

History of Trade Union movement in Cochin: A Retrospect

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ABSTRACT: The trade relation between foreign countries with Kerala, the introduction of railway service and postal service laid the advent of Working-Class Movement in Kerala. Kerala came into existence on Linguistic basis in 1956, until re-organization, politically and administratively what is now Kerala was divided into three parts Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Of these, Travancore and Cochin were ruled by native monarchs, while Malabar was a part of the Madras Presidency (Madras Province) ruled directly by the British. The socio-political elements and conditions were different in the three regions. Cochin was converted to a centre of modern industry at the beginning of the 20th Century. The land was also popularized from the early centuries with the trade relations between foreign countries only because of the ancient port *Muziris*. The British Government that established their absolute paramount power by the dawn of the 19th century suppressed the local and regional rulers in all aspects and obtained a monopoly in trade. After the formation of Cochin Port various industries began to start here. Thus, with the dawn of the 20th century, a good number of the population began to get attracted to the industrial sector. The Cochin Labour Union founded by a group of ordinary laborers' in 1933 at *Palluruthy* was first its kind in Cochin. Kochi was also a common meeting place for leaders from all parts of Kerala. All these factors directly or indirectly influenced popular mass movements and working-class mobilization in the Cochin State.

KEYWORDS: *Trade Union, Cochin State, Kerala, Colonialism, Communism*

Introduction

The State of Kerala is a narrow strip of land on the south-western part of Indian sub-continent, bounded to the west by the Arabian Sea and the east by the Western Ghats.¹ Kerala is a State with typical trade union activities compared to other States in India. The trade relation between foreign countries with Kerala, the introduction of railway service and postal service laid the advent of Working-Class Movement in Kerala.²

Kerala came into existence because of the states' re-organisation on Linguistic basis in 1956.³ Until re-organization, politically and administratively what is now Kerala was divided into three parts Travancore, Cochin and Malabar.⁴ Of these, Travancore and Cochin were ruled by native monarchs, while Malabar was a part of the Madras Presidency (Madras Province) ruled directly by the British.⁵ The socio-political elements and conditions were different in the three regions. Trade union movements originated independently in these regions and later because of the Communist ideologies, to which the masses were attracted at a period, got amalgamated. The working class in the State has been very conscious about their rights and privileges from the very beginning of industrial enterprises.⁶

Trade Unionism in Kerala

Traditionally, the social order in Kerala closely resembled feudal order of the West.⁷ However, unlike in the West, slavery was not imposed on anybody. The society was so organised that one assumes the role in society by birth. Every caste has work category assigned to it by tradition. Caste rigidities were so firmly entrenched that cross migration, as in the West, was impossible. The caste is built into an economic and social system in such a way that landholding is not frittered away.⁸ *Namboodiris* of Kerala, unlike Brahmin caste in the rest of India, was predominantly land-holding class. To a lesser extent, Nair, which is considered as a forward caste, were also land-holding class. A system of matrimonial and semi matrimonial alliances was intricately built into social mores of these two communities in such a way that both *Namboodiris* and *Nairs* held on to their respective inherited land without being fractured through

inheritance. All other backward castes and *Dalits* were firmly entrenched with stiff rigidities, such for example, certain barber castes rendering service solely to *Brahmins* and *Nairs*, while certain other barber caste rendered service solely to backward castes. Other religious communities such as Muslims and Christians moderately influenced social mores. At the same time, converts to these religious groups carried with them some of the vestiges of caste traditions to which they belonged before religious conversion.⁹

Viewed in this background, reforms took place, to begin with, in the caste system during initial stages.¹⁰ The reformers emerged from amongst elites within the caste themselves. V.T. Bhattathiripad from *Namboodiri* caste, Sree Narayana Guru Swamikal from *Ezhava* caste, Mannath Padmanabhan from *Nair* caste, Ayyankali from among *Dalits* were some of the reformers who emerged within their respective castes.¹¹ They strived to put to an end the oppressiveness of the caste system. Certain reformers, especially Sree Narayana Guru Swamikal sought to uplift *Ezhavas* to the status of *Brahmins* by imbibing in the *Ezhava* community some of the desirable traits of good living of *Brahmin* caste.¹²

Political Awakening in Kerala

The Indian National Congress spearheaded the national freedom movement since its inception, in 1885.¹³ It attracted the attention of the people of Kerala. Chettur Sankaran Nair, G.P.Pillai, V. Raiyur Nambiar, Mannath Krishnan Nair, C. Kunhirama Menon, Dr T.M. Nair, C. Karunakara Menon, K.P. Achutha Menon and several others used to attend the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress.¹⁴ Congress was more active in Malabar as it was directly under the British administration. However, the organized political movement began only after the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁵

The entry of Swadesabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai in the political arena was a milestone in the history of Kerala.¹⁶ He edited the Malayalam newspaper '*Swadesabhimani*' published by the great Muslim social activist Vakkom Abdul Khader Moulavi.¹⁷ The Government confiscated the newspaper and the press and deported Ramakrishna Pillai from the State on September 26, 1916. He was the first to bring socialist thought

and a biography of Karl Marx to *Malayalees* long before the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian political scene and almost a quarter of a century before the birth of the Communist Party in Kerala.¹⁸

In 1914, the Home Rule League convened a conference in *Thrissur* and organized the Gokhale Memorial Association to educate people about the fight for freedom. In 1918 the Kochi Mahajana Sabha was formed on the initiative of C.P. Achutha Menon (author of Cochin State Manual) and T.R. Ramachandra Iyer. The Indian National Congress leaders in *Thrissur* were Ikkanda Warriar and Muthedathu Narayana Menon. In Cochin, a leading figure was Paliath Cheriya Kunjunni Achan. All of them tried to instill political consciousness among the people of Cochin State.¹⁹

Emergence of Trade Union Movement in Cochin

Cochin was converted to a centre of modern industry at the beginning of the 20th Century. The land was also popularized from the early centuries with the trade relations between foreign countries only because of the ancient port *Muziris*.²⁰ The British Government that established their absolute paramount power by the dawn of the 19th century suppressed the local and regional rulers in all aspects and obtained a monopoly in trade. The water transport was spoiled and was switched on to the road-rail system.²¹ The changed transport system led to the improvement of industrialization of the Cochin city. A Goods train in June and a passenger train in July were started in 1902, pioneering the rail history of Cochin. Simultaneously, the main roads of Cochin were opened for smooth transportation of goods through road transport vehicles.²² Industrial labour in this district got well organized in Trade Unions. There are influential unions in almost all major industrial concerns.

Thus, with the dawn of the 20th century, a good number of the population began to get attracted to the industrial sector. In every thousand of populations, 209 were engaged in one or other industrial pursuits; among these, 97 were actual workers and the rest were dependents.²³ The industrial population of the state found its occupation mostly in industries related to textiles, wood, metals, food, dress, toilet and building. The table is given below clearly gives the variation in the numbers of workers in various sectors in 1901 and 1911.²⁴

Table 1.2: The variation in the numbers of workers in various sectors in 1901 and 1911

Sector	1901	1911
Textiles	39,684	46,825
Wood	30,598	30,598
Metals	8,590	8,590
Food	48,253	48,253
Dress & toilet	17,718	18,438
Building	8,524	13,532

Source: *Census of India, 1941*, Vol. XVIII, Cochin, Ernakulam, p. 84.

The Cochin Labour Union founded by a group of ordinary labourer's in 1933 at *Palluruthy* was first its kind in Cochin.²⁵ The main reason for the emergence of this Union was meagre wages.⁶⁶ Chowara Parameswaran, P.K. Dewar, M.I. Paul and M.K. Menon are the leaders to help the formation of the trade union movement in Cochin during this period.²⁶ *Karshaka Thozhilali* Union formed under K.M. Ibrahim, Mathai Manjooran and the like gave full support to the Cochin Labour Union. Same Kind of organization was formed at *Cherai, Ochanthuruth* and surrounding areas.²⁷

The earliest Union established in the district was Malabar Hotel Employees Union, *Thoppumpady*, registered on 22nd December 1937.²⁸ The working class in the Cochin State was mainly concentrated in Ernakulam and consisted of workers employed in the Petroleum (Oil) installations belonging to Burma Shell and Standard Vacuum Companies, Cochin Port, Ferry Service, Coir Factories, Engineering Units, Electricity Supply Undertakings and Tata Oil Mill Company (TOMCO).²⁹ It is significant to note that in the 1940s the TOMCO alone had employed 3000 workers. Thus Ernakulam (Kochi) became the hub of industrial and commercial activity and the heavy concentration of workers there inspired working-

class mobilization. Though the Tata Oil Mill Company (TOMCO) started functioning in 1917, a trade union for its employees was formed only in 1939; one of the oldest and best-organized trade unions in the district is still on the register.³⁰ As the formation of a trade union would only invite victimization and repression from the management and the government authorities, the pioneers decided to call their organization 'Deena Nivarana Sangham'.³¹ According to information furnished by the Registrar of Trade Unions, there were 164 trade Unions in this District in 1961-62 and their total membership was 31,452. Most of the trade unions were sponsored by political parties and are affiliated to All India organizations of trade unions such as the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), United Trade Union Congress (UTUC), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and Hind Mazdoor Sabha (H.M.S).³²

A meeting was held under the president ship of V.K. Kutty Sahib on January 28, 1939, to pass the constitution and bye-laws of the *Sangham* and subsequently, they secured registration from the Directorate of Industries, Government of Cochin.³³ This organization, though not the first of its kind in Kerala, was reported to have inspired the formation of similar organizations of employees in the other units of the Tata Oil Mill Company (TOMCO) in other parts of India. This union brought to the workers the conviction that their legitimate demands could be satisfied without resorting to violent strike activity and intimidation. Since then, contrary to the established characteristics of infant unions, this union cooperated with the management in building up a strong, constructive and mutually beneficial system of collective bargaining.³⁴ "*The Kochi Praja Mandalam* had also played a pioneering role in promoting the trade union movement there".³⁵

By late 1940s *Aluva* emerged into a fast-growing industrial town. Soon trade unions appeared in *Aluva* also. Contrary to the working class in *Alappuzha* and *Kollam* centres, the working class in *Aluva* enjoyed several advantages.³⁶ Firstly, most of them had their employment in entirely new and highly sophisticated industries, using better technology. They enjoyed relatively higher earnings. Secondly, they did not have to fear employment insecurity as their products had a steady and substantial

market. Thirdly, the new class of workers, unlike workers in traditional industries namely tiles, pottery and cashew, were more educated, technically trained, qualified or skilled. Besides ordinary workers, many people with higher qualification were employed in these modern factories. As a result of these unique characteristics, trade unions were beneficial for both workers and staff and they operated on an entirely new line, which, in later years came to be known as independent unionism. In short, the basic philosophy of independent unionism that emerged in *Aluva* was twofold: non-affiliation to any central trade union and non-involvement in politics and one industry, one union.³⁷

In *Aluva*, K.N. Gopala Pillai and S.C.S Menon, two veterans in the trade union movement, guided independent unions. K. N. Gopala Pillai was a prominent retired employee.³⁸ But S.C.S Menon was active even after completing half a century of union work. An attempt was also made to organize the *Aluva* Trade Union Council. It initially checked the growing strength of AITUC and pro-Communist trade unions in *Aluva*. But the council did not last long. In the early years, the Tata Oil Mill Workers Union had extended its support. Gradually it became evident that the idea of independent unionism could no longer survive in the highly complex situation in State politics. The workers were also politically conscious.

Cochin by the 1940's possessed a Labour Code. All the important conventions of the ILO satisfied by the Government of India had been brought into effect here also. Along with this, the following Acts were also passed on the Model of the Acts in British India:

- 1) The Workers Compensation Act of 1111
- 2) Trade Disputes Act LXVI of 1112
- 3) Dock Labourers Act XVII of 1112 of 1113
- 4) The Employment of Children Act XIII of 1120
- 5) The Maternity Benefit Act XXVII of 1113
- 6) Trade Union Act III of 1112
- 7) The Factories and the Payment of Wages Act of 1113 and
- 8) The Factory Act II of 1113.³⁹

These laws ensure the organization of Labour and enable reasonable

claims of the labourers. The working hours of the labourers in industries were also regulated through the implementation of the Factory Act II of 1113. As per this Act, “No adult worker shall be allowed to work in a factory for more than ten hours in a day. No adult worker shall be allowed to work in a factory for more than fifty hours in any week or where the factory was of the seasonal one, for more than sixty hours in a week.”⁴⁰ This Act also included a provision for the prohibition of the admission of children in a certain specified class of factories or specified parts thereof and it also included that no woman or child should be employed in any part of a factory for pressing cotton in which cotton opener is at work.⁴¹

By the enactment of Municipal Act, establishments of market and business were strictly regulated. It was mentioned in it that all markets which were acquired, repaired, or maintained out of the municipal funds should be deemed to be public markets and such markets should be opened to all persons of whatever caste or creed.⁴² Act III of 1113 was, intended to amend the Workmen’s Compensation Act V of 1111. As per this, the amount of compensation for death from injuries or disablement from injuries, or partial disablement from injuries etc was decided.⁴³ As a result of the enactment of a good series of enlightened rules to improve the working conditions of the factories as well as the wage system, certain noticeable improvements could be brought into the working atmosphere in the factories. 142 factories were functioning in the state during 1946-47.⁴⁴ But the uniform wage system could not be successfully implemented in the State, as the rate of wages varied from industry to industry and factory to factory. The condition was such that even among the factories dealing with the same industry, in the same locality, there wasn’t any uniformity in the wage rate followed. Besides, most of these factories didn’t make any distinction between basic wages and the dearness allowance.⁴⁵ But the provision of the Factories Act regarding the hours of work had been observed in almost all factories and there had been a steady decline in the employment of children in factories. Out of the total of 12,426 employees, 383 alone were children; the percentage of children to adult is 3.08 as against 5.47 the previous year.⁴⁶

One of the most important developments in the factory system in the

state during the post-war period was the tendency on the part of the working class towards the formation of trade unions to protect their rights against the exploitation of the capitalists. Thus, the number of registered trade unions during 1946-47 was 11, whereas it was only nine last year. The same way the number of unregistered trade unions in the same year was 59 and it was 43 during the 1945-46 period.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The history of the trade union movement in Kerala, spread over several regions and sectors, is closely related to the political movement in the State. The trade unions had played a vanguard role in the political movement for freedom and responsible government. Political ideologies and beliefs had brought together the various segments of the working classes.⁴⁸ The fruition of trade unionism occurred in different segments. *Alappuzha* is the cradle of trade unions in Travancore.⁴⁹ There was also no uniformity in the movement in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. The trade unions emerged in Cochin and *Thrissur* had significant variations from the trade unions in Travancore. The increase of industrialization, expanding labour force, growing trade union consciousness, increasing rate of literacy among the workers are some of the causes that led to the tremendous growth of trade unionism in Kerala.

Kochi and *Aluva* constituted the centres of modern industries, co-existing with some of the traditional industries.⁵⁰ The Cochin region had witnessed several socio-political struggles on par with those of Travancore. The freedom struggle did not assume mass proportion nor face severe repression. Communal grouping too had been virtually nonexistent.⁵¹ When the anti-communist and anti-trade union repression by C.P Ramaswami Government reached its peak, most of the leaders found shelter in Kochi. Even the Travancore State Congress had shifted their headquarters to Ernakulam for a short period fearing onslaught by the *Diwan*.⁵² Kochi was also a common meeting place for leaders from all parts of Kerala. All these factors directly or indirectly influenced popular mass movements and working-class mobilization in the Cochin State.

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