SYNOPSIS

POLITICAL AGITATIONS AND THE TEACHERS MOVEMENT:
THE CASE OF MALABAR 1920-56

The present study, ‘Political agitations and Teachers Movement – The case of Malabar 1920-1956’ is an attempt to analyse the struggles and agitations of the aided elementary teachers of Malabar against private managers and the government. It traces the role played by a particular professional group, the village teachers in the socio economic transformation of Malabar. This movement which grew as a part of the anti-imperialist movement forms an important chapter in the history of modern Kerala.

Our country has a brilliant tradition of national liberation struggle and trade union movement. The region of Kerala also has played a prominent role in their agitations. Outstanding studies have been made at the national level to analyse the various aspects of these movements. But no serious attempt has been made to prepare an objective account of the various streams of the anti-imperialist movement in Kerala. This may be due to the reluctance on the part of the historians to collect evidences from the grass root level or to the relative backwardness of modern historical scholarship in Kerala. The rich sources available in the village libraries in different parts of this region and the materials in the personal collections of the early activists remains unexplored even today. Hence by utilizing all these evidences a comprehensive study of the different streams of the national liberation struggle in Kerala becomes very necessary.

There had been attempts to study the role played by different religious groups caste associations and classes in our national movement. How ever no serious attempt has been made to analyse the various aspects of the teachers movement in Malabar. The condition of the aided elementary teachers of Malabar was extremely miserable. They were a section cruelly oppressed and exploited by the private managers as well as the government. The social renaissance and national movement had awakened the teachers. Thus the teachers movement in Malabar grew as a part of the national movement. Early unions were formed during the Civil Disobedience Movement. But the ideological differences that developed in the national movement hastened their efforts of unionisation. They
demanded regular payment of salary and security of employment. To get their grievances redressed they adopted various forms of agitations. The management and the government tried to suppress the movement. Soon their movement became a major stream of the anti-imperialist movement. Government forbade teachers' politics. But the political pressure compelled the government to change their attitude towards the teachers. The teachers gained the support of all sections of the society and different political parties. They demanded the abolition of the private management system. The teachers also participated in the peasant and workers movements. They opened libraries and reading rooms and acted as the disseminators of ideas in Malabar. They played a crucial role to integrate all these movements with the anti-imperialist movement in Malabar. They played an important role in the spread of socialist ideas among the people. Thus they prepared the ground favourable for the formation of the communist party in Kerala.

The teachers stood for the issues of the common people during the war period and thus their movement was integrated with popular agitation. The teachers continued their agitation against the managers and the government even after independence. They obtained certain benefits and improved their service conditions. The progressive role played by the teachers in Malabar prompted the first communist government to abolish all the disparity between the government and private school teachers.

**Objectives of the study**

1. The major objective of the study is to trace the rise and growth of primary education and the condition of elementary teachers in Malabar during the early decades of the 20th century

2. To highlight the significance of teachers movement in Malabar. It was one of the most active and organised teachers movement in South India.

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4. To show the process of unionisation among teachers and their methods of propaganda
5. To reveal the methods of agitation adopted by the teachers in their fight against the management and the government.

6. To point out the link between the teachers movement and the national movement in Malabar

7. To give some insight to the contemporary movements and agitation

**Chapterisation**

1. **Historical context:**


2. **Efforts at Unionisation:**

   Early efforts at unionization – organizational matters – conferences – formation of MATU – the teachers demands – their response to contemporary politics

3. **Towards Agitation:**

   Dispute between teachers and managers – resistance movement – the anti-imperialist line – Ottappalam conference – Boycott of Gurujana Samajam

4. **Teachers Movement during the War Period:**

   Agitation for war allowance – affiliation with the teachers guild – anti-war campaign – integration of the movement with popular agitations – the strike propaganda of the teachers.

5. **Teachers Movement 1947-56:**

   Political polarization and its impact on the teachers - demand for the abolition of private management system – opposition to the 'Rajaji' scheme – unions attempt to formulate an education policy - the formation of the Kerala State and the policy adopted by the new government.

6. **Conclusion:**

   The summary of the study – some observations
Significance of the study:

No serious attempts have been made to study about the elementary teachers of Malabar, their struggles against the managements and government, their involvement in the national movement and above all their role in the socio political transformation of Malabar. Hence an objective analysis of some aspects of this movement is a desideratum.

The elementary teachers of Malabar actively played the role of leaders, organisers and disseminators of ideas in society. Thus they could emerge as a class of rural intelligentsia in Malabar. Many teachers were attracted to the ideology of nationalism. So their movement grew as a part of the national movement. Though the teachers movement was very active in Malabar, it was not so in Travancore and Cochin. When SITU and Board teachers of Malabar remained relatively passive, the elementary teachers of Malabar came to the forefront of agitations. When all other mass organisation in Malabar faced serious opposition, the elementary teachers obtained the support of different political parties and all sections of society. Many teachers got attracted to left politics and took part in the peasant and trade union movement. They could integrate all these movements with the anti imperialist movement. The facts that prompted them to involve in the national movement and to fight against landlordism and British imperialism are also significant. They opened libraries and reading rooms. The propagated the ideology of socialism and paved the way for the formation of communist party. They were totally committed to society and took up the issues of the common people along with their own demands. An attempt is made to analyse all these aspects in this study.

A brief narrative of the content:

It was with the growth of the national movement that the demand for national education came up. Consequently the Madras Elementary Education Act was passed and the grant-in-aid system was introduced. Merchants, middle class farmers, retired government servants and educated young men of the upper class opened schools in Malabar.
The economic crisis, decline of the matrilineal system and acute unemployment prompted many members of the upper class families to become teachers in aided elementary schools. Several others having an agrarian background also joined these schools as teachers. Many were actually the tenants of the managers who were landlords.

The teachers of the aided schools received salaries much lower than those employed under other agencies. They were also denied favourable working conditions enjoyed by other teachers. The annual grant of these schools were allotted based on the report of the deputy Inspectors. Hence all steps were adopted by the managers and the teachers to please them.

The managers considered the teachers as their servants. They misappropriated the salary of the teachers. Those who resisted were dismissed. Thus the teachers had no security of employment. The department and the government refused to interfere in the questions relating to the pay and service conditions of the teachers. Thus the condition of the elementary school teachers was extremely miserable.

At the same time these teachers could establish intimate connection with the people and emerge as the leaders of the villages. Being the most enlightened section of the rural poor, they actively participated in the social renaissance movement and national movement. Majority of their students were children of poor peasants and workers. It enabled them to realize their grievances and began to organise these groups. All these experiences generated a new hope among them to redress their grievances through organisation and agitation.

Most of the early union activists were supporters of the national movement. They got help and support from the congress socialist. Soon the union activities spread all over Malabar and the teachers demanded regular payment of salary and security of employment.

The early unionisation was actually facilitated by the Gurujana Samajam meetings. The aided elementary teachers met separately after these meetings discussed their issues and units of the teachers union were formed at several places. Propaganda jathas were organised consequently branch unions were formed in different parts of the district.
The main demands raised by the teachers were quarterly grant, regular payment of salary, salary parity with local board teachers, security of employment, monthly salary and representation in the District Education Council. They adopted several methods to highlight their demands. It included *jathas*, refusal to sign the acquittance, observation of special days and weeks, propaganda through press and submission of memorandums to the officials. Public meetings telegrams, mass petitions, delegation to the authorities and distribution of pamphlets were also used to highlight the demands of the teachers.

The managers on their part resorted to many coercive measures – suspension, dismissal, withholding of part or full of the teachers salary, police help and even physical assault against the teachers. The resistance by the teachers often assumed diverse forms. Sitting in ‘dharna’ when dismissed, protest meetings and *jathas*, starting rival schools and organizing hartals and strikes were some of them.

The movement passed through certain phases. The first phase was characterised by propaganda *jathas*, meetings, submission of memorandums, refusal to sign false acquittance and direct resistance against arbitrary dismissal. The MATU decided to take up the issue of the arbitrary dismissal of teachers and submitted a memorandum to the Director of Education. He promised to consider it sympathetically.

At the same time managers dismissed teachers in service to make fresh appointment for low salary. They often refused full salary to their teachers but demanded acquittance for the full amount. Those who refused were dismissed. Now the teachers demanded that appointment and dismissal of teachers be made only with the consent of the department. They also questioned the cruel exploitation of the untrained teachers by the managers. The annual examination was a field of exploitation for the inspectors. So vigilance committee of teachers were constituted to trace it and the union asked the government to make it a public examination. However the teachers felt that their grievances could be redressed only through the abolition of the private management system. The radical teachers conference held at Pinarayi indicated this trend. Consequently the union raised the demand for the abolition of private management system.
In the election of 1937 teachers worked for the victory of the congress candidates. The formation of the congress ministry gave an impetus to the organizational activities of the teachers. It opened the second phase of the teachers movement. But the policy adopted by the congress government disappointed the teachers. The growth of the left trend within the congress was attributed to the teachers. Therefore steps were taken to prevent the political activities of the teachers Malabar.

At the same time the managers attempted to crush the union. Thus the union leaders were dismissed in different parts of Malabar. Besides a large number of teachers were dismissed for being members of the union or for demanding full salary. Some of them were even physically assaulted. But the teachers mobilized popular support and resisted these efforts even by opening rival schools.

The cruel exploitation behind the grant-in-aid system and the issue of the security of employment were the problems confronted by the teachers. Hence when the peasants and workers were fighting against landlordism and capitalism, the teachers demanded the abolition of private management system. They could mobilize great popular support. Now the government promised to introduce a license system to improve the condition of teachers. But it was rejected by the teachers as well as the managers. When the teachers moved to a path of direct agitation the government issued an order containing the provision for a service register to ensure their security of employment. Even though it created a new spirit among the teachers, they repeated the demand for monthly salary and abolition of private management system. But they realised that their objectives could not be achieved without the abolition of imperialism. Hence all efforts were made to integrate their movement with the anti-imperialist movement.

The oppression of teachers became more intensive. Even the union president was dismissed. Now the teachers became aware that a strike was inevitable to redress their grievances. But at that time they were facing the British government directly. Being aware of the importance of the popular support they wished to adopt a mode of agitation that would not affect the education of the students. Thus it was decided to boycott the Gurujana Samajam meetings. Thus the agitation spread all over Malabar. Several teachers were suspended or
dismissed. Many teachers lost their certificates. The department and the managers adopted all efforts to defeat the agitation. It led to picketing, arrest and imprisonment of teachers. The agitation gained great popular support. The oppressive policy of the government was severely criticized. It prompted the government to adopt certain measures favourable to the teachers. The boycott of Gurujana Samajam was a crucial chapter in the history of the teachers movement in Malabar. The elementary teachers of Malabar who were the first to organise an agitation of Civil Disobedience against the British during the war period. Thus they came very close to the left movement and proved to be a major tributary of the main stream of the anti-imperialist movement in Malabar.

The Quit India movement, the Peoples’ War policy and the problems created by the global war had profound impact on the teachers movement in Malabar. The global war had made the life of the teachers extremely miserable. Their agitation for war allowance made them aware of the necessity of a centralized leadership. It led to the formation of the standing committee of the teachers union.

The Quit India Movement and the Peoples’ War Policy had sowed the seeds of disunity among the teachers. But the Tellicherry conference adopted an anti-fascist line and raised the slogan of Teacher, Manager Peoples Unity. The union journal placed a crucial role to maintain unity among the teachers. But an allegation was raised that the communist party was behind this policy shift of the union. It turned some teachers against the standing committee. Consequently clear steps were adopted to affiliate the taluk teachers unions with the Malabar teachers guild. It opened a new chapter in the history of the South Indian teachers union.

The teachers raised the demand for monthly salary and the abolition of private management system. The acute poverty had made the life of the teachers deplorable. Many of them were compelled to give up their profession. So they demanded increase in their salary and DA, and monthly salary without deduction. The teachers turned towards direct action. Their convention held at Calicut revived the former MATU. Consequently government adopted certain measures favourable to the teachers. But their major demands remained neglected. Now the MATU repeated the major demands of the teachers and asked them to be ready
for a general strike. But there was an allegation that the communists were behind the strike decision. It led to the formation of the Nationalist Teacher Forum at Calicut. But the teachers _jatha_ under V.Ramunni from Mangalore to Madras awakened the teachers in different parts of the state. Thus the teachers union in different parts of Malabar got ready for a strike against the government. The strike ballot indicated that majority of the teachers were in favour of a strike. The board and municipal teachers also turned against the government. Teachers obtained support from all corners. Their agitation was viewed as popular struggle and was characterised as a fight against British imperialism. At last government agreed to increase the teaching grant. But as the teachers were demanding a salary scale, the compromise talk failed.

T.T.Krishnamachari, the Central Minister for Commerce reopened the compromise talks. Consequently the government issued a communiqué and sanctioned a salary scale to the elementary teachers of Malabar. The teachers who could feel the change in the attitude of the government decided to postpone their strike but highlighted their demands including the abolition of private management system.

The popular government of post independent India disappointed the teachers. As the political polarisation of the period also got reflected on the teachers movement, the radical section of the union tried to use this situation to fight and obtain their urgent demands. But it was viewed as a communist design and efforts were made to expel them from the union. At the same time the Ranadive thesis adopted by the communist party hastened the suppression of teachers. Teaching grant was withheld at several places. All these created great unrest among the teachers.

The government also failed to implement the promise given to the teachers in 1947. So the teachers repeated their demands including the abolition of the private management system. Thus they moved on to a strike. At the same time they also decided to oppose the new scheme of elementary education proposed by the government. The teachers obtained great popular support. However as advised by the political leaders of Malabar, they withdrew from their proposed strike but continued to oppose the ‘Rajaji’ scheme. It was accused that the communist were the brain behind this opposition. But the opposition continued till
the scheme was withdrawn by the government. The teachers also protested against the denial of voting rights to the elementary teachers and arbitrary dismissal. The organized movement of the teachers in the district of Malabar forced the government to adopt certain favourable measures including the provision for pension scheme and security of employment.

When the teachers were fighting to obtain their demands and opposing all government schemes, they had their own creative proposals and programmes in the field of education. Thus they came forward to formulate an education scheme suitable to Malabar. They responded positively with their own proposal to the white paper published by the government to provide free and compulsory education. Sincere efforts were also adopted to propagate literacy among the people.

The MATU also emphasized the role of the teachers in the Aikya Kerala movement and decided to leave their demand for the abolition of the private management system to the new legislature of Kerala. The formation of the state raised the demand for a common salary scale and an All Kerala Teachers Movement. Thus the first communist government sanctioned a scientific salary scale for the teachers of Kerala. The Minister of education also emphasized the necessity for controlling the private managers. It appeared in the form of the education bill of 1947. It was in fact the result of the tears of the poor teachers of Kerala. The formation of the Kerala Aided Elementary Teachers Union gave birth to the largest teachers movement in India.

The movement in Travancore and Cochin was comparatively weaker. The governments of these states gave more encouragement to education. In Travancore the teachers were reluctant to organize even procession and public meetings. It is also to be noted that the teachers organisation in Cochin emerged not in the model of a trade union, but as one initiated by the department.

The teachers in Malabar did not confine themselves to the limited struggle of the South Indian teachers union. The SITU and its district units called guilds were essentially the association of high school and college teachers. It refused to take up the issues of the elementary teachers. It emphasized constitutional methods and was against all radical methods of agitations.
The board teachers efforts at unionisation and their involvement in the nationalist and class struggles were not at par with those of the aided elementary teachers. They had better salary and service conditions and therefore considered themselves equal to government teachers. Therefore when the elementary teachers were moving on the path of agitation, they were reluctant to join them.

The teachers movement in Malabar was not a mere trade union movement. As the teachers fought against the government and the management at the same time their movement revealed both the features of a trade union and anti-imperialist movement. The teachers were a group profoundly inspired by the social renaissance movement. It turned them towards nationalism. The teachers also felt that they could get the support of the people and ameliorate their grievances only through the national movement. Thus majority of them were attracted towards the ideology of nationalism and by 1936 the teachers movement clearly turned to an anti-imperialist movement. Many among the teachers hailed from peasant and working class families. Majority of their students were children of poor peasants and workers. It enabled them to perceive their grievances. So they took part in the peasant and trade union movements. Being the most enlightened section of the rural poor, the teachers actively participated in the movement against untouchability, national movement, peasant and trade union movement and could integrate all these movement with the anti-imperialist movement. The teachers did not confine themselves to their own union activities, but were involved in all progressive movements in society. They opened libraries and reading rooms and tried to extend literacy outside class rooms. They acted as the disseminators of ideas and emerged as a group of rural intelligentsia in Malabar.

When there was strong opposition against various mass organizations, the teachers movement was not effected by these developments. The teachers belonged to various classes and categories in Malabar society. At the same time the service conditions were equally applicable to all of them. Hence the slogan raised by the union could attract all teachers irrespective of their political views and class interest.

Everybody rallied around the union to fight against the private management and British imperialism. As the teachers were fighting against foreign government,
all sections of society supported them. It was also believed that the improvement in their service condition would lead to the educational progress of the nation. Thus during the early period, political views and class interest could not create a split in the teachers movement.

The teachers played an important role in the spread of socialist ideology in Malabar. It stimulated mass movements all over the district. The teachers, peasants and workers collaborated in almost all activities of the period. They came together to face the food crisis, epidemics and also to open libraries and reading rooms in Malabar. They had a common platform in the fight against British imperialism, landlordism, capitalism and private management system. Thus the teachers played a crucial role in the formation of the communist party of Kerala.

After 1957, there was a sharp polarisation between right and left wing politics in Kerala. It directly effected the teachers movement. There after all their struggles and agitations were more politically motivated. It needs a separate study and enquiry and is not attempted here.

At present the teachers movement in Kerala is very powerful. They act as a strong force behind all progressive movements in this area. The insights drawn from the early struggles and agitations are valuable to the contemporary movements. When the present trend is to be sceptic about the relevance of unions and agitations, the fact that the social transformation of Kerala was mainly the result of the unionizations and agitations should be recognised. At the same time it is to be noted that the teachers of Malabar always stood for the issues of the common people. Their movement itself was highly integrated with other popular agitations. The efforts made by the teachers to promote the educational activities by opening rival schools, literacy classes, reading rooms, libraries and Mid day deal programmes appealed the masses. Thus they could emerge as the leaders and organisers in the village of Malabar. They were totally committed to society. They viewed their profession as a service to the nation and felt that it was their aim of life. To them their profession was not mechanical but an act of self dedication and sacrifice.