. Meenakshi became the full time organizer of the study camps. Among the permanent workers include Meenakshi, Devayani, Lakshmikkutty, Gomati Dev and Dakshayani.

Meenakshi and Gomati Dev were delegated the work of organizing women workers through women’s ‘Factory Committees’ while Devayani, Dakshayani and Lakshmikkutty were to organize the ‘Mahila Sangham’ outside. A study camp was organized by the Communists at Kottayam where 208 women participated. The classes were conducted by C. Unniraja, M.S. Devadas and P. Krishna Pillai. And the participants included Bhavani Amma from Kottayam, P. Yasoda from Kannur and Arya Pallom from Palakkad.

In 1941, women’s ‘Factory Committees’ began to be organized. The issues taken were arbitrary dismissal from work, wage cut, unequal wages, maternity benefits etc. They also took up issues of wife beating, desertion, husband’s prevention of women’s’ political participation etc\(^91\). The convenors of women’s ‘Factory Committees’ and their main organizers were V.J.Aleyamma, Ammini, Meera Velayudhan, “Caste, Class and Political Organisation of Women in Travancore”, *Social Scientist*, Vol.19, Nos.5-6, May-June, 1991, NewDelhi, p.74.


91. Ibid., p.508.
Mariamma, Janaki, Marykkutty, Madhavi, V.S.Sarada, Kalikkutty Assatty and Mary. The membership of Factory Committees between 1942 and 1945 were as below:

4.1 The Membership of Factory Committees between 1942 and 1945

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1942-1943</th>
<th>1944-1945</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.of Factory Committees</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.of members of Factory Committees</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From 1943 to 1945, three conferences of women workers were held along with the annual conference of ‘Travancore Coir Factory Workers’ Union’. Kalikkutty Assatty, an older activist of ‘S.N.D.P. Vanitha Samajam’, also joined ‘Travancore Coir Factory Workers’ Union’. Kalikkutty’s organizational experience proved invaluable in building up the women’s organizations. The ‘Thozhilali Samskarika Kendra’ i.e., ‘Worker’s Cultural Centre’ had its impact on worker’s families who participated as singers and acted in plays. Its aim was to use the talent of workers’ children for the propagation of Communist ideas.

Arranging cultural programmes such as enactment of drama, ‘Ottanthullal’, ‘Katha Prasangam’, dance and recitation of poems with political themes attracted labourers towards radical Trade Union Movement. Among those active in it were P.K. Medini, A.K. Anasuya and K. Meenakshi.

‘Ambalapuzha Taluk Mahila Sangham’ was formed in 1943 with K.Meenakshi as General Secretary and Kalikkutty Assatty as President. A conference was held at Kidangamparampu presided over by K.R. Gowri Amma and addressed by P.Visalakshi. Among the issues discussed were that of

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maternity benefit, the political situation arising from Diwan’s rule and need for responsible government. Local units of the organisation sprang up from Thottappilli to Mararikkulam. K.Meenaakshi also organised spice workers and agricultural workers.

Although writers differ regarding the exact origin of the first agricultural workers’ union, there is an agreement among them that it was formed and registered as a Trade Union in 1940. Thus the first agricultural workers unit, ‘Thiruvithamcore Karshaka Thozhilali Union’ (T.K.T.U.) came into effect with headquarters at Mankombu in Kuttanad Taluk.

The decade from 1940 to 1950 witnessed quite a few struggles by the agricultural workers of Travancore and the participation of women in these struggles was quite significant. It was the bitter social disabilities and the severe economic depression experienced by these labourers which paved the way for the growth of a powerful Trade Union Movement among them. The need for unity and organization to resist the brute forces of the oppressors was increasingly felt and the labourers readily responded to the call of their radical leaders to form Trade Unions. Communist Party grew as per the idea that without women no mass movement will be possible.

Women used to lead processions to extract a promise of wage rise and a six hour day which would have been unthinkable ten years before. Stories of numerous women workers who stopped the jennis in the paddy fields and forced them to grant their demands were heard in those days. The agricultural women workers of Kuttanad had started the gherao93. At times they encircled the landlords to get their demands accepted, for once he left the place under some pretext, there was no possibility of redressal of their grievances. Tactics of this kind generated terror and rage in the minds of landlords. They got the labourers arrested framing false cases against them. They were also manhandled by the rowdies and police.

In 1943, the first taluk level demonstration of women was held at Ambalappuzha. As women marched through the town, hostile comments were heard such as “women are taking to demonstrations, we men will have to cook now”\(^94\). Another procession was attacked by goondas of coir capitalists and a woman worker Joansa, who caught the collar of an attacker, was injured and hospitalized\(^95\). The organization grew rapidly until it was banned along with all other mass organizations during Punnapra Vayalar uprising. Women faced arrests, torture, and rape by military and police, during their house to house raids. Many activists from ‘Travancore Coir Factory Workers’ Union’ like K.Meenaakshi went to organize women agricultural workers, spice workers etc. into the working class and Communist movement.

In 1943, ‘All Kerala Mahila Sangham’ was formed to save the country from Fascist attack, to line-up women for the country’s freedom and to save people from famine and starvation etc. Its pioneering leaders were Thankamma Krishna Pillai, Kamalakshi, Sarawathy and Radhamma Thankachi\(^96\). They fought for land, wages etc. and against feudal oppression. Thousands of women coir workers also participated actively in labour strikes. Women made food, cleaned clothes and provided shelter to Communist Party members. Some of them knew how to use sickle and country pistols. Drawing water, serving food and cleaning clothes of comrades were part of their service to the nation and it were their roles in party work\(^97\). Women political participation of the period establishes that Kerala history is the history of Kerala women too. Women organized strike in Kalarkode field for wage increase to six annas, half an hour rest at noon etc. Goondas and police interfered but women never returned. Women workers went to other fields and discouraged women workers there. Finally wage was increased to six annas a day, and half an hour leisure time was allowed at noon.


\(^{95}\). \textit{Ibid.}, 503.


Punnapra Vayalar struggle was also the story of the women who suffered police brutalities and starvation. The rural masses inspired by Communist ideology, joined hands with the Trade Unions and came into armed encounter with the State government. This revolt lasted for four days from 24 October to 28 October 1946. Leaders of Punnapra Vayalar uprising were K.C. Pathrose, K.C. George, K.K. Kunjan, C.G. Sadasivan, P.G. Padmanabhan, T.V. Thomas, Varghese Vaidyan and C.K. Kumara Panicker. K.C. Pathrose had put his heart and soul into the Communist movement. In front of the thatched house of Pathrose, the Kattunkal Kandathil Veedu, party leaders used to assemble daily to debate issues and take decisions. They included P. Krishna Pillai, A.K. Gopalan, E.M.S.Namboothirippad, K. Damodaran, C. Unniraja, K.K.Warrier, N.C. Sekhar and others.

K.C. Pathrose’s mother Anna Rosa had to even borrow and beg to raise money for meeting the expenditure on food and tea given to leaders. A.K. Gopalan once described Anna Rosa as ‘the Mother of the party’98. The police camp attack by the labourers was followed by the house to house hunting by the military. Thus Travancore experienced the greatest event in its history. It was the culmination of working class struggle in Travancore. It was the only struggle in India in which all the sections of working class joined together under a common banner.

Trade Union Movement spread to other places like Alwaye. ‘Coir Factory Workers’ Union’ appointed volunteers to organize Trade Unions in Alwaye. The pioneer among them was P.G. Raghavan who organized ‘beedi’ workers and aluminium factory workers. ‘Aluminium Factory Workers Union’ came into being in 1944 and E.Balanandan was its first General Secretary. Its first President was J.T. Kayanatt, and its first Vice President was K.C. Mathew. They organized annual meetings of the union and P.K. Medini, the revolutionary singer from Alleppey came there and sang revolutionary songs99. A strike was organized for increase in wages in Aluminium Company. Many labourers were suspended and

98. K. Ramachandran Nair, op., cit, p.105.
another one-day strike was announced for re-instating the suspended labourers. Alwaye Assistant Police Superintendent Sharma announced that firing will be started if the strike was not suspended. A woman labourer Tressiakutty tore her blouse and challenged the police to shoot her. The police retired without taking any action. Tressiakutty was dismissed by the company but the suspended labourers were taken back. Trade Unions were also formed in aluminium, glass, matchbox and bronze factories in Alwaye.

Trade Union Movement developed fast in Quilon, which was the second most important industrial centre in Travancore. There were a number of tile factories, ceramic factories, cashew factories, saw mill, textile mill, paper mill and minerals and metal mines in Quilon. Many coir factories flourished in the coastal areas of Quilon. Out of the forty four factories in the Quilon division, twenty one were coir factories.

Women constitute ninety percentage of the workers engaged in coir industry, concentrated in two sectors of defibring and spinning. The wage rates have been low and working condition deplorable. The overwhelming majority of the workers in coir factories came from the socially backward Ezhava community and they were mostly women. In the coir factories there was a practice of using abusive language against women workers by mooppans. Women applied a novel method of filling their betel boxes with pebbles and throwing them against the mooppans whenever they abused any woman worker.

Kannanthodathu Janardhanan Nair organized ‘Boat Workers Union’ at Karunagappally, ‘Mineral Workers Union’ at Chavara, ‘Cotton Mill Workers Union’, ‘Textile Workers Union’, ‘Tile Company Workers Union’, ‘All Travancore Cashew Workers Union’ and ‘Quilon Factory Workers Union’ at Quilon. A meeting of A.D. Cotton Mill workers was also held at Mill Compound in December 1944 and about five hundred labourers were present. Copies of leaflets entitled “A Prayer to the Public”, published by ‘Travancore

100. Ibid., p.24.
Cashewnut Factory Workers’ Union was circulated\textsuperscript{103}. While various struggles for improved conditions saw active participation by women, it cannot be overlooked that leadership remained predominantly male.

Another major avenue of employment in Quilon was cashew industry. Most of the workers in cashew industry were women. Around 5.30 a.m., they used to arrive factories and many of them brought their children to the factory. The women workers had to work in the most unhygienic conditions. There were no toilet facilities, washing facilities and drinking water was not made available. Wages were given only for unbroken nuts. The payment was based on the weight of nuts but the management usually cheated them while weighing the nuts. If some nuts were by chance eaten by pregnant women, they were given inhuman punishments and humiliation\textsuperscript{104}. The workers of the Indian Nut Company were the first to be united. Women workers gathered around the factory gate and prevented the Manager and officers from entering the factory. In the negotiations that followed, the management agreed to provide bathrooms for women, crèche for children and freedom of Trade Union in the factory\textsuperscript{105}. The following are the prominent labour unions of Travancore which attracted both men and women workers.

### 4.2 Prominent Labour Unions of Travancore\textsuperscript{106}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labour Unions</th>
<th>Year of Commencement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beedi Workers’ Union</td>
<td>1938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boat Workers’ Union</td>
<td>1940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenters’ Union</td>
<td>1944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashewnut Workers’ Union</td>
<td>1938</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{103}. Confidential Files 4248/44, Bundle No.132, dated 12-12-1944, Directorate of State Archives, Trivandrum.


\textsuperscript{106}. P.K.V.Kaimal, Revolt of the Oppressed, Punnapra Vayalar1946, Konark Publishers, Delhi, 1994, p.103.
Paliyam Satyagraha of 1948 was another victory of Communist Party. The Paliyam family was the owner of four big temples and about sixty small temples and *avarnas* could not walk in front of these temples. Meetings, *satyagrahas*, etc. were organized to get the right to walk before the Paliyam temple.

‘Cochin State Prajamandal’, Communist Party’, ‘Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam’, ‘Pulaya Mahasabha’ etc. supported and participated in the struggle. Later, ‘Cochin State Prajamandal’, ‘Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam’, ‘Pulaya Mahasabha’ etc. retreated and the struggle was confined to ‘Communist Party’. Arrests and torture were inflicted on *satyagrahis*.

An interesting feature of Paliyam Satyagraha was the participation of upper class women such as Arya Pallom, P. Priyadatta, I.C. Priyadatta, Devasena, Ezhumavil Saraswathi etc. Arya Pallom advised *antarjanams* of Lakkidi ‘Thozhil Kendram’ to make *Satyagraha* at Paliyam.\(^\text{107}\) P. Priyadatta, I.C. Priyadatta and

Ezhumavil Saraswathi came forward. A great *jatha* of women under the leadership of Arya Pallom was brutally lathi charged.

Women students from Paliyam High School started relay *satyagraha*. The first two were P.G. Mallika and T.K. Prabalakshi. A *jatha* of ‘Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam’, including two hundred women came from Thrissur. A ‘Sauharda Jatha’ from Palluruthy under the leadership of K. K. Kausalya also reached there.

‘Malayala Manorama’ published an article “Streekalum Satyagraham Thudangi” i.e., “Women also started satyagraha”, on 22 December 1947¹⁰⁸. Important women who participated in Paliyam Satyagraha were T.R. Prabala Thaippurakkal, P.R. Leela Valiyaparampil, N.K. Bhanumati Nediyara, P. Mallika Pottasseri, V.A. Omana Pottasseri and others¹⁰⁹.

Four women of Kodungalloor *Kovilakam* actively participated in Paliyam struggle. They were Kunjootty, Rema, Indira and Kochikkavu¹¹⁰. They started a manuscript magazine called ‘Sridevi’ which included stories, articles, poetry, drama, politics etc. All of them were attracted towards Communism. During the Paliyam struggle, Indira Thampuratti and Rema Thampuratti were arrested and were deserted in far off places. The government suppressed the struggle with an iron hand. Paliyam road was finally opened in 1948.

Thus the political participation of women in Travancore became true through their involvement in the activities of political parties like Travancore State Congress and Communist Party.

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