



EMERGENCE OF TRADE UNIONS IN KERALA TEA PLANTATION

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Article History: Received: 01.02.2023

Revised: 07.03.2023

Accepted: 10.04.2023

Abstract

This study examines the emergence and development of trade unions in tea plantations in Kerala, India. The study explores the early trade union activities, the socio-political environment that contributed to the growth of the trade union movement, and the major trade unions that emerged and evolved. Specifically, the study focuses on trade union activities in Wayanad and how workers resisted the control of colonial masters and plantation owners to organize themselves into unions. The study found that trade union activities began in the high ranges through the Congress-led trade union INTUC, which later split to form the AITUC trade union due to differences in opinion. The AITUC became the most vital trade union across plantations in Kerala when the Communist Party of India (CPI) came to power in 1957. The formation of the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM) in 1964 resulted in the emergence of the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU), and many AITUC members became part of CITU.

Keywords : Trade Union, Tea plantation, Kerala, Wayanad, Colonial Masters.

Introduction

In India trade union act was passed in 1926. The registered trade union could engage in trade union activity as laid down by the law. The first Trade union movement in Kerala was Travancore Labor Association (TLA) IN 1922. The entry of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was in early 1950, and the initial activities of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) were in 1952. In 1964 the split within the Communist Party of India (CPI) led to the formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI (M)), resulting in the

construction of CITU. CITU, INTUC, AITUC, STU (Swathanthra Thozhilali Union of Muslim League), and BMS (Bharatheeya Masdur Sangh of BJP) are the central trade unions of Kerala, especially in Wayanad.

The Indian trade union act was passed in 1926. Since then, registered trade unions could engage in trade union activity as laid down by law in India. The first central trade union in India was the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed in October 1920 in Bombay under the national movement's leaders' initiative. Planters/owners were organized

throughout India, while the workers remained unorganized across plantations in India. The protest started as boycotting the colonial market set-up of plantations in Assam and parts of south India.

Trade Unions in Kerala

In Kerala also, there have been several attempts to start the trade union organization since the beginning of the plantations themselves. Still, the workers' unions began full-fledged activities mainly after independence. As in many other places, the emergence of the trade union movement in Kerala is also closely associated with the existing socio-political atmosphere in the state. Early political party leaders in Kerala were later seen donning the role of trade union leaders, especially in the plantations of Kerala. In 1922, the first trade union movement in Kerala, Travancore Labour Association (TLA), was established among the workers in Alappuzha's cob-weaving industry.

The formation of AITUC at an all-India level also accelerated the growth of trade unions in the plantations. The Administrative Report of Travancore–Cochin (TCAR) for the year 1949–1950 stated that the activities in plantations, compared to other sectors, continued to be weak and that there could not be a sufficiently well-organized union found. Nevertheless, the entry of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in the early 1950s and the initial activities of AITUC in 1952 strengthened labor movements in plantations across Kerala. The Communist Party also made independent efforts to start union activities in the plantations of Travancore in 1940 through the formulation of the All Thiruvithancore Estate Workers Union (ATEWU).

In Kerala, the trade union activities began in the high ranges by the Congress-led trade union INTUC. At the same time,

within INTUC, a left-supported group emerged due to differences in opinion, forming a trade union called AITUC in Kerala. In 1957, when the Communist Party of India (CPI) came to power in Kerala, the AITUC union became the most vital trade union across plantations in Kerala. Later in 1964, the split within the CPI and the formation of the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM) resulted in the shape of the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU)¹³³ and many AITUC members became part of CITU.

Wayanad Trade Union activities

In Wayanad, organized trade union activities were banned by colonial masters. Absolute control was exercised over the workers by the management. The workers who tried to organize the workforce to secure their fundamental rights, especially against the inhuman treatment by the Kanganis (The middle man who recruits workers for management), had to face disciplinary action from the administration. The formation of the United Planters Association of South India (UPASI)¹³⁵ in 1893, one of the prime associations of plantation owners, wielded significant influence over the workers and the management. It had decisive power over the workers and was clearly careful and concerned about the rights of planters rather than workers, which callously allowed for the management's inhuman treatment of the workers.

The protest against management was at a gradual pace. There was early resistance from workers with leftist inclinations within the Indian National Congress's (INC) trade union organization, the INTUC. They started engaging with workers through different channels, successfully created a network within them, and formed a collective that met frequently. Through reading clubs, football clubs, drama clubs, musical

troops, etc., they discovered and organized the activists to work for the trade union among the workers. By reliable sources, it is said that the veteran communist leader. C H Kanaran had come to Wayanad in 1946 and organized the plantation workers. He had arrived at Harrisons Malayalam Limited (HML), known as Malayalam Plantation, before. He observed the activities of the plantation workers at the place where the workers used to weigh the tea leaves. He understood the issues faced by the plantation workers. In the evening, he met the estate manager and told him that he had come on behalf of the plantation workers to talk about their issues and insisted that the manager listen to him. The workers were astonished that after listening to C.H. Kanaran, the manager had invited him inside. Workers couldn't stand before a manager during those days and talk to him. While going to speak to the manager, C.H. Kanaran had also taken some of the workers along with him with whom he already had made acquaintance. The discussion with the manager addressed some of the fundamental issues of the workers, such as accommodation facilities, usage of toilets, and the timing of tea breaks, etc. They also addressed the issues concerning female workers. The manager had agreed with the concerns raised by C.H. Kanaran and other people who went along with him. C.H. Kanaran came out after the meeting, and a vast crowd awaited him. Before them, he read out the major decisions from that meeting. This is how initial activities were carried out in the plantation sector. Later on, C.H. Kanaran contacted the Congress leaders and the preparations for organizing the workers union began. The Malabar Plantation Workers Union was established as a result of this. (This union is still active under INTUC). Though the collaboration could not lead to significant struggles, they could initiate discussions with the management and organize the

work. C.K. Govindan Nair (who later became the KPCC president) was the president, and A.V. Radhagopi Menon was the secretary. (Brackets added). The first strike demanding wage increase started from Thalappuza, a plantation in north Wayanad. Some early trade union leaders remember that the protest by plantation workers spread over different parts of Wayanad, including the Arappatta near Meppadi. With the negotiations with the management, union leaders increased the daily wage rate of plantation workers, although the administration was against this settlement. With the help of the British police, union activities were suppressed by management, and all kinds of workers' mobilization were banned. Even though participation in this wage strike was minimal, this is considered the beginning of the trade union movement in the plantations of Wayanad. After this strike, workers learned more about the union and started participating in the activity in different forms. Many leaders were assigned by the Communist parties to work in the plantations of Wayanad. Leaders from outside the plantation made severe efforts to find sympathizers among the plantation workers recruited from different parts of Kerala.

The plantation union leaders expressed their solidarity towards the coir workers of Alappuzha by sending them rice during the Onam festival. It was as per the appeal of A.K. Gopalan, the veteran leader of the communist party. Plantation labor union (STU) state secretary T Hmsa has said, As per the norms of the labor act of 1951, wages should be increased every three years. But no action had been taken by management for a very long time. STU is a trade union of the Indian Union Muslim League and is also very influential among the tea plantation workers of Wayanad. IUML leader K M Seethi Saheb founded it in 1958. The prominent leaders are ET Muhammed Basheer (now a Member of the Indian

parliament from Kerala.) He said Jafar Atholi, EKK Muhammed, Muhammed Kunhi, PV Kunhammed, PPA Kareem, etc.

In 1948, the ban on the Communist party also affected the growth of AITUC in Wayanad. At the same time, however, it provided INTUC a chance to strengthen their trade union activities within the plantations of Wayanad affiliated with the Malabar District Estate Workers Union. K. Kumaran, K. M Krishnan, and Radha Gopi Menon were the prominent INTUC leaders during its early days. AITUC started their unions in Wayanad in 1946, and N E Balaram,

C. H Kanaran, A. K. Gopalan, T. Rama Warriar, and Gandhi Gopalan reached Thalappuza in Wayanad from different parts of Kerala to work alongside the plantation workers through small meetings and campaigns. V. N. Sivaraman, Damodaran Nambiar, Chathu Master, and Mathai Master are the prominent leaders of AITUC.

M.K. Raman Kutty was another prominent Trade Union leader of Wayanad. His union mostly worked among the Malayalam plantation workers in Meppadi. In Chembra Peak Estate, there was another union affiliated with AITUC; it was registered in 1952 and named General Estate Workers Union based in Meenangady. Vylopilly Ramankutty Menon, K.A. Beerankunj, P. V. Varghese Vaidyan, and N.V. Sivram were the chief faces of this union. Around the same time, at Pozhuthana, another union named Kurichayamala Plantation Workers Union was formed by P. Koya Master. All these small unions became affiliated with AITUC over time.

Union leaders faced brutal treatment from Kanganies (the middle man in between workers and planters and their subordinates)

The first demand of the workers union in the plantation was to stop the Kangan

system and take away the influential role of their subordinates over the workers.

In 1967, when EMS led communist government came to power, the worker's issues were widely discussed. The reasonable measures undertaken by the first communist government of EMS and the growth of Trade unions changed the working atmosphere on plantations. Trade unions started to protest against management for their basic needs related to wages and other benefits. Hence they became capable of launching an organized movement against plantation management. With their joined efforts, Trade unions became a pressure group to compel the state and central government to make favorable policies for workers. Now the most influential Trade Union in Wayanad is CITU, supported by CPI(m). Others are INTUC of the Indian National Congress, AITUC, the trade union of CPI, STU of Indian Union Muslim League, and BMS of BJP, respectively. Kanganies, as the agents of management, openly threaten workers to form unions within the plantation. The first organized movement in Wayanad was in 1946 under CH Kanaran against the English-Scottish Company.

Trade unions are with workers for social, recreational, and personal benefits. Marked another era of Trade unions with the permission of management started football clubs reading rooms etc. annual football tournaments were conducted through these forums. Trade unions had also started chit-funds, workers' cooperative societies, and other such initiatives in the 1970s, marking another era of Trade Union activities in Wayanad. It is believed that some leaders had nexus with Naxalism and extreme outfits. The nexal movement was quite strong in Wayanad. Then some trade union leaders supported these revolutionary outfits, which they believed would improve their social status. KC Ayamutty of Thettamala

was a well-known CITU leader who joined this movement.

Conclusion

The emergence of trade unions in India and Kerala is closely linked to the socio-political atmosphere of the respective regions. In India, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed in 1920 by national movement leaders. In Kerala, the Travancore Labour Association (TLA) was established in 1922 among workers in the cob-weaving industry. The activities of trade unions in the plantations of Kerala began to gain momentum after the entry of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in the early 1950s and the formation of AITUC in 1952. The Communist Party of India (CPI) also made efforts to initiate union activities in the plantations of Travancore through the formation of the All Thiruvithancore Estate Workers Union (ATEWU). In 1964, the split within the CPI led to the formation of the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM), resulting in the construction of the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU). In Wayanad, organized trade union activities were banned by colonial masters, and workers who tried to organize themselves were subjected to disciplinary action from the administration. The United Planters Association of South India (UPASI), a prime association of plantation owners, held significant influence over the workers and the management. However, through different channels such as reading clubs, football clubs, drama clubs, musical troops, etc., the leftist inclinations within the Indian National Congress's (INC) trade union organization, INTUC, successfully created a network and formed a collective that frequently met to work for the trade union among workers. Veteran communist leader C.H. Kanaran had

come to Wayanad in 1946 and organized the plantation workers.

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