Chapter 5

TRADITIONAL LABOUR RELATIONS AND TRADE UNION MOVEMENT OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

Analogous to the traditional agricultural practices, there existed a corresponding labour relation in the paddy field of Kuttanad. Besides the Green Revolution strategy, (as discussed in the previous chapter) organisation of the agricultural labourers and their political mobilisation have been a crucial in bringing changes in labour relations. These are briefly discussed in this chapter.

Early Labour Relation in Kuttanad

One of the distinguishing features of slavery/servitude in India was its connection with the caste system. It was hereditary in general and belonged to the lowest caste (Dharm, Kumar, 1965: 34). Slaves could be sold/exchanged by its owner like any other commodity\(^1\). In this part of Travancore, namely Kuttanad, agrestic slavery prevailed in its worst form. Agrestic slaves were solely drawn from Pulaya and Paraya castes\(^2\). The institution of agrestic slavery was spearheaded by the Nampoothiris during 7 – 11\(^{th}\) century. Originally it was a wetland phenomenon. The original 32

\(^1\) According to an observation the price of one slave family in Kuttanad was one ‘anna’ (1/16 of a rupee). See Kamalasanan (1993: 26-27).

\(^2\) Francis Buchanan (1807: 370) used the term ‘slaves’ and ‘cherumar’ (pulayas of Malabar) synonymously.
settlements of Nampoothiris in Kerala developed around the major rice growing tracts on the banks of rivers and more fertile regions\(^3\). Agrestic slaves were mainly restricted to the wetland rice cultivation, other slave castes like Ezhava and others to the garden crop. The institution of unseeability and untouchability prevented their social, occupational and spatial mobility\(^4\). In passing from one part of the country to another, they were to tramp along through the marshes in mud and wet often up to their waist rather than risk the displeasure of their lords and masters by accidentally polluting them while using the public roads\(^5\).

Control over slaves was exercised at two tiers. \textit{Janmi} retained the right to allocate slaves to tenants enslaved under their control and labour was tied to land and transactions of land effected along with the enslaved slaves and they were transformed by three modes.

1) \textit{Janmom} rights and sales to a new master

2) \textit{Kanom} or mortgage for a loan (\textit{Otti} transaction)

3) \textit{Pattom} or rent, whereby the slaves were leased out for an annual sum

\(^3\) It is observed that of the 32 settlements 9 were in pamba valley, 13 in Periyar valley and 5 on the banks of perar (Jose, 1980: 16).

\(^4\) There was scale of distance pollution for several castes. Thus a Nair must keep 7 feet from a Nampoothiri Brahmin, an Ezhava must keep 32, a Cheruman 64 and a Nayadi 74 to 124 feet. The respective distance between these lower castes are calculated by a simple process of subtraction i.e., Ezhava must keep 25 feet from Nair and so on (Tharamangalam, 1981: 106. FN No: 14).

\(^5\) See A.V. Jose, op. cit. 25
Thus the rules to lease transaction in land were made applicable to slave labour as well. The institution of slavery was abolished in Travancore in 1855 and prior to that slave trade was banned in 1812. Though slavery was abolished, it continued to exist in a veiled form at least in giving rise to a new institution namely attached labour (Jose, 1979; George, 1987; Tharamangalam, 1981). They could however not be sold as in the agrestic slavery. The bulk of the labour force in Kuttanad was made up of attached labourers. The labourer together with his entire family was attached to a landlord and generally known by the latter’s name as ‘Murickan’s Pulayan’ or ‘Chalayil’s Pulayan’ and so on. The adult male members had to perform harder work like bunding, ploughing and dewatering operations. Even smaller children had their duties like run the errands or frighten-away crows and other birds by firing the crackers (Tharamangalam, 1981). They were generally housed on the broader portions of the ‘Chira’ (outer bunds of the padashekaram) to keep guard of ‘chira’ and the paddy field and sometimes

---

6 Though it was abolished in Malabar as far back as in 1843 (Varghese, 1970: 42) it did not appear to have a significant difference in the economic conditions of the slaves. Though one small plantation was started as early as in 1898 the British collector himself advised the Cherumars that it was in their interest as well as duty to remain with the masters provided that they were treated kindly.

7 There were three kinds of traditional labourers in Kuttanad: paniyal or attached labourer; panathal also known as onappanikkaran (semi attached labourer) and ‘purathal’ (outsider or completely free casual labourer). See Tharamangalam op: cit: 55. Onappanikkaran is a type of attached labourer. Before the onset of the agricultural operations, during the ‘Onam’ (malayalis festival) season the pulayan and his wife bowed the ‘thampuran’ (landlord) with gifts like vegetable, plantains or bananas or some measure of aval (a local food material made of paddy). Thampuran gave him 10-15 paras of paddy and Rs. 10 on the condition that it should be deducted from the work done for the Thampuran during the punja season. It was come to be called ‘Velakndom’ (credit for works or indebted labour contract). Such indebted pulayas and his family was not allowed to seek work elsewhere and kept themselves at the disposal of the thampuran until the loan is repaid which seldom materialised. Since the contract was effected during the Onam season, he has come to be called ‘onappanikkaran’. For practical purpose we disregard this slight difference between the ‘onappanikkaran’ and the attached labours as their plight was more or less the same (information from field survey).
kept as 'kudikidappukars' on the garden land of the 'janmi'. Why did the labourers keep attached just like slaves even after its de jure abolition?

The tenant cultivators of Kuttanad who benefited from the services of the slave castes devised the attached labour system so as to preserve the services rendered by the slave castes under the command that too at a cheaper wage. Owing to the extremely time bound nature of punja cultivation and criticality of labour application, labour requirement of cultivators of Kuttanad reaches its peak during the cultivation season. The pulaya and paraya castes ensured the ready supply in adequate quantity during the peak season. Besides, strengthening and renovation of the outer bunds before the dewatering operation require huge quantities of mud from the riverbed, coconut trunk and bamboo mat (vesha) and shrubs. It was mainly the pulaya and paraya who undertook such activities. "No other persons can go deep into the river to collect and fetch mud in large country boats (kettuvallam) to the padashekham (George, 1987: A.147).

Further, the hard task of dewatering operations, prior to the introduction of mechanical devices using waterwheel, were done by these classes of labourers. Therefore it was in the interest of the erstwhile lords that they were enslaved though in a different form.

Moreover, since the proclamation of slavery abolition was not backed by any financial assistance to the 'freed' slaves to maintain
themselves, they were forced to be in continued dependence of their former masters. Ban on leasing in land to the slave caste and the effects of rules of pollution and the caste based division of labour forced the pulayas and parayas to restrict themselves to the hard task of wetland cultivation (Ibid: 144).

Ezhava's occupation to wetland was more an exception. Their occupation mainly related to toddy and coconut. Nevertheless a limited number of them engaged in paddy field as Koi-chovān⁸. They did comparatively easier, healthier and cleaner tasks as ploughing, sprinkling lime shell, hedging (inside bunding), sowing and manuring. Ezhava women took the task of weeding and transplanting which were not hard and sometimes harvesting along with the slave castes.

Attached labour system that prevailed was feudal in character. Enforced economic dependence, threat of eviction, perpetration of physical violence, a below subsistence wage rate, were the devices by which the tenant and owner cultivators could exercise their hold over the attached labourers (George, 1987; Karnalasanan, 1993).

---

⁸ Koi-chovān (Ezhavan) is a semi attached male labourer who did the job of bringing food from the landlord to the padashekaram, taking him in country boats to the paddy field and some over all supervising activities.
The system was highly exploitative. During the lean period paddy was given by way of a loan measured with ‘Koolippara’ (a measure less than a standard para) and was accounted at a higher price. After harvest, repayment was paid in standard para and price accounted at a lower level. The net effect of the dual system was double exploitation in quantitative as well as in value terms. In the process of repayment, paddy obtained from harvests got exhausted and entered again during the lean season into a new loan. This cycle went on and the attached labourers got indebted continually for generations with little chance of escape (Ramachandran Nair, 1982).

They (attached labourers) had to suffer from a number of social disabilities. They were not expected to use clean cloth, could not walk through public roads (if they walked, they had to make an identifiable sound so as to avoid sight pollution), not allowed to put on moustache, a clean hair cut and a head band, their children barred from educational institutions, their women folk to lay their breast naked and so on.

They had also to use a set of derogatory words for self reference and a set of honorific words while referring to their employers and landlords: refer themselves as ‘adiyans’ (serfs); their paddy, ‘nelpathy’ (chaff); their rice, ‘kallari’ (stone rice); gruel, ‘karikadi’; (bad gruel) their money, ‘chempukashu’ (coppers); their house, ‘madam’ (hut); their children,

---

9 For different measures of para to pay cut wages, loan, rent etc (Ramachandran Nair: 1982: 236)
‘kidangal’ (calves); their masters’ dwelling place, ‘koilidam’ (god’s place),
master, Thampuran (god) and so on (Jose, 1979; Tharamangalam, 1981).
The landlords ensured that “in their movements, in posture, in demeanour,
in choice of words, in dress, in words and deeds the attached labourers showed
deference, humility and submissiveness” (Tharamangalam, 1981: 57-58). There were also stories of occasional sexual abuse of Harijan
women by the landlords.\(^{10}\)

The relationship between the landlord and his attached labour, it is
argued, had some characteristics also of patron – client relationship. There
had been personal bond of allegiance to their masters. The labourers shared
the joys and sorrows of the landlord. He, the pulaya was willing to sacrifice
his life to protect the master’s property and life. It was believed in those
days that for the successful completion of newly erected outer bund some
human sacrifice was essential. In such circumstances pulaya was willing
and ready to sacrifice even the life of his own son.\(^{11}\) And for such sacrifices

\(^{10}\) Such stories, claims Tharamangalam, are part of the folklore in Kuttanad which neither the landlords
nor the pulaya labourers deny. Young pulaya gents, fair skinned and smart had Syrian Christian blood
flowing through their veins (Tharamangalam, 1981: 58). According to another observation the newly
wedded daughter-in-law on the very next day had to be submitted to the landlord. If the lord was
pleased by her appearance, she had to be in the house of the lord and with him for three months
separated from her husband. This institution was known in Kuttanad as pennu (girl) ketiyal (when
married) padi kanickanam (had to be seen by the lord). Kamalasanan (1993: 154).

\(^{11}\) Tharamangalam 1981 narrates such an instance in Kuttanad burying a labour alive inside the bund,
with the connivance of other labourers of course (p. 59). See also Kamalasanan 1993 pp: 30-31 and 45
for another such incidence. Also take note of the observation by Pillai and Panicker 1965: 121.
Labourers “keeping incessant watch over the vulnerable bunds, throwing himself across the breach
which yawned before him to stem the tide of rushing water. Such sacrifices were not made under duress
but out of a deep sense of personal loyalty and devotion which the system had engendered”. Thakazhi,
story teller of Kuttanad narrates an incident of his father’s attached pulaya committed suicide when he
disowned his attached labourer, Thavappulayan. See Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, “Ormayute
Theeranngalil” (On the Shores of Memory), serialised autobiographical sketches, serial 2, Mathrubhumi
they were amply rewarded\textsuperscript{12}. Further more, they were required to do some military jobs for their master in case of a physical confrontation between the master and his enemies. Every prominent landlord family maintained group of pulaya ‘thugs’ (Ibid).

A feudal system of exchange of gifts was also practised between the landlords and the attached labourers. The lords used to give them gifts of paddy and cloths during the festivals like \textit{onam}, \textit{makam}, \textit{vishu} and \textit{karkidakavavu}. In times of exigencies like the marriage of pulaya’s daughter, sickness and death, the lords offered them financial assistance liberally. In turn, attached labourers also used to give them gifts like vegetables, bananas or plantains (Pillai and Panicker, 1965; Jose, 1979; Tharamangalam, 1981; Kamalasanan, 1993).

It has been argued that the greatest benefit of the system seems to have been the security that the attached labourer obtained from his master. It was for the landlord’s interest to do his utmost to keep the relationship without strain. Some people, speak of the old dispensation, especially the farmers, in glowing terms. But it is generally held that it was a system that enslaved, oppressed, exploited and degraded the labourers\textsuperscript{13}.

\textsuperscript{12} A grand landlord of chalayil family in Kuttanad who was on his deathbed bequeathed his loyal pulayan 4 acres of paddy field and some measure of garden land to his full ownership after the death of the landlord (Field information).

\textsuperscript{13} It seems worth noting to the contrasting findings of some researchers in the change over in Kuttanad and Palghat where attached system prevailed in its worst form in wetland cultivation. “Not a single agricultural labourer expressed the view that the system was good enough. Every worker expressed the view that it was a system that enslaved, oppressed, exploited and degraded them...... while the
Because of these, attached labourers in spite of certain advantages were considered as a kind of slavery. The system collapsed as a result of the unionisation of attached labourers in 1943 (George, 1987: 147). This marked the transition of the pulayas and parayas who were attached labourers to the category of free wage labourers which was already in existence. But according to some scholars the transition from slave labour to free labour was a mechanistic outcome of the capitalist development in agriculture especially the construction of granite walls around the padashekarams (which obviated the need for attached pulayas) and the electrification of the dewatering operations. These developments obviated the need for keeping attached labourers for mud mining and turning water wheels (Jose, 1980).

Despite the early development of capitalism in Kuttanad the relationship between farmers and labourers remained pre-capitalist and authoritarian until the early 1940s (Tharamangalam, 1981: 57). The opening up of plantations by the Europeans in the hilly areas during the latter half of 19th century did not seem to have benefited the agricultural labour landlords are nostalgic about the old system the labourers have no regret that it has changed so drastically and fast” (Tharamangalam, 1975: 59). “The majority of labourers in a Palghat village claimed that the new jannies behaved better than the old landlords: but even close to a third (of the interviewed) claimed that previously the relationship between the landlord and the labourers was more cordial”. And in other village “only a few labourers claimed that the old landlords were worse. The majority either claimed that the previous landlord relationship was more cordial, or else commented on new improvements in their conditions such as the reduction in the hours of work brought about by union activity” (Mencher, 1978: 352).
population of Travancore (Varghese, 1970: 47). This has been attributed to the availability of cheap Tamil labour in the plantation area.

Capitalist investment in punja cultivation could be traced back to the reclamation of paddy fields from the backwaters from the latter half of the 1880s. The ‘Pattom Proclamation’ prior to this in 1865, the introduction of mechanical pumps for dewatering from the turn of 20th century; institutional support from government like interest free loan and tax exemption and increase in the price of paddy during the two World Wars, which prompted further reclamation and the cultivation of paddy fields every year (without leaving fallow as it was the practice earlier); monetization of the rural economy of Kuttanad when farmers paid wages in money and the organisation of farmers in Kuttanad, the formation of Karshaka Sangham in 1937-38 and the advent of electric motors in 1940, despite all these indices of capitalist development, the feudal system of attached labour co-existed with it until 1943 (George, 1987).

It has been argued elsewhere (Jose, 1977) that the casualization process (free wage labour) began as back as in 1912 with the introduction of oil based pumping machine. This process got accentuated by later phenomena of seasonal migration of casual labourers from the regions around Kuttanad and by the swelling of local labour market, electrification of mechanized pumps in 1940 and strengthening of the outer bunds with
granite walls by 1940. Such labour saving technological and infra-structural developments minimised the labour requirements in dewatering and replenishing outer bunds -- the two highly labour demanding operations in *punja* cultivation. Hence farmers abandoned the costly attached labour system and paved way to the casual labour system. Unionisation itself was the result of the discontent of the labourer emerged out of diminution of employment opportunities resulting from the introduction of capital intensive technology (Jose, 1977)

It seems that the elevation of attached labour to the status of causal labour did not take place all on a sudden nor was it so mechanistic. A number of forces were in operation, it seems, that proletarianized the agricultural labourers in Kuttanad. Social movements like S.N.D.P. (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam)\(^{14}\), Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham, Royal Patronage for the spread of education, Missionary activities, economic factors like introduction of mechanical devices and of course, trade union movement all had their due role directly or indirectly in this process. Trade union activities under the communist movement, however, occupy the centre stage in this change-over to which we now turn.

\(^{14}\) The first revolt against the landlords in Kuttanad is attributed to the protest strike under the auspices of the SNDP Yogam in Kavalam even prior to the formation of the trade unions in 1943. See Kamalasanan, 1993: 60. The immediate reason was the physical violence perpetrated to an Ezhava female labour by a Christian landlord.
Organised Movement of Agricultural Labourers

By the mid thirties of 20th century, it is held in general, that the situation was ripe for the emergence of trade unionism in the hinterlands of Kuttanad. The capitalist mode of production provided the ground for the organisation and political mobilization of agricultural labour mass of Kuttanad. During the interwar period, the price of paddy kept low. Farmers were forced to keep the field fallow in rotation. (Cultivation of the padashekharam was resorted only once in three years). The problem was accentuated by the impact of Great Depression. Wages were cut and the number of days of employment dwindled. This led to a greater discontent among the agricultural labourers in general.

The pattern of agricultural employment as it developed in Kuttanad facilitated in formation of the union. It closely resembled that which existed in factory enterprises. Thousands of labourers were employed in vast stretches under one or different farmers (Jose, 1977; Kannan, 1988). The peculiar ecological factors provided the objective condition necessary for their organisation at a time of political mobilization of the labouring poor of rural Kerala (Kannan, 1988: 303).

---

For instance, the average money wage rates of male agricultural labourer in Kuttanad fell from Rs.0.50 in 1921-22 to Rs.0.33 in 1931. See Jose 1977: 41. F.N. No: 22. We don't have estimates of the reduced days of employment. Since the fields were kept fallow for twice in three years, the number of days of employment must have been reduced to that extent.
The contiguity of Alleppey, the nerve centre of trade union activities of workers, coir factories, oil extraction industry and Alleppey port gave further impetus to the organisation of agricultural labours (Jose 1977: 34). Many of the workers in the coir factory were drawn from impoverished agricultural families and also from the families of agricultural labourers of Kuttanad (Tharamangalam, 1981; Kannan, 1988; Kamalasanan, 1993). Factory workers whose working condition in terms of wages and regularity of work seem to have been the normative reference of agricultural labours (Alexander: 1973: 1553). The caste-based hierarchy in Kuttanad and the protected land market which kept out low caste from acquiring land helped the mobilization of the rural proletariat by communists\(^\text{16}\) (Jose, 1979).

However, the immediate stimuli for forming the union was the extreme scarcity of food for the labourers during the Second World War. Government introduced rationing of food items and non-agricultural families were issued ration cards. The agricultural labour families were not given on the plea that they were getting their wages in paddy. Because of the high price of paddy, farmers refused to pay wages in kind to the

---

\(^{16}\) Alleppey had emerged as a hotbed of Trade Union and radical activities. The first labour organisation in Kerala had been founded in Alleppey in 1922 under the name of the Travancore Labour Association of the workers of the Empire, Coir workers in Alleppey. It became the first trade union to be registered under the Travancore Trade Union Act which came into effect in 1938, under the name Travancore Trade Coir Factory Worker's Union. See Kannan, 1988. According to one estimate, 70 per cent of the members of the agricultural labour union in Kuttanad were drawn from scheduled caste mainly Pulaya community. See Oommen (1974: 85).
labourers\textsuperscript{17}. The agricultural labourers who were landed in a crisis responded to the Communist Party's call for the formation of the Union\textsuperscript{18} (Das, 1972).

Thus, a union of agricultural labourers was formed with a small membership (50 in number) largely of Ezhava agricultural labourers in 1939. It was called the Travancore Agricultural Worker Union (Thiruvithancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union)\textsuperscript{19} (Tharamangalam, 1981: 70; Kannan, 1988: 243; Kamalasanan, 1993: 66). They addressed themselves mainly, to the issues of wages, hours of work, security of employment, occupancy rights (tenancy) and the eviction of hutment dwellers.

The immediate demand, however, was the settling of work accounts without manipulations and an increase in the quantity of paddy which was paid as 'adayam' (the annual payment to the workers) from 25 paras of paddy to 100 paras. The strike in Kavalam lasted for 17 days. It was settled only on the conditions that the union leaders would be allowed to check the work account kept by farmers and that 75 paras of paddy would be paid as

\textsuperscript{17} Paddy price during the war rose from six annas to Rs. 5 per para. Before the war one para was sufficient to pay wages to 3 females or 2 males. But due to the rise in price of paddy it was adequate to pay ten females or seven males when wages were paid in cash. Sri. K. Ramachandran Nair 1982: 235.

\textsuperscript{18} The General Strike organised by the Coir Factory workers Union in 1938 was the first of its sort in the history of Kerala. Though the main demand was for responsible government, the workers won a wage increase of 6.26 per cent. The workers thought it as a great success and boosted their morale. Agricultural labourers in Kuttanad who inspired by the success of the coir workers responded to the party's call for organisation and mobilization.

\textsuperscript{19} It was in the early hours of December 8\textsuperscript{th} 1939, in the Tea Shop of Oommer at Pallathuruty in Kannakari Village, the first agricultural labour union ever formed in India was born, argues Kamalasananana (1993: 67) S.K.Das, a communist leader was the secretary. However, it is seen in Achuthanandan (1979) that the unionisation was accomplished only in 1943.
adaya. The successful strike in Kavalam inspired the attached labourers (who were earlier afraid of joining the union especially pulayas and parayas) and they came to the fold of the union (Tharamangalam, 1981; George, 1987; Kamalsanan, 1993). Gradually the farmers could no longer enforce continued attachment by creating indebtedness through manipulation of work accounts. This process, it is argued, initiated the collapse of the feudal system of attached labour in Kuttanad (George, 1987: A. 147).

It is generally held that the first decade of the movement was a difficult and trying period and during 1946-51 both the union and the party functioned as illegal organisation following the Punnapra Vayalar uprising. The period from the early forties to the mid-fifties is regarded as the building up of the movement.

In 1951, the activities of the party (C.P.I) and its organisation became legal. Between 1951 and 57 the union organised a number of protests and struggles. Prior to that the right of land owners to evict ‘hutment dwellers’ was abolished. It was one of the most pressing demands ever since the formation of the union.

---

20 Among the various struggles, those against the Muncken, the Kayal King and the second against the Cabinet Minister Shri. K.M. Kora of Travancore Cochin Govt. were the historical ones Tharamangalam (1981) and Kamalasanan (1993).
The first election after the reorganisation of the state on linguistic lines that brought the Communist Party to power had considerable impact on the trade union activities. The, then Labour Minister of the state, Shri. T.V. Thomas appointed a committee to investigate into the minimum wages of the agricultural labourers. Out of the recommendations of the committee, Industrial Relations Committee (I.R.C) was born. It prevented the police from interfering in the workers’ disputes21. Such pronouncements provided some new vigour and enthusiasm to the agricultural workers. As a consequence conflicts increased in their intensity and number.

Almost in every agricultural season the union made a number of demands. The union appointed its functionaries in different parts of Kuttanad to hoist a red flag at the beginning and at the end of the work. Farmers opposed this and the issue was taken to the IRC. It was finally decided to replace with sirens at convenient centres. There were 14 sirens in Kuttanad taluk (Oommen, 1974). Nevertheless the institution of hoisting red flag continued22.

Another issue was tractorisation. This was opposed by the Kuttanad Uzhava Thozhilali Union affiliated to the C.P.I(M). After a period of protracted strikes and negotiations, farmers were allowed to do the first

21 Industrial Relations committee (I.R.C) in a tripartite body represented by the farmers, labours and the government to settle labour disputes and determine the wage rate and working conditions for various agricultural operations. It was set up in September 1957.
ploughing of the dry soil with tractors on condition that after this, the farmers would plough the dry fields once, and subsequently the wet fields two times with animals. However, the union continued to oppose the introduction of tractors. Thus labourers exercised influence not only over rates and working hours but also the use of a particular technology for cultivation (George, 1987: 1559).

The return to power of a leftist Government again in Kerala in 1967 accelerated further changes in labour-farmer relations in Kuttanad. In addition to the wage revisions and other conditions one crucial issue that surfaced was the right of the employers to employ the workers of their choice. For some operations like harvesting all those who came for work had to be employed.

In 1970, a state wide land grab movement was launched under the leadership of the Marxist led agricultural labour union. It was decided by the union that:

1. The hutment dwellers must refuse to pay any rent for 10 cents surrounding their dwelling places.

2. They must take yield from them.
(3) Activists must occupy excess land by force.23

(4) Preparations must be made to resist attempts by the landlords or the police to prevent the execution of these decisions.

It led to many violent confrontations and encroachments.24 The campaign continued year after year until 1975.

Violence was an important weapon in the armoury of the union. Workers generally responded to the work calls given by the union, voluntarily. Those who did not, were forced to join under the threat of violence. Workers who broke the unions' strike call and worked for longer time than the stipulated were beaten up by communist squads (Alexander, 1973: 1555). Such action and reaction often led to eruption of violence in many parts of Kuttanad.

Farmers responded to trade union violence by forming their own associations. By the early 1960's the various farmers' association had been co-ordinated under one organisation viz. The Akhila Kuttanad Karshaka

---

23 The campaign to occupy excess land had a remote and symbolic aim. Its organizers had neither the resources nor the will to do so. It was to identify all the excess lands and to make their existence a matter of public knowledge and to put pressure on Govt. to take them over and distribute to the landless. See Tharamangalam 1981: 83. It is also possible that the party did not prepare itself for a struggle of the type in which the landless labourers would forcibly take over and cultivate the land. One thing is that, there was not enough land to satisfy all the landless labour households and any distribution by the Party would have created enormous political problems with the movement: see: Kannan (1988: 265).

24 The agitation began on 1st Jan: 1970. According to one estimate 10,000 cases relating to the land grab agitation were registered in the civil and criminal courts in the Alleppey district between 1st Jan; and 31st May 1970, involving an estimated 25,000 accused. The total number arrested were agricultural labourers. See Tharamangalam 1981: 83.
Sanghoms²⁵. Some leading farmers in Kuttanad formed their own para-
military forces to confront the violence of the union²⁶.

Very often the farmers had to surrender to the demands of the unions
due to the violence and the ‘criticality of labour application’ of ‘punja
cultivation’ especially in the harvesting operations. Paddy cultivation was
lucrative since farm productivity and price were showing an uptrend. High
rate of unemployment among the traditional non-agricultural labourers,
(who earlier considered work in muddy paddy field infra-dig) and better
working conditions in agriculture prompted them to join the rank of
agricultural labourers. Nair and Syrian Christian women and even school
going children who rarely participated in other types of agricultural work,
joined harvesting and related operations. In consequence during the late
sixties and early seventies, there had been a phenomenal increase in the size
of the labour force. In Kuttanad Taluk alone, between 1963 and 1971, the
increase in the number of agricultural labour force was more than three
times the increase in population. In Alappuzha district when population
increased by 17 percent, the increase in the agricultural labour force was by
about 57 percent, during the period (Jose, 1979). Favourable working
conditions attracted migrant labourers in thousands from the neighbouring

²⁵ As has been noted earlier, farmers association had existed in Kuttanad since the late 1930’s however, they were nothing more than clubs of big landlords engaged in lobbying the bureaucrats and the politicians.
²⁶ Farmers in upper Kuttanad under the leadership of Shri. E. John Jacob (a former Minister of Kerala) who belonged to the Kerala Congress, organised para-military, outfits known as Niranam ‘Pada’, (group of soldiers) or ‘Kuruvadi pada (kuruvaci - lathi like short stick to beat the violent union activists). Niranam is a village in the upper Kuttanad region of Thiruvalla Taluk.
areas to the paddy fields for harvesting. At the same time there had been no remarkable increase in the area under cultivation.

Agricultural labour market was getting saturated and over crowded. The extent of over crowding in the field was such that, “they (the labourers) could harvest only for 45 minutes or one and a half hours rather than for days elsewhere” (Mencher, 1980 P: 2).

“There were many instances of harvesting done in moon-lit dawns, in collusion with the loyal local workers for minimising the loss of corn due to overcrowdings and for showing patronage to the loyal / preferred workers”. (Thomas and Thomas 1999a: 305).

And more than that “It is a kind of irony when a farmer in Kuttanad had to go to the union offices in the late sixties and seventies to inform them of the date of harvesting and request then to limit the number of workers for that operation. It was only a decade ago that his lordship decided who should participate in harvesting” (Kannan, 1988: 256). Only the harvesters with entry pass were allowed to the paddy field to harvest (Thomas 1994).

Overcrowding in the field engendered unhealthy competition among the workers themselves and between local and migrant harvesters for the meagre work available and struggle between labourers and their employers. Conflicts and physical confrontation increased in number and intensity.
During 1965-75, “few agricultural operations in Kuttanad took place without the massive presence of police” (Tharamangalam, 1981:2). There were many instances of violence erupting in many parts of the region. Strikes, hartals and police interferences leading to lathi charges were frequent in those days. Extreme cases of shooting, resulting in the death of agricultural labourers were also reported. Number of union activists arrested and cases registered by police and charged to courts increased many on flimsy grounds (Oommen 1970; Das 1972; Alexander 1973; Achuthanandan 1979; Tharamangalam 1981 and Kamalasanan 1993).

Labourers’ contempt and protest against the interference of police in those days were vividly ventilated through one of the popular slogans of Kuttanad Taluk Karshaka Thozhilali Union [Affiliated to the C.P.I. (M)] which runs as:

“The labourers who planted and nursed

IR-8 and Thai – chung

when turned up for harvesting

police, police everywhere”

---

27 Thus during the period between January 1965 and December 1969 the number of persons arrested and the cases registered by police and charged to the courts in Alappuzha district was of the order of 609 and 102 respectively. Estimate in T.K. Oommen 1970: 255.

28 IR - 8 and Thai - Chung were two dwarf varieties of high yielding paddy introduced as a part of the Green Revolution Strategy in the late 1960’s.
It was noted earlier that the labour movement in Kuttanad had two phases. The first from the early forties to the mid fifties corresponded to the building up of the movement in a situation of official oppression and stiff resistance from the farmers. The second, a remarkable growth in the number and strength of the unions affiliated to different political parties and the militancy of labour union.

Achievements of Unionization

Trade Union activities brought higher wages and better working conditions to paddy field workers of Kuttanad than those prevailing elsewhere, they managed to retain the system of kind payment for harvesting, succeeded in preventing the mechanisation of agricultural operations and in the setting-up of a permanent body for wage fixation – the Industrial Relations Committee (Oommen 1970; Jose 1979; Tharamangalam 1981; Kamalasanan 1993). The wage payments in kind for harvesting operations increased from less than 10 per cent of the produce in 1951 to 13.9 per cent and after 1970 to 16.65 per cent along with the

---

29 According to one estimate by 1974, there were 14 registered unions in Kuttanad that formed 40 percent of the number of agricultural labourers organization. In the Marxist Party-led union in the district of Alappuzha alone membership increased from 17,900 in 1971 to 43,000 in 1975, (Jose. 1979).

30 After the split in Communist party in 1964, the C.P.I (M) treated conciliation through the I.R.C as antithetical to the revolutionary politics. During the survey in 1996 – 97, these investigators found that the rate fixed by the IRC for males and females were Rs. 70 and Rs. 44 respectively. However, the actual wage rate for male agricultural labourers varied between Rs. 80-100 and for females, Rs. 50-55. When the government led by the C.P.I (M) came into power in 1967, the policy of the party was to carry on agitations and administration simultaneously with a view to sharpen the class war. The attitude of the CPI (M) towards the IRC and other bipartisan and tripartite bodies like wage boards was that these are class weapons to corrupt, disorganise and cheat the working class and our business is to see that they do not succeed”. See Alexander (1973: 1556).
increase in money wage. Further the duration of the non-harvesting operations has been reduced to 5 hours a day in *Kayal* and 6 hours in other areas from 8 to 10 hours a day in the fifties (Oommen, 1974; Jose, 1979; Kannan 1988; Kamalasanan, 1993). Unionisation brought other benefits also. By an Act of the Government all hutment dwellers became owners of their ‘homesteads’. It was estimated that Kuttanad had the highest proportion hutment dwellers; about 28 percent of the state (Oommen, 1974).

This was one of the crucial demands of the unions right from their formation. In consequence, the fear of eviction vanished and attached labour system disappeared. It has also been argued that the movement succeeded in inculcating in them a sense of class consciousness (which made easy the mobilisation and organised struggles), self respect and dignity of labour (Alexander 1973; Oommen 1974; Tharamangalam 1981; Kannan 1988; Kamalasanan 1993).

According to the C.P.I (M) "for the Marxist party the tasks on the trade union fronts do not comprise of only the tactical line of running the trade unions as an organ of daily struggle for the working class under given conditions. While defending the daily interest, they aim at organising a disciplined working class with revolutionary socialist consciousness... enabling the class as a whole to play its historic political role in the revolutionary struggle. And a worker can be said to have developed socialist consciousness when he realises that he is destined to be a wage slave so long as the present social order lasts, that his struggle for emancipation is not only against a particular employer or set of employers but against the state of his own. See Alexander 1973: 1555. It may be true that they have not benefited much in economic benefits terms, it was quite evident that agricultural labourers placed a high premium on social indignity and self respect. This was possible only through the organised movement agricultural labourers by guarding the right to access to educational facilities and to active political participation: Kannan, 1988: 304 – 05.

P. Bardhan (1970) has shown that among the IADP states in India during 1962-3 and 1967-8 Palaghat and Alleppey in Kerala recorded a higher percentage increase in wage rate than any other. This conclusion has been called into question by CDS (1975) and Jose (1980). The former argues (CDS) that given the interdistrict variations in the level and trend of wage rates, unionisation as such doesn't seem..."
In Kuttanad agricultural labourers constituted a class, a rural proletariat, both in the sense of a class in itself” and to a large extent also a class for itself” (Tharamangalam, 1981: 90).

Political mobilisation of labour could not have been possible without the existence and availability of a party with appropriate ideology and strategy to organise the discontented mass of labourers. Without such an agency it is unlikely that even the first step in the organisation would ever have been taken.

Nevertheless there has been many a shortcoming in particular in the matter of going land to the tillers and maintaining the standard of living of the labourer in the face of dwindling days of employment. Agricultural labourers remained agricultural labourers even after the struggle and their political mobilisation. They remained a discontented lot. With a view to appease them certain democratic initiatives (legislative measures) were taken. The Government sought to contain their resurgence and in 1974, passed the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act. This Act was hailed as the “Magna Carta of the toiling masses” by the Kerala Government, and as the “Model Bill” by the Central Government. The provisions of the Act were

\[ \text{to have been in all cases the only or even the main factor contributing to the rise over the period}. \]

The latter of the view that while Alleppey showed a high percentage increase in both money and real wage rates, this was true of many other districts as well where unionisation of the agricultural labourers has taken place until recently. This is due, argues Kannan, to methodological differences and the period of study employed in these studies and concluded that the increase in the real wage rates in Palghat and Alleppey was higher than the state average and between 1968 – 74 (the most intense period of struggle in Kuttanad) recorded the highest increase in real wage rates in the above areas. See pages 257-59.

13 Despite an increase in the money and real wage rate, the real earnings have declined because of the decline in the number of days of employment. See Ramachandran Nair (1988) and Kannan (1983).
considered as the most progressive under Indian conditions. Its main features were security of employment, a provision of Provident Fund for agricultural labourers, fixed working hours, the payment of minimum wages, the setting up of an arbitration body to settle disputes between labourers and landowners and finally exclusion of all matters related to the Act from the Jurisdiction of the civil Courts. This Model Act, however, was to meet with nothing less than a total failure.

Two more marginal welfare programmes to compensate the failure to effect the basic changes were also introduced. The first was a project known as the ‘one lakh housing scheme’ for the agricultural labourers who had no hutment land and who have not benefited from the KLR Act of 1969.34 Notwithstanding many limitations and drawbacks of the scheme it was a public expression and endorsement of the agricultural labourers movement (Kannan, 1988).

The other programme was aimed at all aged members of agricultural labour households, known as the ‘Agricultural Labourers’ Pension Scheme’. It envisaged a monthly pension of Rs. 45 to all agricultural labourers above the age of 60 for men and 65 for women. However the

---

34 This scheme was implemented by the Government of Kerala from early 1972. The genesis of the scheme lay in the programme announced by the Government of India in late 1971. The scheme of the state government was to provide 100 such dwellings in each of the states 960 panchayats. Each dwelling was to have an area of 250 sq: ft: divided into three rooms – kitchen bedroom and a larger multi-purpose room (U.N. 1975, Annexure IV: P: 196). They were to built from money raised from various central and stat government schemes, public and voluntary organisation and materials from department such as the forest and part of the labour required was to be voluntary. The programme came to an end in 1976 when only 56,000 houses were completed which constitutes only 56 per cent of the estimated targeted group. Kannan, 1988: 285 – 86.
scheme ran in to rough weather partly due to the financial difficulties of the state and mainly due to the accusations from the opposition parties that it was a scheme to reward the supporters of the C.P.I(M). The scheme was drastically curtailed by the succeeding anti-left Government. But these schemes, however marginal, could not have come about without the organised strength of the agricultural labourers and their increasing politicisation.

The foregoing discussion shows that the traditional labour relations obtaining in Kuttanad was highly exploitative and oppressive. Against this the agricultural labourers' union emerged, considered to be the first of this sort in the country. Unionisation resulted in the proletarianisation of labour and brought better working conditions in terms of wages and working hours. It forced the government to confer ownership right to all hutment dwellers. Those who did not get the benefit of land reforms were brought under 'one lakh housing scheme'. Besides a pension was introduced aiming at all aged members of agricultural labour households.

Such increase in wage and improvements in working conditions were possible in a milieu of growing farm income. But in later years, growth in the wages turned unrelated to farm income. A discussion on movements in wages and farm income forms the theme of the following chapter.

---