

The Social Background of the formation of the Travancore Labour Association

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Abstract

Travancore Labour Association is considered as the first organised trade union in Kerala, it was the pioneer union which contributed enormously for the welfare of the workers. The association had received significant support from the social reformation movement in the first quarter of 20th century. Especially the SreeNarayana movement and SahodaraSangham had strong base among the coir factory workers of Alappuzha, majority of them belonged to the Ezhava community. This paper is an attempt to discuss the role of Travancore Labour Association in the socio-cultural transformation of the coir workers in Alappuzha and the significant role played by the socio-religious reform initiatives in this regard.

Key Words

Social Reform initiatives, Labour Mobilisation, Class Consciousness, Left Interventions, Moderate Phase.

Introduction

Travancore Labour Association was formed in 1922 as an organisation for the workers of Alappuzha as the predecessor of Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union. Travancore Labour Association functioned as a welfare association for the workers until the beginning of 1930s. The foundation of this association closely associated with caste consciousness than class in its initial phase. The social reformation movement in Kerala like the social reformation in Maharashtra absorbed the influence in the formation of the first labour association. Where N M Lokhande a leading figure of Indian Trade Unionism inspired by the activities of Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule founded the Bombay Mill Hands Association.¹ Like the *SatyaSodhakSamaj* SNDP Yogam and *SahodaraSangham* played a vital role in the formation of Travancore Labour Association.

Materials and Methods

The present study adopts analytical methodology of historical research. The conceptual insights and methodological whereabouts embodies in the recent social science research incorporated in this paper. The study utilised both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include archival records, interviews etc. the secondary sources comprised of books and articles published germane to the study.

Results

The caste hierarchy and social customs influenced the formation of working class in India. It has no exception in Kerala. The social reform movement and the social legislations of the colonial powers in India compelled several higher caste Hindus to enter into jobs in the new industries and similar organisations. But they

were remained a microscopic minority until the Great Depression and the economic crisis in the 1930s. The period from 1920s to the mid-1930s represent the moderate phase of the trade union movement in Travancore. The role played by the forces of self-empowerment the working class compelled to form their own Trade Unions which was quite different from the British India. Where external forces like socio religious reformers and like-minded middle class engaged in the process of mobilisation. In Travancore the founder of the first trade union was came from the ranks of the working class and the enlightened middle class of this region and sought support from social reform movements. The Indian capitalist class encouraged this efforts to tap the benefits resulted from this organisation in a positive manner.

Genesis of Travancore Labour Association

The first organised Trade Union in India was started in Madras. It was in Madras Binnie Mill in the year 1916 by B P Wadia worked behind the formation of this trade union. It was the first well organised union in India with unified member register, account keeping, general body, and working committee, etc. But the British Raj alarmed on this development and took keen interest and put iron hand on it.² This period witnessed the emergence and growth of trade unions in industrial centres all over British India. Trade Unions were formed in the Railways and Press and in the Workshops. Mahatma Gandhi founded a Labour Association at Ahmedabad with the blessings of Capitalists.³ Along with the development of class consciousness Indian working class politically mobilised during this period. Bombay Working class actively participated in the Rowlett Satyagraha.⁴

The first All India organisation for the working class was founded in 1920 at Bombay in this background. The Congress leaders were worked behind the formation of All India Trade Union Congress and the main intention behind this initiative was to send representatives of trade unions to the International Labour Conference. LalaLajpatRai presided the first congress of AITUC and later AITUC transformed as the frontline fighter of working class in India. In the AITUC Session held in 1924, C. R Das presided and in the 6th Annual Session of the Madras Trade Unionist, V VGiri presided over the session.⁵

In Travancore, Alleppey was the centre of Industries and commerce. From 1859 when James Darragh and his nephew Smail, both were Irish entrepreneurs, founded a Coir factory named DarraghSmail & Co. Later Alleppey developed as an important industrial centre in the erstwhile Travancore. Followed by them Volkat Brothers, Aspinwall, William Goodacre & Co., Piers Leslie, Bombay Company, Madura Company were founded by foreign capital. These factories were engaged in the production of Coir and Coir products. In addition to it, the native entrepreneurs established Alleppey Company, Empire Coir Works, and General Supply Agency etc. accelerated the industrialisation in coir sector.⁶

These developments not restricted into coir industry alone Copra, Oil press and Spice industries were developed in Alleppey. Alleppey port became a busiest industrial centre in the west coast by the beginning of 20th century. Water transport was the main source of transportation and many boats were engaged in the transportation of goods from the various parts of the country. These developments in

the next sixty years after the foundation of the first factory in Alleppey the region of Alleppey became the largest labour centres in Travancore and whole of Malayalam speaking region.

After the First World War Travancore witnessed a boom in its industry which reflected through more people were came to Alleppey for employment and the population in this small town was drastically increased during the twenties. Coir industry was the major job sector which attracted the masses. Due to the caste bondages and conventions existed in the society, majority of the workers came to the coir factories who belonged to Ezhava community. Who were the toddy tappers, spinners and agriculturists. This community was came under the influence of SreeNarayana Movement including SNDP and SahodaraSangham in the first four decades of the 20th century. Through the activities of SreeNarayana Guru and his disciples, a counter hegemony was developed on the conventional Travancore society. The formation of the first trade union in Kerala should be explained in this socio-political context.

On 31st March 1922 (1097 Meenam 18 M E) a meeting of workers was organised at the ground near KalappuraKhandakarna Temple in Alleppey, P K Bava was the chief organiser of this meeting, was the Mooppan in the Empire Coir Works, a native industrial initiative at Alleppey. Workers from this factory only participants of this meeting. Swami Sthyavrathan, a close disciple of SreeNarayana Guru was attended the meeting as a result of direction of his guru. P S Muhammad presided over the first meeting of the Travancore Labour Union. M K Antony, B V BappuVaidyar, and Sathyavrathan were took part in the first meeting here M K Antony and P K Bava were elected as President and Secretary respectively. PalpuAsan became the treasurer, he was the owner of a textile shop. T I Karunakaran, T C KesavanVaidyar, B V BappuVaidyar, M K KunjachanMooppan, K M Cherian were committee members. Among them P K Bava and KunjachanMoppan were belonged to the working class.⁷ T C KesavanVaidyar, B V BappuVaidyar were local Ayurvedic Physicians, K M Cheriyan was the Managing Director of South Indian Coir Factory. The meeting was concluded with the speech of Swami Satyavrathan.⁸

Bava started his career as a common labourer in a factory of native owner and raised step by step as Yard Superintendent in the respective coir factory during this period. On those days workers were not appointed the company directly. The Mooppans had the power to appoint a worker. After the formation of Travancore Labour Association P. K. Bava gave job only to those who joined in Association.⁹ In this initial stage most of the office bearers of Travancore Labour Association came from people belonged to the upper strata of the society and factory management. The number of workers coming from the working class were limited.¹⁰

After the formation of the Association P K Bava summed a meeting on 1922 April 24. About 800 workers from different European factories were attended the meeting along with the workers of Empire coir Factory.¹¹ In this meeting two resolutions were passed, one related with the Liquor prohibition and the second is related with demanding of the initiation of labour laws by the government. The second resolution was moved by P K Bava. A Bylaw formulated by M K Antony was placed before the meeting.¹²

On 19 July 1922 a meeting was organised to discuss the bylaw and the future plans of the union. Representatives from various coir factories were attended in this meeting. These representatives demanded to extend the union membership with the workers of other factories. Until then Travancore Labour Union was the organisation of the workers of Empire Coir workers only. This meeting decided to change the name of Travancore Labour Union into Travancore Labour Association.¹³

From 17 August 1922, on the basis of the newly drafted Bylaw Travancore Labour Association gave membership to the workers of Alappuzha by levying two anna¹⁴ as the membership fee and VadappuramBava became the first member of the Travancore Labour Union. ChunganKurumban, AchanKunju, and K C Govindan were followed him. Association decided to give the responsibility to K C Govindan to expand the labour base of the Association and systematic works include receipts in lieu of membership, donations, and weekly fee and presented it in the notice board issue with the signature of the Secretary.¹⁵ Four chakram was fixed as monthly fee to the association and gave the responsibility to K C govindan to collect monthly fee from the workers.¹⁶

This period of Travancore Labour Association was considered as the moderate phase and the association more or less remained as a philanthropic association and actively engaged in social welfare measures. In 1097 M E ThiruvithamkurMahajanaSabha, a political association for the wellbeing of Travancoreans was formed. Travancore Labour Association sent its representatives to this organisation and offered the support of working class. P K Padmanabhan a representative of Travancore Labour Association at the second session of MahajanaSabha held at Kollam in 1924 February 4. He presented the pathetic condition of the workers of factories and plantations in Travancore and suggested solutions for resolving their pitiable plight. He circulated the Charter of Demands of Travancore Labour Association to the members of the Sabha. But they gave little importance to the demands of Travancore Labour Association.¹⁷

For the welfare and betterment of working class with the help and advice of KM Cheriyan, P K Bava started the first newspaper of working class *Thozhilali* (The Worker) from Alleppey. It had four pages in the beginning and it was printed at Lakshmi Vilasam Press at Mullackal.¹⁸ P.K. Bava became the first editor of the *Thozhilali*. He organised the meeting of workers and demanded them to be the subscribers and readers of this Newspaper, was the first newspaper in Kerala owned by the workers.¹⁹ For the leisure and recreation of the workers under the leadership of the association a Library and recreation club was organised at Alleppey. Library was started in 1924 March 20 and it was inaugurated by N Krishnan. For the collection of books to this library association organised campaigns to raise funds and collected money from the wealthy class in the town and organised a book collection march in Alleppey.²⁰

In April 6 and 7 1924, Association organised its first annual meeting at Alleppey. P K Bava spend a large proportion of his income to the smooth functioning of the union. Meeting was held under the leadership of an organising committee comprised of Mooppans from different factories in Alappuzha under the leadership of N Krishnan at BhagavathiVilasam Theatre. As part of the meeting Competitions like

elocution, essay writing etc. conducted with a view to enrich the knowledge of workers and classical musical concert for the entertainment of the workers.²¹ C V Kunjuraman attended and presided over the first meeting in inaugural day of the conference. Changanassery Parameswaran Pillai presided over the public meeting in the second day. Sahodaran Aiyappan, Swami Satya Vratana, and K K Kuruvila the distinguished personalities actively participated in the conference.²² In the general meeting K M Krishnan got across the news regarding the arrest of K P Kesava Menon and T K Madhavan related with Vaikom Sathyagraha. Sathyavratana read the message in the meeting in connection with Vaikom Sathyagraha and the conference decided to send 50 volunteers wearing Khadi under the leadership of P K Bava to attend the Satyagraha.²³

The first annual session demanded representation of the workers in the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly. The conference took serious discussion and passed resolutions regarding the medical service to the workers at factory, to give financial assistance to old and injured workers, adult franchise etc.²⁴ This meeting helped to spread of the name of association in all over Travancore. N Krishnan and P K Bava were selected as President and General Secretary of the Travancore Labour Association.²⁵ Due to the financial constraints P K Bava stay away from the activities of the Association. Travancore Labour Association faced a slowdown in this period but it shortlived. Under the leadership of K C Govindan a labour organisation named Thozhilali Mithram in Alappuzha. It was an organisation to train workers in elocution and reading etc. He merged Thozhilali Mithram into Travancore Labour Association on by accepting the demand of Travancore Labour Association leadership. After P K Bava C K Velayudhan and K C Govindan became Secretary and assistant secretary of the Association.²⁶

In the second annual conference of the Travancore Labour Association held in 1925 June 7, Sardar K M Panicker inaugurated the session. Kannanthodath Velayudha Menon delivered keynote address and K B Selam MLC etc. were addressed the audience.²⁷ In his felicitation speech P K Bava suggested the formation of a co-operative society for the workers modelled on the co-operatives of the capitalists. He wanted to strengthen the workers financial background, the suggestion of Bava accepted the conference and formed 'The Coastal Co-operative Society', the name of the society was suggested by Bava.²⁸

In the third annual session held in 1926 June 20, E.V. Ramaswami Naicker presided the inaugural session. P.K. Madhavan and S. Vasu were became the new President and Secretary respectively.²⁹ Under the leadership of Travancore Labour Association a death fund was formed. 25 rupee was given to the death of adults and 15 to the amateurs. It was decided to deposit 1 annas in a week in the death fund. Under the leadership of Association a hospital was founded near Empire Coir Works in Alappuzha. Treatment in Modern Medicine and Ayurvedia were given to the workers and the remuneration to the doctor was given from the fund generated from the workers.³⁰

Central Legislative Assembly of British India Government passed Trade Union Bill in 1927 February and subsequently in May 1 1927 it became an act. The news of the formation of new trade union act in British India was came to Alleppey

only after two months of its enactment. Travancore Labour Association decided to organise a march of workers to celebrate the event. In front of Goodacre Company at Alleppey workers congregated on 1927 July 11 and from there they started march and assembled at Kidangamparambu Temple compound and conducted a public meeting where assembled labours from different companies gathered here.³¹ From 1928 onwards Travancore Labour Association became a strong union in all over Travancore. Association extends its area of operation up to Chungam Bridge, Muhamma, and Cherthala by opening its branches number two, three, and four respectively.³²

Travancore Labour Association remained as a moderate organisation until 1934. Its secretaries were came from working class and presidents were from professionals or employers in this phase. P S Muhammad, in his welcome speech in the 8th annual conference of the Travancore Labour Association delineate the nature of the organisation. He assured that the employers that the coir factory workers of Alleppey were “loyal to their King and Country and had no intention whatsoever to imitate the worker’s movement in foreign countries.”³³

The significant characteristic of the early activities of Travancore Labour Association had maintained a direct relation with the social reform movements. In this phase of the Trade Union movement had no definite political goals motivated by the emergent class consciousness and stable political ideology in Travancore. The caste and communal organisations like SNDP Yogam, Nair Service Society, SadhujanaParipalana Yogam, SahodaraSamajametc were the motivating force of the organisation. Each castes had its own organisations, in which the Ezhavas constituted second largest community a lion share of the industrial labour. From the formation of industries in Travancore they supported to the trade union movement. It help their economic condition in society. The social legislations under the influence of colonial rule helped them to liberate from the age old caste bondages to a great extent. Ezhavas were the largest social group worked in the coir industry because their traditional occupation is related with the coconut tree and its products.

During this period, the social stratification among Ezhavas was quite evident the vast majority of them were agrarian proletariats, agricultural workers, toddy tappers, marginal peasants, etc. there was a small section of cultivators, weavers and petty traders. There were also a handful of distinguished Sanskrit scholars, teachers, Ayurveda physicians and soldiers. It was from among this small economically well off section who attained modern western education, who took initiatives in the construction of unity among the castes. It is a fact that more than 40 percent of the signatories of Ezhava Memorial were tax payers.³⁴

The membership of Travancore Labour Association was predominantly drawn from Ezhava community who constituted the overwhelming majority of coir-workers and the membership was given to Alleppey workers in SNDP Board of Directors reinforced its caste image to this organisation.³⁵ However viewed retrospectively the Vaikom Satyagraha and the conversion threat by Ezhavas paved the way for accelerating the Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation, the first of its kind in India, in, 1936 November 12.³⁶ The working class of Alappuzha paid a pivotal role in these struggles. C K Velayudhan, V K Velayudhan. P K Madhavan and R Sugathan of the

Travancore Labour Association leadership were important activists of SNDP Yogam.³⁷

SNDP Yogam annual conference held at Kollam in 1926 passed a resolution requesting to the government to pass a bill concerned with limiting the working hours in Factories and demanding accident benefits and other welfare measures to the workers in the various factories.

The anti-liquor campaign initiated at first in Kerala by Sri Narayana Guru asserting that Liquor is Poison was re-initiated by Travancore Labour Association associated with the anti-liquor movement lead by T K Madhavan the leader of SNDP Yogam. P K Bava took the leadership of anti-liquor campaign conducted by Travancore Labour Association. Most of the workers were squandered their money in the toddy shops and it was a major problem to the community. Bava in the middle of the opposition from a section of workers lead Travancore Labour Association to take a positive stand on Anti liquor campaign. He offered jobs for 100 toddy tappers who gave up their jobs would accommodate in the Empire Coir Works with 10 rupee monthly salary. Later it increased to 150 workers.³⁸ From this period onwards Association decided to give membership only to the workers who agreed the policies of anti-liquor movement.

This pro SNDP policies of Travancore Labour Association were not acceptable to Christian and Muslim religious leadership and as they felt that this association was dominated by Ezhavas. In 1934, a separate Christian Labour Association was formed at Alappuzha.³⁹ The Muslims had already withdrawn from Travancore Labour Association and formed an exclusive Muslim Workers Association. In the same year the Kuttanadu Land Owners Association was founded and since the Brahmins were occupied the majority of the land it was Land Owners Association was dominated by them. At the same time KuttanadKarshakaSangham(farmers' association) was formed as a chapter to the All Travancore KarshakaSangham, constituted mainly by upper caste tenants draw from Nairs and Christians.⁴⁰

The caste and religious oriented developments were not succeeded. The effective leadership of the Travancore Labour Association subsided the separatist tendencies. From 1930s onwards Travancore Labour Association became more politicised due to its association with the national movement. The working class were associated with the national movement initially by its association with Vaikom Satyagraha. In 1930 Alleppey workers received the March of Salt Satyagrahis from Trivandrum under the leadership of Ponnara G. Sreedhar at Kaithavana in Alappuzha. In its annual session of 1931 Travancore Labour Association passed resolution in support of the Karachi Resolution of Indian National Congress. In the same year association gave reception to Jawaharlal Nehru at Alappuzha. In Alappuzha Travancore Labour Association played a leading role in Abstention Movement lead by Joint Political Conference.⁴¹

In the 1933 annual session of Travancore Labour Association, E.V. RamaswamiNaicker took part in the conference and presided over it. He had recently visited Soviet Union and appreciated the activities of Proletarian Government which mentioned in his presidential address. It was the first time the workers of Alappuzha

heard an experience of Soviet Union from a person who visited the country.⁴² In 1933 KesariBalakrishna Pillai became the President of the union. V.K. Velayudhan elected as the Vice-President and P. KesavaDev became its General Secretary. Later due to inconvenience of the President V.K. Velayudhan discharged the duties of the president of the Union.⁴³

Thozhilali the mouth organ of Travancore Labour Association had wide readership among the workers and in 1928 it became a weekly. In 1934 Travancore witnessed first general strike of workers of Alappuzha. The enthusiastic leadership of Travancore Labour Association laboured a lot behind this strike demanding the consolidated wages and for reducing working hours. Before this general strike other similar strikes were occurred on the basis of local issues in one or two factories.⁴⁴

Travancore Labour Association came under the influence of Kerala Congress Socialist Party (KCSP) from 1935 onwards. A section of the leadership in the trade union attracted by the socialist ideology. R. Sugathan one of the leading trade unionists of this period represented the labour association in the first annual session of All Kerala Workers Conference, organised by the KCSP at Calicut in 1935.⁴⁵

PS Muhammad, and K P Panicker were the former presidents and representatives of the employers and professionals distanced from the new leadership and activities of the Travancore Labour Association. They represented the aspirations of the employers and in 1935 P S Muhammad was nominated to the State Legislature as the representative of labourers by the government. Then he hadn't any relation with labour movement. To justify his nomination the government with the help of industrialists like K C Karunakaran and M L Janardhanan Pillai Alleppey Labour Union was founded under the leadership of P S Muhammad.⁴⁶ But this organisation was short lived.

This period witnessed some fundamental changes in the ideological base of the Labour Association. Travancore Labour Association transformed into a radical organisation in its programmes and policies. C Kesavan was arrested in 7th June 1935 from SNDP office at Alappuzha in connection with his Kozhenchery Speech. Coir factory workers under the leadership of Travancore Labour Association and SNDP Yogam went to strike against unjust attitude of the Travancore Government. Consequently trade union movement was politicised and accelerated more radical stands. In the eleventh annual session of the Travancore Labour Association held on 12 January 1936 P N Krishna Pillai, KotturKunji Krishna Pillai and CheriyanManjooran and Pattom Thanu Pillai were participated. P K Kunju one of the leading politician in the central Travancore was selected as the President of the organisation.⁴⁷

It is viewed that the Temple Entry Proclamation and the success of Abstention Movement satisfied the long standing ambitions of the middle class with in the depressed communities. These developments alienated the working class from its middle class communal leadership. By 1937-38, one section of leadership inspired by the Socialist and Communist ideologies recognised the need for separate class organisations started asserting itself gradually leading to the de linking of SNDP from Alleppey Coir Workers.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The period, 1922 to 1934 represents the moderate phase of Travancore Labour Association. The Political developments, economic depression of thirties and the impact of social legislations of 1920s and 30s radically transformed this association into a revolutionary force. In earlier phase Travancore Labour Association functioned as a welfare organisation for the workers. The year 1934 witnessed the first general strike under the leadership of Travancore Labour Association, entirely re defined the priorities of action. P.KesavaDev, the new Secretary of Travancore Labour Association was responsible for this transformation of the outlook of the organisation and further developments.

During the moderate phase the workers of Alappuzha were politically educated by the Brother Hood movement and SNDP Yogam. The reading rooms and night classes founded for the factory workers helped them to analyse the developments of distant lands. The *Thozhilali* and *Velakkaran* two important propaganda literature was able to educate politically in this direction. The Socialist and Communist ideas were familiarised during this period through these publications. The former was published by the Brother Hood Movement and the second by the workers themselves. Many political activists in and outside Travancore contributed articles on it. P. Krishna Pillai, George Chadayam Muri, P.Gangadharan etc. the socialists in Cochin and Malabar wrote on the pages of *Thozhilali* in the thirties. Through education activities of working class helped to increase the literacy rate in Alappuzha and adjacent regions. Most of the coir factory workers were literate during this period. The active intervention of the Sree Narayana Movement had a significant role in these developments.

The meetings and jathas were also helped to communicate the workers of all factories under the banner of a single organisation. The book collection march of the workers of Alappuzha became an important campaign to realise the importance of learning. In the annual meetings of Travancore Labour Association and other occasions the trade union and national leaders from in and outside Travancore addressed the workers of Alappuzha strengthened the fraternity of the workers. E V Ramaswami Naicker, Jawahar Lal Nehru, V V Giri etc. were addressed the workers in various periods. These meetings were helped to know about the role of proletariat in the development of political consciousness in the nation building. This period witnessed the breaking away of Travancore Labour Association from its communal influence.

Travancore Labour Association opened its branches in the remote villages of Amalappuzha and Cherthala Taluks during this period. In the villages most of the entrepreneurs and workers were came from the same caste. This helped to realise the class character of society when the owners and workers of same caste came into conflict. The political education given by the CSP and the Travancore Youth League and the failure of SNDP to address this class conflict with in the community resulted in the transition of Travancore Labour Association into in its extremist phase under the leadership of socialist leaders.

The moderate phase of the Travancore Labour Association was too much significant which marked the expansion of the social base of the trade union

movement. The intervention of the association widened the mass base of the movement and prepared the background for the cultivation of class consciousness among the working class with well-defined political programmes and strategies for the radical movement for struggle for responsible government against colonialism and imperialism.

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