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The Origin of Trade Unionism Among  
the Agricultural Labourers in Kerala

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Unique among the regions of the country, Kerala is characterised by both the numerical strength and militancy of organisations of landless labourers. In this paper we would examine briefly the conditions leading to the emergence of these organizations. Essentially we would argue that the rise of trade unionism among agricultural labourers is linked to the institutional and technological changes associated with the permeation of capitalism into traditional agriculture. Such changes lead to the differentiation of the peasantry and subsequently to sharp polarisation of the class forces. We shall show that in Kerala, technological changes led to the deterioration of employment and income earning opportunities of the landless labourer and undermined the traditional landlord-labourer relationships. But such objective conditions alone are not sufficient for the emergence of trade unions. We shall also show that in Kerala factors such as the politicisation of the agricultural labourers and the presence of well organised industrial trade unions have also played a significant role.

We intend to pursue this reasoning by analysing two case studies of agricultural labourers' organizations in two selected regions of Kerala - namely; the Kuttanad and Palghat regions - the two principal rice bowls of the State, where trade unions among agricultural labourers are powerful, militant and have been in existence for a long time.

The area known as Kuttanad is not coterminous with any revenue division. It is spread over 76 low land villages in the Alleppey and Kottayam districts. In this study we would focus attention on one taluk, viz; Kuttanad which is in the Alleppey district. Palghat region here refers to the three main rice growing areas of Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat taluks in the Palghat district. The choice of these two regions requires some further explanation. Alleppey and Palghat have the largest concentration of trade union membership among the agricultural labourers of Kerala. The district wise distribution of membership of the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU) which is the most powerful and influential among agricultural workers trade unions in Kerala shows that in 1972-73, out of a total Statewide membership of 1,30,000, Alleppey and Palghat districts accounted for more than 62 percent.<sup>1</sup> Further within these two districts, Kuttanad taluk in Alleppey and Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat taluks in the Palghat district accounted for the bulk of the union membership.<sup>2</sup>

For these two regions we have some indirect evidence on the pattern of land distribution and also the distribution of the labour force from the Census returns, which throw some light on the nature

agrarian relations in these places. Kuttanad, Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat have a remarkable degree of correspondence in the pattern of land distribution. Data collected during the 1961 Census indicate<sup>3</sup> that there is a greater concentration of land in the big sized holdings in these taluks than in the whole of Kerala.

According to the industrial distribution of the labour force obtained from 1971 Census, Kuttanad taluk has the highest proportion of workers reporting as agricultural labourers, i.e; 59.96 per cent against an all Kerala average of 30.69 per cent. Alathur and Chittoor taluks are next in order with 57.28 and 53.54 per cent respectively. Palghat taluk has 44.21 percent of the workers reporting as agricultural labourers. These figures indicate that the areas we have chosen for study are characterised by a large concentration of wage labour in agriculture. The relative predominance of wage labour and the greater inequality in land distribution make these regions ideally suitable for a study of the emergence of unions

A general scheme of the paper, which we have divided into five sections is given below: In section I we discuss the geographic features and existing cultivation practices in the specific regions we have chosen for study. Section II describes the evolution of traditional agrarian relations in both the regions upto the middle of the 19th century. In part III, the discussion is on the transitional phase which the traditional agriculture passed through in both the regions as a result of tennurial reforms initiated after the middle of the 19th century. The net result of these institutional reforms as reflected in the changing labour relations and the emergence of trade unions among agricultural labourers in both the regions are discussed at length in part IV. The last part gives a brief summary.

Geographical Features and Existing Cultivation  
Practices in The Two Regions

1. Kuttanad

Kuttanad was the principal rice growing region in the former princely State of Travancore. Kuttanad taluk is mostly a water logged area extending over 265 sq.kms (65,172.60 acres) which comprise only the low land villages. Paddy fields in Kuttanad, known as padasekharams number 429 have a total of 56,878 acres and account for 80.2 per cent of the geographical area. As water management poses very serious problems, Kuttanad is mostly a single crop area, where the Punja cultivation is conducted during the months of October to March. Annually, following the onset of the South West monsoon, the padasekharams in Kuttanad are dewatered, and after replenishing the ring bunds around them, the cultivation is carried out.

According to the 1971 Census, the Kuttanad taluk has a total population of 1.88 lakhs. The number of persons who reported agriculture as their principal occupation in Kuttanad works out to about 43 thousands. Among them, about 86 per cent i.e. 37 thousands are agricultural labourers; - 20 thousand male and 17 thousand female. Thus agricultural labourers form about 60 per cent of the work force in Kuttanad.

Kuttanad taluk also has the

highest proportion of female participants in agricultural operations. More than 87 per cent of the women in the labour force have been reported as agricultural labourers.

Wage employment during the Punja cultivation is the single most important source of income to the agricultural labourers in Kuttanad. In fact there is very little employment opportunity outside agriculture; and within agriculture it is mostly in rice cultivation, as about 87 per cent of the entire geographical area is brought under rice cultivation alone. Moreover, being a water logged area there are serious constraints to the development of transportation facilities and consequently there is very little mobility of labour. In this region, country boats and canoes still continue to be the principal means of transport. Due to the absence of alternative employment opportunities within the region and on account of the inadequate transportation facilities, labour force in Kuttanad are left with no alternative other than employment in the paddy fields to secure their subsistence requirements.

Besides, agricultural employment is highly seasonal in nature, as cultivation is practiced only between October and March and a second cropping is attempted only in selected areas of Kuttanad, constituting no more than 25 per cent of the total available land. The non-cultivating season is a period of almost complete unemployment for agricultural workers in Kuttanad.



## 2. Palghat

Most of Palghat district was a part of the Malabar district of the old Madras Presidency. The district now comprises the five taluks of Alathur, Chittoor, Palghat, Ottappalam and Mannarghat. This is the foremost rice growing region of Kerala. Among the five taluks

however, rice cultivation is concentrated in the first three viz. Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat, which are also extensively covered by irrigation facilities. In these areas two crops Virippu (Autumn) and Mundakan (Winter) are raised annually; sometimes a third crop (Punja) is also attempted in certain areas.

According to the 1971 Census,<sup>5</sup> the number of persons to whom agricultural wage employment was the principal source of income was 195 thousands in Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat taluks and they formed about 51 per cent of the entire work force. Among the 195 thousands of agricultural labourers, about 56 per cent were women.

## II

### The Traditional Agrarian Relations

We shall examine the agrarian relations that existed in the two regions before the implementation of the institutional reforms. The traditional agrarian structure was one which evolved over a long time and got established by the 19th century. The relations that developed in Kuttanad and Palghat regions had a remarkable degree of similarity. The important features of the system<sup>6</sup> were the following.

- (a) It was founded on a caste-based hierarchical society wherein, the superior ownership rights on land called jannom rights were held by the temple authorities (Devaswoms), the Brahmin families (Brahmaswoms), or the Nair Chieftains. They constituted the class of non-cultivating landlords who thrived on the rent share (that varied from 25 to 50 per cent of the gross produce) which they extracted from the tenants who leased in the land from them.

- (b) In both these regions land used to be leased out to tenants in large parcels - often extending over 10 acres - by the janmies. These tenants, who mostly belonged to the Nair or Syrian Christian communities in the case of Kuttanad and Nair or Thiyya communities in the case of Palghat were also owner cultivators in most cases.
- (c) Under the traditional system there existed a protected land market. The privilege of leasing in land was not extended to members of the scheduled castes and tribes who formed the lowest strata of the society. There were discriminatory rules and regulations of the caste society, which effectively restricted their entry into the land market as potential tenants.
- (d) The actual tilling operations in lands thus leased out, was done not necessarily by the tenants but by labourers belonging to the scheduled castes and the backward communities like the Ezhavas. The scheduled caste members, who were socially relegated to carrying out the agricultural operations were treated as aggrestic slaves tied to the land and transacted along with it by the janmies.

The input of labour in rice farming is subject to a high degree of seasonality. Hence it would be in the interest of every farmer to ensure an adequate supply of labour to take care of his seasonal requirements. Since the demand for labour is seasonal, and full employment conditions are reached at regular intervals, labour would tend to command a higher price in the peak season. Hence in areas



where the principal form of economic activity is rice farming, we find institutions like the attached labour system developing, whereby each employer ensures the services of an adequate number of labourers by attaching them to their households by offering them pecuniary benefits. When the farmer enters into formal or informal agreements of this sort he is primarily motivated by two considerations: (i) to reduce the risk involved in the non-availability of labour for peak season operations, (ii) to reduce the labour costs. The attached labour system is devised in such a way that the consumption requirements of the labourers in the lean season are at least partially met by the employer as a trade off for rendering their services during the peak season in adequate quantum on a regular and contractual basis. The labourer and his family are often housed in a small plot of land attached to the farm; they are assured of employment opportunities within the farm and are given cash advances and perquisites at intervals.

The wage payments offered also take into account the seasonal variations in the demand for labour. Comparatively high wages are offered for the peak season operations like harvesting and threshing. For example in the case of harvesting, in most places, wage payments are made on a crop sharing basis. This has the added advantage to the farmer in that it reduces the risk burden (especially when the crop prospects are highly dependent on the monsoon conditions), so that if the harvest turns out to be poor, wages need to be paid only in proportion to the output. However, at least a good proportion of the annual subsistence requirements of the attached labourers household are met by wage income provided by the employer.

Hence for the farmer the crucial considerations that are relevant to such contractual relationships are: the scale of his requirements for labour during the peak season and also the quantum of employment that he can afford to provide to the labourers round the year.

In the Palghat region, since double cropping was practiced from very early times, a higher volume of labour per unit of cultivated land was required. Hence bonded labourers were retained by the landlords at the rate of two to three per hectare of paddy land. These tied labourers<sup>7</sup> who mostly belonged to the Cherumar caste were regarded as indispensable for rice cultivation which involved long hours of onerous and backbreaking work in the monsoon conditions of the region. When tenants, who often belonged to the better placed castes leased in land from the janmi, they were also allotted the Cherumars along with the land. Control over them were exercised at two different tiers, Being the private property of the landlord they were housed in tenements provided by the janmi; but the responsibility of giving employment and also wages were shared by the tenants. The janmi exercised patronage over the bonded labourers who had absolutely no rights on the land; they had to render servile obedience in exchange for favours and occasional loans. The characteristic features of this system was that it was inherently coercive in nature, and perpetuated itself by trapping the poor and the weak in the vicious ~~circle~~<sup>circle</sup> of poverty and bondage.



The attached labour system described above developed in both Kuttanad and Palghat. A question would naturally arise, as to why in the Kuttanad region, where single cropping was the rule and the quantum of labour required was not as high as elsewhere, the attached labour system developed? The possible reason is that in Kuttanad, even for the one crop raised, the labour requirement was relatively higher when compared to other regions. In the special context of Kuttanad, the actual process of cultivation had to be preceded by a whole range of operations like the construction of ring bunds around the paddy fields, dewatering etc. It used to require weeks of prolonged labouring over the waterwheels, before the padasekharams were completely dewatered. Further the risks involved in cultivation were so high, that farmers required persons to keep constant vigil over the paddy fields against the ring bunds breaking away. Owing to the very rigorous natural constraints, paddy cultivation in Kuttanad has got to be conducted within a strict time schedule. If it starts before the end of the monsoon there is a risk of flooding and if it is delayed saline water from the sea which enters the rivers makes irrigation difficult. Therefore the sowing season commences everywhere in Kuttanad almost simultaneously. In such circumstances each farmer required a steady supply of labour and hence secured the services of attached labourers. The contracts between landlords and labourers were purely informal. The services of male labourers and their families were contracted; and these workers were called anapanikkar.<sup>8</sup> The anapanikkar also known as paniyals used to attend to all kinds of operations specific

to Kuttanad cultivation right through the season. The farmer would provide them with land to set up huts so that they become completely attached to their farms. The paniyols also had some security of employment in the off-season, as sometimes they would be put to work in the garden lands of the farmers or to some other sundry household occupations. The prospects of living accommodation and continued employment served to lure the workers to become paniyals. In Kuttanad the paniyals scarcely changed their masters. As they continued to stay in the homesteads provided to them they also became the kudikidappukar (hutment dwellers) of the landlords".<sup>9</sup> Essentially the same features were present in the attached labour system in Palghat. In both the regions the system ensured labour supply during peak season. In the lean months the attached labourers were paid daily wages at rates lower than those prevailing in the market. The ties were secured through a system of advances.



### III

#### The Transitional Phase of The Traditional Agriculture

It was a society characterised by such agrarian relations that entered into a transitional phase by the middle of the 19th century. The transitional phase witnessed the restructuring of age old agrarian institutions in both Kuttanad and Palghat. However, what happened in these two regions cannot be viewed in isolation of the developments in the broader geopolitical units to which they belonged viz; Travancore and Malabar. Here we require a brief digression into certain historical developments in Travancore and Malabar from the middle of the 19th century onwards.

## 1. Travancore

In Travancore, the whole initiative for institutional reforms came from the Monarchy which for historical reasons pursued a policy of containing the feudal chieftains. As a consequence of this policy, even by 1850 a major share of the cultivated land and the whole of the waste land came under the State. These reforms meant, above all, that the tenants were merely to pay land revenue (and nothing else) to the State.

"In Travancore, which had grown in the course of the 18th century from a small principality to a much larger political unit through a success of conquest of other chieftains, the traditional interpretation of the rights of the jammies was retained to the advantage of the tenants who held land from them. Strengthening monarchical rule in the State required in fact curbing the power of these jammies. Further, in the process of expansion Travancore had annexed a larger part of the land belonging to rival chieftain and their allies; as a result, by the middle of the 19th century, State-owned land accounted for more than three-fourth of all the cultivated land in its territory. By merely conferring full ownership rights on the tenants of all such State-owned land it became possible therefore to create a broad-based class of peasant proprietors in Travancore. This was done through a royal proclamation in 1865". 10

## 2. Malabar

In Malabar which formed part of the Madras Presidency, the British Administration all along followed a policy of appeasing the feudal chieftains; as a consequence the tenant farmers became the most expropriated class. Thus in the latter half of the 19th century, while far reaching changes were being brought about to the tenurial structure in Travancore, in Malabar the traditional system was retained intact with the jammies in full control of the situation. However, tenancy reforms were initiated in Malabar also but only around the 1930's. The important thing to note here is that these measures came about largely in response to popular demands. The peasant organizations of Malabar (of the land holding strata) played a crucial role in projecting these demands. In fact Malabar had a long tradition of peasant revolts organised against the oppressive regime of the jammies that date back to the coming of the British<sup>11</sup>. The Malabar peasant movements achieved disti

organizational shape and gathered momentum in the 'thirties and forties of the present century<sup>12</sup>. They were organised by a strong left oriented leadership, which was later to become the hard core of the communist party in the State. The Malabar Karshaka Sangham (The Farmers Forum of Malabar) was formed in 1937 and it soon emerged as a powerful organization of the tenants. The important demands raised during this period were: (1) the fixation of fair rent; (2) the termination of all feudal levies and extractions collected by the janmies and (3) abolition of the right to evict arbitrarily exercised by the janmies.



In the 'forties the Karshaka Sangham waged a series of agitations demanding these reforms. That the demands were met with stiff resistance and that the colonial powers gave complete support to the feudal chieftains in retaining their privileges rendered the whole decade one of the bloody turmoils in the agrarian front of Malabar. There were certain marginal attempts made by the Madras Presidency government<sup>13</sup> to redress the grievances of the tenants. Nevertheless the landlords reigned supreme in Malabar till the middle of the 'fifties.

Reading through the literature on peasant movements (referred to above), one cannot help making certain generalisations about the character of such movements. The tenancy reforms, which were the objectives of the movement, were always envisaged within the framework of traditional land relations. The superior ownership right of the landlord over the leased out lands were not disputed at all. All that the tenants demanded were only fixation of their fair rents and also the right to remain as cultivators without being evicted.

It is important to note that any discussion for a ceiling on operational holdings or a programme for redistribution of land among the lower orders of the peasantry did not form part of the agenda of the Karshaka Sangham during this period. The possible explanation for this is that though the membership of the Karshaka Sangham included tenants large and small, the leadership of the organisation everywhere tended to concentrate in the hands of the larger holders, who naturally had serious stakes in any re-distribution programme.

There were also attempts made around this time to organise the lower orders of the peasantry. Such attempts were, however, motivated by different considerations. The peasant leaders tried to mobilise the bonded labourers in Malabar against their feudal lords. Campaigns were launched to secure human rights to them against social disabilities like untouchability, laws of pollution and rules prescribing modest clothing to them, and against the janmies' right to evict them arbitrarily from their tenements. Such attempts also formed part of the social reform movements that swept over Malabar from the second quarter of this century onwards. However conferring direct economic benefits to the landless labourers was not initially envisaged in the programme of the Karshaka Sangham.

The opportunity for a comprehensive legislation on land reforms in Malabar came about only in 1957, when the First Communist Ministry came to power through elections held after the linguistic reorganisation of the State in 1956. That marked the beginning of a prolonged phase of experimentation on land reforms covering the

whole of Kerala. The last of the series of legislations - The Kerala Land Reform Amendment Act - which sought to abolish landlordism completely in the State was finally enacted only in 1969.<sup>14</sup>

What is remarkable about this period is that there was a clear time lag in the implementation of the tenancy reforms between Travancore and Malabar. While in Travancore tenurial changes took place by the end of the last century, it was only many decades later that similar changes came about in Malabar. This time lag had its bearing on the subsequent developments in both the regions - especially in the emergence of organisations of landless workers.

#### IV

#### The Impact of Institutional Changes in The Two Regions

##### 1. Kuttanad

##### The Kaval Reclamation Programmes

The tenancy reforms initiated in Travancore in the 19th century led to the emergence of a class independent peasantry, and from among them came a class of capitalist entrepreneurs who opened up the plantations in the high ranges and reclaimed the backwaters for Kaval cultivation in Kuttanad. Extensive areas in the backwaters of Kuttanad were reclaimed for rice cultivation by Kuttanad farmers, in operations which required substantially large capital investments.<sup>15</sup> These operations, though initiated as early as 1856, gathered momentum in the first two decades of the 20th century. The advent of the pumping machine in 1912<sup>16</sup> made this ambitious scheme viable, while



the rapid rise in the price of paddy<sup>17</sup> during the first World War period made the venture commercially attractive. In this process they brought about 20,000 acres of the Vembanad Lake (Kayal) under cultivation in and around the Kuttanad taluk.<sup>18</sup>

#### Changes in the Pattern of Labour Deployment

Opening up of additional land for cultivation, with vast areas under individual possession had far reaching repercussions on the agrarian relations in Kuttanad. Along with the extension of cultivation the scale of labour requirements for agricultural operations also increased. These operations were also seasonal in nature, as only annual cropping was attempted in the kayal areas. Further on account of the rigorous constraints imposed by nature the operations in the kayal zone had to be conducted simultaneously with the rest of the Kuttanad region. Agricultural labourers in Kuttanad, retained under the traditional attached labour systems were not sufficient to cope up with this increased labour requirement. Further, padasekharams in the kayal zone being vast expanses of paddy fields, agricultural operations like dewatering, sowing or transplanting and harvesting had to be carried out in unison, which required the services of thousands of labourers together for peak season operations. This necessitated the inflow of migrant workers in large numbers in to Kuttanad from the adjoining taluks to make up for the labour shortage.

The seasonal migration of labourers into Kuttanad has now become a well-established custom. Such migrant workers would pour into Kuttanad at the commencement of the cultivating season, and also during the time of harvesting operations. They would come in groups and work for farmers with bigger holdings. Usually their coming is preceded by a contract in the lean season, which their headmen enter into with the landlords after taking lumpsum advances. The landlord also provides accommodation to the migrant workers in the improvised huts called panthas generally set up on the outer bunds of the paddy fields. These workers would also take care of the extra harvest operations like drying the hay, transporting and storing the grain etc. The large scale employment of migrant labour initiated a transition from the attached labour system to the employment of casual labour.

With the advent of oil engines during the early part of this century there came about a major shift from the traditional labour intensive methods for purposes of dewatering the paddy fields. Subsequently the technology was improved with the use of electricity. This implied that in "about 50,000 acres of land round about Alleppey" <sup>19</sup> dependence on human labour for dewatering purposes could almost completely be dispensed with. Yet another form in which this transition from a labour intensive to a capital intensive technology in agriculture came to be manifested was through improving the ring bunds around the paddy fields with permanent granite walls. This also led to minimising the year to year deployment of labour for maintenance and repair of the ring bunds at the beginning of the cultivating season.

The cumulative result of these developments was that farm operations became increasingly seasonal in nature. This implied that there was no need to hire permanent labourers and retain them all through the year. All that the farmers needed was an adequate supply of labour only for shorter intervals. There was no dearth of labourers to meet this demand. The rural labour market was gradually swelling up on account of the population pressure.<sup>20</sup> Thus the organizational changes in Kuttanad agriculture resulted only in a gradual and systematic erosion of the existing employment opportunities to the agricultural labourers.

#### The Inter-War Period in Kuttanad Agriculture

In spite of the kayal reclamation programme in the first quarter of the 20th century, rice cultivation in Kuttanad could not attain a sound footing till the mid forties. There was noticeable decline in the price of paddy during the inter war period<sup>21</sup> and this led to kayal lands being kept fallow, or cultivation attempted only once in two or even three years. The worst sufferers of this deteriorating situation were obviously the agricultural labourers. The cash equivalent of agricultural wages paid in Kuttanad also appears to have declined considerably during 1921 to 1931.<sup>22</sup>

The pattern of agricultural employment, as it developed in Kuttanad, had close resemblance to what existed in the big factory enterprises. Labourers in hundreds or even thousands would be put to work in padasekharams under one or several employers, with the

difference that the working conditions, and remuneration used to be much worse than those in the factory enterprises.<sup>23</sup> It led to greater dissatisfaction among the agricultural workers and by the mid thirties the situation was getting ripe enough for the idea of trade unionism to permeate into the hinter land of Kuttanad.

#### Trade Unionism in The Neighbouring Industrial Areas

Also at this time, momentous changes were taking place on the labour front, in and around the neighbouring industrial town of Alleppey. The coir industry which supported a large share of the industrial labour force and also a large number of rural households by providing them with income earning opportunities outside agriculture was on a declining phase from the beginning of the thirties.<sup>24</sup> There was considerable unrest among the industrial labourers following the systematic cut in wages and retrenchment which employers resorted to from 1924 onwards. Trade unions organised by the leftists gained considerable foothold among the coir factory workers. The tension which was mounting up had its culmination in the general strike of 1938 which in terms of participation and achievement was a remarkable victory for the workers. A Committee<sup>25</sup> appointed by the Travancore Government to enquire into the trade disputes in the coir manufacturing sector lists, among other reasons, the glut in the labour market of unskilled workers as the principal factor leading to deterioration of industrial relations in Alleppey and other areas.

Alleppey in those days was the nerve of all trade union activities. Besides the coir factory workers, unionism also flourished among workers in the oil extraction industry, the Alleppey port and also the water transport services. These organisations came to exercise decisive sway over the employers in the matter of wage determination. There was also something remarkable about the quality of leadership, in those days. Pioneer leaders like P. Krishna Pillai, R. Sugathan and others were known for their radicalism, integrity and commitment of the cause of workers.<sup>26</sup> Trade unionism in Kuttanad agriculture was in a way the offspring of unionism in the industrial establishments of Alleppey. From 1938 onwards the task of organizing the agricultural labourers of Kuttanad was taken up by the leadership of the coir factory workers a task which they successfully accomplished by the beginning of the 1940's.

## 1 2. Palghat

Organised labour movement among the agricultural labourers is a relatively recent phenomenon in Palghat, compared to the case of Kuttanad. Powerful labour organisations began emerging only around 1968, while in Kuttanad, as we have seen, a similar situation had developed in the early fifties. As in the case of Kuttanad, we shall try to relate this phenomenon to the institutional and the technological changes that took place within the agrarian setup of Palghat.

### Land Reforms and The Changing Agrarian Relations

The completion of the land reforms in the 'sixties', altered the complexion of the agrarian structure of Palghat in that the benefits were disproportionately shared among the various classes of peasantry. The large holding tenants, who in the pre-independence period formed the backbone of the peasant movements emerged as the dominant group in the agrarian sector, who replaced the feudal intermediaries, as a consequence of the land reform legislations. Further, parallel to the process of tenants liberating themselves from the bonds of feudal obligations, there also took place a massive extension of irrigation facilities. There were seven irrigation projects in this region.<sup>27</sup> - major and minor ones - almost all of them commissioned in the post independence period. This meant assured water supply for two crops and also made possible the highest yield rates of paddy in this region.



While a landed elite emerged from the remnants of the traditional society, the landless labourers were left high and dry in the whole process of implementing the land reforms. The latter had played no small a part in creating the atmosphere for tenancy reforms. Some ten to fifteen years ago, these labourers had fought shoulder to shoulder with the tenants against the oppressive regime of the feudal chieftains in Malabar. After the implementation of the land reforms their interests began to diverge. The landed elite no longer belongs to the CPM led Karshaka Sangham, as they have set up their own pressure

group in the Karshaka Samajam,<sup>28</sup> an organisation which claims to stand for farmers without any political leanings. It looks as though that a multi-class based organisation, which the Karshaka Sangham was designed to be in the beginning, has outlived its existence in the old form. As a result, during the last few years there has been a massive exodus of Palghat farmers from the parent body to the newly formed Karshaka Samajam.

#### Agricultural Labourers in The Transitional Period

The worst affected parties of this transitional phase were of course the agricultural labourers, whose economic status was considerably undermined in the process. During the 'fifties and 'sixties' of this century, the 'bonded' labour system evolved into a kind of 'permanent labour system'. Bonded workers were retained as regular workers attached to the same farm and given permanent employment rights. Such permanent workers among whom women outnumber men were employed for a whole range of operations beginning with the preparation of the field to harvesting, threshing and storing of grains. Regarding wage payments, the system of kind payments for all the agricultural labourers was continued right through. However, only the permanent workers would take part in harvesting operations, for which they would earn a share of the produce locally known as Pathambu, which usually turned out to be the largest component of their wage bill.<sup>29</sup> This mode of labour relations had evolved in Palghat agriculture by the beginning of the 1960's.

The Advent of The New Technology And The Unequal Distribution of Benefits

It is in this context that we have to analyse the impact of the 'new technology' which was introduced into Palghat agriculture in the 'sixties. The extension of the irrigation facilities which had already taken place, provided the necessary basis for the introduction of the new technology.

Palghat district was also adopted under the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme. The new technology package of high yielding variety seeds, fertilisers and pesticides along with water management facilities enabled the farmers to reap richer harvests in that region. In Table VI . . . in the foot note 30 are given the per hectare yield rates of paddy for the Virippu (Autumn) and Mundakan (Winter) crops in the Palghat region as a weighted average of the yield rates in Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat taluks from 1962-63 to 1972-73. What is discernable from the figures is a noticeable improvement in the productivity rates for the Autumn crops. This was largely the result of a shift to short duration high yielding varieties. In the case of the Winter crop there was an improvement as well a stabilisation of the rates at relatively higher levels of productivity. Moreover, paddy prices increased significantly in Palghat during this period. The cumulative impact of these developments was that the tenants turned farmers of Palghat who came to acquire considerable marketable surplus consolidated and strengthened their economic position vis-a-vis the other classes of the agrarian population.



Shift Towards The System of Hiring Casual Labour

The advent of the new technology led to a systematic undoing of time honoured practices of labour/<sup>use</sup>and generated discontent among the agricultural labourers. The significant development of recent times is that the new agricultural technology has considerably affected the employment opportunities already available to the labourers in that it has brought along with it extensive displacement of labour following the introduction of tractors; and has also necessitated changes in the pattern of labour deployment as a concomitant of systematic and scientific management of farm operations inevitable for the successful cultivation of the new varieties of seeds.

Palghat is one region where tractorisation has made considerable progress during the last ten years. "Demand for tractors more than tripled between 1965-66 and 1967-68, bringing the total in the district to 377.<sup>31</sup> From a survey conducted in 1970-71 as part of the 'World Agricultural Census' it was found that out of a total 1335 tractors numbered in Kerala, over 67 per cent belonged to the Palghat district. Currently the number of tractors in Palghat has gone upto 850.<sup>32</sup> We could also gather that most of these tractors belong to Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat taluks and that there are only very few of them functioning in Ottappalam and Mannarghat taluks." Apart from the incipient capitalist farmers, even the small farmers found it profitable to hire tractors to do the ploughing in their plots.<sup>34</sup> The net result of tractorisation on a large scale in Palghat region is that over the last few years, almost the entire male labour force employed in ploughing operations have been displaced. This also implied that the total labour

requirement per acre of land has been reduced by about 30 mandays a year. The introduction of tractors has called for a tight rescheduling of operations. Most of the farmers who hire the tractors get the ploughing operations finished at a stretch, and consequently all other operations which traditionally used to be conducted over a longer period of time also came to be lumped together. This implied increased dependence on casual labour for finishing the operations quickly.



The new technology has also led to marginal increases in the quantum of labour required for operations like transplanting, especially in the Virippu crop now being brought under more scientific management. However, such marginal increases must be analysed in the context of the changes the new agricultural technology has necessitated in the pattern of deployment of labour for rice cultivation. The new varieties of seeds require larger doses of labour within a shorter period of time. This is quite unlike the case of the traditional varieties, where there is greater manoeverability in the conduct of farm operations, in that smaller doses of labour can be spread out over a longer period of time. The system of hiring permanent workers that developed in Palghat was conditioned to this mode of labour requirement. Workers were recruited at the rate of one or two persons per acre of double cropped land, and they could look after the entire agricultural operations. But the changed circumstances required more workers to finish the operations faster.

There was no dearth of labourers in Palghat to meet the additional demand. The rural poor consisting of the non-permanent landless labourers and the small holding peasantry to whom wage employment became a supplementary source of income could readily fill the gap.<sup>35</sup> Apart from them there were also the migrant workers from the adjoining Tamil districts, who constituted a source of cheap labour to the Palghat farmers. This was the situation which led to the recruitment of more casual labourers to conduct farm operations along with the permanent labourers. It resulted in the existing work being shared by a larger number of workers, and consequently the average wage income of the permanent workers tended to decline. This caused considerable resentment among the permanent workers who felt that they were being deprived of their job opportunities within agriculture. The farmers however, agreed to employ only the permanent workers for the harvesting operations (which carried higher remuneration) while they insisted on their right to employ more casual labourers in the case of other agricultural operations - especially the transplanting operations.

Yet another development that led to discontent among workers was the wide practice of retrenching labour, which employers resorted to as part of their attempts to rationalise the use of labour. In a way this was also the side effect of land reform legislation. Partitioning of land into smaller bits and sale of land above the ceiling limit were widely resorted to by farmers in Kerala (and especially so in the Palghat region)<sup>36</sup> throughout the sixties. Further most of these land transfers were from the

large holders to small peasants, who in order to carry out the farm operations did not require the services of permanent workers, as they could be substituted by family labour. These were the factors that were responsible for the beginning of institutional change: in particular from the attached labour system to the emergence of free wage labourers.

One can sum up the arguments saying that the traditional systems of labour utilisation developed in Palghat became incompatible with the changed set of circumstances that marked a transition from traditional farming to production for the market with the new agricultural technology. The situation became ripe for political parties to enter the field and to rally the workers under their banner. The attempt was met with spontaneous response from the agricultural labourers in that region.

## V

### Summary and Conclusion

Tenancy reforms which did not seriously envisage any land redistribution programme had the effect of promoting the growth of capitalism in agriculture in both Kuttanad and Palghat regions. The decline of landlordism facilitated the transition of the erstwhile tenants with large operational holdings into a class of capitalist farmers, who, in the changed circumstances could convert farming into a prosperous enterprise. Relieved of the burden of rent payments, the farmers now retained the surplus which they managed to plough back into agriculture to improve the techniques of production,

and soon initiated the transition into a capital intensive technology within agriculture. They could bring about substantial improvements in the productivity of land and labour; the former on account of improved techniques of management, irrigation facilities, better quality seeds and fertilisers; and the latter on account of greater stress on mechanisation.

The tenants - turned owner cultivators carried on the entire range of farm operations with hired labour. The agricultural labourers thus employed were by and large kept out of the purview of land reforms; and they turned out to be the people worst affected in this transitional process. The benefits were disproportionately shared in the farm sector and the inevitable outcome was a greater polarisation of class forces in agriculture. The advancement of capitalism led to the decline of traditional system of labour relations and erosion in the existing employment opportunities, while simultaneously the size of the labour market was swelling on account of population pressure. As the pace of mechanization advanced, dependance on labour for farm operations tended to be minimised. The age old attached labour system started breaking up, and there was more emphasis given to recruiting casual labourers for money wages. Consequently there was considerable discontent and feeling of deprivation among the rural poor.

This seems to be the broad setting against which organizations of agricultural labourers have emerged. Both in Kuttanad of the early 'forties' and Palghat of the mid 'sixties', one can identify

the existence of these objective conditions. There were also other concomitant factors that promoted the growth of unionism in both regions: the able and inspiring leadership of the pioneers and the active patronage rendered by the political parties.

It may also be mentioned, that we intend to pursue this study with an analysis of the functioning of the trade unions in both the regions, which would be attempted separately.



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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Membership of the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union in Alleppey and Palghat Districts 1972-73

	Number	Percentage
Alleppey	35,107	27.04
Palghat	45,000	34.66
Kerala	129,815	100.77

Source: Report on The 4th Annual Conference published by the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union Office, Alleppey 1974.

2. Out of the 45,000 members enumerated under KSKTU in Palghat district in 1973, Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat taluks accounted for 93 per cent of the membership.

Taluk wise Distribution of KSKTU - Membership in Palghat in 1973

Taluk	Number	Percentage
Alathur	11,500	25.6
Chittoor	19,630	43.6
Palghat	10,740	23.9
Ottappalam	1,860	4.1
Mannarghat	2,270	2.8
Total	45,000	100.00

Source: Data supplied by the Secretary, KSKTU Palghat district, on 28.8.75. No such talukwise distribution of trade union membership for the Kuttanad region could be readily obtained. However, it was pointed out by the Secretary of the KSKTU in Alleppey district that majority of the union membership in the district came from Kuttanad taluk alone.

3. Percentage Distribution of Land Holdings by Size Class in Kuttanad, Alathur, Chittoor & Palghat Taluks and Kerala State

<u>Class Interval in acres</u>	<u>Kuttanad taluk</u>	<u>Alathur taluk</u>	<u>Chittoor taluk</u>	<u>Palghat taluk</u>	<u>Kerala State</u>
Less than 1.00	23.12	15.24	3.58	16.43	48.32
1.00 to 2.50	24.64	28.46	15.72	31.45	31.95
2.50 to 5.00	16.51	24.96	21.13	22.78	12.41
5.00 to 10.00	14.73	19.09	25.54	19.26	5.24
10.00 to 30.00	16.43	11.39	28.55	9.88	1.79
30.00 and above	4.57	0.71	5.34	0.45	0.28
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Talukwise distribution of landholdings are available only in the Census Records of 1961. The data are based on a 20 per cent sample of rural households engaged in cultivation classified by the size of land cultivated. Refer Table B XII in District Handbooks on 1961 Census, Kerala State.

4. Census 1971; Kerala Series 9 "Census Handbook of Alleppey District".  
 5. Census 1971; Kerala Series 9. "Census Hand Book of Palghat District".

6. The evolution of agrarian relations over time in the geographical units of Travancore and Malabar which encompass Kuttanad and Palghat regions respectively are discussed in T.C. Varghese "Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences ch.2,3 and 4 Allied Publishers, 1970.

For a separate account of the Travancore region in the 19th Century see "Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States" by Lieutenants Ward and Commer. Travancore Sircar Press 1863.

For an account of the Malabar region in the same period see William Logan Malabar Manual Vol I Madras Government Press, 1951

7. Detailed description on the bonded labour system as it existed in these regions is given in the writings of William Logan. op.cit. See also Dharma Kumar "Land and Caste in South India", Cambridge University Press, 1965. ch.9
8. Information relating to the system of labour use as they existed in Kuttanad were collected mostly from interviews with the farmers in Kuttanad. One may also refer to Thakazhi Sivasankaran Pillai's novel Two Measures of Rice which throws light into social and historical origins of the attached labour system in the Kuttanad region.



9. It would be of interest to note that according to a survey conducted by the Kerala State Bureau of Economics and Statistics in 1966-67 among the different categories of households, the proportion of hutment dwellers was the highest in Alleppey district (26.7%), while the corresponding figure for the whole of Kerala was only 12.3%. No figures are available for the Kuttaanad region, where one should assume that the proportion must be higher than for the whole of Alleppey district. See "Land Reforms in Kerala - A Survey 1966-67", (mimeo) Govt of Kerala, 1968
10. Ch.6 p.3 "Poverty Unemployment and Development Policy: A Case Study of Selected Issues with Reference to Kerala". Vol I Report (Mimeo) Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum March 1975 For a more elaborate account of these issues also see Varghese T.C. op. cit. Ch.4
11. The Malabar peasant outbreaks popularly known as "Moplah Revolts" which originated in 1835 and got intensified in 1876 and also in 1921 had their roots in agrarian discontent. See W. Logan, op.cit Ch.3. Mr. Logan was a firm opinion that the "Mopilla outrages were designed to counteract the overwhelming influence, when backed by the British Courts, of the janmies in exercise of the novel powers of ouster and rent raising conferred upon them". p.584
12. The history of the movement relating to the first half of the 20th century is discussed in detail mostly in books written in Malayalam. See in particular
  1. A.K. Gopalan "Manniru Vendi" (For the Soil) Chinta Publishers, 1975.
  2. A.K. Podaval "Keralathile Karshaka Prasthanathinte Oru Lakhu Dhayithram". (A Brief History of Peasant Movement in Kerala) Mathrubhoomi Book House, Trivandrum 1969.
  3. A. Madavan Nair "Malabar Kalapam" (Malabar Revolts) Mathrubhoomi Press 1971.
  4. For a brief account of the period written in English language read: E.M.S. Namboodiripad: "Kerala Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow". Ch.7 National Book Agency Calcutta.
13. The appointment of the Raghaviah Committee to study the Land problem in 1927 and the subsequent enactment of "The Malabar Tenancy Act of 1929" which sought to fix fair rents and prevent arbitrary eviction, was the first serious attempt made by the Government in this line. However in conferring benefits to the peasantry, the Act proved to be ineffective on account of the numerous loopholes provided within it. Also the Act seemed to have had the effect mainly safeguarding the interests of the upper layers of the tenantry - the kanmadars and customary verumpattomdars-many of whom continued to be the intermediaries rather than the actual cultivators". See Varghese T.C. op. cit. P.138

14. Land lordism in the State had been clearly on the wane right from 1957 onwards, as the rent share accruing to the landlords were being systematically reduced through tenancy reforms over the whole period. Following the 'Land Reforms Act of 1964', by 1966-67, in the State as a whole about 94 per cent of leased in land under all types of tenure had got fixity of tenure - either through the sanction of the Land Tribunals or through mutual agreement between the parties concerned. See "Land Reforms Survey 1966-67" op.cit. However it also needs to be pointed out that as the provisions of the act were being finally enacted, there was not much surplus land left in the State for redistribution, as most of it had evaporated in gifts and partitions undertaken since 1957.
15. For a detailed account of the whole process See "Land Reclamation in Kerala", V.R. Pillai and P.G.K.Panikar, Asia Publishing House, 1965. ch.2
16. Ibid p.20
17. The price of paddy in Kuttanad region increased from Rs.0.65 per standard para in 1910-11 to Rs.1.71 per standard para in 1918-19. (Price data corresponds to that of Ambalapuzha taluk which now form part of the Kuttanad region and have been collected from various issues of "Statistics of Travancore". formerly published by the Government of Travancore.)
18. The distribution of land holdings in the kayal zone is marked by a high degree of skewness. It is not unusual for farmers in this zone to own holdings of the size 50 or even hundred acres. A sample survey on the distribution of land holdings in the kayal region by V.R. Pillai and P.G.K.Panikar conducted in 1962 provides interesting information.

Distribution of Selected Holdings in The Kayal Area of Kuttanad by Size

<u>Areas in acres</u>	<u>Holdings</u>	
	<u>No.</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
0 - 10	2	5
11 - 25	2	5
26 - 40	6	15
41 - 60	8	20
61 - 100	12	30
100-250	6	15
251-500	3	7.5
501- and above	1	2.5
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All	40	100.0

Source. V.R. Pillai and P.G.K.Panikar, op.cit p.48 The reader however needs to be cautioned that the survey was not a scientifically carried out one. "At the same time the sample is free from any conscious bias". See also "A Note on The Sample Survey of Kayal Cultivations", pp.60.61

19. Estimate of the area where electricity from the Pallivasal Hydro Electric Project would be used for dewatering purposes in Alleppey is given in T.K.Velu Pillai "Travancore State Manual" Vol.III P.504. Also see "Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission", Government of Kerala, 1971 where it deals with the history of paddy cultivation in Kuttanad. Ch.III.
20. The decade 1921-1931 was one during which there was an unprecedented growth in population. In the Travancore State, population increased by 24.8 per cent compared to 13.9 per cent in the previous decade See Varghese T.C. op.cit. pp 123-125, the rural sector this implied, not only that there were many mouths to feed but also that they had to be provided with employment
21. The price of paddy in Kuttanad consistently declined over the period and by the time it was 1936-37, the prices had come down to Rs.0.45 per standard para. (Source, T.K.Velupillai, "Travancore State Manual". Vol III, Ch. XIV, p.30)

22. Estimates of Average Money Wage Rates Paid to Male Agricultural Labourers in Kuttanad

Year	Wage Rate Rs. Ps
1921-22*	0.50
1931**	0.33
Percentage decline = 34	

\*Figure obtained from "Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission" op.cit. p.27

\*\* Figure obtained from the data given in Census of India 1931 - Vol. XXVIII Travancore. Part II Tables VI Statistics of Wage

23. Sketchy description on the form of exploitation as it prevailed in Kuttanad in the 'thirties and 'forties of the present century are given in some of the articles written in Malayalam, by leaders of the trade union movement there. See S.K.Das Agricultural Workers Movement in Kuttanad, published in "The Golden Jubilee Souvenir of Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union". Alleppey, 1972.
24. This phase and more importantly the growth of the trade union movement among factory workers of Alleppey are discussed at length in articles contributed by various pioneering union leaders to the "Coir Factory Workers Jubilee Souvenir Volume", op.cit.
25. "Report of the Board of Conciliation of Trade Disputes in Mats and Matting Industry", Government of Travancore, 1939.
26. A detailed account on the leaders in those days can be had from T.V.Krishnan: "Kerala's First Communist". Prabhat Book House, Trivandrum

27. The irrigation projects are Malampuzha, Mangalam, Walayar, Gayatri, Chitturpuzha, Cheraluzhi and Pothun'y. They provide irrigation facilities to paddy fields in the three taluks of Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat.
28. The Karshaka Samajam was formed in 1970 with headquarters in Palghat town. From an initial strength of barely 2000 members over the years it has grown into a powerful body having more than 20,000 numbers by the end of 1974. The functioning of the Samajam is mostly concentrated in the taluks of Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat. In these taluks, the Samajam has sixty Mandalams (units) each having fifty or more members. ( These details were furnished by Mr. A. Sekhara Menon, President of the Deseeya Karshaka Samajam, Palghat District. )
29. In other parts of the State, especially in Kuttanad region, workers, irrespective of the fact whether they have been previously employed in the same farm or not, are allowed to take part in harvesting and claim the wage share.
- 30.

Yield Rates and the Average Farm Price of  
Paddy in Palghat

<u>Year</u>	<u>Yield Rates</u>		<u>Average Farm Price</u>
	Virippu (Autumn)	Mundakan (Winter)	(Rs. per Standard para)
1	2	3	4
1962-63	2117	2803	2.78
1963-64	2787	3099	3.26
1964-65	2669	3077	3.53
1965-66	2940	2344	6.00
1966-67	2802	3189	6.35
1968-69	2697	2857	6.76
1969-70	2921	2738	6.52
1970-71	2611	2731	5.82
1971-72	3211	3289	6.61
1972-73	3121	2895	8.22

Source: Col.2,3 and 4 Data collected from the Office of the Bureau of Economics and Statistics, Government of Kerala, Trivandrum

31. See Francine Frankel: "Indias Green Revolution, Economic Gains and Political Costs" (Oxford University Press, Bombay 1971).p.116

32. See "The Third Decennial World Census of Agriculture, 1970-71 Report for Kerala State, Vol. II p.622 (Agriculture Census Division, Bureau of Economics and Statistics, Government of Kerala, 1973).
33. Figures obtained from the Regional Transport Office, Palghat to oral enquiries made on 25th August, 1975.
34. The relative advantages from tractorisation comes out sharply of a Study on Tractor Use and Its Impact on The Farm Economy of Kerala (Agricultural Division, State Planning Board, Kerala August 1969)

As per this study "On an average, the tractor takes three hours for ploughing one acre of Virippu land, 2.40 hours for Mundakan as against 15 pairs of bullocks required for one acre of Virippu and 18 pairs for one acre of Mundakan". (pp.28-29) The table quoted below (p.26) also indicates that the farmers can save enormous amount by switching from bullock labour to tractor ploughing.

Savings of Resources per Acre

	Rs. Ps
Traditional ploughing cost per acre	264. 00
Tractor ploughing cost per acre	67. 00
Saving per acre on Account of Tractor use	197.00

On the basis of the figures from the study, we could also make rough estimates of the number of tractors required to plough the total area under paddy in Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat taluks. If we assume that the tractors could be operated at the rate of 10 hours a day for 70 days in both the seasons the number of tractors required to plough 68 thousand hectares under Virippu (Autumn) and 55 thousand hectares under Mundakan (Winter) in the three taluks (figures obtained from crop cutting survey reports op.cit. for 1971) should work out to 1150. This region as we have already noticed have about 850 tractors by July 1975.

35. Between 1961 and 1971, the number of Agricultural Labourers in the three taluks of Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat increased by 39 per cent, while during the same time the population increase by 21 per cent. It is also the case that the number of people who reported as cultivators declined by 18 percent in these taluks during the same decade.

Total Population, Number of Agricultural Labourers and Cultivators in Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat Taluks During 1961 and 1971

	<u>1961</u>	<u>1971</u>	<u>Percentage Increase</u>
Population	809,985	978,736	20.83
Agr. Labourers	140,129	194,723	38.96
Cultivators	54,276	44,628	-17.78

Source: Census 1961 and 1971. District Hand Book of Palghat op.cit.

36. Currently it is very difficult to obtain reliable data on the actual distribution of land holdings in Palghat. There are numerous instances of land being partitioned into small benami holdings to avoid the ceiling laws incorporated into the land reform legislations. Moreover since the coming of the graded procurement levy system in Kerala in 1964, there has been a noticeable increase in the partitioning of paddy lands to bring each individual holding below the exempted limit. This trend is clearly indicated by the fact that between 1971-72 and 1974-75 in the three taluks of Alathur, Chittoor and Palghat, out of a total area of 117567 hectares under rice, the number of holdings of size less than 2 acres has increased from 26,200 to 42,883 with a corresponding increase in the area from 26,034 to 43,194 hectares. (Figures collected from the Department of Civil Supplies, Government of Kerala, Trivandrum.)