

The Origins and Nature of Kerala Political Specificity; Social Reform, Nationalism and Communism to 1940

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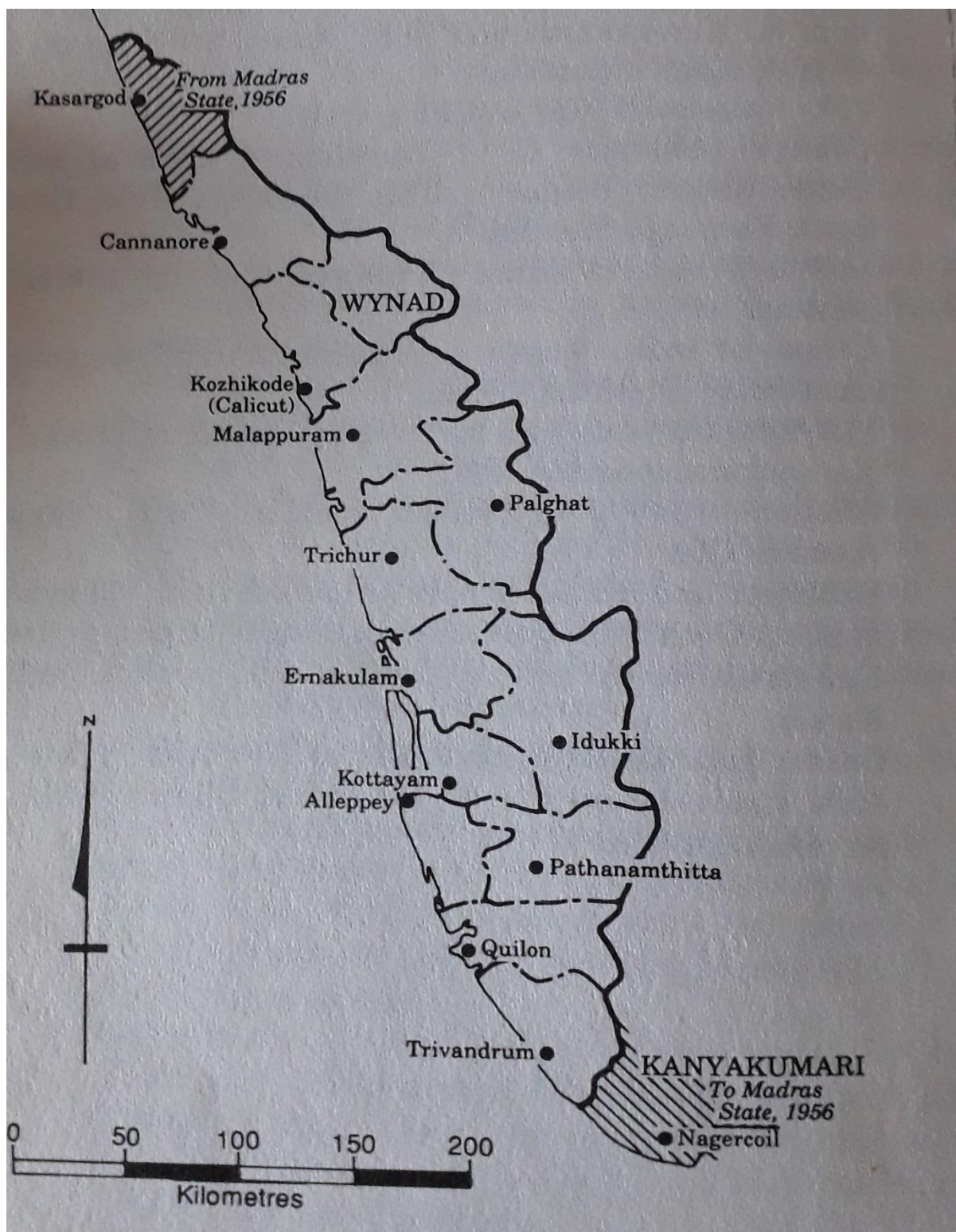
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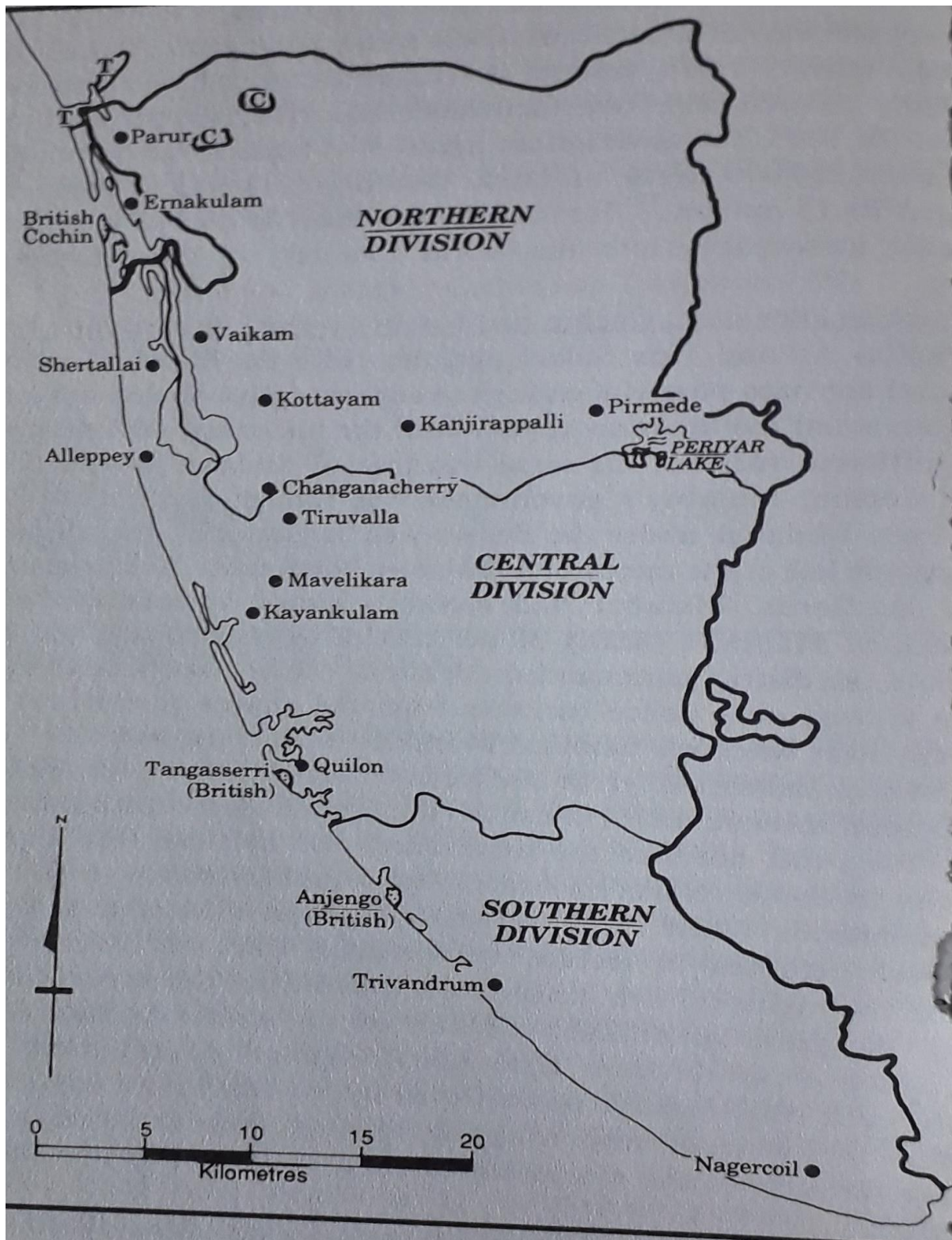
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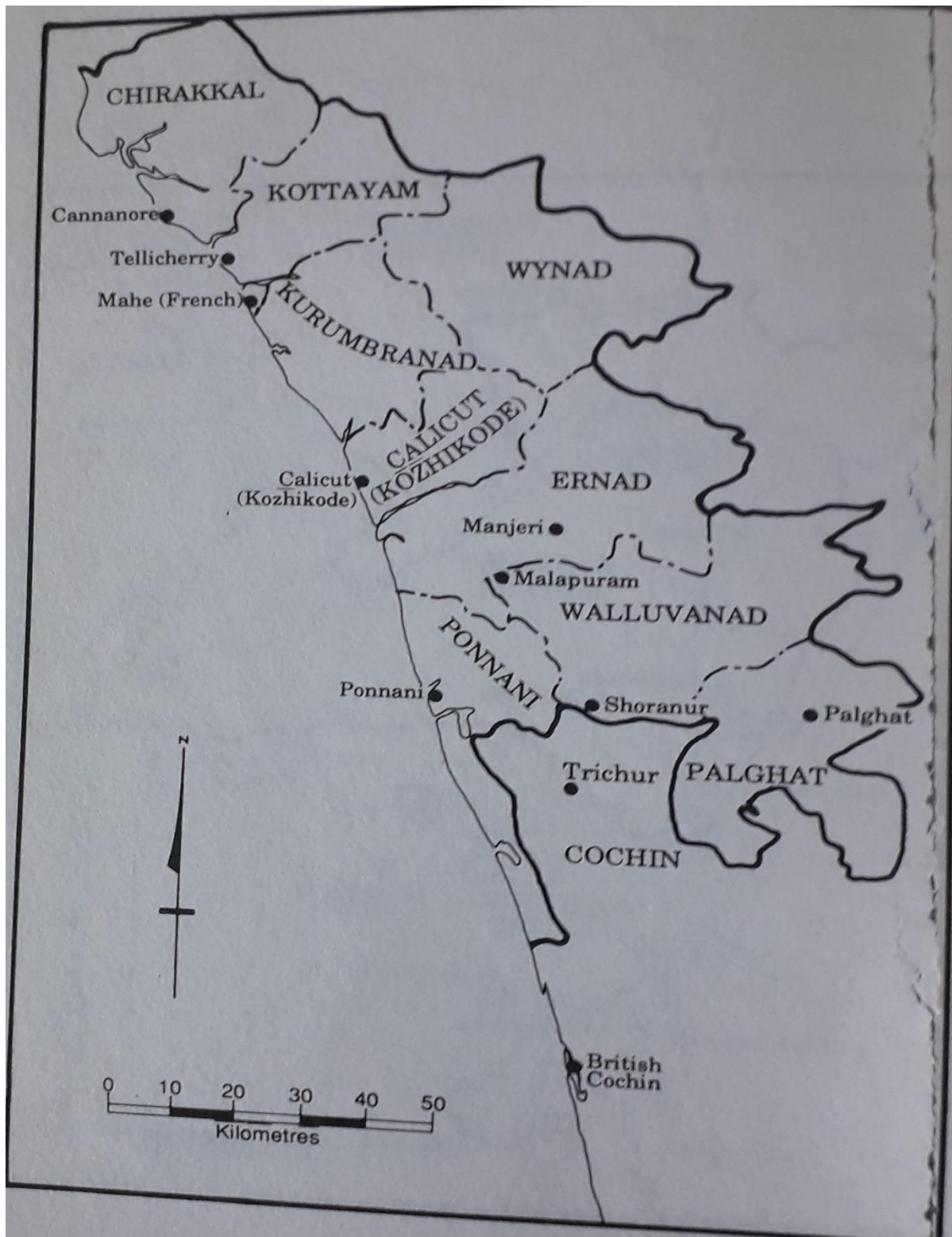
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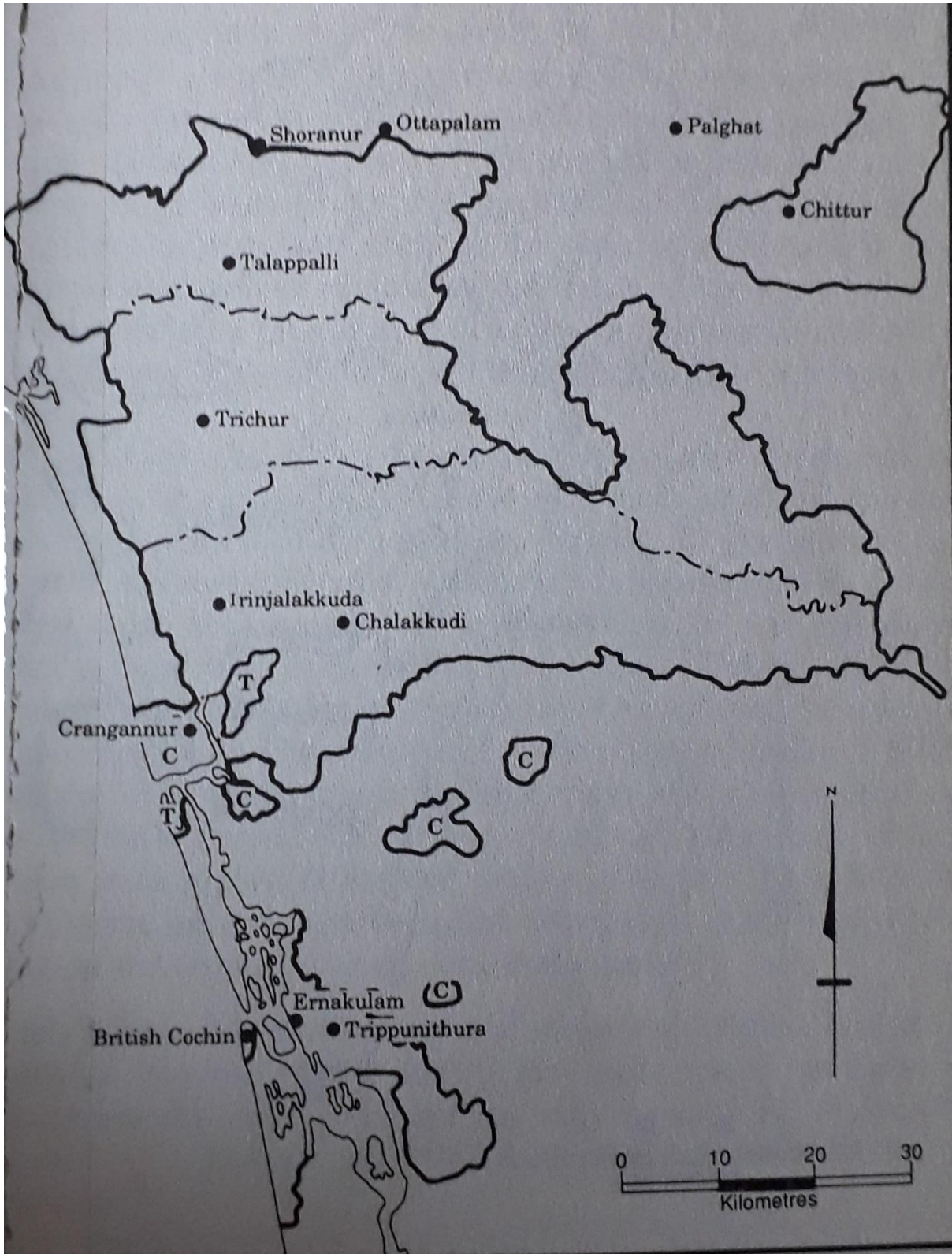
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Cochin Kingdom 1941

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of Indian democracy, the southern state of Kerala occupies a prominent place where a number of political milestones were achieved for the first time. This was the region where European imperialist ambitions began with the landing of Vasco Da Gama in Calicut and was, subsequently, also one of the places where some the earliest expressions of anti-imperialist struggle against European domination took place in the Indian subcontinent.¹ The erstwhile Travancore Kingdom, which formed the southern portion of modern Kerala, was the first among princely states to start experimenting with limited forms of legislature in 1888.² But the most important milestone that sets Kerala apart from the rest of India was perhaps the election in 1957 of the first non-Congress government in post-independence India, which was also the first elected Communist majority government in India.³ It is arguable, too, that Kerala is also the only state in India today where the Communists remain a relevant political force.⁴

There are some unique factors specific to Kerala with historic roots in social and political developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that explain this phenomenon. My study seeks to explore the deep origins of this ‘Kerala specificity’ by looking at the development of social movements in relation to their impact on politics, with particular reference to the degree to which they imbued this politics with a radical consciousness centred around social and political equality. This radical consciousness gradually emerged, I argue, first

¹ A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, November 2019 (Kottayam: D C Books, 2019), pp. 176-86; For more detailed exploration of early anti-imperialist struggle in Kerala see, Kurup, K. K. N., *India's Naval Traditions: The Role of the Kunhali Marakkars* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1997).

² Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, p. 272.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁴ Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, *Why Communism survived in Kerala but died in Bengal: Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd writes* (2021) <[Why Communism survived in Kerala but died in Bengal: Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd writes | The News Minute](#)> [accessed 11 October 2022].

from a coalescence of social reform movements with a Congress-led nationalist movement, which was then transformed under the rising tide of socialism and communism. This has meant that the nationalist movement in Kerala evolved in a manner different from its development elsewhere in India, or at the national level, such that Gandhian-led mobilizations did not get subverted by communal elements marked by Hindu-Muslim polarization. Rather, nationalism in Kerala was shaped by anti-caste and anti-landlord elements that favoured the rise of leftist forces.⁵ This has something to do with the region not having succumbed to Hindu cultural nationalism, a fact that has continued relevance in contemporary Kerala.

As will become clear, aside from the primary sources consulted, my study draws substantially on an existing body of scholarship, but its novelty rests in exploring the linkages between social reform movements, key organizations, and nationalism and how this led to the emergence of a distinctive political culture which developed over a long period of time, some of whose roots can be traced back to the nineteenth century. It also reveals the continuities between anti-caste politics and the role of trade unions in pushing for greater egalitarianism in the political sphere. In-depth exploration of these complex connections remains scarce, and I seek to achieve this by synthesizing works on subjects (the wider political, particularistic social reform movements) that are not usually treated together. The aim is to bring out a vision of Kerala's past that will emphasise the continuities mentioned above.

This dissertation will explore these themes in this way. A brief prologue and an introduction to Kerala's social composition is provided and precursors to reform are identified. Chapter one then explores the conditions prevailing at the end of the nineteenth century in Kerala: here the changes wrought by the establishment of colonial rule, the abolition of slavery, administrative reforms in the princely kingdoms, missionary efforts and other factors that

⁵ Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Left Radicalism in India* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 134-6.

altered pre-colonial social dynamics are detailed. This history is then linked to the rise of a nascent Ezhava (which was an untouchable caste) middle class, and the ideology centred around the spiritual figurehead of Narayana Guru. The second chapter of the dissertation will trace the linking of Guru's ideology with the efforts of the rising middle class of Ezhavas which resulted in the establishment of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), and its early history of activism between 1900-20. It will also briefly explore the similarly-inspired leaders and organizations of other untouchable caste groups like the Pulayas. In the third chapter, the rising currents of social reform centred on the assertion of rights by untouchable caste groups, and the forces of nationalism, are shown to coalesce and collide from the 1920s with Gandhi taking over the leadership of the Indian National Congress. The main focus here is an analysis of the course and impact of the great protest movement known as the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924-25. A final chapter considers subsequent chief moments of protest and radicalisation in Kerala and traces the growth of the early socialist movement from the 1930s onwards; it charts the distancing of Kerala's politics of caste-based reform from the nationalist mainstream and shows how this was fuelled by disenchantment with Gandhian methods and ideology. It reveals the role of the Congress socialists in enabling the rise of the communist movement and highlights the continuities of this movement's concerns with the earlier programmes for civil rights of the untouchable caste social reformists in Kerala. Indeed, the Congress socialists, who would later transform into communists, would radically reframe the language, and aims of social reform by recasting caste inequality in terms of economic – that is, class inequality.

PROLOGUE

Key Aspects of Society and Politics in Nineteenth Century Kerala

Many of the pre-conditions for the emergence of social reform movements in other parts of India were also evident in Kerala. The consolidation of British colonial rule in India in the nineteenth century, followed by the emergence of a nascent middle class in this milieu, saw the rise of ‘colonial modernity’: the result in part of the combination of liberal-reformist efforts and Christian missionary pressure that was notably present in Kerala as it was in other areas of India.⁶ But within this general picture, there were some crucial differences that stand out as constituting a ‘Kerala specificity’.

In terms of political units, what constitutes Kerala today broadly fell under three political entities from the nineteenth century until independence – the Malabar, the Cochin and the Travancore kingdoms. The Malabar region consisted mostly of the northern region of Kerala and had come under British rule in 1793, becoming a district of the Madras Presidency. Meanwhile, Cochin and Travancore were Hindu theocratic kingdoms that roughly corresponded respectively to what are now the central and south-central regions of the state of Kerala.⁷ This unusual configuration had an important bearing on the future development of politics in the region. As Malabar was directly under British rule, anti-colonial and nationalist movements dug deeper roots here initially from where they spread to Cochin and Travancore. Conversely, as Cochin and Travancore were Hindu theocratic states indirectly controlled by

⁶ M.S.A. Rao, *Social movements and social transformation: A study of two backward classes movements in India* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 6-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-9.

Britain, the resistance to colonialism all too often combined with resistance to the caste oppression reinforced by the Hindu theocratic establishment.

As in the rest of India, the upper-castes generally dominated the social and economic structures of Kerala's society but, unlike the other parts of British India, their actual numerical strength was relatively miniscule. As such, the dominant upper-castes (*savarnas*) in Kerala were not the Brahmins but the Nairs whose position within the varna caste hierarchy is still a matter of dispute. Regardless, the Nairs who were traditionally soldiers, chieftains and gentry often outnumbered the Brahmins in most places. Hence, the ire of untouchable (*avarna*) reformers and radicals alike in Kerala was largely directed at Nairs, the enforcers of the Brahminical hierarchy, rather than at the Brahmins themselves, which explains why anti-Brahmin sentiments didn't take hold here.⁸ Generally, the Brahmins and Nairs were landlords and occupied the high offices of the state, while untouchable castes like Ezhavas, Pulayas and Parayas constituted the labouring classes. Hence, the caste system in Kerala in the nineteenth century often resembled a nascent class system. Added to this mix was the substantial presence of Christians and Muslims in Kerala. While they occupied varying places within the socio-economic hierarchy, the most important factor in their relationship with the (upper-caste) *savarnas* was that large sections of the lower castes and untouchables often converted to Islam or Christianity in the hope of escaping caste discrimination.⁹

Another striking feature of Kerala was that, unlike British Indian provinces such as Bengal, there was a visible absence of any social reform fervour among *savarnas*, save for a few exceptions like Brahmananda Sivayogi. Being relatively secure in their traditional occupations and lifestyles, the Nairs and Brahmins were highly averse to aspects of

⁸ Rao, *Social movements and Social transformation*, pp. 11, 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

modernization for most of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Moreover, issues like Sati (the sacrifice of widows), female infanticide and widow remarriage which preoccupied the northern reformers were largely unapplicable to them as they did not have such customs for the most part. Nair women often had polyandrous relationships supplanted by practices of matriliney (*marumakathayam*) and in the case of widows, Brahmin women were forced into lifelong seclusion rather than sati. Outside of Nairs and Brahmins, in all other caste groups widowed women had the right to remarry. Interestingly, when movements did emerge among *savarnas*, around the turn of the twentieth century, they did so with the focus not on issues such as sati or the rights of widows but, rather for changing existing marriage practices and inheritance laws.¹¹ This can be seen as an attempt to consolidate their position in the face of the threat posed to them by the middle classes newly emerging from the ranks of the untouchables who were increasingly challenging the social, political and economic standing of the upper castes.

In Kerala, then, the earliest expressions of social revolt came not from the western educated elite of the *savarnas* but from amongst the ranks of untouchable castes (*avarnas*) – some achieving middle class status despite their caste positions – with a focus on caste oppression. In this way, the social movements in Kerala completely bypassed that more familiar stage of protest in India, which centred around the issues such as the position of widows; instead, it was the various caste disabilities suffered by the *avarna* castes that formed the core around which the reformists agitated.¹²

Long before Keralites had ever heard of ideas of socialism or communism, there were significant movements that pointed in the direction of social equality. One such was the

¹⁰ M.R. Manmathan, *Recasting Images: Essays on Social Reform in Modern Kerala* (Calicut: Farook College Publications Division, 2017), pp. 8-9.

¹¹ Manmathan, *Recasting Images: Essays on Social Reform in Modern Kerala*, pp. 8-9.

¹² Ibid; see also, K.N. Ganesh, 'Malayali Culture and the Problem of Kerala Renaissance', in *Religion, Community and Identity: Reform and Change in Kerala*, ed. by Ashok Mundon (Thiruvananthapuram, ISDA Publications, 2016), pp. 24-5.

Channar Revolt in the 1850s.¹³ Starting as an agitation – ‘the breast cloth movement’ – by converted Christian Nadar women for the right to wear upper garments in the 1810s, the movement had all the bearings of a social revolt and gradually progressed to a universal demand for all *avarna* castes to have the same right which resulted in the 1859 Proclamation in Travancore which granted this.¹⁴ Also of significance was that, owing to pressure exerted by Christian missionaries and the colonial state, the kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin made some changes to their political and social structures. Administrative reforms relating to land tenure were implemented and the public service sector expanded leading to the opening of schools, colleges, hospitals, and other public works. These changes allowed for a small section of the *avarna* castes to feel more acutely their relative disparity in social status in the caste dominated society that followed discriminatory practices like untouchability, unapproachability, and the constriction of social mobility.¹⁵

In this milieu, possibilities emerged such that many among the depressed classes could voice their dissent against their existing socio-economic conditions. This was exemplified by figures such as Vaikunda Swamikal, Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker, Dr. Palpu and Sree Narayana Guru. Perhaps the earliest among these was Vaikunda Swamikal. Born in 1809 to a Nadar (untouchable caste) family, he rechristened himself as an avatar of Vishnu, the ‘Vaikunda Swami’, who was sent to deliver the Nadars and other untouchables from Brahminical tyranny and started preaching his anti-caste discourses in the early-1830s. By 1839, his popularity was such that he had incurred the wrath of the then Travancore king (Swati Thirunal) for his state

¹³ Rajmohan Gandhi, *Modern South India: A History from 17th Century to our Times* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018), pp. 210-11.

¹⁴ Trivandrum, Kerala State Archives, Cover Files, Vol 1, Bundle No:4, 15905, *Wearing of Upper Cloth by Christian Convert Women*, 1826.

¹⁵ K. N. Ganesh, ‘Malayali Culture and the Problem of Kerala Renaissance’, in *Religion, Community and Identity: Reform and Change in Kerala*, ed. by Ashok Mundon, pp. 23-4.

patronage of *savarnas* and the over taxation of *avarnas*. For this he was arrested and imprisoned.¹⁶

Regardless, Vaikunda continued preaching equality of all castes and at the same time condemned the various disabilities that were imposed on the downtrodden castes. He was also against elaborate and expensive rituals, idol worship and animal sacrifice. For propagating his ideals, he founded an organization called the *Samathuva Sangam* (Equality Society) and established alternative shrines called *Nizhal Thankals* wherein untouchables and other *avarna* caste people could worship without caste distinctions or Brahminic oversight.¹⁷ As we shall see in subsequent chapters, Vaikunda's tactics of contesting oppressive caste traditions prefigured those used by later figures such as Narayana Guru, who figure prominently in this thesis. A tradition had been born in Kerala. Indeed, contemporaneous to Vaikunda was Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker (1825-74), an Ezhava (another untouchable caste) master of the traditional martial arts *Kalaripayattu* and *Kathakali* dance.¹⁸ He is known to have openly supported the breast-cloth movement by exhorting the Chanar women to defy royal edicts and he organized boycotts against *savarna* men who harassed the *avarna* women. He is also said to have defied caste taboos by dressing up as a Brahmin to enter the Guruvayur temple, while also setting up traditional schools for Ezhavas in the 1870s.¹⁹

As audacious as these pioneers of a political tradition in Kerala were, for the most part, they represented individual and isolated islands of protest. The more organized and concerted attempts at reform and challenging caste-inequality by *avarnas* would not materialize until the

¹⁶ P. Sarveswaran, 'Sri Vaikunda Swamikal and Social Changes in South India', ed. by S. Raimon, in *Sri Vaikunda Swami and Social Reform Movement in Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram: Vaikunda Swami International Centre for Study and Research, 2017), pp. 15-21.

¹⁷ Ibid; P. Johnson, 'Vaikunda Swamikal: Harbinger of Social Change in Kerala', ed. by P.F. Gopakumar, in *Faces of Social Reform in Kerala: Essays in Honour of Dr. S. Sivadasan* (Thiruvananthapuram: Dr. P.F. Gopakumar, 2015), pp. 11-15.

¹⁸ Rekha P., 'Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker: Precursor of Sree Narayana Guru', in *Faces of Social Reform in Kerala: Essays in Honour of Dr. S. Sivadasan*, pp. 35-7.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 38-40.

1890s, with the emergence of other key figures such as Dr Palpu and Narayana Guru. This shall be explored in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 1

The Historical Basis for the Development of a Social Reform

Movement in Kerala

At the dawn of the twentieth century, there was a palpable restlessness among many belonging to the untouchable castes (also called *avarnas*) in Kerala. Suffering severe socio-economic disabilities and oppression imposed on them by the ruling elites and upper castes groups like Brahmins and Nairs, they constituted the bulk of the downtrodden sections of Kerala's populace. Under the impetus of British rule, they became increasingly conscious of their miserable social position, and yearned for a better future. No longer content with being subservient to the rigid orthodoxies of caste oppression, they were increasingly assertive in their demands, asking for equal access to public education and a greater share in the government jobs.

While similar 'currents' were visible in early nineteenth century, the ones that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth and in the early-twentieth centuries were markedly different in scale and impact in that they were far more widespread and well organised. Whereas previously, such movements were contained within certain groups like the Shanars or Nadars, and focused on winning limited concessions and social mobility, the tremors of social reform now permeated all sections of the untouchable castes from the Ezhavas, who were the highest in social rank among the untouchables, down to the Pulayas and Parayas who were the lowest. The reasons behind this phenomenon can be attributed to the following main factors – the impact, variously, of missionaries, reform and expansion of the state, the decline of matrilineal

familial systems and the development of caste and communal organizations. The role of each factor shall be examined in depth before proceeding to consider their consequences.

Christian Missionaries and Emancipation of Untouchables

One of the peculiar features of Travancore and Cochin kingdoms in the early-twentieth century was the high proportion of the native Christian population in these regions. Despite being theocratic Hindu states, a quarter of their population, around 25 per cent, was Christian by 1911.²⁰ A few factors contributed to this; even before the arrival of Europeans, there was a sizeable Christian presence in the region, called the Syrian Christians. Their presence motivated several Protestant missionaries to concentrate their proselytization efforts in the region such that by the end of the nineteenth century, Kerala had the highest concentration of Christian missionary activity in India.²¹

Among the many proselytizing sects and their establishments, the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) were the most widespread. LMS work in Kerala began with the arrival of William Tobias Ringeltaube in 1806, with assistance from British Resident Colonel C. Macaulay while CMS activities began in 1816 with direct patronage by Colonel Munro during his tenure as Resident (1810-19).²² While the missionaries were not particularly targeting Hindu *avarnas* for conversion, the nature of the caste hierarchy in nineteenth century Kerala enabled higher castes like Brahmins and Nairs to enjoy many social privileges, which when reinforced by the Hindu theocracies of Cochin and Travancore, gave them few incentives to be receptive to missionary work. Conversely, their lack of

²⁰ Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858-1936* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 189.

²¹ Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore* (London: W.H. Allen and Co, 1883), pp. 2-3.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 253, 262.

privileges in the existing order attracted untouchable castes like Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas and Nadars to Christianity.²³ They saw in Christianity a hope for amelioration of civic disabilities they suffered on account of being ‘untouchables’. Christianity not only offered an ideology that was theoretically egalitarian, but also provided upliftment in the form of education in mission schools, access to government via the missionary links with the British and princely governments, and generally a better standard of living.

Christian missionaries played a vital role in awakening a sense of injustice of the caste system among untouchable castes through their proselytizing activities.²⁴ Missionaries not only lobbied the British government but also the princely states of Travancore and Cochin to achieve their ends in numerous circumstances.²⁵ This was evident earlier in the nineteenth century in the breast-cloth movement (the movement of untouchable women for the right to cover their upper bodies), in the abolition of slavery in the 1850s,²⁶ in campaigns against forced labour (*uriyam*) and also in the lobbying for public access for untouchable converts to the governmental institutions and facilities such as courts, hospitals and roads.²⁷

While the British state was officially neutral in matters of religion and didn’t want to be seen as overtly favouring the missionaries, the missionaries were nonetheless able to exact favours from them, which came in the form of direct and indirect pressures exerted on the princely states through the offices of the British Resident who was a powerful agent of British influence. The tenures of British Residents like Colonel C. Macaulay (1800-10) and Colonel J. Munro (1810-19) may be noted in this regard as a period where missionary activity coincided

²³ Robin Jeffrey, *Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908* (London: Sussex University Press, 1976), pp. 37-40, 50-56.

²⁴ Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual, Vol 2* (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), pp. 114-16. https://archive.org/details/b29352708_0002/page/n5/mode/2up. [accessed 25 March 2023].

²⁵ Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore* (London: W.H. Allen and Co, 1883), pp. 414-20.

²⁶ K. K., Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1973), pp. 78-81.

²⁷ Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, pp. 60-70. See also, Jeffrey, *Decline of Nayar Dominance* (London: Sussex University Press, 1976), pp. 44-64.

with the British interest. Both were active and open supporters of missionary efforts. Munro was also to obtain significant grants of land and money from the Travancore Rani for the missionaries.²⁸

Similarly, the missionaries were able to extract favours from princely states through their connection with the paramount power to open educational and medical institutions. The LMS established the Nagercoil Seminary in 1818, which became the prestigious Scott Christian College in 1893 and the 'Pulayars Charity School' in 1861 among others. The Kottayam College established in 1814 by the CMS, received generous funds from both the Maharani and Resident, and went on to produce several catechists and government officials.²⁹ The CMS also established the Cambridge Nicholson Institute in 1859 for training teachers. In women's education, Rev. Benjamin Bailey established the Women's Education Centre at Kottayam sometime between 1820-30.³⁰

As the governments of Travancore and Cochin were generally reluctant to open schools for untouchable castes and girls, the missionaries filled the gap. To some extent, the governments and the missionaries' agendas dovetailed with each other, as was seen by the grant-in-aid system introduced by the Travancore government in 1875 to assist missionary educational efforts.³¹ However, by the 1890s, there was a marked change in the government attitude; there were now more strenuous efforts made towards expanding government education and exerting greater control over education. In 1894, the Travancore government introduced education reforms aimed at improving school inspections and revising the criteria for aid. As a result, several mission schools lost the aid they had received since 1875. In 1902, rules were made prohibiting the use of 'unapproved' textbooks and readers in aided schools

²⁸ Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, pp. 56-7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-9.

³⁰ Chummar Choondal, *The Missionaries and Malayalam Journalism* (Trichur: Kerala Geeta Press, 1975), p. 24.

³¹ Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, pp. 98-103.

and, in 1904, the state went so far as to even ban religious instruction in schools.³² However, despite these efforts by the Travancore government to curtail missionary influence in education, for the most part, the missionaries and the government were able to maintain good relations with each other.

State Intervention, Public Welfare and Economic Expansion

In the nineteenth century, the different regions of modern Kerala witnessed several state interventions in the area of land reform, education, health, and general public welfare such that they had far-reaching effects in altering the socio-economic hierarchies and conditions of the region. Although the nature and pace of these interventions varied in the different regions, the influence of British power produced a kind of uniformity in their effects.³³ While Malabar was directly under British rule, the kingdoms of Cochin and Travancore, though nominally sovereign were also subject to British ‘influence’ or at times direct intervention by the British Resident, who was the same official for both states. This meant that these states were often pressured into enacting administrative reforms at the behest of the British, who were often urged on and enabled by missionary activities.

Both Cochin and Travancore were nominally Hindu theocratic states – they invested large amounts of their financial resources in legitimizing the ‘Hindu’ nature of their states by maintaining or subsidizing a large portion of the temples, and their associated charitable

³² Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, pp. 103-7.

³³ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992) pp. 25-6.

businesses and properties in their states. This in turn benefited upper-caste groups like Brahmins and Nairs.³⁴

State intervention, partially at the behest of the British, came in the form of land legislation, abolition of slavery and practices like *uriyam* (unpaid forced labour), the reclamation of wastelands for cultivation, greater freedom of movement for labour and a general expansion of government in the field of public works.³⁵ In the area of land legislation, a number of acts were introduced to improve the position of tenants vis-à-vis their landlords – for example, the Jenmi-Kudiyam Act of 1867 and the Tenancy Act 1896 in Travancore, the Compensation for Tenancy Improvement Act 1887 in British Malabar, and Cochin Raja's Theetorum in 1863.³⁶ These legislations also accelerated the sale and purchase of land which was previously unsaleable.

The governments also abolished their monopolies in pepper and tobacco in 1860 and 1863 respectively, thereby attracting increased foreign capital. This expanded the plantation economy centred around tea, rubber and coffee, further boosting the cash economy. Economic growth was further enabled by growing demand for agricultural labour in neighbouring Ceylon and British Indian provinces and the increased demand for coconut products from America and Europe between 1870 and 1890. These widespread economic changes not only affected high caste Hindus but also untouchable castes like Ezhavas. As such, unlike in other parts of South

³⁴ *Report on the Administration of Travancore M.E. 1067/A.D. 1891-92* (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1893), pp. 139-40; See also, *Proceedings of the First Meeting of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore* (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1904) p. 19. See headings 'The Devaswoms and Religious Institutions' and 'Ootupuras and Charitable Institutions'.

Note: *Ootupuras* denotes the free feeding of Brahmins. For *ootupuras*, See also, Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 23-4.

³⁵ P. Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala: Narayana Guru, SNDP Yogam and Social Reform* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016), pp. 21-6; See also, C. Achyuta Menon, *Life of T. Sankunni Menon: The Diwan of Cochin 1860-79* (Trichur: V. Sundra Iyer and Sons, 1923), pp. 131-44.

³⁶ M.A. Oommen, *Land Reforms and Socio-Economic Change in Kerala: An Introductory Study* (Madras Christian Literature Society, 1971), pp. 17-33.

India, where the newly emerging middle classes were almost entirely drawn from the Brahmins, here the middle classes also rose from amongst the ranks of the untouchable castes.³⁷

The different states constituting the modern Kerala region also expanded efforts in different regions to provide education. This began early on: the first English schools in south India were probably the Raja's Free School in Travancore in 1836, which was tuition free and the English school at Trichur (Cochin kingdom) in 1837.³⁸ While school education continued to expand in all the regions throughout the century, it was mostly attended by Nairs, Brahmins and Christians, with the presence of untouchable caste groups and Muslims often being negligible.³⁹ Simultaneously, the conversion of a large number of untouchables to Christianity also worried the established Hindu rulers in these states, and in the early decades of twentieth century, they began to pay more attention to their education.

While the state reforms and economic growth did not drastically improve the lives of most untouchables, they did however, partially erode the traditional caste hierarchy. Thus, some sections of the Ezhavas, an untouchable caste group, became prosperous and increasingly conscious of their social disabilities and educational deprivation which were not commensurate with their rising economic stature. It was these middle-class sections of the Ezhavas who would initiate the most organized struggle for civil rights in the twentieth century.

Decline of Matriliney and its relationship to Erosion of Caste Status

The cumulative effect of administrative reforms, land reforms and the expansion of public education and services was such that it was bound to have far reaching implications for

³⁷ P. Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 24-6.

³⁸ Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, pp. 84, 200.

³⁹ *Report on the Administration of Travancore M.E. 1067/ A.D. 1891-92*, pp. 179, 205-6, 209-10, For Cochin see, Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, pp. 209-10.

the familial structures of Kerala. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, significant portions of Kerala's population, including high castes like Nairs and sections of the untouchable castes like Ezhavas (who were called Thiyyas in Malabar), were organized along matrilineal familial lines (*marumakkathayam*).⁴⁰ However, by the twentieth century, the matrilineal system had become untenable owing to the changing socio-economic conditions.

Historically, matriliney was underpinned by the joint-family system and collective ownership and control of land; it was indivisible and belonged to the corporate entity of an entire family. A matrilineal family was nominally headed by a woman, and while the property was passed along the female line, it was managed by her brother or uncles, called *karanavan*, on behalf of the entire family (*tharavadu*).⁴¹ This severely restricted transfers or sale of land. But the land reforms initiated by the British and their vassal states, the Cochin and Travancore kingdoms, and the disengagement of large sections of Nair men from their traditional occupation of soldiering due to the alliance and treaties with the British, saw growing pressure brought to bear on the ability of the matrilineal family to sustain itself through landed property. Increasingly over the generations, upper caste groups like the Nair sold off their lands to prosperous Christians and some affluent sections of low caste groups like Ezhavas and Nadars.⁴²

Simultaneously, the Nairs also sought to move towards newer professions in the bureaucracy of the state by acquiring English education. This in turn resulted in their dominating government services and education⁴³ and it created a sense of resentment among the emerging groups, like the rising middle classes of Christians and lower castes owing to

⁴⁰ Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, pp. 34-7, 49-50.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 23-4, 40-5.

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 13-14.

their lack of positions and influence in the government services. This provided the impetus for their forming caste and communal associations.

Rise of Caste and Communal Associations and the Stirring of Social Reform

The cumulative effect of Christian missionary activities, governmental interventions in society and economy, the expansion of the cash economy and the decline of matriliney among Nairs helped nurture distinct caste and religious identities in Kerala. Furthermore, some other developments also accelerated this process. Between the 1890s and 1910s, the Travancore government started to perceive Christian missionaries as a threat to its Hindu theocratic nature due to the rising number of converts that they were acquiring among the untouchable castes. This was duly emphasised by the noted government officer and gazetteer Nagam Aiya, who stated in 1906, ‘There is no doubt that, as time goes on, these neglected classes will be completely absorbed into the Christian fold’ and that it will ‘add to the difficulties of administration in a country like ours’.⁴⁴

As a result of this growing anxiety over the rising Christian population, the Travancore state became more open to suggestions regarding amelioration of the condition of lower castes to stem conversions. The conciliatory approaches towards untouchables now meant limited access to government schools and colleges, some concessions in the form of land allotments and abolishing some restrictions regarding access to public roads. However, despite these measures, discrimination against them continued in matters of education, especially girls’

⁴⁴ Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual, Vol 2*, p. 116.
https://archive.org/details/b29352708_0002/page/n5/mode/2up. [accessed 10 March 2023].

education, as was to be seen in the representations to the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly in 1904 and 1907.⁴⁵

Another factor that indicated growing communal consciousness can also be seen in the anxieties expressed by representatives in the assembly regarding expenditure incurred on religion – this, as suggested earlier, referred to temples, businesses and initiatives benefiting upper-caste Hindus– by the government.⁴⁶ This, combined with statistics showing a preponderance of Brahmins and Nairs in the various government services, incited resentment among different communities. Thus, from the 1900s onwards, we see a marked growth of caste and communal organizations like the Travancore and Cochin Christian Association, the Roman Catholic Christian Association Nagercoil, Nayar Samajam, Elava Samajam, the Muslim Aikya Sangham and the Muslim Merchants' Association.⁴⁷ The growth of such organisations among the emerging middle classes of Christians and Muslims percolated downwards such that the untouchables too started forming associations to demand better rights and respectability.

Among the untouchable castes, the Ezhavas had the highest social standing and were also the most numerous. Traditionally, their caste assigned them the profession of toddy tappers and cultivators of palm trees, but only a few among them engaged in these occupations, with majority being agricultural labourers of various sorts ranging from sub-tenants to landless labourers. Even still, by the end of the nineteenth century, substantial sections of them were able to become prosperous due to changing economic and social conditions.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Proceedings of the First Meeting of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore 1904*, p. 23; See also, *Proceedings of the Fourth Meeting of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore* (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1908), p. 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 47-50; *Proceedings of the Fifth Session of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore* (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1908) pp. 74-9.

⁴⁷ *Proceedings of the First Meeting of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore 1904*, pp. 24-5; See also, *Proceedings of the Fourth Meeting of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore*, Appendix B, p X.

⁴⁸ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 40-5.

The abolition of slavery and other kinds of forced labour enabled them to take up paid work, and this, coupled with growing demand for skilled and unskilled labour in the growing plantation economy and expanding cultivation under the state, improved their economic standing.⁴⁹ This was further helped by the disruption in traditional land relations caused by the land reforms of the mid-nineteenth century and the erosion of Nair matrilineal families and their control over land. Disgruntled members of the Nair joint-families were increasingly able to use the court system to demand the partition of property.⁵⁰ This is evinced by the rise in laws relating to inheritance towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth centuries.⁵¹ Between 1906 and 1907, the Nairs were selling the most land, with Christians and Ezhavas taking maximum advantage of this. This in turn allowed a section of them to become prosperous such that, by 1904, out of 261 big landlords who paid an annual land tax of Rs100, eight of them were Ezhava.⁵² This was also visible in their representation in the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly in 1904.

The rise in economic status of a marginal section of the upwardly mobile Ezhavas was also matched by their growth in education. While all the governments in the region had invested significantly in expanding public education, especially English education, for the most part, by the end of the nineteenth century, the higher castes like the Brahmins and Nairs, and Christians tended to be the main beneficiaries. Christians were able to make use of missionary institutions which accounted for a substantial portion of total educational institutions. The prosperous Ezhavas, like the converts from untouchable castes were able to obtain greater opportunities in education through these missionary institutions.⁵³ These conditions gradually fostered a growing section of prosperous Ezhavas who began to assert themselves against the taboos,

⁴⁹ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 24-5.

⁵⁰ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, pp. 37-41.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43-4.

⁵² Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 23, 41.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30, 42-3, 45-6.

restrictions and disabilities imposed by the caste-system. It was these sections that joined hands with Christians and Nairs in putting forward the ‘Malayali Memorial’ of 1891, with one of its main signatories being Dr. Palpu.⁵⁴ The memorial was largely the work of the ‘Malayalee Sabha, a group of largely English educated Nairs who, though enjoying many caste privileges vis-à-vis untouchables and dominating lower orders of government service, still resented the complete control of the high offices by the Brahmins, especially the non-Malayalee Brahmins. As a memorial for complaining only about the exclusion of Nairs would have been easily defeated, the Malayalee Sabha sought allies among Ezhavas and Christians and included within it their concerns for exclusion from government service. The memorial supposedly claimed to represent all sections of Malayalees with over 10,000 signatories. While the memorial was largely induced by and for the concerns of Nairs, the inclusion of other groups, notably Christians and Ezhavas, awakened similar aspirations in the latter.⁵⁵

In many ways, the person and struggles of Dr. Palpu was emblematic of the emerging middle classes among the Ezhavas. Having studied English with some help from Christian missionaries, he passed the matriculation examination in 1883 and had applied unsuccessfully for medical studies in Travancore. He would go on to pass the Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery examination at Madras and apply for medical service with the Travancore government in 1889 only to be rejected again.⁵⁶ His caste status was undoubtedly the key factor in this. He then went on to pursue a career as a medical officer in the Mysore government service leaving behind a distinguished service record there for combating plague in the city and for reforming its healthcare sector. During this time, as well as later, he tried numerous methods to convince the Travancore government to reverse their policy of exclusion of Ezhavas. He first sent a memorial as early as 1885 to the Travancore Dewan but this was quietly ignored. Later in 1896,

⁵⁴ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 46.

⁵⁵ Jeffrey, *Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore*, pp. 153, 157-8, 161-2, 167-8.

⁵⁶ Rao, *Social movements and Social Transformation*, pp. 32-5.

he started another massive petitioning campaign with over 13000 signatures, which was the famous 'Ezhava Memorial'.⁵⁷ The Dewan, Shankara Soobier, responded to this condescendingly stating that there weren't many among Ezhavas who wanted to pursue higher education and that such measures would incur the displeasure of the (high caste) savarna Hindus. Following this rejection, several other petitions were sent, both by individuals and groups, but all were rejected on the grounds that they represented only the exclusive interest of a section of Ezhavas.⁵⁸

Despite these setbacks, Palpu continued his fight for social justice and tried several strategies to bring pressure to bear on the Travancore government. He met Lord Curzon when he visited Mysore and submitted a memorial to him regarding the condition of the Ezhavas and tried reaching the British Parliament. The British Parliament directed the Indian government to investigate the matter and take appropriate measures.⁵⁹ He contacted G.P. Pillai, who had drafted the Malayalee Memorial and also a congressman, who raised the issue on the Indian National Congress's platform in 1895.⁶⁰ Besides these efforts, he gave publicity to the issue through writing articles in the press and also publishing a book in English, *Treatment of Thiyyas in Travancore* (The Thiyyas referred to the Ezhavas from a particular region, Malabar).

However, despite his persistence, Dr. Palpu found that petitions and memoranda could not force the Travancore government into making any meaningful concessions or improvements in the condition of the Ezhavas. In 1891, Palpu met in Bangalore Swami Vivekananda, who was the most influential Hindu spiritual figure in India at the time, and

⁵⁷ Meera Iyer, *Palpu: A doctor, activist who fought the plague and the caste system*, 21 August, 2020, < <https://www.deccanherald.com/spectrum/palpu-a-doctor-activist-who-fought-the-plague-and-the-caste-system-876229.html>

⁵⁸ Rao, *Social movements and Social Transformation*, pp. 32-5.

⁵⁹ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 47-8.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

informed him of the many problems faced by the Ezhavas and other untouchables.⁶¹ sympathetic Vivekananda made two main suggestions – that a fight against caste discrimination required a more organized and sustained effort, ergo a viable organisation and, more importantly so far as he was concerned, that such an organization could succeed only if it had a spiritual messianic figure who could inspire the masses.⁶²

While Palpu was able to address the first shortcoming soon after, forming the Ezhava Mahasabha in 1896 and organizing meetings in various places like Paravoor and Mayanoor, finding a spiritual figurehead in Sree Narayana Guru wouldn't happen until much later. Meanwhile, the Ezhava Mahasabha tried to intensify its fight for social rights and make alliances with similar organizations elsewhere in Malabar, but they could not make much progress for several reasons. Firstly, the middle-class organisation and interests of well-to-do Ezhavas, centred around education and government jobs, was not able to appeal to the interests of the majority of uneducated Ezhavas, who were agricultural labourers. Secondly, there was caste, class and region-based differences or discrimination within the ranks of the organisation; the Ezhava in Malabar, the Thiyyas, looked down on their fellow caste folk in Travancore and Cochin as inferior, and the affluent groups discriminated against the poorer lower-class groups. Thirdly, the middle-class leadership tended to conduct their propaganda in English which the majority did not understand.⁶³ It was the coming together of Palpu and Narayana Guru in 1903 that finally saw the emergence of a mass movement among Ezhavas, fulfilling the preconditions set by Vivekananda.

⁶¹ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, p. 50; see also Novalis, 'The Gait Circular Once More', *The Tribune*, 27 November 1910, p. 2. Here the author mentions the earlier meeting of Vivekananda with Thiyya leader Dr. Palpu.

⁶² Komalezthuthu, K. G. Madhavan, 'Doctor Palpu', in *Es. En.Di.Pi. Yōgam plāṭṭinam jūbili smārakagrantham* (Malayalam), ed. by G. Priyadarshan, pp. 374-9.

⁶³ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 48-50.

The Centrality of Narayana Guru

In fact, Narayana Guru's quest for the social advancement of untouchable and oppressed castes had begun before his encounter with Palpu. Born as Nanu Asan in 1856 in a village near Trivandrum, his family was respected for being Ayurvedic physicians and traditional teachers (*asans*) which gave him some cultural and intellectual standing among his peers.⁶⁴ After a period of study under Vedic scholar Raman Pillai Asan, he returned to his village in 1881 and briefly ran a school. He got married in this time but renounced married life for that of an ascetic. From here on, Guru went on wandering in different places throughout south India interacting with Christians, Muslims, and several groups of untouchable people like Pulayas. It was in this period that he met other famed *sanyasins* (Hindu ascetic) of Kerala at the time like Chattampi Swamikal and Thaikat Ayyavu who were known for being critical of caste discrimination.⁶⁵

It was also during this period of wandering that Guru began to refine his spiritual beliefs and ethics, which would be the basis of the ideology of the organisation Sree Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana Yogam founded in 1904. From the late 1880s, he started to preach the doctrine that propagated, '*One God, one religion, one caste for all humankind*'⁶⁶ and expanded on it to attack the caste system. In this regard, the first thing he did was to challenge the monopoly of the Brahmins to study and acquire mastery of sacred scriptures. This was seen as essential as mastery over the scriptures was seen as one of the crucial marks of caste status. Guru started teaching Vedantic scriptures and doctrines to students of Ezhava background and to other untouchable castes like Pulayas and demonstrate that they could attain mastery over

⁶⁴ Nancy Yielding, *Narayana Guru: A Life of Liberating Love* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2019), pp. 7-9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-22, 27-33.

⁶⁶ G. Balakrishnan Nair, *Sree Narayana Gurudeva Krithikal/Sree Narayana Guru Complete Works, Vol 2.* (Malayalam) (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2003), pp. 403-9. < [complete works of Sree Narayana Guru vol 2 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) > [accessed 3 April 2023].

sacred literature with the right training. Additionally, Guru started to promote cordial relations between different untouchable castes like Cherumas, Pulayas and Pariahs in the hope of creating a sense of solidarity amongst them. To this end, he not only taught children from these backgrounds but also employed Pulaya as cooks.⁶⁷

The first *mutt* (Hermitage) was established in 1888 at Aruvipuram and the second one at Sivagiri in 1904, which later became his main centre. At the time of the establishment of the first temple, Guru and Palpu hadn't crossed paths yet. As such, this temple was only meant as a base for his closest followers which amounted to no more than 24 people and its aim was to conduct daily *poojas* (ritual oblations and prayers) and conduct annual festivals. This was called the *Aruvipuram Ksehtra Yogam* (Aruvipuram Temple Association) and although its reach and aims were very limited, the inscription laid on the temple by the Guru himself – '*In this model place all inhabitants irrespective of caste and religion can dwell freely as brothers*' – had already laid the ideological foundation for the later Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (or SNDP) in 1903.⁶⁸

Guru's ideology was meant to be both philosophical and pragmatic, at the same time as it was meant to be a synthesis of both modern and traditional values. On the one hand, he advocated for equality of all castes and religions, called for rejection of archaic customs and traditions, encouraged his followers to advance themselves through modern education and to participate in industry. On the other, he was a follower of Advaita (the oldest school of Hindu orthodox philosophy centred around monism) and a deeply religious man in the traditional-conservative sense; he communicated his principles in religious idiom and did not advocate

⁶⁷ Rao, *Social movements and Social Transformation*, pp. 37-8.

⁶⁸ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 52, 64, 84-5.

setting up of a new religion or sect.⁶⁹ Thus, his ideology can be seen as a synthesis of both tradition and modernity.⁷⁰

Narayana Guru also felt the need for an organization, which was crucial for bringing about socio-religious changes and for attaining power and progress. As such, he exhorted his followers to ‘strengthen themselves by organisation, liberate by education’. He stressed the need for an organization not exclusively for just one community or caste, but one that could bring all, irrespective of caste and religion, under one banner as equals without any discrimination. At the same time, to bring about such a radical social consciousness and change, he also recognised the need to appeal to religion, in such a way as to address the spiritual needs of the people and also to counter what he saw as the myriad of superstitions and backward customs and practices. In his time, the religious practices of all castes of Hindus were a varying mixture of magic, sorcery, witchcraft, and divination and involved such practices as worship of snakes and spirits and totems, sacrifice of lambs and goats, ‘devil dancing’ and such like. Naturally, like the Ezhava elites under the influence of western education, Narayana Guru also saw these practices as wasteful and irrational and that such practices contributed to the decadence of society. To this end, he called on his followers to reject such undesirable customs like *talikettu kalyanam* (tying of tali – which was a thread necklace that symbolises marriage), *tirandukuli* (first mensuration rites) and ritual animal sacrifice that were viewed by him not only as degrading but also expensive and elaborate.⁷¹ Additionally, he also promoted teetotalism and tried to persuade his followers to restrain from liquor consumption and production.

⁶⁹ P. K. Gopalakrishnan, ‘Narayana Guruvum Deshiye Navoathanavum’ (Narayana Guru and National Reform) in *Es. En.Di.Pi. Yōgam plāttinam jūbili smārakagrantham* (Malayalam), ed. by G. Priyadarshan, pp. 20-7.

⁷⁰ P. Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 59-60.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-1.

Guru advocated for monogamy as opposed to prevalent polygamous marriages and simplified marriage rites with hymns in Sanskrit and Malayalam. To realize these religious reforms, he believed in the need for establishing alternative temples, monasteries (mutts), hermitages (ashramas) run by a group of committed celibate monks, priests, and missionaries.⁷² In his view, this was necessitated not only by the need to realize the socio-religious reforms he was suggesting, but also to allow the Ezhavas and other untouchables to develop separate spaces of their own separate from those of the upper castes. He also adopted a unique mode of worship in some temples where idols were replaced with mirrors and plaques. This new reformed religion was called Narayana Dharma, which was fundamental to the creation of that organisation, the SNDP – to be considered in the next chapter - which was most important, either directly or by inspiration to others, in the quest for the rights of untouchable castes.

Conclusion

The growing social consciousness and self-assertion of lower caste and untouchable caste groups in the core period focused on in this dissertation were enabled by a context fashioned by certain longer-term developments.

Firstly, the expanding economy and administration of different regions in Kerala, through land reforms, introduction of public works department, expansion of cultivation, public education system and medical system had some corrosive effects on traditional social relations enforced by caste principle. The land reforms enacted in the different regions starting from the 1860s onwards, not only led to the disintegration of matrilineal families, especially among the dominant Nair castes, but also their retreat from their traditional occupation of soldiering and subsequent consolidation of occupations within the administrative services. This eroded one of

⁷² P. Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, p. 65.

the primary bases for pre-modern caste hierarchy – the indivisible and non-saleable property of the *taravad* (the Nair matrilineal family). The land sold off by Nairs were largely bought by Christians, but by 1880 a small section of the Ezhavas, had become prosperous enough to become landlords and exploit the decline of the Nair monopoly over land. It is from this nucleus that an Ezhava middle and upper class would emerge enabling the later formation of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam or SNDP. Reforms also entailed the government selling off or ending its monopolies in land ownership and certain produces like rubber, pepper, tobacco etc. This not only increased further sale and purchase of land as a commodity but also expansion of the cash economy and plantations across the region. Certain industries like coir manufacturing and toddy production, which groups like Ezhavas were traditionally associated with, also boomed towards the end of the nineteenth century further enabling the rise of an aspirational Ezhava middle class.

Secondly, untouchable caste groups were able to make marginal gains through the agency of Protestant missionaries. Shunned by the higher castes, the missionaries were welcomed by the lower caste untouchables as they saw in Christianity, a way to circumvent caste restrictions. In this way, the work of Protestant missionaries was crucial in giving the initial blows to casteism. Missionary agencies like London Missionary Society and Christian Missionary Society gained widespread adherents among the untouchable castes like Pulayas and Parayas, forcing Travancore and Cochin governments to give more and more concessions to untouchable groups. Thirdly, the favouring of caste and religious groups, particularly Nairs and Brahmins within government services, fuelled resentment among rising middle classes of Christians and Ezhavas. This reinforced caste and religious identity and provided the grievances around which caste-based associations would organise.

It is in this context of emerging and competitive class interests of different religious and caste associations, that social religious reform movements of twentieth century Kerala

emerged. Among all the untouchable caste groups, Ezhavas were to create the most powerful movement for reform centred around the charismatic sage-like figure of Narayana Guru, who gave them an ideological vision and pragmatic programme for social reform with a broad egalitarian foundation. This enabled subversion of brahminical practices and Gods for the purposes of resisting and rejecting brahminical hierarchy. It greatly appealed to the rising middle classes of Ezhavas who organised under the banner of the SNDP which grew out of Guru's earlier religious movement, which was transformed, in great part under the guidance of Dr. Palpu, into a political association that was to have a wide impact. This will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

Formation, Growth, and Impact of Sree Narayana Dharma

Paripalana Yogam (SNDP)

The Early SNDP and Affinal Organisations

The SNDP's origin can be traced back to Narayana Guru's consecration of a Shiva temple at Aruvipuram in 1888 along with an ashram. At first it was called the Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam and had 24 members. It was renamed the Aruvippuram Temple Association in 1899 and had as its Secretary, Kumaran Asan. This organisation was purely religious in nature, conducting annual poojas and festivals. Thus, it was at first intended to propagate the religious aspects of the Guru's teachings and not to carry out any social activism. This, however, changed when Padmanabhan Palpu (popularly called Dr. Palpu) met with Guru.

While Palpu had political acumen and influence, he soon realised that a charismatic spiritual figure was necessary to reach out to the majority of Ezhavas who were deeply religious, and he found this in Narayana Guru. Similarly, Guru, though commanding great respect and admiration amongst common people, lacked the financial resources or political connections of Dr. Palpu. As such, the meeting of Guru and Palpu complimented and coincided with each other's aims. Palpu then went on to thus reorganize Guru's Temple Association into the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (or SNDP) which meant the Association for the Propagation of Narayana Dharma (Narayana Dharma refers to the ideas, principles and philosophy of Guru discussed in the earlier chapter). Ten life members of the 'Temple Association', in effect members rich enough to pay Rs 100 as a membership fee, met together

to form a joint stock company in January 1903.⁷³ As such, the imprint of Ezhava elites can be seen in the transformation from an ashram into an association (*yogam*) and a joint stock company.

The stated objectives of the Association were the material and moral advancement of Ezhavas in Cochin and Travancore, and their Thiyya counterparts in Malabar, so as ‘to promote and encourage religious and secular education and to inculcate industrious habits among the members of the community’. Though its stated objective was social reform centred around the philosophy of Narayana Guru, in its early years, it behaved more as a commercial enterprise than as a social reform organisation. In its 1903 Articles of Association, it is stated that not more than one-fourth of the annual monetary subscription was to be used for social reform purposes and the rest was to be loaned out on interest to accumulate capital. The membership fee was also extremely high, such that it was not possible for lower class Ezhava to become members. Moreover, the Association had a very hierarchical structure, with a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, board of directors and council members, all of which closely resembled a corporate entity which further illustrates its relatively elitist/middle-class character in the early years. While some of these rules were contrary to the ideals of Guru, and as its supreme spiritual head he supposedly had the authority to interfere in all its organs and levels, he could not since the organizational tasks were carried out by others. As such, the Association made Guru its spiritual head and nominally adopted his philosophy to gain from his spiritual aura. Lastly, despite its highly corporate structure, the Association did have some elected members and democratic institutions, like unions which were established at the district level with branch offices at the village level which expanded over time.⁷⁴

⁷³ P. Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 84-6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-88.

The Association held its first annual meeting in January 1904, coinciding with the *Shivaratri* festival. It was dominated by the middle and upper-class elites.⁷⁵ On the first day, Palpu delivered a speech calling for advancement of education and industry as a way to develop the Ezhava community. The first meeting also saw the inauguration of a ‘women’s conference’ to highlight education of girls and this henceforward became a regular feature of the Association’s meetings.⁷⁶ At its 1905 annual meeting, an industrial exhibition was organized at Quilon which was attended by over two thousand people and included not only influential Ezhavas but also British officials like Mr Bourdillon, the Chief Conservator of Forests.⁷⁷ This reflected the growing standing of the Association, in a short span of two years. Similar initiatives were also taken in 1907 when the Association held an Industrial and Agricultural exhibition in Cannanore.⁷⁸ The efforts to promote modern industry produced results such that there were many enterprises owned by Ezhavas by the 1920s. Some of the prominent ones include the Travancore Weaving and Trading Company set up by Palpu and his associates in 1906, the Calicut Bank set up in 1910-11, the Malabar Economic Union set up in 1914 to provide assistance to emerging entrepreneurs and the Kerala Vyavasaya Company, which focused on lending credit and technical assistance for setting up factories.⁷⁹

Outside of economic development, the Association’s involvement in the intellectual sphere was spearheaded by the charismatic poet-writer Kumaran Asan. Asan, being its first secretary and who continued in that position for most of the time between 1903-1920, developed a reputation as powerful social critic through his poems, speeches, and writings. Many of these were initially published through the official mouthpiece of the Association –

⁷⁵ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, p. 87.

⁷⁶ Rao, *Social Movements and Social transformation*, pp. 48-9.

⁷⁷ Travancore Correspondent, ‘Travancore Items: Industrial Exhibition’, *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 10 February 1905, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Correspondent, ‘News of the Day: Bombay’, *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 20 November 1906, p. 6.

⁷⁹ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 106-7.

'*Vivekodayam*', established in 1904, of which he served as an editor.⁸⁰ Although a devout disciple of Guru, Asan often used Buddhist lore in his poems. Two of his famous poems, *Chandala Bhikshuki* and *Duravastha*, offer widespread a critique of untouchability and the suffering borne by untouchables, and this attracted widespread acclaim as well as outrage. While the former is based on the Buddhist lore narrating the story of Buddha's disciple Ananda and his encounter with an untouchable woman, the latter narrates the fictional inter-caste marriage between a Namboothiri woman and a Pulaya man.⁸¹

Asan also propandized for the Association through powerful speeches in the Sree Moolam Assembly to which he was nominated as a member in 1908.⁸² The Sree Moolam Assembly was the legislative assembly of the Travancore state whose origins date back to 1885, but by 1905 it had developed and expanded considerably such that it had a limited number of elected representatives with limited power in executive matters of the state. During this time, clamour for access to governmental institutions, especially educational institutions, had been growing within the Ezhava elites. This is evinced by the presentations given by two Ezhava landlords at the Assembly in 1904, both of whom highlighted the need for 'throwing open' to Ezhavas, all public schools, Ayurvedic and Sanskrit Colleges as well as other public offices.⁸³ They also highlighted the issue of complete exclusion of girls from government schools. Similar concerns were also raised in the annual sessions of the Sree Moolam Assembly in 1907 and 1908 by members of the SNDP, which included Kumaran Asan, as well as others.⁸⁴ During his tenure as the Association's general secretary, its prime objective was to secure the admission of Ezhava children to public schools and to get an adequate share of the government jobs. In

⁸⁰ Rajendra Cherupoika, *Kumaranasan: The Poet of Renaissance (Biography)* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2018), pp. 13-15, 21-3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-53.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 92; see also, *Proceedings of the Fifth Session of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore*, pp. 73-4.

⁸³ *Proceedings of the First Meeting of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore 1904*, p. 23.

⁸⁴ *Proceedings of the Fourth Meeting of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore*, p. 45.

1908, the Travancore government issued an order opening most government schools, except for a few located near temples, to Ezhavas and as a result 326 out of 369 were opened to Ezhavas. Even so, girls remained largely excluded from government schools and it would not be until 1910 that Ezhava girls got admission to them. Yet, as late as 1919, only 180 out of 352 schools were open to Ezhava girls.⁸⁵ The struggle for access to modern education took a positive turn when the Educational Code of 1911 was passed by the Travancore government which opened access to public schools to all castes and communities. Regardless, the Association continued its campaign for educational rights as admissions discrimination continued, and it would not be until 1915 that Ezhavas gained admission to Ayurvedic Colleges, and until 1918 for Sanskrit Colleges.⁸⁶

The Association also took steps to open its own colleges and schools. Early on, in 1905, Narayana Guru had started a Sanskrit school attached to his *ashram* in Aruvippuram which was later shifted to Trivandrum. In 1906, the Association started an education fund with the objective of providing both technical and general education. In 1907, Paravaoor Kesavan Asan, an Ezhava had started an Ayurvedic school that taught not only traditional medicine but also modern anatomy and physiology. In 1917, the Association with the support of the government, started the Akhila Ezhava Vidyabhyasa Mahasabha (All Ezhava Education Conference) whose aim was to finance primary education among the community and to encourage the government to remove any remaining restrictions on the Ezhavas and open new schools in areas where they did not have any. In 1922, the Association built its first English School at Alleppey and later on started a free Anglo-Sanskrit Boarding School at Aluva which was bigger and attained better results than government schools. Additionally, the Association also built and handed over schools to the government. All these strides in education led to a great increase in graduates

⁸⁵ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 96-8.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

(including in the law) and, post-graduates who went on to serve in distinguished capacities in both the British Indian government as well as the governments of the princely states.⁸⁷

Aside from education, the Ezhava middle classes also carried out intense campaigns for access to government jobs. This was a particular focus because, although government jobs did not ensure great wealth, they were considered a sure path towards greater social mobility, not least through achieving respectability and gaining access to power. At the time of the Malayali Memorial in 1891, there was not a single Ezhava in government service with a salary of Rs 5 or more. Government service was mostly the preserve of Non-Malayali Brahmins and Nairs, and this remained more or less unchanged in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁸⁸

Simultaneously, there was growing discontent over the state's religion-related expenditure.⁸⁹ This naturally prompted some representatives to plead for the separation of *Devaswoms* (Temple Management Boards) from the main revenue department as it was highly suspected that the large portion of the state revenue acquired through its secular activities were being apportioned for the *Devaswoms*. But despite their pleas, the Travancore government continued to ignore their demands for a long time. It was in these circumstances that the Civic Rights League was formed in 1918 to agitate and lobby for the separation of the revenue and Devaswom departments. This League which claimed to represent the aspirations of 2.6 million people, was an alliance of Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims who believed that such a separation would mean greater access to government jobs in the revenue department as it was the biggest department in government with over 4000 jobs, out of which 3800 were held by high-caste Hindus, chiefly Nairs.⁹⁰ Although the League eventually disintegrated, it did achieve two

⁸⁷ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 98-9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 13-14, 99-100.

⁸⁹ *Proceedings of the Fifth Session of the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore*, pp. 74-9. See 'Religious and Charitable Institutions'.

⁹⁰ Robin Jeffrey, 'Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940', *Social Scientist* Mar. 1976, Vol. 4, No. 8, pp. 3-27, pp. 11-13.

things; firstly, the government conceded to their demands in 1922 and separated the two departments allowing for more appointments of the aforementioned excluded groups. Secondly, and most importantly, it drew in a lot of middle class Ezhavas, who were simultaneously members of the SNDP and enabled them to build alliances with other communities. One such person who acquired political acumen as member of the League was T. K. Madhavan, who would later emerge as a major leader of the Association and also the Indian National Congress in 1924 at the Vaikom Satyagraha. In this way, the Yogam helped Ezhavas attain some political heft, even though it was severely restricted by its Travancore-centred elites.

To give some sense of the wider impact and influence of the SNDP, by 1909, it had 900 official members all throughout Kerala with 25 branches in Travancore, 5 in Cochin and 3 in Malabar along with 17 temples.⁹¹ A number of regional organisations also sprang up in imitation of the Association after 1904 – for example, the Ezhava Sabha in 1905, the Cochin Ezhava Samajam which later became the Cochin branch of the SNDP in 1915, the Malabar Thiyya Mahajana Sabha and the Sree Narayana Sangham in Malabar.⁹² These organisations, although separate from the SNDP, had more or less adopted their organisational strategy as well as their ideology. Sahodaran Ayyappan was one of the major leaders of the movement to emerge from Cochin. Although initially inspired by Guru, Ayyappan significantly diverged from the religion-centric discourse of his mentor towards one aimed at rationalism, atheism, and later socialism. His slogan became ‘No caste, No Religion, No God, necessary for humanity’.⁹³

⁹¹ Rao, *Social Movements and Social transformation*, pp. 52-3.

⁹² Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, p. 95.

⁹³ Ajay Sekher, *Sahodaran Ayyappan: Towards a Democratic Future* (Calicut: Other Books, 2012), pp. 27-8, 32-3, 120.

Early in his career, he realized that while Ezhavas were rightly protesting the discrimination meted out to them by castes above them, chiefly the Nairs, they themselves often discriminated and looked down on those castes below them like the Pulayas. It was to combat this contradiction that he founded the Sahodara Sangham (Brotherhood Association) in 1917 and its official journal *Sahodaran* in 1919.⁹⁴ The Sangham had its own women's wing from the start led by Pappikutty Yogini and Lakshmi Amma in 1917. As soon as the Sangham was established, Ayyappan conducted an inter-caste feast in 1917 in which he invited members of his community to eat with a Pulaya and break the taboo of dining with an untouchable.⁹⁵ Although he had the support of Guru, the event caused a stir among the orthodox Ezhavas of Cochin such that he and twenty-four of his comrades and their families faced extreme social boycott from the more conservative members of their community. Nonetheless, they persevered, and Ayyappan continued to intensify his efforts to combat caste prejudice. As such, several branches of Sangham were established throughout Cochin, Travancore, and Malabar regions. This not only resulted in inter-dining activities becoming more widespread with Christians and Muslims increasingly participating in them, but also to an increase in the incidence of inter-caste marriages as shown in the census of 1931.⁹⁶

Like Guru, Ayyappan was also against certain customs viewed as archaic, such as sacrificing fowls and singing obscene songs at festivals. He made numerous interventions to stop such practices in many temples in Cochin kingdom. Using the platform of *Sahodaran* as well as other mainstream newspapers, he was adept at both inspiring and provoking the general public which he did on numerous occasions in the course of his activism. Later in life, he abandoned religion completely, advocating rationalism and atheism, thereby founding the first

⁹⁴ Sekher, *Sahodaran Ayyappan*, pp. 31-2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 34-5.

⁹⁶ Rao, *Social Movements and Social transformation*, p. 54.

rationalist society in Kerala in 1935, the Yukthivadi Sangham and its newspaper *Yuktivadi*.⁹⁷ He was also known as an admirer of the Bolshevik revolution and had published articles with a photo of Lenin praising the revolution's accomplishments in his *Sahodaran* weekly as early as 1919.⁹⁸ Besides this, he also made numerous presentations in the Sree Moolam Assembly arguing for universal access to public education and government jobs and the repealing of all discriminatory practices.⁹⁹

Rise of Ayyankali and the Pulaya Movement

There is little doubt that the social awakening and assertion of Ezhavas also had a salutary effect on untouchable groups, chiefly the Pulayas.¹⁰⁰ The Pulayas were considered amongst the lowest within the caste-hierarchy of untouchables¹⁰¹ and had been designated as a 'slave caste' prior to the abolition of slavery in the 1850-60s.¹⁰² Even after the abolition of slavery, their conditions did not improve significantly and they often continued in their traditional occupations as bonded agricultural labourers at the mercy of their landlords.¹⁰³ Such miserable conditions naturally encouraged a great many of them, particularly in Travancore, to convert to Christianity such that by the end of the nineteenth century, almost half of the population of Pulayas, along with other untouchable castes like Cherumas and Parayas, had converted to Christianity.¹⁰⁴ While conversion to Christianity marginally improved their

⁹⁷ Sekher, *Sahodaran Ayyappan*, pp. 32-3.

⁹⁸ Rao, *Social Movements and Social transformation*, p. 81.

⁹⁹ Sekher, *Sahodaran Ayyappan*, pp. 129-37.

¹⁰⁰ K. Saradhamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1980), pp. 147.

¹⁰¹ Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual, Vol 2*, pp. 403-4, 406-7. < https://archive.org/details/b29352708_0002/page/n5/mode/2up. >

¹⁰² T. K. Gopal Panikkar, *Malabar and its Folk* (Madras: G.A. Natesan and Co., 1900), pp. 152-3, 156-7.

¹⁰³ Saradhamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala*, pp. 96-100.

¹⁰⁴ Panikkar, *Malabar and its Folk*, pp. 175-6.; see also, Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858-1936*, p. 180.

condition, they continued to face much discrimination and oppression in many areas of public life. Those that did convert also faced severe discrimination from the Syrian Christians in their access to churches and schools despite the best efforts of missionaries.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, conversion did not significantly improve their economic condition and most of them continued as agricultural labourers to either Nair or Christian landlords.¹⁰⁶

It was in this context that Ayyankali emerged as a popular leader of the Pulayas in the late nineteenth century. Born in 1863, to a family of agrestic slaves, he had no formal education in his childhood. Despite this, from early on in his childhood, he had displayed defiance towards the oppressions of caste system subjugating his people and challenged the norms of the day by walking on roads prohibited to his caste group, often risking physical assault.¹⁰⁷ But it was not until he was around thirty years old that he started to take a keen interest in active social reform. Inspired by the ideals of Narayana Guru who preached equality of all men, he started his earliest campaigns for the rights of Pulayas between 1898-1900. This was for their right to use public roads, which often-involved violent clashes between his followers and upper caste men, especially Nairs, which would remain a marked feature in his campaigns for the next two decades.¹⁰⁸ This prompted him to form an organization for militant resistance and assertion of the civil rights of the Pulayas – the ‘*Ayyankalipada*’ (Ayyankali’s Army). After numerous confrontations, he was successful in pressurising the Travancore government to open all public roads, barring few exceptions, to all castes by 1900.¹⁰⁹ His agitation for the use of public roads made him a popular leader and organizer of Pulayas. Thereafter, he formed the

¹⁰⁵ Correspondent, ‘Caste Question Among Christians’, *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 3 September 1909, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Correspondent, ‘General News’, *The Leader*, 25 April 19, 1914, p. 5. ‘West Coast is the only place where conversion to Protestant Christianity has not improved the status of untouchables, and this is on account solely of our caste prejudices.’

¹⁰⁷ P. F. Gopakumar, ‘Ayyankali and the Radical Intervention in the Process of Social Reform’ ed. by P. F. Gopakumar, in *Faces of Social Reform in Kerala*, pp. 63-4.

¹⁰⁸ Saradhamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala*, pp. 147-8.

¹⁰⁹ T. H. P. Chentharassery, *Ayyankali the First Dalit Leader* (New Delhi: Navdin Prakashan Kendra, 1996), pp. 13-19.

organisation, Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) in 1907 along the lines of Guru's SNDP.¹¹⁰ It organized meetings and processions to educate Pulayas about their rights and duties, and encouraged them to pursue cleanliness, education, and temperance. This organisation also often clashed violently with higher castes when its members pursued their rights.

Following the example set by Ezhavas and their key organisation the SNDP, Ayyankali also pressed for advancing the educational rights of Pulaya children, including free and compulsory education. Since their children were excluded from most schools, both government and private, as early as 1904, he established a private school specifically for them.¹¹¹ Simultaneously, he petitioned the Travancore government relentlessly for their entry into government schools. But even after it was officially sanctioned in 1911, they were still not admitted to schools. In response to this, he asked his fellow community members not to work in the paddy fields of those opposing the admission of their children, especially girls. This strike soon got the support of the local fishermen, and it became a landmark in Kerala's history being the first recorded instance of an agrarian strike.¹¹² It lasted from 1913 to 1914 and it was called off only after the government intervened to ensure a compromise. As a result, not only school entry and travel rights were permitted but the landlords also agreed to raise wages of the Pulayas working for them. This was significant in the sense that a caste issue had become entwined with land rights.

Similar agitations were also organised for the right of Pulayas to enter marketplaces in 1914 and 1915. In 1915, he instigated a movement of Pulaya women to break their glass-bead necklaces which had been a symbol of their servitude to upper-castes and exhorted them to

¹¹⁰ Chentharassery, *Ayyankali the First Dalit Leader*, p. 19.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 20-21.

¹¹² Correspondent, 'Disturbance in Travancore State: All Over Admitting Pulaya Girls', *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 10 December 1914, p. 6.

wear the same ornaments as upper-caste women.¹¹³ Ayyankali organized substantial support across different caste groups and consequently clashes occurred between them and the Nair caste enforcers.¹¹⁴ After numerous clashes, the Travancore government caved into their demands and removed caste restrictions for wearing ornaments. As his stature as a public leader grew, he was also increasingly courted by sympathetic high officials like the Dewan, and this led to his nomination in the Sree Moolam Assembly in 1912. There, he relentlessly petitioned the government on issues relating to education and land rights. On education, he advocated the free and compulsory education for all children and for complete fee waiver of Pulaya children in government schools on account of their historic social disability. Between 1920-22, he also petitioned the Travancore government to allot some portions of land to landless Pulayas and succeeded in getting them 500 acres of waste land as their own property to develop in 1922.¹¹⁵

Initially, the SJPS under Ayyankali was able to gain support from other untouchable caste groups like Parayas and also their Christians counterparts, who joined the organisation. However, a schism developed within their ranks when the government tried to favour Hindu Pulayas over the Christian converts. The Parayas under the leadership of Kundan Kumaran Parayan formed the Brahma Pratyoksha Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham, and their Christian counterparts formed the Christian Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham, which maintained links with the Church Missionary Society. Their demands, however, were much the same as that of Ayyankali's SJPS - that schools be established for their children, and that they too be given access to lower grade government posts.¹¹⁶

The movements launched by the Pulaya leaders in Travancore also inspired the Pulayas of Cochin to start agitations against caste inequities. Even before the Cochin Pulaya Mahajana

¹¹³ Correspondent, 'Pulayas Vs Nairs: A Serious Riot at Perinad', *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 28 October 1915, p. 7.; see also, P.F. Gopakumar, 'Ayyankali and the Radical Intervention in the Process of Social Reform', p. 68.

¹¹⁴ Correspondent, 'Anti-Pulaya Riots', *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 14 August 1915, p.6.

¹¹⁵ Chentharassery, *Ayyankali the First Dalit Leader*, pp. 67-8.

¹¹⁶ Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, p. 161.

Sabha was formed, a group of Pulayas organised protests against the government rule prohibiting their entry into Ernakulam, the capital of Cochin. They protested by disrupting the birthday celebrations of the Maharaja by beating drums and singing songs on a platform of boats in the Vembanad backwaters. Thereafter, the Maharaja ordered an investigation which eventually led to lifting the ban on the entry of the Pulayas into the capital. Many local Pulaya leaders like K. P. Kuruppan and Krishnadiyasa played an important role in this agitation. On 2 October 1913, they were the first to lead a delegation of Pulayas into the city of Ernakulam. In 1919, the Dewan of Cochin, T. Vijay Raghavacharya, soon after accepting office, established schools for the untouchables and threw open all schools to them, with few exceptions. The state also supplied them with free books, slates, clothes, and other essentials, exempted all untouchable children from the payment of school fees and adopted mid-day meal schemes to increase their participation. These policies resulted in an increase in the number of Pulaya students in government schools. Many night schools were also introduced to spread literacy among their adults.¹¹⁷

Although Ayyankali's organization eventually faded away and its influence waned due to internal schisms, his strident efforts to uplift Pulayas helped disseminate anti-caste sentiments and a desire for justice among other untouchables. As we shall see, this later paved the way for a militant assertion of the lower castes under the aegis of the nationalist movement, and later the communist movement.

¹¹⁷ Rajsekhar Basu, 'A Page from Dalit history in Kerala: The Pulaya Movement in Travancore– Cochin in the pre-Communist phase', *Studies in People's History*, 3, 1 (2016), pp. 50-1.

Conclusion

The versatile ideology of Narayana Guru and his spiritual charisma, along with capable leaders like Dr. Palpu, Kumaran Asan and Sahodaran Ayyappan, each of whom brought unique sets of skills and talents to the Association, enabled the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam to become the principal agency for social reform centred political action for the Ezhavas in early twentieth century Kerala. Founded in 1903, and although strongly middle-class in character, the Association nonetheless spearheaded strident campaigns for greater access for Ezhavas in the fields of education, industry, and access to government jobs in its first two decades. It also enabled them to make modest beginnings in political organisation and mobilisation through the Civic Rights League and develop temporary alliances with other communities to achieve common objectives which considerably eroded the stigma of untouchability. These modest political beginnings would later translate into greater mobilisation and reach its peak under the leadership of T. K. Madhavan in the 1920s, who would emerge not merely as an important leader of the Association but also of the Indian National Congress in the region during the Vaikom Satyagraha which shall be explored in the next chapter.

Inspired by Guru's message, and emulating the strategy of SNDP to some extent, the Pulayas would wage a similar, but more militant struggle under the leadership of Ayyankali. This was necessitated by the fact that while the Ezhavas were considered the highest in caste hierarchy among untouchables, the Pulayas, who were historically a slave caste, were on the opposite end of the caste hierarchy, thereby being amongst the lowest of the untouchables. Under the leadership of Ayyankali, they would wage a sustained and intermittently militant struggle, first for access to roads, then for educational, occupational and land rights. Through sustained confrontation and agitation, both the Ezhavas and Pulayas were able to win a modicum of rights. But the most important consequence of their sustained struggles was the

growing recognition by the Travancore, and later Cochin governments, of the unsustainability of ignoring their demands and maintaining rigid caste taboos. These governments looked at the growing political-social consciousness among untouchables like Ezhavas and Pulayas and their occasional alliances with other religious communities like Christians with great alarm, as they recognized in them a possibility for subverting the Hindu theocratic orders on which they were based.

By 1920, the substantially visible socio-political awakening among the various oppressed castes was also beginning to have some positive effect on the higher castes who under pressure from changing economic and political conditions, started to reconsider their traditional privileges and place in society. Although limited in their scale and impact, the higher caste sections like the Nairs and Brahmins too initiated their own social reform organisations in the form of the Nair Service Society, founded in 1914¹¹⁸ and the Yogakshema Sabha, founded in 1908, respectively.¹¹⁹ While these societies did not largely address issues related to their domination of *avarnas*, they nonetheless represented a growing realisation among their communities about the unviability of existing customs and attitudes in modern times. This took the form of addressing inheritance issues and reformulating marriage relations. Occasionally, changing attitudes towards untouchables were also visible; in 1911 at a meeting of Keraleeya Nayar Samajam (an association of Nairs) at Shertalay, the need for supporting the efforts to educate and ‘elevate the depressed classes’ was noted. In 1917, in the magazine edited by the Ezhava journalist Murkoth Kumaran, a Nair author by the name of P. V. R. Nair lambasts the Nair community’s attitude towards what he understood as progress and modernity. While criticising their reluctance to abandon traditions like *marumakkathayam* (matrilineal joint-

¹¹⁸ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, p. 103.

¹¹⁹ E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *Reminiscences of an Indian Communist* (New Delhi: National Book Centre, 1987), p. 9.

family) he also condemns their sense of superiority over *avarna* (untouchable castes) like the Thiyyas and commends the latter for their progress in modern education and the professions.¹²⁰

Similarly, the Muslim intellectual Vakkom Abdul Khader Moulavi (1873-1932), would go on to advocate reform in the Muslim community, advocating for modern education for both the sexes, and he would form the Muslim Aikya Sangham in 1921. More notably, he is credited with the founding of the newspaper, *Swadeshabhimani* in 1911, which gained repute not only for advocating social reform, but also for its criticism of the government for which it would be heavily repressed. It would be one of the earliest nationalist oriented newspapers in Kerala.¹²¹

The rising political fervour enabled by social reform movements like the SNDP and SJPS in the 1910s, would gradually coalesce with the growing currents of nationalist fervour and reach its zenith in the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924, and the Guruvayur Satyagraha in 1936, which will be covered in the subsequent chapters.

¹²⁰ Murkoth Kumaran, *Samudayadeepika* (Cannanore: P. Kunhi Kannan, 1917), pp. 14-19.

¹²¹ Mujeebu Rehiman M.P., 'What Happened to Kerala Muslim Reform Movement?', ed. by Asokan Mundon, *Religion, Community, Identity: Reform and Change in Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram: ISDA Publication, 2016), pp. 124-7, 130.

CHAPTER 3

The Convergence of Social Reform and Nationalist Movements in

Kerala: Origins and Nature of Vaikom Satyagraha

By the 1920s, important developments were taking place at the all-India level that would be refracted through Kerala and that would set the stage for the coalescence of social reform with the national independence movement there. On the national stage, Gandhi had emerged as the premier leader of the Indian National Congress by implementing a novel form of resistance based on the axioms of *satyagraha* (truth-force) and *ahimsa* (non-violence). They have become internationally famous as prioritizing civil disobedience of unjust laws and through techniques of passive resistance. Meanwhile, in the princely state of Travancore in Kerala, the crescendo of social reform was reaching its peak with the rise of caste-based organisations like the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) and Nair Service Society (NSS) covered in the previous chapter.

In the 1890s the question of choosing between social and political reform had vexed the early Congress leadership with the dominant consensus being in favour of pursuing political objectives like greater representation of Indians in public service and self-rule as opposed to social justice-related objectives like addressing caste discrimination and women's rights.¹²² Therefore, social issues like untouchability and the upliftment of marginalised groups through education had taken a back seat in the Congress agenda for a long time. But when Gandhi assumed leadership of the Congress, these issues once again came to the forefront as a part of

¹²² B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. by S. Anand (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2014), pp. 210-13.

the Gandhian constructive program which sought to combine social issues with political mobilisation.¹²³

Meanwhile, in Kerala, as shown in the last chapter, prominent leaders had emerged from among the untouchables who gave them a new spiritual ideology, organisation, and tactics for enhancing their social position and fighting against different forms of caste discrimination. These included figures like Sree Narayana Guru, Kumaranasan, Ayyankali and Sahodaran Ayyappan. The movements initiated by these personalities acted as catalysts in the rapidly developing political situation which would see the rise of other, more political, figures such as T.K. Madhavan who would combine the momentum of the social reform movements and organisations with the political ambitions and nationalist objectives of the Congress to further their aims. This would result in the pivotal Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924, the first Satyagraha in India that would combine a nationalist political objective with the social objective, in this case challenging the caste supremacy of *savarnas* in Travancore.

Although not entirely successful, the Vaikom Satyagraha would be a pivotal moment in the history of Kerala's and India's freedom movement. It was the founding moment of a political culture that would make possible many lesser and two other major Satyagrahas in Kerala's history, the Guruvayur Satyagraha in 1932-33 and the Paliyam Satyagraha in 1947-8 which would be landmarks in the political development of Kerala. This chapter is structured in this way. It sketches the history of the Congress in Kerala up until the momentous Vaikom Satyagraha; it then reveals the growing role of print media in nurturing public opinion not only in favour of social justice issues, but also in spreading nationalist and later socialist-communist ideologies. After that, the Vaikom Satyagraha will be examined in depth, as a signal example of the convergence of nationalist struggle and the struggle for social reform.

¹²³ Bipan Chandra, with Mridula Mukherjee and others, *India's Struggle For Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), pp. 245-6.

The Indian National Congress in Kerala

The roots of the Indian National Congress in Kerala can be traced back to the organisation's earliest decades in the late nineteenth century when leaders like G.P. Pillai, Sir Sankaran Nair and C Kunhirama Menon attended its annual sessions in different parts of India.¹²⁴ G.P. Pillai was the Congressman who raised the issue of Ezhavas at Congress sessions in the late nineteenth century and through his connections in the British Parliament. Sankaran Nair was the president of the Congress session held in 1897 at Amaravati; as we have seen, he was also one of the signatories of the Malayalee Memorial covered earlier in this dissertation. A conference of the Congress was held in Kerala at Calicut in 1904, but the first full-fledged district committee of the Congress in the territory was only formed in 1910 with Kunhirama Menon as its secretary. Its first political meeting took place in 1913 in Calicut.¹²⁵

Despite finding early roots in Kerala, the Congress in the first two decades of the twentieth century was a rather mild organisation which did not engage in overt political activity. This was because it was dominated by the moderate faction until 1920, which largely represented the interests of the landlords in the region. Sometime before this, in 1907, a split had taken place in Congress ranks at the national level between the so-called 'moderate' and 'extremist' factions. (These descriptors of the tendencies will be adopted in this thesis since they were used by contemporaries, including those within Congress itself.) While the former preferred petitioning, memorials, and prayers, believing in the ultimate benevolence of British rule leading to self-rule, the latter preferred more sustained agitation and mobilisation, and had no faith in the good intentions of British rule. A similar factional split was replicated at the

¹²⁴ A. Sreedhara Menon, *Keralavum Swathanthrya Samaravum* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2019), pp. 45-6.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Kerala level but as noted, the moderates were dominant until 1920.¹²⁶ In this period, for the most part, nothing of great political significance happened except for a walkout from a district meeting chaired by local Collector in 1916 by the Malabar Congressman Kesava Menon protesting against the collection of war funds. However, by 1919, Congress had local branches in both Travancore and Cochin states.¹²⁷ In Travancore, A.K. Pillai was able to organise 64 Congress committees within two years of its inception. They oversaw on a limited scale the boycott of foreign cloth, the development of *khadi* (hand-spun and woven cotton cloth used as an alternative to foreign cloth) the promotion of inter-caste dining and opposition to untouchability during the nationwide Non-Cooperation Movement of this time.¹²⁸

An important milestone in the organisational development of the Congress occurred on 28 April 1920 at Manjeri in British ruled Malabar. At the Manjeri political conference, attended by over 1300 delegates from all over Kerala, differences between the extremist and moderate factions came to the fore over acceptance of the Montague-Chelmsford reforms proposed by the British government.¹²⁹ (These reforms envisaged granting greater representation of Indians in the administration of the colonial state but were rejected by Indians for being too minimal in their scope). The conference saw the victory of the extremist faction's resolutions rejecting the reforms over the moderates' resolutions favouring them, with the latter walking away from Congress. It was also significant for another reason - the moderates represented the interests of rich landlords, while those more sympathetic towards peasants and farmers naturally sided with the extremists. As such, the takeover of leadership by the extremists also led to agrarian reform

¹²⁶ Menon, *Keralavum Swathanthrya Samaravum*, pp. 46-7.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 76; See also, Manaloor Joseph Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972), p. 42.

¹²⁸ Mary Elizabeth King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India: The 1924-25 Vykam Satyagraha and Mechanisms of Change* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 82.

¹²⁹ Menon, *Keralavum Swathanthrya Samaravum*, pp. 47-9.

coming to the forefront of Congress' platform at this conference.¹³⁰ This split was later resolved with Gandhi taking over the helm of Congress affairs.

Another important event in the development of the Congress organisation in Kerala was the Mappila Revolt of 1921, which itself was a direct consequence of mobilization for the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat Movement, which was the first major Gandhian-led all-India resistance to British rule. This revolt would last for almost six months from 1 August 1921 till the end of the year and resulted in several atrocities both by the Mappila rebels and government. Ultimately, when the rebellion was crushed, the reputation of the Congress in Malabar, where it had the largest presence in Kerala till then, was in tatters.¹³¹ While *savarna* Hindus, who formed the core of the membership of the Congress at the time, blamed it for inciting the Muslims, the Muslim populace for their part felt betrayed by the Congress when they did not come to their defence in condemning atrocities by the government forces.¹³² This greatly divided the emerging national intelligentsia and leadership, and it was in this context that the Vaikom Satyagraha was launched in 1924.

Print Media and the Dissemination of Ideologies

Aided by the educational activities of both the Christian missionaries and different administrations in the region, by the 1920s, Kerala had the highest literacy rate in India.¹³³ This naturally helped in the expansion of print media in the region which was key in disseminating widespread interest in political and social issues of the day. As such, not only were local issues like educational and job opportunities for untouchables covered in the press, but also national

¹³⁰ Menon, *Keralavum Swathanthrya Samaravum*, pp. 48-9; See also, A.K. Gopalan, *Kerala Past and Present* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1959), p. 37.

¹³¹ K. N. Panikkar, *Essays on the History and Society of Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Council for Historical Research, 2016), pp. 165-78.

¹³² Menon, *Keralavum Swathanthrya Samaravum*, pp. 74-5.

¹³³ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, pp. 3, 26, 55-6.

and international events like the Non-Cooperation movement, First World War, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Such an extensive coverage greatly helped in spreading ideas about Gandhian nationalism, democracy, and socialism amongst Keralites. Some of the most prominent journalists who helped disseminate such ideas are Ramakrishna Pillai, C. Krishnan (popularly known as Mithavadi Krishnan), T.K. Madhavan and C.V. Kunhiraman.

C. Krishnan was one of the few prominent faces in Malayalam journalism who propagated the radical reforms advocated by Sree Narayana Guru. Being a man of considerable talents and resources, he established his own printing press known as Empire Press in the city of Calicut and bought the press rights to the *Mithavadi* (meaning Moderate) in 1909, an erstwhile defunct publication.¹³⁴ In 1913, he relocated *Mithavadi's* chief bureau to Calicut where he began its publication as a monthly. In its very first publication, *Mithavadi* announced itself as a paper dedicated to the Thiyyas (Ezhava counterparts in northern Kerala and Malabar) and C Krishnan's association with it would earn him the nickname Mithavadi Krishnan.¹³⁵

Even before he had bought the rights to *Mithavadi*, he had built a reputation as a journalist, being a frequent contributor and columnist for numerous publications like *Keralasanchari* and *Kerala Patrika*.¹³⁶ As a propagandist for Guru, Mithavadi gave extensive coverage to the most important of his temple dedications. In this way, C. Krishnan helped spread Guru's message in the Malabar region. His growing importance to the SNDP Yogam's organisation was visible when he presided over its 9th annual meeting held at Shivagiri in 1913. At this meeting, Krishnan gave an interesting speech which derided not only the division among Ezhavas but also emphasised the necessity of developing the Yogam as a secular

¹³⁴ G. Priyadarshan, *Kerala Patrapravarthanam Suvarnadhayangal* (Trivandrum: Current Books, 1999), p. 140.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-1.

organization for the welfare of all communities in India despite it being heavily rooted in single community, emphasising that this was in keeping with the Guru's ideology.¹³⁷

Although Krishnan and the *Mithavadi* generally reflected a favourable attitude towards British rule, this did not however prevent him from criticising it when he felt this was warranted – an instance of this occurred in relation to a British collector named A. J. Thorn who tried to enforce caste bans regarding the usage of temple roads in 1917. Krishnan duly published a lengthy article criticizing the British officer's attitude towards enforcing untouchability.¹³⁸ Regardless, he was generally more inclined towards British rule than he was towards Gandhi and Congress, the latter of which he viewed apprehensively as an organization of *savarnas*. This hostility was reinforced by his conviction that British rule had enabled the weakening of the caste system. As such, he feared that if India were to become immediately independent, all the meagre gains made by the untouchables would be reversed. It is in this vein that he wrote in the *Mithavadi* in June 1919, “Whatever freedom we (*avarnas*) got, we got not by petitioning and begging the upper castes, but through the efforts of those without caste and those of other religions”.¹³⁹

Furthermore, he repeatedly pointed out the large number of high offices occupied by persons from untouchable castes in British-ruled Malabar as compared to their relatively paltry number in Travancore and Cochin. Mithavadi Krishnan rightly perceived the Congress of the time as an organisation of savarna interests which preoccupied itself with the question of self-rule or Home Rule without ever addressing the issue of civil rights for the untouchable and other depressed classes. In yet another article in September 1916, he wrote: “It is our sincere opinion that there should come a time when there exist no doubts about the invalidity of higher

¹³⁷ Priyadarsanan, *Kerala Patrapravarthanam Suvarnadyayangal*, pp. 142-3.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-6

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

or lower castes in the minds of the masses”. Despite his doubts, when Congress launched the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924, he gave it full support and partially retracted his earlier doubts about the organisation, even lauding it for taking an interest in civil rights related issues at Vaikom rather than purely focusing on criticising the British.¹⁴⁰

Mithavadi Krishnan not only wrote on social issues, but his paper also extensively covered international topics like the First World War and the Russian Revolution. During wartime, it published a single sheet paper solely dedicated to developments in the war for the cost of a half anna. Such extensive coverage of the First World War at that time was exceedingly rare in Malayalam journalism and was matched only by *Malayala Manorama*.¹⁴¹ In his writings, Mithavadi Krishnan made numerous analogies between oppression of peasants in Russia and untouchables in India. In 1916, he wrote, “It is always a good thing that the people exercise greater authority and self-rule, but this must not be conflated with the political ambitions of a select group of people from elite castes.... Those who sit on top of the downtrodden masses will be brought down by the same. This is the lesson that Russia and similar places teaches us - that masses will eventually topple those with power”. When the revolution broke out in 1917, he wrote in April of the same year, “The people of Russia have deposed their king and created a government of the masses without their king. Two months ago, if anyone told this would happen there, they would have been summarily dismissed, but now see what’s happened. This is not surprising - the Russian masses were treated like slaves, and they retaliated by overthrowing their oppressor. This only proves that freedom shall triumph everywhere eventually. Let those who oppress and divide others into upper and lower castes take note, for this might be their fate also”.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Priyadarsanan, *Kerala Patrapravarthanam Suvarnadyayangal*, pp. 146-7.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-2.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 146-8.

Another notable journalist in Kerala, but one who diverged from the pro-British stance of Mithavadi Krishnan was the eminent journalist and politician of the Ezhavas, T.K. Madhavan. Although he had faced severe caste discrimination since childhood, he was later inspired to take up the nationalist cause by Gandhi. Greatly impressed by Gandhi's idealism, Madhavan fully adopted his credo centred around non-violent resistance (satyagraha) and became a full-fledged Gandhian. Before he became one of the leading figures of the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924, he had acquired political experience as part of Civil Rights League in 1918. His political activism was further enhanced by his journalistic endeavours.

It was on 15 April 1915 that T.K. Madhavan started *Deshabhimani* (meaning Patriot) newspaper along with another veteran journalist associate called T.K. Narayanan.¹⁴³ It was inspired by the work of another exemplar of Malayalam journalism – Ramakrishna Pillai, who was credited with publishing the earliest biography of Karl Marx in Malayalam and of Gandhi's life in South Africa.¹⁴⁴ After some disagreements with Narayanan over the management of the newspaper, Madhavan took over the establishment completely. Thereafter he became its editor and also one of its chief contributors. Madhavan founded *Deshabhimani* primarily for raising awareness regarding the fundamental rights of the untouchables. Even though there were many newspapers at that time, those prioritising social issues of the Ezhavas were few.¹⁴⁵ There was the SNDP's mouthpiece *Vivekodayam* and *Mithavadi*, but both of them functioned more as magazines; prior to *Deshabhimani*, there didn't exist any daily newspapers that could propagandize for issues like untouchability.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ P. K. Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavanṭe jīvacaritr̥am* (T.K. Madhavan's Biography), ed. N. K. Damodaran (Kottayam: DC Books, 1986), pp. 57-8.

¹⁴⁴ P. C. Joshi and K. Damodaran, *Marx Comes to India: Earliest Indian Biographies of Karl Marx by Lala Hardayal and Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai, with Critical Introduction* (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1975), pp. 94-8.

¹⁴⁵ Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavanṭe jīvacaritr̥am*, ed N.K. Damodaran, pp. 58-9.

¹⁴⁶ Priyadarsanan, *Kerala Patrapravarthanam Suvarnadhyayangal*, pp. 279-80.

Deshabhimani covered a wide range of subjects like education, science and technology, religion, society, agriculture, trade and commerce, history, biography, and labour. Of particular note is the role it played in popularizing the poetry of Kumaranasan, who lyricized the plight of untouchables through his poetry.¹⁴⁷ Commenting on the state of education in Travancore he wrote, “Instead of pursuing a concrete and beneficial educational agenda, the government seems to change its educational policy on the whims of ever-changing officials and bureaucrats. This is completely unsuited to a supposedly enlightened administration”. *Deshabhimani* extensively argued for and covered issues relating to school entry of untouchables, employment opportunities for them and the civil rights campaign. Later it also extensively covered the temple entry movements, especially the Vaikom satyagraha. It covered the resolutions passed by the untouchability committees, the arrests, the many deprivations faced by the volunteers, Gandhi's message and visit, Sree Narayana Guru's involvement and such.¹⁴⁸

Like C Krishnan's *Mithavadi*, T.K. Madhavan's *Deshabhimani* also gave widespread publicity to the Russian Revolution in hagiographic terms, often making subtle parallels between the Russian and Kerala historical contexts. In a cover piece titled 'Russian Czar Executed by His People' dated 4 December 1918, Madhavan writes, “W.B. Stead once wrote that when a King disregards his people's genuine wishes and ignores the debt he owes them, then opposition to that King becomes the duty of all patriotic citizens. The execution of Charles 1 in England proves this point. In the case of the Russian Revolution, the Russian Revolutionary Council has followed this principle to the letter. It would be wise for autocrats everywhere to understand the causes behind the execution of the greatest autocrat in the world and his family and take note of their gruesome fate”.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Priyadarsanan, *Kerala Patrapravarthanam Suvarnadyayangal*, pp. 280-1, 284.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-3.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

Reflecting on the role of the Yogam and social reform at its fifteenth anniversary celebration on 11 May 1918, he made a call for activism: “There are a lot of people willing to criticize authority, tradition, or social norms. It is not that the criticism is unwarranted or unnecessary, but it’s one thing to only talk and yet another to work actively for change. Those who only criticize should do more to contribute more actively for change, lest their activism is mere cheap talk. Such persons are not contributing towards social welfare but societal destruction”.¹⁵⁰ Simultaneously, Madhavan also saw his social justice activism as part of a wider nationalist project. In this regard he says, “It is not my intention that I fight merely for my own community. I intend to fight for mine as well as all other communities. My religion is Indian nationalism. The rise and growth of India is my eternal aim. Sree Narayana Guru's advice has helped me develop this vision”. Popularising Gandhi's call to eradicate untouchability on 12 October 1921, he emphasised that “Gandhiji has advised us that the Hindu community will never attain any kind of Poorna Swaraj (independence or self-rule) without first eliminating untouchability.”¹⁵¹

Deshabhimani's growing stature as a newspaper for social reform in Kerala attracted the attention of some other prominent journalists at the time like C. V. Kunhiraman. He had founded the first Ezhava owned newspaper called *Sujanandini* in 1889. But this venture closed down in 1906 as a result of inter-caste disturbances during which upper caste men burned down its press.¹⁵² This was on account of its campaign for the right of entry to government schools for untouchables. Following this, Kunhiraman worked as government schoolteacher writing articles advocating for Ezhava causes under an alias in the newspaper *Kerala Kaumudi* and declared boldly in its first issue on 24 November 1910, “that the paper sought to advance the

¹⁵⁰ Priyadarsanan, *Kerala Patrapravarthanam Suvarnadyayanal*, p. 287.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 348-9.

interests of Ezhavas as they remain backward in many respects and to inform the government and society of such interest”.¹⁵³

It is also highly plausible that it was an article of Kunhiraman’s that germinated the idea of temple entry in the Kerala press as a way to combat untouchability. This article was titled, ‘We Also Want Access to Government Temples’ and was published in *Deshabhimani* in December 1918 and declared that “Even though God is one, we need to pray to all the thirty-three million gods in this land to open their eyes to the injustices suffered by us. For that we need access to all roads. Our hope is that all the different sects of Shaktites, Vaishnavites and other devotees will be inspired by our devotion and join us in prayer. No prejudice or discrimination can withstand such devotion and unity.”¹⁵⁴ In 1926, following the withdrawal of the Vaikom Satyagraha, he would be one of chief proponents of mass conversion by Ezhavas, especially to Christianity.¹⁵⁵

The most important newspaper to emerge in the 1920s was the *Mathrubhumi* (meaning Motherland). It had been founded in 1923, to combat the negative fallout of Congress’s involvement with the Mappilla rebellion of 1921 and would be instrumental in advancing Gandhi’s constructive programme for combating untouchability.¹⁵⁶ It was established by Kesava Menon, an ardent Gandhian nationalist who served as its editor until his death in 1978. It would be one of the principal newspapers covering the Vaikom Satyagraha and would publish news accounts from Vaikom three times a week for the duration of the movement’s course which spanned over twenty months.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Priyadarshan, *Kerala Patrapravarthanam Suvarnadyayangal*, p. 354.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 355-6.

¹⁵⁶ Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, p. 284; see also, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *How I Became a Communist* (Trivandrum: Chinta Publishers, 1976), pp. 56-7.

¹⁵⁷ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 100-2.

Preparations for the Vaikom Satyagraha

Prior to the Vaikom Satyagraha, the Congress had undergone drastic organisational makeover under Gandhi's leadership. With respect to untouchability, several sessions were held which passed resolutions against untouchability of which the Nagpur session of December 1920 was the first. The Nagpur session is also famous for launching the Non-Cooperation Movement. Simultaneously, the Indian National Congress also reorganized its units at the provincial level along linguistic lines. This resulted in the affiliate local committees of Malabar, Cochin and Travancore coming under a single regional entity – the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC).¹⁵⁸

Similar resolutions were also passed at other sessions – at Ahmedabad in 1921, Bardoli in 1922 and Kakinada in 1923.¹⁵⁹ At Kakinada, Madhavan met Gandhi in person for the first time and the conversation between them resulted in the plan for a temple-entry movement in Travancore.¹⁶⁰ Here, Muhammad Ali's presidency during the session was also instrumental in getting Madhavan's resolutions against untouchability passed at Kakinada.¹⁶¹ One of these resolutions involved the formation of anti-untouchability committees in all regions where Congress existed. These resolutions had more resonance in Kerala than elsewhere because of the existence of organisations like the SNDP, which had long opposed caste discrimination, and which by now, had held several meetings across the region trying to address the issue.¹⁶² Besides the SNDP, it was also supported by certain progressive elements of upper-caste society like the Yogakshema Sabha of the Namboothiri Brahmins, the Nair Service Society (or NSS) and the Kerala Hindu Sabha.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 82-5.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-9.

¹⁶⁰ Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavanṭe jīvacaritrām*, ed N.K. Damodaran, pp. 120-4.

¹⁶¹ P. Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, p. 175.

¹⁶² Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavanṭe jīvacaritrām*, ed N.K. Damodaran, p. 149.

¹⁶³ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, p. 86.

Taking advantage of the rise in nationalistic fervour during this period, between 1920-21, T. K. Madhavan and his colleagues toured different parts of Travancore, trying to popularize the issue of temple-entry for untouchables both within and outside Travancore through meetings and the distribution of propaganda material.¹⁶⁴ At a meeting in the temple town of Oachira, Madhavan proclaimed that temple entry was not merely a matter of faith or religion but that, alongside religious aims, 'it had both political and social aims as well' which were connected to civil rights and human dignity. This was later published as a pamphlet entitled 'Temple-Entry'.¹⁶⁵ Aside from Madhavan, Kumaranasan, who was at this time a member of the Sree Moolam Assembly, had raised the issue of temple-entry and the ongoing discrimination faced by the untouchable castes in the assembly in 1922.¹⁶⁶

While Madhavan was organizing at the local level, Gandhi was also busy setting up the overall tone for the upcoming struggle at Vaikom. Wary of the British driving a wedge between the princes and the Congress, Gandhi did not want to antagonize the Maharaja of Travancore. As such, he disavowed his direct participation in the struggle as well as that of the central leadership, instead opting to direct its course from a distance. In this way, Vaikom was to be experimental in that the local leaders would direct action on the ground without involvement of the entire party, but this would be within parameters set by Gandhi.¹⁶⁷

Following the resolutions passed at the Kakinada session, the KPCC met on 24 January 1924 at Ernakulam (in the Cochin kingdom) and formed anti-untouchability committees under the overall leadership of Koyappalli Kelappan Nair. A popular figure in Travancore politics, Kelappan was the founding president of the Nair Service Society and also a patron of the *Mathrubhumi* newspaper. Showing his commitment to progressive values, he dropped his caste

¹⁶⁴ Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavanṭe jīvacaritrām*, ed N.K. Damodaran, p. 154.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-9.

¹⁶⁶ Cherupoika, *Kumaranasan: The Poet of Renaissance*, p. 110.

¹⁶⁷ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 84-5.

name, being addressed only as Kelappan. He would be the most iconic leader of the Congress during the freedom struggle era in Kerala earning him the moniker ‘Kerala Gandhi’. Besides him, the initial Anti-Untouchability Committee’s leadership consisted of T.K. Madhavan, Kurur Neelakantan Namboothiripad, Kesava Menon, T.K. Krishnaswamy Aiyar and Kannathodu Velayudha Menon. Among these, Kesava Menon, the founder, and chief editor of *Mathrubhumi* was the head of the KPCC.¹⁶⁸

Once the leadership posts were decided, the anti-untouchability committees met at Quilon on 6 February 1924, resolving to conduct intense propaganda for temple entry and to submit monster petitions to the Maharajas of Travancore and Cochin.¹⁶⁹ The idea was to build an alliance of different castes and communities, especially from amongst the ranks of *savarna* Hindus. Following the Quilon meeting, the leaders went around popularizing the goals of the Anti-Untouchability Committee and recruiting volunteers to form local committees from village to village.

After a month of preparation, the Shiva temple at Vaikom was chosen for the upcoming Satyagraha. This was for many reasons. Firstly, it was the most prestigious temple in Travancore kingdom with many of its rituals and festivals being associated with the royal family and its aristocracy.¹⁷⁰ Secondly, it was easily accessible by road and waterways from the nearby princely state of Cochin.¹⁷¹ Thirdly, there were also certain legends within the Ezhava ranks that the temple was originally open to all castes in medieval times and many Ezhavas had been massacred there in the distant past when they tried to enter.¹⁷² However, the most important reason would be that the Vaikom temple was symbolic of the exclusions of the so-called untouchables: they were forbidden to walk on all the four roads approaching the

¹⁶⁸ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 89-90.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁷⁰ Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavanṭe jīvacaritrām*, ed N.K. Damodaran, pp. 150-1.

¹⁷¹ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, p. 91.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

temple from different directions whereas such restrictions did not apply to Christians or Muslims. Their explicit exclusion was reinforced through sign boards (*teendal palakas*) which warned against entry by untouchable castes.¹⁷³

On 29 February 1924, leaders of the Anti-Untouchability Committee held a public meeting at Vaikom which was attended by several Ezhavas, Pulayas and even high caste people. The principal speakers were Madhavan, Kesava Menon, and Pillai. Denouncing untouchability, the meeting loudly proclaimed that a large group of persons belonging to all, or no, castes would march on the roads approaching the temple on 1 March, only stopping to offer worship at certain points. However, the planned date of the march was postponed until 30 March as there was disagreement amongst Congress leaders regarding preparation for the struggle.¹⁷⁴ George Joseph, a Syrian Christian Congressman from Travancore, wanted to pursue the struggle as a fight for civil rights rather than as a temple entry movement thereby involving the participation of other religious communities in the region. Meanwhile, Gandhi having already declined to take active leadership, offered guidance from Bombay. He warned the would-be satyagrahis against initiating full-fledged civil disobedience and instead commanded them to restrict the action to non-violent protest. Furthermore, temple entry as an objective was ruled out in favour of opening up the four roads to the temple.¹⁷⁵

During this period of delay, the issue of untouchables using the temple roads was debated in the Sree Moolam Assembly. The reformists argued that it was an issue of civil rights while their opponents claimed that the question of forbidding or giving access was, given the claims of private property, one for the temple authorities to decide on. The orthodox opposition consolidated behind an organisation called Savarna Mahajana Sabha and rallied the opinion of

¹⁷³ Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavante jīvacaritrām*, ed N.K. Damodaran, pp. 151-2.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-3.

¹⁷⁵ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 93-7.

a vast section of the Namboothiri Brahmins; meetings were held both in support of and against the anti-untouchability movement.¹⁷⁶ As the date for the planned march approached, the police set up barricades and checkpoints around the disputed roads to prevent the entry of the satyagrahis. All the key leaders arrived by March 27 at Vaikom and setup a makeshift camp for incoming volunteers who came in large numbers.¹⁷⁷

The Onset of the Vaikom Satyagraha

The Satyagraha began on 30 March 1924 with a march by volunteers led by T.K. Madhavan, K. Kelappan, Kurur Nilakantan Namboothiripad, K.P. Kesava Menon, Kannathodathu Velayudha Menon and George Joseph.¹⁷⁸ The volunteers were first read out the instructions given by Gandhi regarding strict adherence to non-violence even if attacked and that the action be postponed if any deviation to such commitment occurred. With the limited purpose of merely opening of the roads to the temple, volunteers from across southern India gathered in large numbers and assembled themselves in rows of two each and walked towards the prohibited roads. They stopped about twenty yards from the prohibited demarcation lines, and from there a group of three volunteers marched forward towards the police lines. The first three of these volunteers were Kunjapy (a Pulaya), Bahuleyan (an Ezhava) and Govindan Panicker (a Nair).¹⁷⁹ Upon reaching the police barricades, the police informed them that only Panicker, the Nair, would be allowed to continue, and when the latter refused, all three sat down before the police picket lines. After about an hour, the police promptly arrested all the three volunteers. On the next day, the same routine was repeated. Both batches of Satyagrahis were sentenced to six months imprisonment in the Trivandrum Central Jail. The police were also

¹⁷⁶ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, p. 95.

¹⁷⁷ Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavanṭe jīvacaritrām*, ed N.K. Damodaran, pp. 153-6.

¹⁷⁸ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, p. 97.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

informed that the same procedure would be repeated daily until the prohibition for road access was withdrawn.¹⁸⁰

But just as the Satyagraha was garnering support, it was paused as some Vaikom notables contacted the leaders of the Anti-Untouchability Committee who in turn temporarily suspended the campaign. This was partly because the committee's leaders received reports from random informants that a major riot was to about to occur between Nairs and Ezhavas and partly on the advice of Gandhi.¹⁸¹ Two Namboothiri brothers had called on Gandhi at Bombay to make their case that the temple roads were private property. While Gandhi rejected their claim, he nonetheless agreed to a pause in the belief that the orthodox camp could be won over through compassion and negotiation.¹⁸² Some excerpts from an article written in *Young India* proves his conviction: "The present campaign in its inception is based on the assumption that the reform is required by the vast majority of caste Hindus and that the prohibition against the suppressed classes is not warranted by the genuine Hindu scriptures ...The uniform courtesy towards the opponents of reform will break the edge of the opposition. They must regard Government not as opposed to the reform but as pledged to carry it out at the earliest possible moment".¹⁸³

During the duration of the suspension, the satyagraha volunteers passed their time in their ashram, which was donated to them by Narayana Guru.¹⁸⁴ They used this time to reorganize their efforts to create more publicity, collect funds and organize the large influx of volunteers coming into Vaikom at the time. They came from diverse backgrounds and included

¹⁸⁰ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 98-100; see also, Robin Jeffrey, 'Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940', p. 15.

¹⁸¹ Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavanṭe jīvacaritrām*, ed N.K. Damodaran, p. 162; King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 102-3.

¹⁸² King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 102-3

¹⁸³ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 'The Vaikom Struggle, The Duty of the Satyagrahis; Mahatmaji's Advice', *Young India*, 2 April 1925, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala State Archives Department, 2018), pp. 43-4.

¹⁸⁴ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, p. 186.

people of different faiths, castes, languages, educational and occupational backgrounds. As the Satyagraha remobilisation efforts gathered pace, the district magistrate attempted to foil it by summoning the key leaders – Kelappan, Madhavan, Kesava Menon, A.K. Pillai, and others – to appear at the magistrate court in Kottayam. Refusing to obey the summons, all the six leaders instead chose to march to the barricades and courted arrest on 7 April 1924. They were also given six months of imprisonment.¹⁸⁵

Thus, the satyagraha movement got reactivated after a period of brief suspension lasting six days, boosting the morale of the volunteers. The second reactivation period saw a vigorous effort in spreading the ideals of Satyagraha, and Gandhian-inspired nationalism – spinning and wearing khadi, promoting temperance and self-reliance, decrying and promoting the abolition of untouchability and unapproachability along with singing patriotic songs like *Vande Mataram*.¹⁸⁶ On 11 April, George Joseph was arrested and given the same six-month imprisonment.¹⁸⁷ It was at this point, with all the key leaders in prison, that it was decided to invite Erode Ramasamy Naicker, popularly known as Periyar, to take over overall leadership of the Satyagraha. Periyar who at this time was an active Congress member and involved in its campaigns, made haste to Vaikom without hesitation. He was a well-known anti-caste crusader in south India who had risen to fame through vehemently ridiculing Brahminical beliefs and the caste system. Upon arriving at Vaikom he would be jailed twice, initially for month and, later, for a six-month period.¹⁸⁸

As the jails filled up with volunteers, the police changed their tactics by ceasing arrests, instead focusing on wearing down the willpower of the volunteers by reinforcing the barriers and forcing them to stand in the sun at the height of summer. The order to cease arrests came

¹⁸⁵ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 105-7.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-8.

¹⁸⁷ Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavante jīvacaritrām*, ed N.K. Damodaran, p. 177.

¹⁸⁸ Bala Jeyaraman, *Periyar: A Political Biography of E.V. Ramasamy* (New Delhi: Rainlight/Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2013), pp. 15-17.

after April 10.¹⁸⁹ From here on, the struggle entered its second phase, with satyagrahis responding by not only maintaining their composure by not crossing the police lines but also escalating the action by resorting to fasting.¹⁹⁰ Within days, several volunteers fainted due to the stress of fasting in heat and they were hospitalized.¹⁹¹ Once again, Gandhi intervened to prohibit fasting as a method of protest in Vaikom as, he held, it went against the established parameters of trying to ‘win over’ the opposition. Additionally, Gandhi also put additional restrictions on Satyagraha barring the participation of non-Hindus and Hindus from outside Kerala.¹⁹² This not only soured Congress’ relations with local Christians, but also forced a group of Akalis who had travelled from Amritsar to support the Satyagraha with their kitchens to go back by June 1924.¹⁹³ Gandhi put forth the former restriction as in his thinking it amounted to a form of coercion, and the latter to avoid the Vaikom campaign being labelled by its opponents as a conspiracy by Christians to weaken Hinduism. As such, although he had the best of intentions in imposing these restrictions, it nonetheless irritated the local leadership of the struggle and hampered the growth of the movement in the long-term. George Joseph and Periyar were the most prominent leaders who disagreed with Gandhi’s policy of exclusion of non-Hindus, and which led to these leaders eventually becoming disillusioned with Gandhi and the Congress.¹⁹⁴

Here it might be noted that the earlier tactic of trying to cripple the movement by arresting its key leaders probably came at the suggestion of the British establishment in Madras. They perceived the Vaikom Satyagraha as a political rather than as a socio-religious

¹⁸⁹ Robin Jeffrey, ‘Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940’, p. 15.

¹⁹⁰ District Magistrate, Kottayam, To R. Krishna Pillai, Chief Secretary, Trivandrum, 28 April 1924, ‘Meetings at Vaikom’, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju pp. 33-4.

¹⁹¹ Correspondent, ‘Vaikom Satyagraha’, *The Leader*, 17 April 1924 in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju, pp. 54-5.

¹⁹² Jeffrey, ‘Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940’, p. 19.

¹⁹³ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 117-18, 124.

¹⁹⁴ Jeyaraman, *Periyar: A Political Biography of E.V. Ramasamy*, pp. 17-19.

mobilization with the potential to spread nationalistic sentiments from British India to the princely states.¹⁹⁵ The arrest of key leaders in the initial phase, the battle of willpower following the stoppage of arrests and Gandhi's restrictive stipulations together had a demoralizing effect on the Satyagrahis. If that wasn't enough, there were volunteers who faced ostracism from their families and social boycott by those leaning to the orthodox position; moreover, they had to deal with a smallpox outbreak within their ashram.¹⁹⁶ Due to these desperate conditions, the committee sent a delegation to Gandhi seeking advice in mid-May 1924, who in turn gave them two options. The first course of action involved forming a deputation to travel around Travancore to collect funds and volunteers for the Satyagraha and the second involved collecting and submitting monster petitions to the Maharajah through organized processions (*Jathas*) from Vaikom to Trivandrum and back. The volunteers chose the first option while deferring the second for a later date.¹⁹⁷

Elsewhere, the news of the campaign was gradually influencing wider Travancorean society. On 16 May, the SNDP and the Kerala Nair Samajam held a joint meeting near Vaikom to support the satyagraha. It was according to its supporters, "The most inspired spectacle ever witnessed in Travancore attended by over 15000 people".¹⁹⁸ Similar expressions of support and sympathy came from outside of Travancore, from the likes of Arya Samaj branches in Rajasthan and Punjab.¹⁹⁹ (The Arya Samaj was a major Hindu reformist movement based primarily in northern India.) Eminent personalities like C. Rajagopalachari, C.R. Das and C.F. Andrews also lent their support.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 113-15.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁹⁸ Jeffrey, 'Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940', p.16.

¹⁹⁹ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 136-7.

²⁰⁰ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, p. 179.

On 31 May 1924, an interview of Narayana Guru was published in the *Deshabhimani* newspaper which created some controversy. It was reported that the Guru didn't approve of the passive resistance methods of Satyagraha to combat untouchability. Expressing his disapproval he said, "There must be the power of endurance. It is required not for exposing oneself to rain nor for starving oneself. One should enter where he is prohibited from entering; and should endure the consequent troubles. If belaboured, that should be calmly put up with, and it should not be retaliated. But if any barricade is put up, one should not remain on this side of it. It should be scaled. It is not sufficient to walk along the roads; but one should enter the temple itself. One should enter all temples".²⁰¹ For a while, it seemed like the Guru was instigating his followers to forcibly enter temples with violence, if necessary, but he later clarified with Gandhi that he did not approve of violence to combat untouchability and that he supported the Satyagraha.²⁰² Gandhi and Guru would meet face to face in March 1925.

Regardless, the satyagrahis persevered against great odds. Between June and September, they endured numerous violent attacks by upper-caste thugs opposed to the satyagraha as well as severe abuse at the hands of the police. Incidents of volunteers being beaten up, limestone being thrown in their eyes causing permanent blindness, and of police causing severe injury to genitalia were reported. It was suspected that the thugs were secretly supported by certain high-ranking policemen.²⁰³ On top of that, there were the floods of 1924, during which the Satyagrahis continued to maintain their vigil.²⁰⁴ This would be known as the Greatest Flood at the time resulting in the death of one of the volunteers from drowning. Alongside maintaining their vigil, the volunteers would also assist in humanitarian efforts of

²⁰¹ Sathees Chandra Bose, 'Nation, Region and the Two Logic of Reform: Reconsidering Vaikom Satyagraha and the Views of Gandhi and Narayana Guru', in *Religion, Community and Identity: Reform and Change in Kerala*, ed. by Asokan Mundon, p. 51.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3.

²⁰³ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 145-6, 148, 151-3.

²⁰⁴ C. R. Mitra, *Sree Narayana Guru and Social Revolution (A Complete Biography)* (Shertalai: Mitraji Publications, 1979), p. 157.

flood relief providing food and shelter to the flood refugees, at times feeding around 600 people.²⁰⁵ While these activities naturally garnered more sympathy for the satyagraha, the flood also had the inadvertent effect of loosening caste barriers in the region as people were forced to cooperate with each other in this time of great crisis.

In August, the reigning Maharaja, Sri Mulam Thirunal died causing the Satyagrahi to suspend their campaign temporarily. He was succeeded by his nephew, Sri Chithira Thirunal, but as he was a minor at the time, his aunt Sethu Lakshmi Bayi took over the reign temporarily as the Maharani Regent.²⁰⁶ Unlike her predecessor, who was understood to be more conservative leaning in his outlook, the Maharani Regent was seen as someone who was more inclined towards the reformists. Immediately upon her ascension, she freed twenty of the jailed satyagrahis which included Madhavan and Kesava Menon. In quick succession, the other leaders were also freed.²⁰⁷ With all the major leaders out of prison and back at the ashram, Gandhi's earlier second suggestion of conducting a *jatha* or a mass procession from Vaikom to Trivandrum and back was reconsidered. While Gandhi approved of the *jatha*, he also wanted to delay it for the intervention of Madan Mohan Malaviya, a renowned Brahmin pundit and Hindu nationalist, so that he could negotiate with the Travancore government for opening the temple roads.

Earlier in April, when Gandhi had called for suspension of the campaign for the first time for mediation, he had thought of involving Malaviya to convince the orthodox opposition. Malaviya fitted the bill for these purposes for the reasons given above: his Hindu nationalism and his fame as a Brahmin pundit.²⁰⁸ However, this did not happen at the time as events escalated before Malaviya could intercede. This time around, Malaviya agreed to intervene on

²⁰⁵ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 141-3.

²⁰⁶ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, pp. 180-1.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, p. 103.

behalf of the satyagrahis but said he would be delayed until 10 November.²⁰⁹ Using the time until Malaviya arrived, the Anti-Untouchability Committee made preparations for collecting signatures of *savarna* Hindus in Travancore and for conducting the *jatha*. The All-India Congress Committee agreed to donate Rs 2000 monthly for the ashram's expenses and prominent leaders like T.K. Madhavan, George Joseph and Kesava Menon arrived at Vaikom to continue their campaign as before, especially since a great festival was about to commence in the region which could help boost their visibility. They distributed over 100 books and had a plan to collect as many as 100,000 signatures for the *savarna jatha*.²¹⁰ Meanwhile Narayana Guru, who since the controversy in June had kept partially aloof from the campaign visited the satyagraha ashram at Vaikom on 27 September 1924, and donated Rs 1000 to the campaign.²¹¹ He also adopted the khadi dress code, which he would maintain till his death, ordered that *charka* (Indian spinning-wheel used to weave khadi) be used at his ashram and declared he himself would offer satyagraha if ever the need arose. This signalled his greatest ever endorsement of the Satyagraha campaign.²¹² Thus, the third phase of the campaign would start off with the *jathas*.

The procession, which would be later called the '*Savarna Jatha*', was to be a meticulously planned affair. It was to be composed exclusively of hand-picked *savarnas* who would not only maintain the discipline of the Vaikom satyagrahis but would also be organized along military lines - units of ten men were to be led by a captain, ten such units under a lieutenant, with the whole *jatha* under a commissioner with overall control exercised by a

²⁰⁹ District Superintendent of Police, Kottayam, to Commissioner of Police, 'Report on the Meetings at Satyagrahasramom on 22-2-1100/7-10-24', 7 October 1924, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju pp. 37-8.

²¹⁰ District Magistrate, Office of the District Magistrate, Kottayam, to Chief Secretary, Trivandrum, 12 October 1924, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju pp. 40-1.

²¹¹ District Magistrate, Office of the District Magistrate, Kottayam, to Chief Secretary, Trivandrum, 'Reference to Sri Narayana Guru Swamy's donation of Rs 1000/- to Satyagraha fund', 4 October 1924, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju p. 35.

²¹² *Ibid.*

commissioner-in-chief.²¹³ This was to be Mannath Padmanabhan Pillai, the leader of the Nair Service Society. Satyagraha leaders like Kesava Menon, A.K. Pillai, Kelappan Nair and Parakulam Parameswaran Pillai were to be the commissioners. They would march from Vaikom to the capital Trivandrum and submit the monster petition to the Maharani Regent. Newspapers not only advertised the precise start and end dates for the *jatha*, which was to be on 1 November and 10 November respectively, but also reported the precise timings and dates the *jatha* would be in each town and village.²¹⁴

As planned, the *jatha* was flagged off on 1 November with about 100 volunteers consisting chiefly of Namboothiris and Nairs who set off from Vaikom. Their leaders were adorned with special headdress and regalia so that they could be easily identified and proceeded in a military formation. Besides bearing the insignia of their respective caste organizations, the *jatha* also carried Congress flags, and often chanted patriotic slogans in support of the Congress and Gandhi.²¹⁵ Despite their composition, the *jatha* was well received in many places - at one place, the Pulayas came out and donated rice for the march and at Shivagiri Mutt, where Narayana Guru resided, the Guru offered his blessings. The popularity of the procession rose such that by the end of it, its numbers had swelled to about a thousand volunteers.²¹⁶ Separately, another *jatha* of 500 *savarnas* started from South Travancore under the leadership of Emperumal Naidu. As they were well received in all the places they went, both the *jathas* concluded peacefully without violence.²¹⁷ They finally converged on 11 November at Trivandrum near the police parade ground and the combined strength of the procession and

²¹³ K. Rama Varier, Inspector of Police, Vaikom, to District Magistrate, Kottayam, 'Report of the Inspector of Police, Vaikom', 8-3-1100, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju p. 171. Note that the date given in the original document is in Malayalam era which corresponds to 24 October 1925.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-4.

²¹⁵ Mitra, *Sree Narayana Guru and Social Revolution (A Complete Biography)*, pp. 164-5.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 171-2, 174-5.

their sympathisers proceeded on to Shanmugam beach to conduct meetings.²¹⁸ The next day, a twelve-member deputation met the Maharani Regent in her palace. Their efforts had garnered more than 25,000 signatures of *savarna* Hindus which were presented to the Maharani in a memorial. Although she was sympathetic to their demands, the Maharani could not give a definite reply either way because of her position as the monarch. She deferred her decision to a later date, as a motion had come up in Travancore's Legislative Council regarding the issue, and this guaranteed a decision once a resolution was reached on that motion.²¹⁹

As they waited for the Legislative Council to deliberate on the matter, the satyagrahis continued their campaign with the same determination and resolve as before. This irritated the orthodox *savarnas* who unleashed goons to intimidate the satyagrahis. This in turn resulted in several incidents where the latter were severely beaten up and injured, even resulting in the death of a volunteer on 14 December 1924.²²⁰ On 7 February, the resolution put forth by a legislative council member for opening the roads surrounding the Vaikom temple to untouchables was defeated in a close match with twenty-two against and twenty-one for the resolution. A deep irony of the situation was that the person who introduced the resolution, N. Kumaran, and the one who was instrumental in its defeat were both from the SNDP. While Kumaran was the SNDP's general secretary, the man whose vote was behind the defeat was Parameswaran, who was the elder brother of Dr. Palpu, the founder of the SNDP, who was also a nominated government official.²²¹ This considerably demoralized the satyagrahis who pleaded with Gandhi for advice and redirection. Sensing the desperation in the Satyagraha camp and perhaps worrying that the lagging interest in non-violent methods might incline

²¹⁸ T. R. Raman Pillai, Office of the Inspector of Police C.I.D., Trivandrum, To Commissioner of Police, Trivandrum, 'Report on Savarna Jatha Meeting at Sangumukhom Beach on 26-03-1100', in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju pp. 181-6. Note that 26-03-1100 corresponds to 11 November 1924.

²¹⁹ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 175-7.

²²⁰ Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala*, p. 181.

²²¹ *Ibid*, p. 182.

activists towards a more direct-action approach of forcefully entering the temples, Gandhi agreed to visit Vaikom and negotiate with the various stakeholders. This ended the third phase of the satyagraha.

Gandhi first arrived in Kerala in the city of Ernakulam on 8 March 1925, accompanied by his personal secretary Mahadev Desai and his son Ramdas Gandhi, and then proceeded to Vaikom on 9 March 1925.²²² As Gandhi's tour was well advertised in the media of the day, the government of Travancore decided earlier on that it would be wiser to have him invited as a state guest rather than have him arrive on his accord, as this would perhaps prevent Gandhi from making hostile statements about either the British or Travancore governments. He was therefore invited as a state guest of Travancore and escorted by W.H. Pitt, the Commissioner of Police for Travancore. Pitt records that at Vaikom, Gandhi was received by large crowds of people aside from the satyagrahis along with the leading lights of the Satyagraha campaign - Kelappan Nair, A.K. Pillai and T.K. Madhavan, and after brief interactions with them, he retired to the Satyagraha ashram.²²³

On the next day, he met with a deputation of *savarna* notables at the residence of the Brahmin Indanturutil Devan Neelakantan Nambiathiri who represented the orthodoxy.²²⁴ The discussion lasted for about three hours and was attended by 17 men in total. The main argument was between Gandhi and Rajagopalachari representing the satyagrahis and Indanturutil Nambiathiri, Viswanatha Ayyar and M.K. Raman Pillai representing the orthodox camp.²²⁵ It mainly revolved around the scriptural and religious validity of untouchability and

²²² W. H. Pitt Esquire, Commissioner of Police Travancore, Office of the Commissioner of Police, To Chief Secretary, Trivandrum, 'Report on Gandhiji's Tour in Travancore', 24 March 1925, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju pp. 131-2.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 133.

²²⁵ Mahadev Desai, *Proceedings of the Conference held at Mr. Indanturutil Devan Neelakantan Nambiathiri's House, Vaikom* (shorthand transcript), in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju pp. 104-28.

unapproachability and whether the satyagrahis were in the right in forcing the issue. While Gandhi tried his best to convince them, for their part, the orthodox camp couldn't be convinced and defended it as a matter of belief and custom, refusing to compromise even when confronted with the possibility that their faith might not be supported by authorities or scriptures after all.²²⁶ As such, it was inconclusive with neither side being able to convince the other. Nonetheless, it was an eye-opener for Gandhi in terms of his perceiving the obstinacy of *savarnas* committed to their prejudices and privileges; he had presumed until this point that they could be won over with compassion. At the end of the discussion, Gandhi offered three choices to the orthodox camp to resolve the issue. The first was to conduct a referendum of *savarnas* either only at Vaikom or in the whole of Travancore on the issue. This was acceptable to most of the *savarnas* present but was refused by Indanturutil on the grounds that matters of faith could not be decided by the majority. The second option suggested by Gandhi was for the *savarnas* to 'show the authority of Sankaracharya' for the custom of unapproachability; that is, to prove the scriptural and other sacerdotal legitimacy for justifying their custom subject to cross examination by other pundits of similar stature from Kashi or anywhere else, who would be neutral. The third option was direct disputation between three arbitrators with the Dewan as the umpire, with Gandhi selecting Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, as his candidate.²²⁷ After giving these choices, Gandhi gave them time and the option to choose or reject any or all.

After the discussion, Gandhi attended an open-air meeting at Vaikom in the evening which Kerala State Archives claim was attended by over 10,000 people and which included large numbers of women and members of untouchable castes.²²⁸ Expressing his 'deep admiration and sympathy' for the Vaikom struggle, Gandhi admonished untouchability and

²²⁶ *Proceedings of the Conference held at Mr. Indanturutil Devan Neelakantan Nambiatiri's House, Vaikom* (shorthand transcript), in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju, pp. 106-12.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-8.

²²⁸ W.H. Pitt Esquire, Commissioner of Police Travancore, 'Report on Gandhiji's Tour in Travancore', 24 March 1925, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju p. 142.

unapproachability as having “no place or sanction in the history of Hinduism” and stated that “untouchability is a blot on humanity and therefore upon Hinduism”.²²⁹ He rationalised this view based on his understanding that religion in modern times must be subject to the ‘test of universal reason’ and that any religion which merely relies on scripture and authority was bound to perish. Besides this, he expressed his confidence in the government, subtly implying that the Dewan, and possibly many others like him, were more open to the satyagraha’s aims than imagined.²³⁰ Furthermore, he also encouraged weaving of khadi as a means to end poverty in India, stressed the importance of Hindu-Muslim unity and general communal harmony, and concluded by expressing his admiration for the people of Travancore in this regard who had set a good example for the rest of India to follow.²³¹

Following this, he visited several important towns and cities throughout the Travancore kingdom ending his Kerala tour at the city of Trichur in Cochin kingdom in late March.²³² Regarding the Vaikom satyagraha, only two of the meetings Gandhi held during this tour were significant: the ones with Maharani Regent and Narayana Guru which were held on 12 March 1925 in Warkalai. The meeting with Maharani Regent and the Dewan gave him the impression that the queen was sympathetic to the untouchables but as a reigning sovereign, she was powerless to grant the opening of the roads by royal decree without overwhelming public support.²³³ Gandhi’s meeting with Narayana Guru would be the first time the two would meet face to face. Pitt records that this meeting between Guru and Gandhi was attended by only a few Ezhava leaders and sympathisers associated with the Satyagraha. Guru expressed to Gandhi his dissatisfaction with non-violent methods to achieve social equality, as he believed

²²⁹ Esquire, Commissioner of Police Travancore, ‘Report on Gandhiji’s Tour in Travancore’, 24 March 1925, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju, pp. 143-4.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

²³² *Ibid.*, pp. 132-40.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

this should be achieved by whatever means necessary. This was the same anxiety he had expressed earlier in May 1924. However, Pitt also records that Gandhi seems to have convinced Guru of the efficacy and necessity of non-violence in all social movements, with the latter agreeing to it unconditionally.²³⁴ Later, Gandhi would also claim that Guru had agreed to adopt khadi and would not permit anyone in his ashram to present themselves before his presence without wearing khadi. Similarly, Gandhi also expressed his opposition to Guru's ideology of 'One caste, one god, one religion' as he believed that as human beings are diverse, so their beliefs bound to be.²³⁵

Following the meeting and exchange of ideas with Guru, Gandhi would depart from Kerala. However, prior to Gandhi's departure, there are two events worth mentioning that would conclude the fourth phase of the Vaikom Satyagraha. The first involves a follow-up to Gandhi's earlier encounter with the orthodox camp led by Indanturuttill Nambiathiri who now met with Gandhi on 17 March 1925. Nambiathiri presented a set of *slokas* (verses), which he claimed supported the present practice of untouchability and unapproachability in Kerala, supposedly authenticated by a Raja of Kodungallur. Gandhi however dismissed this interpretation, claiming that the text only referred to unapproachability in relation to residential houses and not public roads or temples. Even so, Gandhi promised to submit the verses to learned Pundits in North India and Malabar, and further agreed that their interpretation, along with Gandhi's conclusions on the subject would be published in the columns of *Young India*.²³⁶ The second event involves Gandhi sending a letter to Pitt on 18 March, on reaching a settlement regarding opening the roads at Vaikom. In this letter, Gandhi welcomes the suggestion given

²³⁴ Esquire, Commissioner of Police Travancore, 'Report on Gandhiji's Tour in Travancore', 24 March 1925, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju, p. 135.

²³⁵ W. H. Pitt Esquire, Commissioner of Police Travancore, 'Report on Gandhiji's Speeches and Tour Programme: Gandhiji's Speech at Sivagiri Madom', 13 March 1925, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju, p. 64.

²³⁶ Mahadev Desai, *Proceedings of the Conference of Mr Gandhi with the Savarna Hindus held at Vaikom*, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju, p. 129.

by Pitt about the ‘possibility and desirability of removing the barricades at Vaikom and the picket’ in return for Gandhi’s guarantee that the satyagrahis would not cross the boundary line. He agreed to this idea in the hope that the government of Travancore itself might yet still be swayed in favour of the Satyagrahis.²³⁷

On 25 March, Pitt replied positively to Gandhi’s letter stating that he had discussed the contents of the letter with the District Magistrate of Kottayam who agreed to withdraw the prohibitory order. The new policy would take effect on 7 April 1925 to give time for instructions to reach all levels and prevent confusion. Furthermore, Pitt also assures Gandhi that ‘all barricades and structures on the four temple roads at Vaikom are to be demolished immediately and the materials sold’ although the policemen on guard would remain there until the agreement came into operation.²³⁸ Contrary to the confidence expressed in his letter to Gandhi, Pitt was however, more cautious about the consequences of withdrawing the barriers. In his letters to the Chief Secretary to the government of Travancore, he expressed uneasiness over being seen as unfriendly by *savarna* Hindus if the conversation between him and Gandhi became public. He also worried about “the possibility of a mass attempt by *avarna* Hindus who are not Satyagrahis and so not bound by the agreement to use the Vaikom Temple roads on the prohibitory order being withdrawn”.²³⁹

The agreement between Pitt and Gandhi came into effect on 8 April 1925, ending the fourth phase of the Vaikom satyagraha, starting the fifth and final phase of the struggle.²⁴⁰ Even though the agreement was honoured by both sides, there was a sense of consternation in the satyagraha camp. The volunteers felt that although Gandhi made considerable impact in

²³⁷ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, To W.H. Pitt, 18 March 1925, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju, pp. 160-1.

²³⁸ W. H. Pitt, Commissioner of Police, To Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 25 March 1925, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju, p. 165.

²³⁹ W. H. Pitt, Commissioner of Police, To R. Krishna Pillai, Chief Secretary, Trivandrum, 25 March 1925, in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju, p. 164.

²⁴⁰ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, p. 199.

softening the stance of the government, no other tangible gains had been made. Thus, the Ezhava volunteers and those associated simultaneously with the SNDP started talking about conversion.²⁴¹ This was however rejected by Narayana Guru and T.K. Madhavan. Following the agreement, the satyagraha continued with 15 volunteers at each gate which was later reduced to 10 volunteers as a result of the agreement.

On 20 June, the *Mathrubhumi* carried reports that the government was considering opening three of the disputed roads to all people, while maintaining the restriction on the eastern road which was used by the temple priests.²⁴² Regardless, Kelappan urged the satyagrahis not to give in until all the roads were opened. On 21 June, a government official reported that untouchables were already seen walking on the three roads. Furthermore, on 4 July the *Mathrubhumi* reported that the *avarnas* had started walking on all the roads.²⁴³ Elsewhere, *avarnas* were walking along forbidden roads in the town of Ambalapuzha. Here T.K. Madhavan pleaded with them to not force the issue.²⁴⁴ As they began to use all the roads around the temple, the government came up with the solution to open all the three roads and build a secondary connector road on the eastern side for the use of *avarna* castes which would still cordon off a small portion exclusively for *savarna* castes which was communicated to Gandhi on 8 October 1925.²⁴⁵ Accepting this compromise, Gandhi in turn ordered Kelappan to cease the Satyagraha. Initially, there was some confusion as to the actual settlement as Kelappan and other leaders understood Gandhi's missive to mean that all the roads were opened meaning complete victory for the satyagrahis. But this confusion was later cleared up with the Anti-Untouchability Committee issuing a resolution on 17 November 1925 to end the

²⁴¹ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, p. 200.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 201-2.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-3.

²⁴⁴ Madhavan, *Ṭi. Ke. Mādhavanṭe jīvacaritrāṃ*, ed N.K. Damodaran, p. 213.

²⁴⁵ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, p. 206.

Satyagraha and dissolve the committee, with its official ending coming on 23 November 1925.²⁴⁶

Conclusion

Lasting more than 600 days, the Vaikom Satyagraha was a titanic struggle symbolizing peak convergence between the aims of social reformers and Indian nationalists. It would be an important landmark in the political history of Kerala for several reasons. Firstly, it would revitalize the Congress's morale and strength in Kerala after losing face as a result of the Mappilla uprisings in 1921.²⁴⁷ This would help it expand its base considerably outside of British-ruled Malabar and would be consequential in its later campaigns. Secondly, it undid the social norms underpinning many of the caste taboos regarding movement of people. It did this by way of large-scale involvement of volunteers from outside of Travancore belonging to all classes, religions, and castes. Moreover, the *jatha* or political procession, had been introduced as a method of protest and mobilization for the first time in Kerala.²⁴⁸

Here it must be noted that most of the Ezhava and other untouchable caste leaders remained aloof from the Satyagraha. The SNDP covertly supported the movement, with some of its leaders like Madhavan being directly involved. Thirdly, although the immediate aim of the satyagraha was not completely achieved, it did however have long-term consequences which would ultimately result in a temple entry proclamation in 1936. One of the immediate consequences of it was the similar Satyagrahas initiated in 1926 and 1927 elsewhere for road access around temples with varying degrees of success.²⁴⁹ This involvement of Madhavan

²⁴⁶ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 206-7.

²⁴⁷ M.R. Manmathan, *Recasting Images: Essays on Social Reform in Modern Kerala* (Calicut: Publications Division Farook College, 2017), p. 128.

²⁴⁸ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, pp. 118-19.

²⁴⁹ Mitra, *Sree Narayana Guru and Social Revolution (A Complete Biography)*, p. 166.

would not only make him a prominent Congress leader but also the general secretary of the SNDP in 1927. However, his rising political stature would be cut short when he died in 1930.²⁵⁰ For the most part, however, its members remained aloof from the Satyagraha. This was so for the earlier mentioned reasons as some of their leaders like Mithavadi Krishnan, were deeply suspicious of the Congress which they perceived as an upper-caste organization. Moreover, it is also highly plausible that most of the untouchables lived in fear of the *savarna* castes on whom they depended on for livelihoods. Many of them were tenants who depended on the mercy of their *savarna* landlords and the few that had gained employment with the government would not risk its displeasure by joining the satyagrahis.

Regardless of whether it was perceived as a failure or not, it cannot be denied that Vaikom was an important turning point in Kerala's history not only for the civil rights of the deprived sections of its society, but also in shaping its future political trajectory. The perceived failure of it to achieve a complete victory would also have other consequences resulting in the temporary distancing of regional politics from the national freedom struggle which will be covered in the next chapter.

²⁵⁰ King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, pp. 214-16.

CHAPTER 4

The Transformation of Politics in Kerala: From Social Reform and Nationalism to Communism (1930-40)

It would be nearly six years after the end of Vaikom Satyagraha in 1925 that another major campaign to push for the emancipation of untouchables would be launched. In the intervening period, the key leader of the Vaikom Satyagraha, T. K. Madhavan, would die and the focus of social reform leaders would shift from challenging untouchability vis-à-vis access to temples and roads, towards greater representation. Meanwhile, as suggested below, at the national level, certain other developments were taking place that would have political implications in Kerala.

Following the Lahore Session in 1929, the Indian National Congress under Nehru and Gandhi's leadership would make the historic '*Poorna Swaraj*' declaration.²⁵¹ This declaration would call for the attainment of complete independence for India from British rule and would be the first of its kind made by the Congress. It would initiate the Civil Disobedience Movement and Gandhi's famous 'Salt March' on 12 March 1930 to break the salt laws – these levied a tax on salt, and court arrest.²⁵² Following Gandhi's lead at the national level, Congress's Kerala branch, the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC), under the overall leadership of K. Kelappan, would also initiate Salt marches and the courting of arrest. The main venue of the salt marches were the beaches of Calicut and Payyannur in Malabar.²⁵³ Amongst the many

²⁵¹ Chandra, with Mukherjee et al., *India's Struggle For Independence*, pp. 266-8.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 270-1.

²⁵³ K. Ramachandran Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram: The Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment, 2006), p. 15.

leaders of the Congress campaign for civil disobedience in Kerala were Krishna Pillai and Ayillyath Kuttiari Gopalan Nambiar (also called A. K. Gopalan), who would not only play a leading role in this, the Guruvayur Satyagraha, but also emerge as the principal leaders of the communist movement in Kerala in later years.²⁵⁴

Being the last major campaign for temple entry in Kerala during British rule, the Guruvayur Satyagraha would be a steppingstone in the further development of politics in the region. This chapter will briefly explore the nature of the Guruvayur Satyagraha before delving into the transformation of the Gandhian dominated Congress in Kerala into one dominated by socialists and communists. Using the platform of the Congress, the disenchanted radicals would create within it a faction called the Congress Socialist Party which would attract the membership of broad range of leftists. The camouflage given by the Congress banner would enable them to transform not only the nature of urban and rural politics by mobilizing unions, but also to rearticulate caste inequality as a fight between landlords and cultivators. Meanwhile, the failure of the earlier Vaikom Satyagraha would push the different religio-political groups to search for alternatives for greater access to power, first through constitutional means, which resulted in the abstention movement, and later through civil disobedience.

Civil Disobedience and Guruvayur Satyagraha

Deeply motivated by Gandhi's example, the leaders of the Civil Disobedience movement in Kerala would show outstanding commitment in not only breaking the salt laws but also in enduring many police brutalities in the form of lathi charges and harsh imprisonment.²⁵⁵ Here, the example of Krishna Pillai needs mention as he would gain a

²⁵⁴ Gopalan, *Kerala Past and Present*, p. 41.

²⁵⁵ E. Balakrishnan, *History of the Communist Movement in Kerala* (Ernakulam: Kuruksheeta Prakashan, 1998), pp. 31-4, 41-3.

reputation as an unwavering proponent of the nationalist cause despite the severe police assaults at the beaches of Calicut in 1930, and for enduring harrowing conditions in prison.²⁵⁶ Harsh prison life for detained protestors meant that they had to endure severe beatings, hard manual labour, being stripped to underwear and being served unhygienic rotting food. These conditions, along with the fact that men like Krishna Pillai and A. K. Gopalan encountered revolutionaries from Punjab and Bengal in prison, ensured the radicalization of many Congress workers in the long run and their movement to the left.²⁵⁷ This process of radicalisation was furthered when Gandhi, against their wishes, called off the first civil disobedience movement with the Gandhi-Irwin Pact on 5 March 1931.

It was in the wake of the withdrawal of the first Civil Disobedience movement that the Guruvayur Satyagraha was launched. Perhaps sensing a general feeling of disillusionment within the volunteer corps over Gandhian tactics accentuated by the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, the Kerala leadership of the Congress convened a conference in the town of Badagara on 5 May 1931 which passed resolutions urging campaigning for temple entry for untouchables.²⁵⁸ This would be the pretext for the start of Guruvayur Satyagraha. In many ways, this would be a continuation of the earlier Vaikom struggle with similar tactics but different objectives – rather than settling for access to roads, the Congress had decided on a direct assault on untouchability by demanding temple entry as they believed it would attack the core of the issue.

Prior to the official start of the satyagraha, volunteers would march from village to village to popularize the aims of the satyagraha. In one such march, A. K. Gopalan, who had been appointed as the captain of the volunteer corps for the Satyagraha as whole, was beaten up at Kandoth village for leading a group of volunteers from *avarna* castes which resulted in

²⁵⁶ T. V. Krishnan, *Kerala's First Communist: Life of 'Sakhavu' Krishna Pillai* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1971), pp. 15-18; See also, Balakrishnan, *History of the Communist Movement in Kerala*, pp. 31-4, 41-3.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁵⁸ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, p. 17.

him being incapacitated for several months.²⁵⁹ These events would earn them much sympathy and support such that preparations for the satyagraha would be complete by the end of October. On 1 November 1931, the Guruvayur Satyagraha was launched under the leadership of Kelappan with the express objective of opening the main temple in Guruvayur for the untouchables.²⁶⁰ Similar to the Vaikom temple, this temple too was under the trusteeship of a royal family, which in this case was the Zamorin of Calicut. Prior to British rule, the Zamorins had been the rulers of the Kingdom of Calicut. Although they lost their political authority when they were absorbed into the Madras Presidency, they still retained a certain ritual and ceremonial authority. Hence, the satyagrahis would appeal time and again to the Zamorin to change the laws relating to the temple, but the latter would not budge. Unlike the rulers of Travancore, who had some political authority and pretensions to modernity, the Zamorins had been reduced to ceremonial figures which in turn made them staunch upholders of orthodox customs.²⁶¹

Very early in the campaign, on 7 November, the captain of the temple-entry campaign T. Subrahmaniam Tirumumbu and several others were arrested. For several weeks, there was, however, no major incident as the volunteers only lined up daily at the gates of the temple's entrance, singing songs and conducting speeches from 3 am (when the temple opened) until late at night.²⁶² Then on 26 December 1931, the orthodox parties let loose their vigilantes on the satyagrahis beating them up severely. Shocked by this violent reaction, a section of the satyagrahis retaliated by tearing down the blockades and forcibly entering the temple forcing it to close for a month.²⁶³ Although the satyagrahis did not resort to violence against persons, this was a significant departure from the restraint shown at Vaikom. After the temple reopened,

²⁵⁹ Krishnan, *Kerala's First Communist*, p. 19.

²⁶⁰ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, p. 17.

²⁶¹ Sreedharan, *A Survey of Kerala History*, p. 316.

²⁶² Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, p. 18.

²⁶³ Gopalan, *Kerala Past and Present*, p. 42.

Krishna Pillai did a daring act which raised his stature as a leader - he rang the bells of the temple's sanctum sanctorum.²⁶⁴ As this was a right only reserved for Brahmins, this was a radical act for which he suffered further assault and arrest. By late January 1932 most of the leadership was in jail serving prison terms and the leadership of the satyagraha now fell on to the shoulders of women volunteers who were led by Kamalavathy, Devaki Amma and Kunhikavamma.²⁶⁵

Similar to Vaikom, the satyagraha would continue despite the repression, winning greater support among all groups, with volunteers coming in from Travancore, Cochin and elsewhere in British India. By September 1932, Kelappan had concluded that a decisive 'push' was necessary to tip the struggle decisively in favour of the satyagrahis as the tempo of the campaign was fast changing with radicalising currents becoming more apparent – at some places, the sympathisers of the satyagrahis retaliated against anti-satyagraha campaigners with violence.²⁶⁶ For this, he started an indefinite fast on 21 September 1932. Many others, including A. K. Gopalan and Krishna Pillai, followed suit with slogans like 'Death or Temple Entry'. However, on 2 October, the fast-unto-death campaign was ended on the advice of Gandhi who promised to intervene and negotiate with the Zamorin for temple-entry.²⁶⁷ A referendum was held within the region in which the temple was situated, which surprisingly revealed a majority of the *savarnas* of the region being in favour of temple-entry for untouchables.²⁶⁸ However, no actions were taken immediately in this regard. With this, the Satyagraha was ended on a similar note as the Vaikom campaign but there were also some significant departures. Firstly, the campaign, although starting with similar tactics and strategy in mind, escalated into violence

²⁶⁴ Krishnan, *Kerala's First Communist*, p. 20.

²⁶⁵ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, p. 18.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ Gopalan, *Kerala Past and Present*, pp. 42-3.

on the part of the orthodox very quickly and, later, on the part of the sympathisers of the satyagraha. The latter was a new development, as in the previous struggle, both the active volunteers and their sympathisers steadfastly stuck to the creed of non-violence. Secondly, the repression faced by the satyagrahis and Gandhi's seeming back-peddalling during his campaigns greatly disillusioned a large section of the Congress workers who were engaged as satyagrahis in the Civil Disobedience Movement in general and in the Guruvayur Satyagraha in particular. They started to perceive Gandhian methods as not being effective enough to tackle social prejudices or resist British imperialism.

After the Guruvayur Satyagraha, the satyagrahis and their leaders would once again commit themselves to the second Civil Disobedience movement which started on April 1932, only to be disappointed yet again by its termination by Gandhi in 1934. In fact, the final end of the Civil Disobedience movement, and the disappointments attendant upon it, would be crucial in the rise of the socialist caucus in the Congress, and later the communists, which would come to dominate the Kerala Congress. Lastly, while at Vaikom there was some involvement of caste organisations like the SNDP and the NSS discussed in the last chapter, at Guruvayur, their involvement was further diminished, suggesting that the onus of social reform had passed from the hands of the caste organizations to political agents like the Congress party. Thus, although, the caste organizations would continue to exist even after independence and until the present time, by the end of the 1930s, the hey-day of their politics had passed. This would be accentuated by the Temple Entry Declaration of 1936 by the Maharaja of Travancore which declared all the temples owned by the state to be opened to all 'classes of Hindus'. This momentous change resulted in part from the impact of the Guruvayur Satyagraha, but also from that of what would be known as the Abstention Movement in the state of Travancore.

The Joint Political Conference and the Abstention Movement

In the aftermath of the Vaikom Satyagraha, Madhavan had emerged as a prominent leader of the SNDP expanding its branches and membership considerably. Within eighteen months of his taking over the post of general secretary of the SNDP in 1927, he had expanded its membership from 4200 to 50000 spread over 255 branches.²⁶⁹ He had used the experience he had gained as a preeminent leader of the satyagraha to reorganize the Yogam along Congress lines and used it to conduct Satyagrahas for opening roads to untouchables in other towns in Travancore in alliance with progressive sections of the upper-castes like the earlier mentioned Padmanabhan Pillai and the NSS. However, despite these efforts, there seemed to be little change in the lukewarm attitude by the Travancore government towards the emancipation of untouchables and temple entry would not be achieved in his lifetime. Moreover, the death of Madhavan in 1930 would see the fracturing of the alliance between middle-class Ezhavas and progressive sections of the Nairs who had seen few concrete results in terms of advancement for them. The foci of Ezhava political action would now shift from working for temple entry for untouchables to securing for them greater representation in government and the legislature. In this they would find natural allies among Christians and Muslims.²⁷⁰

Despite the widespread solidarity witnessed between progressive sections of the upper-caste Nairs and the Ezhava middle classes of the likes of Madhavan during the Vaikom Satyagraha, the domination or monopoly of the government services and the state legislatures by the Nairs had long been a sore point. Even as late as 1931, Nair pre-eminence in the state legislatures could be seen in their holding 65 percent of the seats in the legislative council with Christians getting only 17 percent, and Ezhavas and Muslims getting none.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Jeffrey, 'Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940', p. 19.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ The Executive Committee of the All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem* (Calicut: M.M. Varkey, 1934), p. 27.

Nair and other upper-caste domination of Travancore's government was discussed in the previous chapter and here it would suffice to say that their dominance continued for the most part despite many attempts by the Travancore government at reforming the legislature. Partly due to popular pressure applied by organisations like the SNDP,²⁷² and partly due to the need to keep abreast of developments in British India, the Travancore government had been experimenting with reforming its administration and legislature including through expanding the franchise and the number of elected representatives, giving women the right to vote and stand in elections in 1921, increasing the number of nominated members from untouchable castes like Pulayas and Ezhavas and so on.²⁷³ In the 1920s, the government also tried to placate the untouchable castes through other means, such as granting land for settlement and cultivation to Pulayas and encouraging cooperative and credit societies among them.²⁷⁴ These measures, although piecemeal, can be said to have partially paid off as it staved off mass participation of the bulk of the untouchable castes at Vaikom and other places. But now, in the early-1930s, the Abstention Movement, or '*Nivarthanam*', came into being in opposition to the limitations of the legislative reforms announced on 28 October 1932.²⁷⁵

The proposed reform envisaged restructuring the legislature along bicameral lines with upper and lower houses and an expanded membership. The upper house was to be called the Sri Chithira State Council with a total of 37 members, 22 of whom were to be elected and 15 nominated. The lower house was to be called the Sri Mulam Assembly with a total of 72 members of whom 48 were to be elected and 24 nominated. There was a caveat to this reformed membership composition – government controlled most of the nominations, nominating 10 out

²⁷² The Executive Committee of the All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem*, p. 22.

²⁷³ Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, pp. 22-3, 27, 32-3, 58-9.

²⁷⁴ Maurice Emygdus Watts, *Address of the Dewan of Travancore to the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly: Twenty Fourth Session – 1103, 27th February 1928* (Trivandrum: Government of Travancore, 1928), pp. 3-4.

²⁷⁵ Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, p. 103.

of 15 members in the Council, and 12 out of 24 members in the Assembly. Added to this was the franchise restriction: members had to be paying of Rs 5 in land tax to qualify for the Assembly and Rs 25 for the Council. Cumulatively, all of these measures seemed to the would-be Abstentionist alliance proof that the government sought to perpetuate Nair dominance in government affairs without giving due representation to Ezhavas, Muslims and Christians commensurate with their population strength.²⁷⁶ (The Ezhavas alone matched the Nairs in population strength and the different Christian groups collectively far outnumbered Nairs.)²⁷⁷ But as mentioned earlier, this was not reflected in the legislature or the government services both of whose composition had always been overwhelmingly dominated by Nairs.²⁷⁸

Prior to the announcement of the reforms, the different caste organizations who would later come together in the Abstention movement made separate appeals expressing their dissatisfaction with their current representation. Ezhavas had submitted two memorials to the government, one in March 1932 and another in July 1932 asking for 'special or joint electorates' with reservation of a certain number of seats without being excluded from the general seats.²⁷⁹ This demand was exemplified by an Ezhava organisation called the All-Travancore Ezhava Political League which demanded that Ezhavas be represented with numbers of seats reserved them commensurate with their population strength. Similar steps were also taken by Muslims and Christians through their different organizations. Muslims under the leadership of the Lajmathul Muhammadiya Association passed a resolution on 21 August 1932 demanding separate electorates. Christians under the leadership of the Travancore Latin Christian Mahajana Sabha and the Travancore State Catholic Congress also made similar appeals for reservations in the months of September and October respectively.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem*, pp. 29-30.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6,9, 14-15.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-1.

²⁷⁹ Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, pp. 104-5.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-5.

From the announcement of the reforms in late October until January 1933, the government and the different caste and communal organizations tried desperately to negotiate with each other but in vain. By the month of November, a flurry of resolutions was passed condemning the reforms by the aforementioned organizations alongside others such as the All-Travancore Muslim Service League and the Ezhava Mahajana Sabha. The Ezhava Mahajana Sabha had met under the auspices of the SNDP under the chairmanship of Sahodaran Ayyappan on 27 November 1932 and, in addition to condemning the underrepresentation of Ezhavas, condemned the property qualification criteria which they sought to be replaced with a universal adult franchise.²⁸¹ On 17 December 1932, the various delegates of Ezhava, Christian and Muslim organizations first met to make common cause through the formation of the Joint Political Conference (sometimes called the Joint Political Congress). This newly formed political organization then sent a deputation to the Dewan Thomas Austin for redress, but the government showed no signs of conciliation. As a result, the executive committee of the Joint Political Conference (JPC) met on 25 January 1933 and declared what would be known as the ‘Abstention Resolution’. This was the start of the Abstention (also called *Nivarthanam* in Malayalam) Movement which sought to boycott elections to the legislatures due to be held later that year.²⁸² Besides conference members, it was attended by sympathetic previous members of the legislature, by those who had put up their candidature for the upcoming elections and also by representatives from the various organizations of the Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims.

Conference members T. J. Matthew, K. C. Mammen Mappillai met with twice with Dewan T. Austin in March 1933 to discuss the possibilities of a rapprochement.²⁸³ At the second meeting, they seemed to be making headway - a draft of the press communique that

²⁸¹ All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem*, pp. 33-4.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 34-7.

²⁸³ Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, pp. 114-17.

was to be published by the government was read out in the presence of the Chief Secretary and the Political Secretary: this promised to dissolve the legislature if any gross injustice resulted from the elections. However, the Dewan and government backtracked on the assurances given. It is widely believed that arrival of Sir C. P. Ramaswami Iyer as a special constitutional adviser to the king on 24 March 1933 had some hand in the backtracking, the hardening of the government's stance and the Dewan turning back on his word.²⁸⁴

In fact, Ramasamy Iyer was perhaps the main author of the 1932 reforms.²⁸⁵ He had made a statement, published on February 21, 1933, that if serious injustices were seen in the outcome of the elections, the government would reconsider the makeup of constituencies and representation. However, since this was said to a deputation of Nairs, it was seen as him favouring the upper-caste Nair community.²⁸⁶ This won him the scorn of Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims who demanded his dismissal.

An article called 'Knight Errant' criticising the extra-constitutional status of Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer was published in the Christian owned newspaper *Dasan* on 25 March 1933 resulting in its forfeiture.²⁸⁷ Allegations regarding the huge drain of state finances for maintaining the special adviser also contributed towards calls for his dismissal. Newspaper reports about the alleged favouritism and authoritarianism of Ramaswamy Iyer spread both within and outside the state giving abstentionists some publicity outside Travancore. Some newspapers suggested that either he be dismissed or that he replaces the Dewan, Thomas Austin. In this way, responsibility for his actions and comments could be fixed on him.²⁸⁸ The

²⁸⁴ All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem*, pp. 50-2.

²⁸⁵ Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, p. 107.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

²⁸⁷ All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem*, p. 56.

²⁸⁸ Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, pp. 109-11.

abstentionists also passed resolutions demanding the removal of Ramaswamy Iyer as constitutional and legal advisor to the Maharaja.²⁸⁹

In midst of this controversy, the Maharaja and his adviser left for Europe. Meanwhile, the Travancore government covertly communicated to the Viceroy Lord Willingdon the impression that abstention was a form of non-cooperation/civil disobedience in order to justify unleashing repressive measures.²⁹⁰ In such measures, the police, the excise, and magistracy were utilised. Meetings were immediately banned. A planned meeting in the town of Parur in north Travancore on 2 April 1932, under the chairmanship of Mithavadi Krishnan, was prohibited by the District Magistrate of Kottayam.²⁹¹ This was the fate of planned meetings at Mavelikkara, Quilon and other places – all fell victim to their respective District Magistrates.²⁹²

The government also tried to compel or induce candidates from the abstentionist communities to stand in for election and return them uncontested.²⁹³ Regardless, the boycott of the abstentionists was a resounding success with the government-sponsored candidates for abstentionist communities collectively ‘winning’ only 16 out of 70 seats for both houses. None of the ‘winning’ candidates from among the Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims had any political stature in Travancore.²⁹⁴ Thus, the abstentionists succeeded in making the elections a farce.

Following the end of the elections, the ban on meetings were lifted in July and a meeting of prominent citizens of the town of Minachil was planned on 30 July 1933. The meeting, aside from expressing dismay at the representatives elected from Minachil, was also called to welcome the return of the Maharaja from his tour of Europe. However, the local District Magistrate overreacted and prohibited all meetings for the next fifteen days. This incited a

²⁸⁹ K. K. Kusuman, *The Abstention Movement* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1976), pp. 40-1.

²⁹⁰ Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, pp. 111-13.

²⁹¹ All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem*, pp. 55-6.

²⁹² Kusuman, *The Abstention Movement*, pp. 41-2.

²⁹³ All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem*, pp. 59-62.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

storm of public meetings in different towns, resulting in massive condemnations and resolutions demanding the dissolution of the newly elected legislature.²⁹⁵ On the inaugural day of the new legislature, 31 July 1933, several Ezhava, Christian and Muslim youth observed fasts to register their opposition. In the month of August, the abstentionist cause got a boost when some of the government-backed elected members in the legislature started demanding caste and communal lists of those employed in the different public services.²⁹⁶ On 25 August 1933, the Executive Committee of the Joint Political Conference met at Trivandrum and publicised to the press serious allegations of misconduct and fraud perpetrated by government officials and invited the government to investigate these.²⁹⁷

Although a Nair conference in September at Trivandrum called for support for the government and maintaining the status quo, in October, Ramaswamy Iyer sent feelers to some abstentionist leaders to find a way out of the impasse.²⁹⁸ However, nothing came of it as the former would not concede to the dissolution of the legislature. Moreover, the activities of the abstentionists and their opponents were starting to create fissures in their own communities. In November 1933, the Vaikom Satyagraha hero, K. Kelappan was lamenting the communal polarization evident in the movement. There was even a group of self-styled leaders of the Ezhavas in one area who started disowning the movement as primarily the work of Christians and similar accusations were also levelled by a section of Muslims. Such folks now began to support the government and to conduct anti-abstention meetings in places like Kanjirappally and Nedumkunnam.²⁹⁹

From here on the tempo of the abstention movement waxed and waned with pro and anti-abstentionist meetings being held sporadically from town to town. The appointment of

²⁹⁵ All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem*, pp. 62-3.

²⁹⁶ Kusuman, *The Abstention Movement*, pp. 45-6.

²⁹⁷ All-Travancore Joint Political Congress, *Travancore the Present Political Problem*, p. 63.

²⁹⁸ Kusuman, *The Abstention Movement*, pp. 46-7.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8.

Mohammed Habibullah as the new Dewan of Travancore in March 1934 raised the hopes of the abstentionists, who met with him in May 1934 and duly presented a memorial to him. While he did hear them out and was possibly sympathetic to the Abstentionist cause, no measure was initially taken by him, and it was claimed that he had been overruled by the palace authorities.³⁰⁰ This suggested the growing influence of Ramaswamy Iyer behind the scenes.

However, in January 1935, the abstentionists scored a major victory when the government created a Public Service Commission, with the High Court judge G. D. Noakes as the Commissioner to reorganize recruitment to the public services. This commission intended to give due representation to underrepresented communities and make appointments ‘reflecting the numerical strength’ of the three groups.³⁰¹ In April 1935, the Nair Brigade was reorganized allowing for recruitment of persons who were not from Nair castes. These victories bolstered the morale of the abstentionists who started calling for the removal of Ramaswamy Iyer once more. A crucial moment was reached at a meeting of the Joint Political Conference on 7 June 1935. The Conference leader C. Kesavan was arrested. Since he was one of the most famous leaders to emerge from the Abstentionist movement and as he was the leader of the SNDP, of which he had been elected general secretary in 1933, Kesavan’s arrest infuriated the Ezhava masses who began to talk of mass conversion to other religions.³⁰² He was only released after two years when he was given a hero’s welcome, but his arrest and the excitement it generated around mass conversions by Ezhavas to other religions was an important context for the Temple Entry Proclamation of the Travancore government in 1936.

Somewhat paradoxically, the proclamation was issued under the stewardship of Ramaswamy Iyer, who by this time – needing to make concessions to a popular movement –

³⁰⁰ Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, pp. 114-17.

³⁰¹ Kusuman, *The Abstention Movement*, pp. 64-5.

³⁰² Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, pp. 117-19.

had manoeuvred himself into the position of Dewan.³⁰³ Despite the misgivings of the abstentionists, Ramaswamy Iyer gave effect to some of the changes desired by the abstentionists: thus, there were changes in the composition of the legislature enhancing Ezhava, Christian and Muslim representation in 1937.³⁰⁴

Congress Socialists in Malabar and Peasant Unions (1934-40)

The withdrawal of the national Civil Disobedience movement from the India-wide stage – this is to be distinguished from Kerala’s movements outlined above which were in some ways a reaction to Gandhi’s reigning in of civil disobedience – accelerated the differences between the more conservative leaning leaders of the Congress and the more radical members who increasingly turned to socialism and Marxism as an alternative to Gandhian ideology. There were two main reasons for this shift. On the one hand, Gandhi’s oscillation between compromise and confrontation, reinforced by his near total command over national politics, irked many in the provinces. As such, the pressure by national leaders, who tried to influence the course and outcome of regional struggle in conformity with the national imperatives, forced many to search for alternatives.³⁰⁵ One such search resulted in the formation of regional political parties that would contest elections and effect changes from within by gradually democratising it through calls for responsible government. Thus, we see the formation of the Joint Political Conference which evolved into the Travancore State Congress in 1938 which campaigned for democracy at the regional level. Yet another more prominent development was

³⁰³ Kusuman, *The Abstention Movement*, pp. 82-3.

³⁰⁴ Koshy, *Constitutionalism in Travancore and Cochin*, pp. 118-22.

³⁰⁵ Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 119-20.

the rise of the socialist faction within the Indian National Congress, which acting as the radical conscience of the organisation, deliberately tried to push its agenda leftwards.

Those pressing for a leftward tilt in Congress's policy and strategy would have been energised by the worldwide impact of the Great Depression. The massive slump in prices it caused deeply affected the major agricultural exports from Kerala like pepper and coconut.³⁰⁶ This put massive burdens on the economy which in turn, disrupted rural relations. In the Malabar region, where the economy was centred around plantations mostly owned and managed by Nair *tharavadus*, one saw the reinstatement of feudal levies on their tenants, cultivators, and others in addition to the rents extracted. This involved the collection of extra shares of the crop harvest which was stockpiled.³⁰⁷ Moreover, the authority of this landed class came to be reinforced by the colonial state with the police becoming the enforcers of the dominant *tharavadus*.³⁰⁸ These reinforced old social mores and roles which had eroded to some degree under the assault of nationalism and temple-entry movements.

It was in this context of disillusionment with national politics and the conditions wrought by economic depression that the Kerala Congress Socialist Party (KCSP) came into existence on 12 May 1934.³⁰⁹ This was the Kerala branch of the all-India Congress Socialist Party, and it had some distinct features. Its members initially operated within the overall regional organization of the INC in Kerala. According to Balakrishnan, unlike their national counterparts, the Kerala socialists did not yet have a clear position on where they stood between Gandhian and socialist ideology.³¹⁰ However, they felt somewhat alienated from the

³⁰⁶ Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, pp. 121-3.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-4.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 151.

³⁰⁹ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, p. 19.

³¹⁰ Balakrishnan, *History of the Communist Movement in Kerala*, pp. 45-6.

mainstream Congress leadership whom they derogatively referred to as the ‘Sunday Congress’ for their relative distancing from the hardships faced by frontline activists and members.³¹¹

Another distinct feature of the Kerala socialists is pointed out by Dilip M. Menon: this was that the initial leadership of the Kerala socialists was largely drawn from Nair and upper-caste leaders within the local branch of the National Congress who were not only dissatisfied with the Gandhian elite, but were also from the lower strata of landowners who had fallen on difficult times due to the Depression and the feuds resulting from the land partition of matrilineal *tharavadus*. Younger members of these economically-precarious ‘lesser *tharavadus*’ had already built relationships with dependent labourers and cultivators in the earlier Gandhian nationalist programs for temperance, the fight against untouchability and for temple entry.³¹² The earliest leaders of the Congress socialists like A. K. G, Krishna Pillai and E. M. S. Namboodiripad, who later founded the Communist Party in Kerala, were from this group. This aspect of the leadership would be tactically important in the years between 1934-40 when the KCSP went on to form peasant unions in North Malabar and infiltrate industrial unions in the towns and cities, especially in places like Aluva and Ernakulam in the Cochin Kingdom and Alappuzha and Kollam in Travancore. On the one hand, it allowed them to act as arbitrators and mediators between the dominant landlords who belonged to the savarna castes and the aggrieved peasants who were mostly from the lower and untouchable castes.³¹³ On the other hand, it helped them mobilize different categories of labourers who not only fell into categories such as the landless, agricultural labourers, factory workers, and peasants generally, but were also divided along caste and religious lines.³¹⁴

³¹¹ Balakrishnan, *History of the Communist Movement in Kerala*, pp. 45-6.

³¹² Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, pp. 130-1.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-2.

³¹⁴ K. K. N. Kurup, *Peasantry, Nationalism and Social Change in India* (Allahabad: Chugh Publication, 1991), pp. 124-8.

The fact that the KCSP leaders were mostly Nair, wasn't highlighted, as they were perceived as being opposed to those high caste Nairs who exploited peasants and others. This combined with the political experience and reputation they gained in the Civil Disobedience and the Guruvayur temple entry movements, gain them the respect of wide sections of lower classes of different caste and religious backgrounds. This helped them to transcend differences between such groups to some extent. In this, they were able to reframe the earlier social reform narratives centred around caste oppression and a unified Hindu community into one that stressed the antagonism between workers and capitalists, cultivators and landlords, oppressed and the oppressors, as well as a community of the exploited.³¹⁵ This reframing of the language of earlier social reform and nationalist ideologies into one of class struggle along socialist lines is evident in two statements made by that key leader of the socialists, Krishna Pillai, in 1934. Referring to dissolving caste and religious differences, he said, 'Tiyya, Nayar, Pattar, Mappila and Christian – one must forget these differences and assert that, "I am an agricultural worker, I am a mill worker and my success is the success of each worker belonging to my class".³¹⁶ On another occasion, impressing upon the need to take up the issues of peasants, he said, 'land all over India must be deemed to belong to cultivators by a proclamation'.³¹⁷

The earliest attempt to form a peasant union in north Malabar under CSP leadership took place in 1935 with its chief organizers being Vishnu Bharateeyan and Keraleeyan. Bharateeyan, belonging to the Nambisan caste of temple officials, in keeping with his intellectual background, often used references from Bhagavad Gita and the Puranas to make fiery speeches on class exploitation to attract listeners to socialism and communism. A crucial event that enabled the growth of the peasant union was when he intervened on behalf of an overseer in Kolacheri by instituting a successful lawsuit against a Namboothiri landlord who

³¹⁵ Kurup, *Peasantry, Nationalism and Social Change in India*, pp. 124-6.

³¹⁶ Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, pp. 117-18.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

had seized his share of the crop without any compensation. This success spurred the growth of a peasant union in Kolacheri.³¹⁸ Early interventions by the CSP and attempts at organizing unions involved taking advantage of such fissures that existed within structures of authority between landlords and their overseers and in turn, the overseers helped build connections between activists and labourers.

On 1 November 1936, the first all-Malabar peasant meeting was held at Parassinikadavu with *jathas* (processions/marches) from Cannanore and its neighbouring villages. Reiterating the new framing of the fight for caste equality, Bharateeyan said at this meeting: ‘There are only two castes, two religions and two classes – the haves and have nots.’³¹⁹ Two major resolutions were adopted at this meeting – one called for the complete abolition of customs and terms of speech that denoted or emphasised the lower-caste or untouchable caste status of labourers. This was a marked shift from the earlier programs of caste organizations and the Indian National Congress which emphasised temperance and khadi (hand-woven cloth), with a focus only on self-help and improvement without questioning caste inequality. The other major resolution, dealt with combating excessive levies imposed by the landlords on their dependents and labourers. To this end, peasant unions were formed in Alavil in July 1937, and a *jatha* led by A. V. Kunhambu refused to negotiate with the overseer and demanded to deal directly with the landlord who was the Raja of Chirakkal.³²⁰ They demanded that the undervaluing of rents paid by peasants to landlords in grain be halted. After much back and forth, the unions were successful in their attempts at negotiating with the Raja. It is noteworthy here that the basis of authority itself was not being challenged but only its excesses but, at the same time, the unions were also determining what was fair. Similar processions of peasant unions were conducted all throughout Malabar which at once challenged feudal levies and

³¹⁸ Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, p. 133.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

undermined caste deference, such that by 1937 there were about eighty local trade unions and two district unions in Malabar. This resulted in the formation of the All-Malabar Peasants Union in May 1938 which boasted a paid membership of around 30,000 by the end of the same year.³²¹

The demands of the peasant unions were diverse enough to include within their ambit the concerns of the bonded labourer, agricultural labourer, tenant cultivator, small landowner and so on.³²² At the same time, the peasant unions did not merely limit themselves to bargaining for material concessions from landlords. As they grew in stature and numbers, they also began to question and defy social deference and taboos imposed by the caste system. In August 1938, a peasant conference was held in Blathur village which was attended by over 7000 peasants. The dominant landlord in the region, Anantan Nambiyar, was warned against abusing his labourers' wives and daughters and that from here on, the peasants would neither address him with honorifics nor move out of the way when he passed. Such defiance of old caste norms also extended to behaviour and attitudes in that lower castes increasingly started to wear shirts and waist clothes below their knees which had hitherto been the privilege of Nairs only.³²³ Through such measures, and also through the experience of marching in hundreds and thousands, the peasant unions were able to not only challenge caste hierarchy but also create a new alternative culture of working people's solidarity.

Aside from this, the KCSP also continued the social reform agenda in spreading literacy and education by establishing reading rooms adjacent to party and union offices where political discussions often took place, and also by publishing pamphlets and newspapers to spread their message.³²⁴ In 1935, the KCSP took over the ownership of *Prabhatham* and made E. M. S

³²¹ T. J. Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaptation* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1982), pp. 72, 74.

³²² Kurup, *Peasantry, Nationalism and Social Change in India*, pp. 124-8.

³²³ Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900-1948*, pp. 137-8.

³²⁴ E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *Selected Writings Vol 2*. (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1982), p. 187.

Namboodiripad its editor. Aside from explaining Marxist concepts to the public, *Prabhatham* highlighted working-class issues and news relating to the formation of unions, resolutions passed by them, and reports of strikes in mills and factories.³²⁵ In 1938, Namboodiripad also published the first Marxist history of Kerala, *Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi* (Kerala, the Malayali's Motherland).³²⁶ Prominent literary works by Marxist writers like K. Damodaran were also published during this period: his *Raktapanam* (Draught of Blood) and *Pattabaki* (Rent Arrears) published in 1939 were laden with Marxist themes and did much to valorise the poor and marginalized in Kerala's popular consciousness as well as popularising socialism and communism.³²⁷

The collective experience and transformation of consciousness in the reading rooms and *jathas* bred militancy in the unions whose members increasingly acted outside the defined parameters of activism set by the CSP leaders. In 1938, the first red volunteer squads were trained along military lines by Chandroth Kuhiraman Nayar, a one-time member of the police force.³²⁸ These squads were meant to act as a counterforce to the police who were supported by the landlords. By the end of 1939 all the villages in south Malabar had volunteer squads which were then used to attack the police and even local courts. Sometimes peasant unions went a step further and even set up quasi-administrative structures and courts in areas where they were strong.³²⁹ Other events also helped the reach and spread of CSP unions. In 1938, the KCSP members were able to sweep the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee's (KPCC) elections in alliance with a section of nationalist Muslims led by Muhammad Abdur Rahman. This enabled them to break the stranglehold of the Congress Right – and they dissolved eight out of the nine non-socialist Congress committees. As socialists gained control of the main

³²⁵ Krishnan, *Kerala's First Communist*, p. 36.

³²⁶ Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900-1948*, p. 148.

³²⁷ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, pp. 134-5.

³²⁸ Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900-1948*, p. 152.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-2.

regional bodies of the Congress, some KCSP members, chiefly the earlier mentioned A. K. Gopalan, Krishna Pillai and E. M. S Namboothiripad, were able to form the Communist Party of Kerala in secret.³³⁰ By 1940, two-thirds of all office bearers of the KPCC belonged to the 'left-wing'. The tussle between the Congress right and left did not go unnoticed by the authorities, however, and the key radical leaders were arrested. In response, the Left KPCC resolved to observe 15 September 1940 as 'Protest Day' against the repressive measures of the Viceroy and called for meetings and demonstrations all over north Malabar.³³¹ Massive demonstrations were witnessed in Calicut, Tellichery, Pappinisseri, Mattanur and Cannanore and there were confrontations in many places between the crowds and the police. At Tellichery, police opened fire on the militants and at Morazha, a group of 60 red volunteers from amongst a crowd of between 700 and 1000 clashed with the police, and in the ensuing melee the sub-inspector was killed. Similar scenes were also witnessed at Mattanur, with the police being attacked with sticks, umbrellas, and stones.³³²

The trade union movement in Travancore 1920-38

Although its precise date of origin is a mystery, the Travancore Labour Association (TLA) being set up somewhere between 1920 and 1924, was perhaps the first attempt in Kerala at organizing workers into a labour union.³³³ The groundwork for it was laid by Vadappuram Bava, an Ezhava who started working at an early age in the coir factory Darragh Smail Company. Due to his diligence, he was able to rise through the ranks of workers over the years and had become a *moopan* (job contractor) hiring workers. Among the workers, *moopans*

³³⁰ Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala*, pp. 65, 70-2; for information on Abur Rahman see, Namboodiripad, *Selected Writings Vol 2.*, pp. 192-4.

³³¹ Namboodiripad, *Selected Writings Vol 2.*, pp. 207- 8.

³³² Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, pp. 155-6.

³³³ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 53-4.

generally had a bad reputation for being highly exploitative - they often acted as the hired thugs of the factory owners, beating up workers for indiscipline and were known to extract high commission fees and levy other exactions from the meagre wages of those they contracted. However, Vadappuram Bava was different, having risen in rank from the lowest position, he was sympathetic to their plight.³³⁴ He was also an ardent follower of Narayana Guru and was active in an organization called Ezhava Yuvajana Sangham which propagated Guru's ideology.³³⁵ When T. K. Madhavan was mobilizing for the Vaikom Satyagraha, Bava had distributed pamphlets among the coir workers of his factory calling for a campaign against untouchability and lending support to the satyagraha for temple-entry.³³⁶ For this, he was dismissed from Darragh Smail & Co. Later when the Travancore Labour Association was established under his leadership, it sent 50 volunteers to participate in the Vaikom Satyagraha.³³⁷

A majority of the early members of TLA were Ezhavas, and they also adopted Guru's temperance program.³³⁸ However, this did not mean that the Labour Association's membership was exclusively Ezhava. It was a secular organization that had in its earliest iteration as its presidents Dr M.K. Antony, a wealthy Syrian Christian doctor based in Alappuzha, and P.S. Mohamed, a social worker from the same region.³³⁹ Besides social reform issues, the TLA also took up worker's issues from the days of its inception. It fought against the physical abuse of workers by employers and their henchmen, bargained for higher wages and shorter working hours. It also arranged for death funds for workers who had lost a family member, conducted reading and literacy classes, set up health clinics and awareness programs, provided relief work

³³⁴ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 53-4.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-4.

during epidemics and also held night schools for workers. Although it initially consisted of networks built with the help of *moopans*, the Travancore Labour Association was able to gradually gain the trust of the factory and mill workers and become a proper trade union such that by 1926 it had around 20,000 members.³⁴⁰ Between 1926 and 1930, the organisation conducted several successful small-scale strikes against wage cuts in various factories across Travancore owned by both Indians and Europeans alike. In 1931, they conducted a major strike involving 4000 workers across several factories and mills which lasted for three months.³⁴¹

It is worth mentioning that although the Travancore Labour Association was not particularly radical in its early years, it nonetheless gave some degree of support to the major social reform and nationalist movements of the day. Its role in supporting the Vaikom Satyagraha has been mentioned earlier. It also assisted volunteers travelling to Calicut for participation in the Salt Satyagraha and later the Guruvayur Satyagraha.³⁴² From 1933 onwards, one sees the gradual penetration of socialists and other radical leaders into the TLA leadership. In 1935, the Association was already deputing R. Sugatan to represent it at the All-Kerala Labour Conference which was held at Calicut. This was part of the first convention of the Kerala Congress Socialist Party. For the first time, the representatives of sixteen trade unions from all over Kerala came to face to face with each other. By 1936, CSP influence within the TLA was visible enough to create tensions between them and the non-socialist factions in the Association.³⁴³ By 1937, the TLA had become a registered union and had renamed itself as the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union (TCFWU). In 1938, with assistance from red volunteers from Malabar, The TCWFU would go on to conduct a massive strike of 30,000 workers in support of the Travancore State Congress's Civil Disobedience campaign.³⁴⁴

³⁴⁰ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 56-7.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 63-5.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-6.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

The Travancore State Congress and the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1938

In 1937, popularly elected governments, most of whom were led by Congress ministries, swept to power in various British Indian provinces. In the Madras Presidency, a Congress ministry was formed under the leadership of C. Rajagopalachari. This development had its impact in the princely state of Cochin whose Dewan Shanmukham Chetti instituted a dyarchy with elected ministers holding limited executive powers in 1938.³⁴⁵ Furthermore, in February 1938, the National Congress passed a resolution calling for the formation of responsible government in the princely states. All these developments naturally excited the aspirations of the political elite in Travancore who also began to demand responsible government, especially as they were smarting under the increasingly autocratic rule of the Dewan Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer.³⁴⁶

Since the Congress disavowed any direct involvement within the princely states, it was felt that a political party along the lines of the INC was needed within Travancore by its leading intellectuals and politicians. Thus, came into existence the Travancore State Congress (TSC) which was formed on 22 February 1938.³⁴⁷ It included most of the notables of Travancore politics at the time who were erstwhile members of the Joint Political Conference like C. Kesavan, C. V. Kunhiraman and A. J. John and also included some others who would later become communists – men like Puthupally Raghavan, P. T. Punnoose and T. Velayudhan. Its first president was Pattom Thanu Pillai and its secretaries were K. T. Thomas and P. S. Nataraja Pillai.³⁴⁸

On 30 March, the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) extended its support to the Travancore State Congress in its fight for responsible government against the

³⁴⁵ Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, pp. 122-3.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-3.

³⁴⁷ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 22, 24.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

autocratic rule of the Dewan, which included calls for universal adult suffrage and freedom of press subject to the acceptance of the Maharaja's authority.³⁴⁹ From early on, the Travancore government under the leadership of Dewan Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer tried to suppress the Travancore State Congress through numerous methods of intimidation similar to those witnessed against the Abstention movement.³⁵⁰ On 5 April 1938, Iyer's tenure as Dewan was extended for another five years which strengthened his grip on the Travancore government. While simultaneously preparing plans for reforms that envisioned creating a constitution based on the American model for a future independent state of Travancore, he also plotted for an impending confrontation with the State Congress, socialists, communists, the Travancore Youth League and trade unions.³⁵¹ Offices of newspapers critical of the government like the *Malabar Advocate* were attacked, ransacked and closed down, along with the residences and offices of leaders and advocates representing the arrested State Congress leaders.³⁵² Following this, the Travancore State Congress responded by conducting protest marches and meetings in several places; these were met with lathi charges and attacks by government thugs; at times they were met with retaliation by the crowds who resorted to pelting the police with stones.

At this juncture, there was friction between some members of the Travancore Youth League, which was an affiliate of the State Congress, and those who had affiliations with the National Congress who wanted to form another political party called the Travancore National Congress.³⁵³ Youth League members would be crucial in pushing the cadre of the State Congress towards the left and would later crystallize as socialists and communists. This was

³⁴⁹ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 22.

³⁵⁰ Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala*, pp. 80-1.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-81.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

³⁵³ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 25-6.

evident very early on when on 22 August 1938, the Youth League invited Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, a leader of the all-India Congress Socialist Party to chair their convention.³⁵⁴

In August 1938, the Dewan brought in an executive order called the 'First Regulation' which imposed a total official ban on speeches, marches and meetings of Congress members but this was duly defied by the State Congress leaders like Pattom Thanu Pillai and T.M. Varghese and they were arrested.³⁵⁵ Other leaders continued to defy the ban and conduct speeches and they too were arrested and charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government of Travancore. Anticipating such repression, the TSC had instituted a mode of leadership whereby one leader was automatically replaced with another as the 'dictator'. Pattom Thanu Pillai was succeeded as dictator by Padmanabhan Pillai, who was also arrested soon. His arrest prompted agitations at Neyattinkara where the police resorted to firing, killing one person and injuring others.³⁵⁶ This became a recurring pattern for the rest of the struggle; protest marches met with police brutality and firing and occasional retaliation by the crowds who in some places, like Chengannur, attacked police stations and forced the closure of the magistrate's and local government offices. Intermittent violence spread militancy in many places. Meanwhile the State Congress's overall leadership kept quickly passing from one 'dictator' to another as the arrests proceeded.³⁵⁷

Militancy also spread to the town of Kallara-Pangode. Here, the State Congress committees and the Youth Leaguers picketed the markets which were notorious for being controlled by government cronies and charging exorbitant prices and levies. When police arrived, they were blocked by activists on the road and violent clashes ensued which ultimately

³⁵⁴ Krishnan, *Kerala's First Communist*, p. 42.

³⁵⁵ Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala*, p. 81.

³⁵⁶ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, p. 27.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

resulted in crowds instigated by Youth League leaders attacking police stations, and the latter unleashing a reign of terror with the support of the army.³⁵⁸

In the midst of this tussle between State Congress and Youth League on the one side, and the Travancore government led by the Dewan on the other, the Congress Socialists who had entrenched themselves within State Congress ranks or in those of the Youth League, devised plans to intensify the struggle against the Dewan by involving a broad mass participation of working-class organizations. At a meeting held in Thrissur, they declared the struggle in Kerala as part of broader nationwide struggle for independence.³⁵⁹ To this effect, they trained a corps of 5000 red volunteers who were organized into strike committees, ward committees, factory committees and campaign committees under the overall leadership of Krishna Pillai. On 19 October 1938, workers of Cherthala, Aror, Ambalapuzha and Alappuzha held marches, demonstrations and strikes and declared a general strike two days later.³⁶⁰ These were the earlier mentioned workers affiliated with the TCWFU.

Their primary demands were to end the Dewan's autocratic rule through the granting of responsible government and the introduction of universal adult suffrage, but there were other demands too. These included release of all State Congress and Youth League political prisoners, the reduction of working hours, an increase in wages, maternity leave, and other benefits. As the workers were joined by the red volunteers (specially trained militant cadres of the Congress Socialists) clashes ensued between them and the police, with the police resorting to lathi charge and the vandalizing of union offices. On 24 October, police opened fire on protesting workers resulting in two deaths. Nonetheless, the strike went on for twenty-five days before it subsided.³⁶¹ This was a historic strike in the sense that it was the first general strike

³⁵⁸ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 28-9.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

that affected the entirety of Travancore state and it had political demands as well as those linked to the material interests of the working class with the strikers achieving a six per cent rise in wages.

As the workers struck in several major industrial centres of Travancore, a major demonstration was led by a prominent woman leader of the State Congress known as Accamma Cherian, who had become the twelfth ‘dictator’ of the Travancore State Congress. She had made her way from Cochin to Madurai and then to Trivandrum (the capital of Travancore) by train on October 23.³⁶² From the railway station she proceeded to the Fort and the adjoining Palace in which the Maharaja resided. Along her way she gave speeches and was joined by enthusiastic crowds which included red volunteers from Alappuzha. After she reached the main venue of the Palace, scenes of confrontation ensued. When the European army captain in charge of the government forces threatened to fire on the crowd, Accamma Cherian bravely rebutted him by asking the captain to shoot her first as she was their leader. This statement would give her widespread acclaim as the confrontation ended an hour later when the crowds learned that most of the arrested State Congress leaders had been released. This was a significant event and was probably the largest political demonstration witnessed in Kerala till that point involving anywhere between 20,000-100,000 demonstrators.³⁶³

Accamma Cherian’s confrontation, which would be known as ‘the Great Palace March’ would be the last major action of the State Congress struggle against the Dewan in 1938. The release of political prisoners had the effect of dampening the radical influence of the movement and the escalating violence had attracted the attention of the National Congress's national leaders like Gandhi and C. Rajagopalachari, who put pressure on the State Congress to abandon

³⁶² Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, pp. 124-5.

³⁶³ Ibid., pp. 124-5; see also, Meryl Sebastian, *Accamma Cherian: Why India forgot this freedom fighter from Kerala* (2022), < [Accamma Cherian: Why India forgot this freedom fighter from Kerala - BBC News](#) > [accessed 2 October, 2023].

the civil disobedience movement in favour of negotiations with the Dewan.³⁶⁴ On 9 January 1939, Pattom Thanu Pillai, who by now had resumed leadership of the Travancore State Congress after being released, declared an end to the civil disobedience but also warned the Dewan that the National Congress might restart it in the future if he did not follow through on the promises. The decision to suspend the movement might have also been influenced by worries regarding the growing influence of socialists and communists in the Youth League whose radical actions did not sit well with the Congress right and their counterparts (for example, Pattom Thanu Pillai) in the Travancore State Congress.³⁶⁵

Conclusion

In the 1930s, the disenchantment with Gandhian leadership in Kerala in both nationalist and social reform causes took two paths, which although presented divergent paths at their beginnings, converged in the end due to the rise of radicalising elements. In the Malabar region, this manifested in the rise of the Congress socialists who skilfully subverted it from within for almost a decade. Meanwhile, in Travancore, the various caste organizations, cut adrift by the Indian National Congress's official policy of non-intervention, pursued politics independent of it, first through the abstention movement, and later through its own methods of civil disobedience in 1938, which provided an opening for the now well-entrenched socialists in Congress ranks to extend their reach into the princely states.

The political experience that the Congress socialists gained as frontline activists in the Civil Disobedience movement and Guruvayur Satyagraha helped them a great deal in extending their reach to the rural areas and hinterlands of Malabar. Here the early Congress

³⁶⁴ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 34-5.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

socialists skilfully used their association with the mainstream National Congress and their caste-class status to build a base of support in the form of peasant unions whose growth in a short span of time between 1934-38 was phenomenal. A number of factors enabled them to do this - their careful and pragmatic approach towards peasant grievances, where they were careful not to pursue a militant line from the start while working within legitimate claims, undoubtedly helped them pursue their goals as much as the protective umbrella of the overall Congress organization. Yet other factors could also be attributed to the favourable circumstances that have enabled the growth of socialist and communist movements elsewhere like the economic depression and the disarray of national or regional politics that could effectively challenge them. Regardless, Congress socialists, through their unions, gradually became a force to be reckoned with by 1939-40 such that they could well test the boundaries of earlier restrictions by pursuing a militant line that could not only challenge the colonial state's force but in turn could also shift the Congress organization towards the left. In terms of social reform, they radically altered the earlier focus on untouchability towards one directed towards undermining deference for upper castes and creating an alternative culture of working-class solidarity that could dilute, if not altogether liquidate, caste differences.

However, in Travancore, the situation was different. Here trade unions had been established independently of the National Congress and were in part the results of an earlier era of mobilization by Ezhavas like Vadappuram Bava. The Travancore Labour Association, formed in the 1920s, consisting of workers mostly belonging to Ezhava castes working in the coir and weaving industry, would gradually grow and expand and would be intermittently involved in the mass struggles of the region. Parallel to events in Malabar, socialist and communist influence would start to make its presence felt there in the early 1930s. Unsurprisingly, most of the same core leadership that were instrumental in their growth in Malabar, like A. K. Gopalan and Krishna Pillai were also key to their growing influence in

Travancore towards the late 1930s. By 1938, the Travancore Labour Association had rechristened itself as the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union (TCFWU), had a large membership numbering around tens of thousands and by the end of the year, they would conduct massive strikes in association with the ongoing civil disobedience movement led by the Travancore State Congress.

CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE

As revealed in the earliest sections of this thesis, there were certain antecedents in the late nineteenth century that were specific to Kerala that enabled the rise of anti-caste or *avarna*-caste-led social reform movements in the twentieth century. These came in the form of individualized revolts of certain charismatic spiritual figures who sought to reframe existing beliefs in a more egalitarian manner, like Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker and Vaikunda Swamikal, as well as sporadic and isolated efforts at organizing, like the Breast-Cloth Movement of the Nadar women between 1810-1850s. Due to their isolated and individualized nature, they could not develop into a mass movement for the emancipation of untouchables from the many hardships imposed on them by the caste system. However, the onus of reform was kept alive through other means – administrative reforms of the various governments in the region, combined with missionary efforts to win converts from untouchables through access to their educational and healthcare institutions, allowed for a small portion of them to become economically prosperous enough for a middle-class to emerge amongst them. This was most true of the Ezhavas, the untouchable caste who was highest in ranking among all the untouchable castes in Kerala. It was from this class that the first major attempts at building and sustaining an organization for the emancipation of untouchables came in the person of Dr Palpu and the organization Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam in 1903.

While historical circumstances for the growth of organized efforts for civil rights of the untouchables were not favourable for most of the nineteenth century, between 1900 and 1940, the social reform discourse in Kerala, centred around the assertion of untouchable castes underwent a series of transformations within the framework of changing socio-political contexts. They were shaped by a myriad of factors that were both regional and national, and to

some extent even international – the internal schisms within the different caste and religious communities within the princely states, the nationalist movement led by Gandhi, the World Wars, the 1929 Depression and so on. These influences pushed and pulled the reform movements and their objectives in different directions with differential results. Founded in 1903, the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) was the first and perhaps the most important reformist organization in Kerala and had, in its initial decades, all the ingredients necessary to lead a successful socio-political mobilization – a core ideology centred around a charismatic spiritual leader, Narayana Guru, a corps of effective organizers and intellectuals who extended the appeal of the organization and a strategy designed to build momentum gradually through lobbying, memorials, the setting up of alternative religious practices and institutions, temperance programs, schemes of educational betterment and demands for lower castes to gain a greater share of public resources. The SNDP's methods and premises became popular enough for similarly-inspired organizations to spring up such as the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS). Consequently, the reach of their politics began extending beyond the confines of Travancore, where they had originally been focused.

However, this gradualist approach associated with these early-twentieth century organisations was not to last long. The rising force of nationalism in India were soon to overlap with the concerns of the reformist movements in particular regions, and the culmination of this in Kerala was to be seen in the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924. This fused an India-wide nationalist strategy of civil disobedience with the movement for lower caste rights. For the first time in history, then, the Vaikom Satyagraha brought the issue of untouchability, practiced in Kerala as unapproachability, to the national stage. Hitherto, there had been a great divide, sanctioned by the political elites, between the nationalist political struggle and the campaigns for social reform/rights. They were deemed separate endeavours. However, Vaikom broke that line of thinking. Although the Satyagraha campaign in Kerala at this time was fought on the grounds

of the limited objective of merely gaining access to roads surrounding the Vaikom temple, which it did not completely achieve at that time, its long-term implications for challenging caste inequality and prejudices were profound. There were also other consequences. The satyagraha popularized a form of protest – the *jathas* or political processions. These marches of satyagrahis going from cities and towns into villages and crossing boundaries between the different regions not only undermined caste taboos that had previously restricted such movements, but also helped to create a sense of solidarity and national consciousness between people in the disparate regions of Kerala, that is, the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and British-administered Malabar.

Significantly, it was during the course of the Vaikom Satyagraha that radical rhetoric and propaganda first made its appearance in the political sphere. Speeches by Ayyappan exhorting the public to overthrow the reigning monarch of Travancore in emulation of the Russian Revolution, and those by Periyar that chastised the very foundation of Hinduism may have been somewhat isolated with no visible effects at the time. But they sowed the seeds of a nascent radical consciousness which manifested itself a decade or so later.³⁶⁶ Moreover, the failure of the Vaikom Satyagraha to achieve its aims was perceived by many as the failure of the middle-class, Gandhi-following Ezhava elites – men like Mithavadi Krishnan and others; this now also led many who were politically active in Kerala to distrust the Gandhian leadership of the Indian National Congress. The seething undercurrent of disaffection with the limited achievement of Gandhian-inspired Satyagrahas for social emancipation would reach a cathartic stage in the wake of the withdrawal of the Guruvayur Satyagraha in 1932 and the Civil Disobedience campaign in 1934. Gandhi's perceived backtracking and compromise, on both fronts, would embolden a younger generation of radical Congressmen in Kerala like A. K.

³⁶⁶ Robin Jeffrey, 'Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940', p. 18; For Periyar's speech see, C. S. Ramachandra Iyer, I.P. Cantonment Trivandrum, to District Superintendent of Police, Trivandrum, 'Public Office Maidan Meeting on 19.4.99', in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. by P. Biju pp. 5-7.

Gopalan, Krishna Pillai and Subrahmaniam Thirumumpu, to move towards socialism under the aegis of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934, forming its Kerala branch called the Kerala Congress Socialist Party in the same year.

The Congress Socialists, rose to prominence at an opportune time when national politics were at a lull and when Depression was ravaging the Kerala countryside. This would enable them to steer politics in Kerala away from the imperatives set up by mainstream national leaders like Gandhi, C. Rajagopalachari, and Nehru. The valuable experience and standing gained during earlier civil disobedience and Satyagraha campaigns would enable them to mobilize peasant unions in Malabar on an unprecedented scale from 1934 onwards. By the end of the decade, the Kerala socialists had captured most of the Indian National Congress's organizational framework in the region, precipitating a split between left and right within Congress ranks. Although, the left-wing Congress socialists would continue to work within the overall Congress organization until 1942, the stage was set for the emergence of the communists in Kerala with the Communist Party of Kerala being formed in 1943.

The Congress socialists in Kerala, from whose ranks the communists emerged, followed a radically different approach to fighting caste inequality by reframing it in economic terms of 'class struggle'. Rather than focusing on specific practices and aims like untouchability or temple-entry, they would shift the discourse to challenging the deference accorded to *savarna* castes as landlords and capitalists. This focus on class allowed them to blur the distinctions of caste and religion to some extent. This radical departure in the framing of caste inequality was also accompanied by methods of spreading 'education' and propaganda to create a new alternative working-class culture through newspapers, pamphlets, reading rooms and literary works. In this, one can trace the continuities with earlier reformist organizations who also tried to create alternative cultures to the mainstream traditional hierarchies based on caste and religion.

As the Congress Socialists were emerging dominant in Malabar, caste- and religion-based politics in Travancore were also taking a distinct turn quite detached from the objectives of the Indian National Congress. Although the INC had a presence in the region dating back to the 1910s and had at times achieved widespread membership, as during the Vaikom Satyagraha, the deliberate policy of the Gandhian leadership to not involve themselves in the affairs of princely states severely restricted their growth and expansion in the region. Congress's suspension of the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1925, and the deaths of illustrious and influential leaders such as Guru and T.K. Madhavan, only increased this disconnect between the Congress and Travancore's oppositional political elites. This manifested first in the purely constitutional 'Abstention Movement' of the Joint Political Conference between 1932-35 which saw an alliance of Ezhava, Christian and Muslim middle-class elites conduct a successful boycott of elections to the Travancore legislature on the grounds of its undemocratic and upper-caste bias. The repression unleashed by the Travancore state by its enigmatic and ambitious Dewan, Sir. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, during and after the Abstention movement would enable the rise of more militant elements within the polity under the aegis of the Travancore State Congress and the Travancore Youth League who would, in 1938, initiate a massive civil disobedience movement against the Dewan independently of the National Congress. Such circumstances enabled socialists and communists within their ranks to radicalize the movement by involving in its industrial unions they had helped to form, hence the strikes at this time which involved tens of thousands of workers.

By 1940, socialist-communist ascendancy within peasant unions in Malabar and industrial unions in Travancore were such that they were able to push any mass movements in the region towards pursuing a much more militant line. Agitations often dressed up as anti-imperialist struggle, whether against the excesses of upper-caste landlords in Malabar, or against the repression of the autocratic Dewan of Travancore, often acquired a distinctive

confrontational tone which was a stark departure from the earlier Gandhian emphasis on compromise and non-violent agitation.

To now take the story beyond the chronological limits of this thesis, some developments after 1940 requires brief exploration. The radicals' fortunes during the Second World War were deeply affected by an ideological allegiance to the USSR. While pursuing a militant line between 1939 and 1941 in trying to push the Congress leftwards, in 1942, they would do a complete volte-face and declare support for British rule on account of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.³⁶⁷ On the one hand, this would tarnish their reputation as they disavowed participation in the Quit India movement in 1942.³⁶⁸ But on the other hand, it would enable them to operate legally and come out of the protective shell of the Congress as an independent political party.³⁶⁹

Perhaps perceiving great damage to their reputation, from 1946 onwards until 1948, they would once again pursue the militant line.³⁷⁰ Two events in Kerala now occurred that help to explain both the growth of communists in Kerala as well as the transformation of caste politics. The first was the insurgency staged by communist-affiliated unions and groups in the Vayalar-Punnapara region in 1946 which saw armed clashes between the military and police forces of Travancore kingdom and the militant striking workers in Alappuzha.³⁷¹ Most of the striking workers were from Ezhava, Pulaya and other untouchable caste backgrounds who were radicalized as much by the oppressions of their upper-caste superiors in the factories and farms (for example, summary dismissal from work, forced labour, intimidation by thugs) as by the famine-like conditions wrought by developments and policies during World War Two which

³⁶⁷ A. Sreedhara Menon, *Punnapra Vayalarum Kerala Charitram* (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1999), p. 14.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, pp. 169-78.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 178-89.

³⁷¹ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 77-89.

saw around 20,000 workers dying from starvation in Travancore.³⁷² The socialists and communists, who had come to prominence during the 1938 civil disobedience movement, naturally exploited this resentment and used red volunteers and demobilized soldiers to train the strikers: in the ensuing clashes it is estimated that anywhere between 1000 and 2000 communist cadres were killed.³⁷³ Although the rebellion was easily defeated, this event enhanced the reputation of the Communist Party in Kerala and greatly contributed to their myth-making. Communist theoreticians allege that the confrontation became inevitable due to the Dewan's repression, but opponents claim that they deceived the poor workers with misinformation campaigns about the strength and intent of the government forces, and that the bloodshed was completely avoidable.

The second event of great significance for the growth of support for the communists in Kerala was the Paliyam Satyagraha in 1947-48, which was the first post-independence agitation against untouchability in the princely state of Cochin.³⁷⁴ This movement was launched to secure general access to the Paliyam Road (which led to an important temple). This was controlled by the Paliyath Achans who were distant relatives of the Cochin royal family. Although it was not as impactful as the Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagrahas, it had some distinct features that set it apart from them. While Vaikom and Guruvayur actions drew participants largely from progressive sections of upper-caste Hindus, the Paliyam Satyagraha saw active involvement by a number of *avarna* caste groups' organisations – for example, the Cochin SNDP, Pulaya Mahasabha and Vettuva Mahsabha – as well as multiple political parties, including the Indian National Congress, the Communist Party of India and Kochi Praja Mandalam.³⁷⁵ While Gandhian policies had prevented the involvement of non-Hindus in the

³⁷² A. Sreedhara Menon, *Punnapra Vayalarum Kerala Charitram* (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1999), pp. 18-24.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

³⁷⁴ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 216-17.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 216-17.

previous Satyagrahas, no such restriction was visible in this one, as Christians, Muslims and various other groups throwing their support behind it. Mass participation of unions were also visible, notably in those demands of satyagrahis relating to the reduction in working hours, minimum wages, and maternity and unemployment benefits.³⁷⁶ Lasting for almost three months between December 1947 and March 1948, the Satyagraha was initiated on Gandhian non-violent principles, but it did not stay that way for long with scenes of forced entry to the temple, direct action involving trade unions and intermittent clashes between police and demonstrators. The death of communist union leader A.G. Velayudhan during the struggle created a martyr for the movement.³⁷⁷

While the communists could not always win a decisive victory in a given battle, such losses were often offset by long-term gains. Thus, while Congress ministries came to power and stayed in power in almost all Indian states until the mid-1960s, in Kerala alone, this pattern was broken with a Communist ministry coming to power in 1957 under E. M. S. Namboodiripad. Although this government didn't last long and it has often been criticized for being headed by a Brahmin, it is noteworthy that two of its prominent cabinet ministers came from the *avarna* castes – K.R. Gowriamma and P.K. Chathan Master. In this regard, the Congress would not be far behind either: C. Kesavan, the radical Travancore State Congress leader who was an Ezhava, would briefly be the chief minister of the short-lived Travancore-Cochin state from 1950-52. That state would be merged with Malabar to form the Kerala state in 1956. Significantly, another prominent member of Congress, R. Shankar – who in the 1940s had been the general secretary of the SNDP – became Kerala's first Ezhava chief minister in 1962.

³⁷⁶ Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, pp. 218-20.

³⁷⁷ Payyappilli Balan, *Paliyam Samarakadha* (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1998), pp. 163-7.

The attainment of the highest positions of power in Kerala by persons from *avarna* backgrounds by 1950 shows to some degree the effectiveness and fulfilment of objectives of the social reform movements of untouchables started by Narayana Guru and his contemporaries and carried forward by many others. As shown in this thesis, complex preconditions, and struggles – some stretching into the nineteenth century – enabled this and have helped to give Kerala its distinctive political mould. While this does not mean that caste identities have become redundant in Kerala, it does point to that certain blurring of caste and religious rivalries that have checked the advance of communal ideologies and internecine inter-religious violence in the state. If at the start of the twentieth century, politics was pursued distinct from social reform, by the middle of it, both were so intermeshed so that one was hardly distinguishable from the other. Such blunting of caste and religious distinctions, as also the increasing salience of class identities, is the legacy of social reform movements in Kerala's history, as also the result of the distinctive articulation of nationalism, socialism, and communism in the region.

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Glossary of vernacular terms, organisations and movements, and personalities

Vernacular terms

Advaita: a branch of Hindu philosophy or a philosophical school that preaches monism and centred around the teachings of the Sankaracharya.

Ahimsa: Sanskrit for non-violence.

Ayurveda: a broad system of traditional medical and healing practices codified in Hindu religious scriptures and practiced in diverse forms throughout India.

Avarnas: a collective term for caste groups that are considered untouchable and/or unapproachable within the Hindu caste hierarchy. They occupy the lowest positions in terms of social rank as they are considered 'polluted' or unclean castes and thus face the most severe discrimination.

Asan: an honorific term denoting teacher or a master of certain disciplines in the traditional educational systems of Kerala.

Ashram: A hermitage or spiritual retreat. In the context of Gandhian Satyagrahas, the Satyagraha Ashram acted as a place of respite and headquarters for planning and executing constructive programmes and political action.

Charka: The Indian spinning wheel used to weave khadi which became the icon of Indian nationalism. Currently a part of the flag of the Indian republic.

Cherumas: an *avarna* caste group similar to Pulayas in social rank and associated with agricultural labour.

Devaswoms: government-run institutions/ bodies that managed temples, their finances, and associated properties.

Dewan: a title or rank equivalent to prime minister in the Hindu kingdoms and principalities in British India. In Travancore and Cochin, the Dewan was nominated by the Maharaja after consultation with the British resident.

Ezhavas: an *avarna* caste group in Kerala considered to be amongst the highest in rank among untouchables who were historically associated with toddy-tapping, distillation, and cultivation of palmyra trees. However, some Ezhava lineages, especially those in the north, were also associated with martial traditions and proficiency in *Ayurveda*.

Jatha: a political procession that involves activists and volunteers marching from place to place with placards and sloganeering to popularize their ideology or movement. A novel form of political mobilization and protest that came into vogue in twentieth century Kerala, particularly after Vaikom Satyagraha.

Kathakali: a form of folk dance-cum-drama that was performed at Hindu festivals like Onam which was used to narrate mythological, historical tales as well as satire.

Karanavan: the manager of a matrilineal household who was usually a brother or uncle of the chief inheritor of properties. He was invested with the powers of management and administration of household properties and even held considerable authority over the conduct of individuals in the household.

Kalaripayattu: a traditional martial art of Kerala that was mostly practised by Nairs, and some sections of Ezhavas in the earlier, including pre-colonial, period.

Khadi: A type of hand-spun and woven cloth, typically cotton, that served the dual purposes of resistance to British rule by boycotting foreign cloth and promoting Indian cottage industry.

Mappila: The term used to refer mostly to Muslims in the Malabar or northern regions of Kerala.

Nadar/ Shanar: The Tamil counterpart of the Ezhava caste group who were present in southern and eastern portions of the Travancore kingdom in the pre-independence era. They were the main group behind the 'breast-cloth' movement of the 1850s.

Narayana Dharma: the name given to the philosophy/movement centred around Narayana Guru's ideology.

Nair: a savarna caste group in Kerala who, though often designated as '*Sudras*' (lowest in caste-hierarchy but not untouchable) in some government records, nonetheless enjoyed privileges of upper-caste groups on account of being associated with martial traditions and having special marital or conjugal relations with Brahmins. Historically, they were the soldiering castes who formed the bulk of the militaries of pre-colonial Kerala. They often practiced matrilineal customs.

Nambuthiris/Namboothiris: the highest ranking of all castes and among the Brahmins of Kerala. They were historically associated with temple rites and management of temple properties but also came to be a substantial portion of the landlords in north Kerala as well as being predominant as government administrators and bureaucrats in Travancore and Cochin.

Nizhal Thankals: special shrines created by Vaikunda Swamikal where caste pollution was barred. These were the precursors to Guru's own temples in the twentieth century.

Nivarthanam: the Malayalam term denoting abstention.

Marumakkathayam: the term used for the system of matriliney practiced in Kerala which involved inheritance and property being passed through the female line. Simultaneously, it may at times may also have involved polyandry. It was mostly practiced by Nairs, but sometimes emulated by some groups of Ezhavas and Muslims. The practice became defunct by the latter half of the twentieth century on account of successive legislation and reform efforts.

Pulaya: an Avarna caste group in Kerala that were historically considered parallel to agrestic slaves.

Paraiyar: an Avarna caste group lower in social rank than Pulayas who were disparaged or considered evil by upper castes for their shamanic and magic-related rituals and beliefs. Traditionally, they were associated with the profession of festival drummers. The English word pariah is likely to have originated from Paraiyar.

Poorna Swaraj: a popular slogan of the Indian National Congress denoting complete independence from British rule.

Sanyasins: the term used for Hindu ascetic monks who abandoned marital life and other normative social norms and roles.

Satyagraha: the term means 'truth-seeking'; it was a novel form of non-violent protest developed by Mahatma Gandhi in the twentieth century with varying degrees of overlap with civil disobedience and passive resistance.

Savaranas: a collective term used to denote the so-called 'clean' castes that fall within the purview of four-tier Hindu social hierarchy with the Brahmins, the priestly caste, at the top, and the Sudras, the servile caste, at the bottom. Although the term originally included all castes, its usage in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century increasingly referred to only higher castes. As such, the term can simultaneously mean those of higher caste or those who are not considered untouchables.

Shivaratri: a festival centred on the wedding of the Hindu God Shiva to his consort Parvati.

Swadeshi: meaning self-reliance. Typically, it denotes a nationalist policy of promoting Indian industries and crafts and a simultaneous policy of boycotting foreign or British goods.

Swaraj: self-rule.

Talikettu Kalyanam: a type of marriage involving the tying of 'tali' which is kind of sacred thread.

Tharavadu: a Nair matrilineal household.

Thiyyaa: Ezhava counterpart in north Kerala or Malabar in general. In terms of social mobility and respect, Thiyyas were considered better off than Ezhavas.

Tirandukuli: a traditional custom that involved marking and celebrating the 'coming of age' of a girl through ritual baths at the time of her first menstruation.

Uriyam: a form of forced and unpaid labour that was exacted from avarna caste groups like Pulayas and Ezhavas.

Vande Mataram: translates as 'I praise you Motherland'. A famous nationalist slogan derived from the epic poem of the same name written by Bengali intellectual Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

Yukthivadi: meaning rationalist. Also, the name of a magazine started by Sahodaran Aiyappan for criticising religion and promoting rationalism and atheism.

Zamorin: the erstwhile title of the King of Calicut who ruled over large swathes of northern Kerala in pre-British era.

Organizations and Movements

All-Malabar Peasants Union: a federation of peasant unions from across Malabar region formed in the late 1930s and an important source of strength for the emergence of socialists and communists in Kerala.

Abstention Movement: a movement of boycott of elections launched by the Joint Political Conference in the early 1930s in Travancore to protest against unjust representation in the legislatures. Also called *Nivarthanam* in Malayalam.

Breast-Cloth Movement 1810-50s (*Marumarrakkal Samaram*): an early emancipation movement of a section of *avarna* women in the early to mid-nineteenth century that fought for women's right to cover their breasts and not pay 'taxes' for doing such. Pre-modern caste rules forbade *avarna* women such rights.

Church Missionary Society (CMS): an international British missionary society of evangelical Anglicans who were active in south and central Kerala in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-4): the second major nationalist movement launched by the Indian National Congress under Gandhi's leadership and the first one to openly declare the achievement of 'Poorna Swaraj' or complete independence as its goal.

Civil Rights League: an organization consisting of an alliance of Ezhava, Christian and Muslim middle classes that campaigned for greater access to government jobs for the aforementioned groups, particularly in the revenue department, in the late 1910s.

Communist Party of India (CPI): the principal communist party that came into being in 1943 as a result of the rupture within Congress ranks over support for Britain during the Second World War. In Kerala, the communists came out of the ranks of the Congress socialists.

Cochin Ezhava Samajam: an organization founded by Sahodaran Aiyappan for the reform of Ezhavas in Cochin kingdom and the propagation of Narayana Guru's ideology; the organisation later became the Cochin branch of the SNDP (see below).

Cochin Praja Mandalam: a regional political party that emerged in Cochin in the 1940s roughly contemporaneous with the Travancore State Congress.

Congress Socialist Party (abbreviated as CSP): The socialist wing of the Congress that was formed in 1934 when disaffection with Gandhi's leadership arose as a result of the suspension of the civil disobedience movement. The CSP became the meeting point for radicals, socialists and communists and was instrumental in nurturing the communist leadership when open loyalty to communist ideology was banned in India.

Guruvayur Satyagraha: A major campaign for temple-entry for the untouchables held directly under the leadership of Kerala Congress between 1931-2, for access to Guruvayur temple, being one of the most important temples in Kerala (see chapter 4).

Indian National Congress (abbreviated as INC): the principal organization/political party that spearheaded India's nationalist and freedom movement in the twentieth century.

Joint Political Conference/Congress (abbreviated as JPC): a political organisation formed in the Travancore state in 1930s consisting of an alliance between Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims seeking to boycott elections which were deemed too favourable to (upper-caste) Nairs. It later evolved into the Travancore State Congress. It was the principal organization behind the Abstention Movement.

Kerala Congress Socialist Party (abbreviated as KCSP): the Kerala branch of the Congress Socialist Party.

Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (abbreviated as KPCC): the centralized regional core leadership of the Congress in Kerala that emerged in the late 1910s.

Khilafat Movement: a major movement of protest by Indian Muslims protesting the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate following the Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War 1. It later joined up with the non-cooperation movement and had great resonance in Malabar region.

London Missionary Society (LMS): another international British missionary society consisting of interdenominational evangelical and other protestant groups who were active in south and central Kerala in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and who were the principal competitors of the CMS (see above) for converts.

Mappila Rebellion 1922: a major insurrection by Muslim/Mappila peasants and tenants in the southern Malabar regions of Valluvanadu and Ernadu such that British control broke down in the region for almost six months. It is infamous for creating communal fissures between Hindus and Muslims in northern Kerala.

Malayalee Sabha: an organization formed in the late 1880s with the exclusive purpose of promoting the employment of Malayalees in the civil services and administration of Travancore state in opposition to the preponderance of savarna caste members from other linguistic regions. It was the principal organization behind the 'Malayalee Memorial' in 1891 which became defunct soon afterwards.

Nair Service Society (abbreviated as NSS): a reform organization founded in 1914 to propagate reform amongst Nairs mainly relating to the regulation and later abolition of matriliney. It also propagated for modern education among Nairs and sometimes advanced mildly progressive views in relation to the treatment of untouchables.

Non-cooperation Movement (1920-22): the first major nationalist movement conducted by the INC under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in reaction to the Rowlatt Act of 1919 and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. It was the first mass movement in which Gandhian mass civil disobedience and satyagraha were observed nationwide.

Paliyam Satyagraha: The first Satyagraha post-independence against untouchability held between 1947-48. Held for access to Paliyam roads for untouchables that were adjacent to an important temple. It involved multiple political parties, social organizations and trade union action (see conclusion).

Sadhu Jana Paripalana Yogam (abbreviated as SJPS): The organization founded by Ayyankali (see below) in 1907 along the lines of the SNDP (see below) for the purpose of propagating reform amongst Pulayas and other untouchables who formed the lowest stratum of the caste hierarchy. While its ideological program was similar, the SJPS tended to take a much more agitational and militant approach to reform than the SNDP.

Samathuva Sangham (Equality Society): an early social organization set up by Vaikunda for propagating casteless society. It became defunct soon after his death in the 1850s.

Sree Moolam Popular Assembly: the legislative assembly of the Travancore kingdom which started out as a mere advisory body in 1888.

Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (abbreviated as SNDP): the premier reformist organization of twentieth century Kerala, formed by Ezhava intellectuals and middle-class professionals in 1903 and centred around the ideology propagated by Narayana Guru.

Travancore State Congress: A political party that evolved from the JPC (see above) in the late 1930s. Initially independent of the Indian National Congress, it conducted major civil disobedience movements against the Dewan's rule. It later merged with the INC.

Travancore Labour Association: the first labour union formed in Travancore state in 1920s by Ezhava workers. it later developed into the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union in 1938.

Vaikom Satyagraha: A major Satyagraha campaign undertaken between 1924-5 for access to roads around the Vaikom temple for the untouchables who were debarred from them (see chapter 3 for details).

Yogakshema Sabha: an organization started for the reform of Nambuthiri Brahmins in 1908. Its focus was a campaign to allow for the remarriage of Brahmin widows and the reform of familial relations among Nambuthiris.

Yukthivadi Sangham: Kerala's first rationalist organization started by Sahodaran Aiyappan in the 1930s to promote rationalism and atheism.

Personalities

Abdur Rahman, Muhammad: a left-leaning nationalist Muslim leader who was an active Congressman in the post-Mappila rebellion period. Founder of the Muslim nationalist newspaper *Al-Ameen* in the 1920s, he was also known for being opposed to the partition of India.

Aiya, Nagam: noted government official and Dewan of Travancore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who was the author of important government records such as the Travancore State Manual. The Manual has important sociological and historical information regarding different castes and communities as well as administrative and census data.

Ayyappan, Sahodaran: eminent follower of Narayana Guru in the Cochin kingdom who became the principal organizer and leader of the SNDP in the region. He was the founder of an affiliate organization of the SNDP, Sahodara Sangham (meaning Brotherhood Organization) as well as Kerala's first ever rationalist organization Yukthivadi Sangham in the early twentieth century. Known for his radical views, he was an early proponent of inter-caste dining, and later of rationalism and atheism. He was also one of the earliest to popularize socialism among Ezhavas.

Ayyankali: a Pulaya reformer who was known for propagating direct action and militant confrontation for the rights of Pulayas and other untouchables in the early twentieth century. He was also an early proponent of affirmative action for untouchables in education and land allotment in Kerala and was the founder of the SJPS (see above).

Bava, Vadappuram: founder of the earliest trade union in Travancore, the Travancore Labour Association in the 1920s. Follower of Guru and an early union organizer among coir workers in Alappuzha.

Bayi, Sethu Lakshmi: Maharani or Queen Regent of Travancore during the later phase of the Vaikom Satyagraha; known for her sympathies towards the reformists.

Gopalan, A. K.: a prominent Nair leader of the Congress who later became one of the key figures in the Communist movement in Kerala. He gained repute for his role in the Civil Disobedience Movement and in the Guruvayur Satyagraha and as a Congress leader.

Guru, Narayana: the spiritual figurehead of Narayana Dharma philosophy and the SNDP and possibly the most celebrated social reformer of Kerala in the modern period. He was the person associated with the motto, *'One caste, One Religion, One God – for all humanity'*.

Habibullah, Mohammed: the only ever Muslim Dewan in the history of Travancore who held office from 1934-6. Reputed to be sympathetic to abstentionists, he was nonetheless powerless to help them.

Iyer, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy aka Sir C.P: Dewan of Travancore known for masterminding the Temple Proclamation granting temple entry for untouchables in 1937. Infamous for being autocratic and deeply suspicious of Christians. He is also accredited with a distinguished civil service career in British India and brief associations with the Congress.

Joseph, George: a Syrian Christian Congressman and nationalist leader from Travancore who was a key organizer of the Vaikom Satyagraha in its earliest days.

Kelappan, K.: a progressive minded Nair leader of the Congress who would be the prominent face of Congress in Kerala throughout the freedom struggle era. An important leader in all major Congress campaigns held in Kerala, his monicker was 'Kerala Gandhi'.

Kesavan, C.: the general-secretary and leader of the SNDP (see above) and a major Ezhava politician in Travancore in the 1930s. He was associated with the abstention movement and later the Travancore State Congress and became the first Ezhava head of state/chief minister of the merged Travancore-Cochin state after independence.

Kumaran Asan (also spelled Kumaranasan): eminent Ezhava poet and intellectual famed for his contributions to modern Malayalam poetry and literature in the early twentieth century. He was also the first general secretary of the SNDP as well as a nominated member of the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly.

Kunhiraman, C. V.: Ezhava journalist and intellectual who often argued for conversion to Christianity or other religions for overcoming caste discrimination.

Krishnan, C. (aka Mithavadi Krishnan): Ezhava journalist and intellectual who popularized Guru's ideology in Malabar region. Founder of *Mithavadi* newspaper. A severe critic of Congress and Gandhi who occasionally advocated for conversion to Buddhism for Ezhavas to escape untouchability.

Madhavan, T. K.: one of the earliest Ezhava leaders of the Congress who was greatly influenced by Gandhi and simultaneously, also a leader of SNDP in 1920s for a brief period.

He was the earliest proponent of using the method of satyagraha for fighting untouchability in Kerala and was one of the principal leaders of the Vaikom Satyagraha.

Malaviya, Madan Mohan: a prominent northern Indian Congress leader who was simultaneously associated with nascent Hindu nationalism. One of the chief interlocutors chosen by Gandhi during the Vaikom Satyagraha for negotiations with the Hindu orthodoxy.

Menon, Keshava: progressive Nair leader of the Congress and founder of the nationalist newspaper *Mathrubhumi* in 1920s.

Naicker, Erode Ramasamy aka EVR or Periyar: famed Tamil anti-caste crusader who is known for his radical criticisms of Brahminic belief systems and domination over avarnas. He was briefly a prominent leader during the Vaikom Satyagraha and also a Congress leader. He was also a key ideologue of the later Dravidian Movement and Self-Respect Movement.

Nambiathiri, Devan Neelakantan: an orthodox Namboothiri Brahmin who represented the interests of the conservatives, especially the Vaikom temple authorities, in the dialogue with Gandhi in 1925.

Namboodiripad, E. M. S. or EMS: the first communist chief minister of Kerala who started his career in the Namboodiri reformist organization Yogakshema Sabha, then Congress and who later became communist. One of the key leaders of the early communist movement in Kerala and one of its key theoreticians.

Padmanabhan, Mannath: a prominent leader of the NSS in its infancy and also one of the key *savarna jatha* leaders in the Vaikom Satyagraha.

Palpu, Padmanabhan (aka Dr. Palpu): An accomplished Ezhava doctor and intellectual of late nineteenth and early twentieth century who was one of the founders of SNDP (see above).

Pillai, Krishna: a radical Congressman who is often credited with being the founder of the Communist Party in Kerala. He came to fame through participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Guruvayur Satyagraha.

Pitt, W. H.: British Commissioner of Police in the Travancore kingdom during the Vaikom Satyagraha who often accompanied Gandhi during his visit there in 1925.

Rajagopalachari, C.: a major Tamil Brahmin Congress leader from Madras Presidency who was a staunch follower of Gandhi. One of the interlocutors on Gandhi's side at Vaikom in 1925. A major figure of the Congress right and leader of the Congress ministry in Madras Presidency in the late-1930s.

Sugatan, R.: A trade-union leader in Travancore who was associated with the SNDP in his early years and later became a communist.

Swamikal, Vaikunda: Charismatic self-styled avatar of Vishnu who claimed he had been reincarnated to fight against the caste oppression of the *savarnas*. He introduced separate temples for *avarna* castes for worship and was founder of the Ayyavur faith.

Thirunal, Sree Mulam: Maharaja of Travancore during the early phase of the Vaikom Satyagraha and known for his conservative leanings.