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**AGRICULTURAL  
LABOUR UNIONS**

**A Study in Three South Indian States**

**K.C. ALEXANDER**


# AGRICULTURAL LABOUR UNIONS

A Study in Three South Indian States



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## FOREWORD

Rural development in the seventies has laid greater emphasis on development with social justice. As a result, all the development programmes oriented themselves to the weaker sections of the community. However, evaluative studies of these programmes revealed that the impact of these on the target groups has not been what was intended to be. One of the factors that hindered these groups from taking advantage of these economic opportunities is their vulnerable position in the existing social structure which does not provide them avenues to be otherwise. Therefore, there has been a realisation, of late, to get these groups organised in order to make them not only economically viable but also socially potential enough to demand and sustain their rightful share of the fruits of development. Efforts have been made by political parties, voluntary agencies and, sometimes, governmental agencies to organise the rural poor, but the success stories of these attempts are relatively few.

In South India, organisations of the rural poor, particularly of agricultural labourers, have emerged in certain parts of Alleppy (Kerala) and Thanjavur (Tamil Nadu) districts. This roused the curiosity of interested sections to know the factors that led to the emergence of such unions in these areas and why such unions did not emerge in other areas. Two other questions that interested many a researcher were : What is the impact of the activities of these unions on farmer-labourer relations and status of agricultural labourers? Has unionisation of labourers adversely affected agricultural production? These are precisely the issues that Dr. K.C. Alexander tried to examine in the study reported in this monograph.

I do hope that the findings of the study will be of interest to all those concerned with the organisation of the rural poor—workers of political parties, government officers and academicians.

*Hyderabad* \  
*July, 1978*

B.C. MUTHAYYA  
*Dean-in-Charge*

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I also record my grateful appreciation of the manner in which the respondents and leaders of labourers, farmers and workers of political parties in the study area lent me their support in collection of information used in this report.

While I record my gratitude and appreciation to one and all who had made my task easy in this study, I put it that I alone am responsible for any deficiencies in this study.

*Hyderabad*  
*July, 1978*

**K.C. ALEXANDER**

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## I: INTRODUCTION

### THE PROBLEM

During the inter-war period and after, there have emerged unions of agricultural labourers in some areas of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The influence of these unions of agricultural labourers on the traditional agrarian structure in the two states had been pronounced. But such unions did not strike roots in the neighbouring state of Karnataka in spite of the fact that all the three states are predominantly agrarian. The growth of these unions in the pockets where they had their origins has not been very smooth in that the labourers had to wage incessant struggles against the farmers to assert their rights. It was also on record that some political parties had taken keen interest in organising the agricultural labourers for struggles against the farmers. It is again on record that in the course of some of these struggles, quite a few people had lost their lives which resulted in the enactment of legislations protecting the interests of the agricultural labourers.

It was, therefore, considered worthwhile to make a study of the origin and growth of these unions in these parts in the background of social structural characteristics of the areas where these unions had become strong and registered phenomenal growth in contrast to other areas. In addition, a descriptive account of the growth of the unions is also sought to be given and examine their impact on traditional social relations in comparison with areas where they did not exist. A passing assessment has also been made whether unionisation of agricultural labourers had any adverse impact on agricultural production.

With this end in view, Kuttanad region of Alleppy district in Kerala state; Thiruthuraipundi and Orathnad taluks of Thanjavur district in Tamil Nadu, and Mandya and Maddur taluks of Mandya district of Karnataka were selected for a comparative analysis. In all these areas, paddy is the principal crop which requires the services of a large labour force. Though the agricultural background of these areas was similar, having been covered by the intensive agriculture development programme, the level of unionisation of agricultural labourers was different.

It was reported that the Kuttanad region of Alleppy district witnessed the emergence of strong unions of agricultural labourers. In Thiruthuraipundi taluk of East Thanjavur, there were strong unions of agricultural labourers whereas in Orathnad taluk of West Thanjavur, the agricultural labourers were not organised. In Mandya and Maddur taluks, there were no unions of agricultural labourers at the time of our study.

### METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through long interviews with the leaders of the unions of agricultural labourers and also political parties which were engaged in promoting the cause of agricultural labourers. Information was also

collected from secondary sources; and primary data were collected through an interview schedule administered to a sample of respondents. Details about the origin, activities, achievements and organisational structure of different labour unions were obtained through interviews with the leaders of the unions.

The sample of our respondents consisted of 248 and 250 persons respectively, from Mandya-Maddur (Karnataka) and Kuttanad region (Alleppy, Kerala) and 200 respondents each from Thiruthuraipundi and Orathnad taluks of Thanjavur. The respondents were selected in a two-stage sampling procedure involving, first, the selection of sample villages and then the respondents. In all, the total number of respondents covering the three areas was 898. In the course of the analysis and discussion that follows, we have described the three regions as Mandya for Mandya-Maddur taluks, Alleppy for Kuttanad region, and Thanjavur for Thiruthuraipundi-Orathnad taluks.

The analysis was primarily confined to the respondents and any observation in general terms relating to a particular region should be understood as reflecting the position in relation to the respondents only.

#### THE STUDY AREAS

The basic economic and social characteristics of the three districts from which the study areas were chosen are described here to serve as a backdrop for the analysis.

#### **Agriculture**

Mandya district (Karnataka) is in the southern plains region of the Deccan Plateau and is spread on either side of the Bangalore-Mysore highway. The district has a geographical area of 12.3 lakh acres, out of which 6.8 lakh acres (55 per cent) are under plough. Within the cultivated area, an extent of 1.5 lakh acres is under assured irrigation provided by the Krishnarayasagar Dam on the river Cauvery. An area of 0.6 lakh acres draws its irrigation water through wells, tanks and other sources. The remaining area of 4.56 lakh acres is cultivated under rain-fed conditions<sup>1</sup>.

In areas with assured irrigation, paddy and sugarcane are generally cultivated alternately. In 1961, 32 per cent of the cropped area in Mandya taluk and 28 per cent of the cropped area in Maddur taluk were under paddy.

Out of the 168 cultivator-respondents and 27 labour-cultivator respondents in the sample, 127 (76 per cent) of the former and 20 (74 per cent) of the latter cultivated paddy as the principal crop. Sixty per cent of the cultivators and 41 per cent of the labour-cultivators had sugarcane as the second crop.

Thanjavur district (Tamil Nadu) is in the delta area of the river Cauvery. It has alluvial soil and a vast network of canals. Of the geographical area of 23.9 lakh acres, 14.3 lakh acres are cultivated. Of this, 11.5 lakh acres (80 per cent) are irrigated by canals and 0.6 lakh acres (4 per cent) by other sources. The district also receives about 66 cms of rain during the North-East monsoon. These advantages had led to widespread cultivation of paddy in the district, where 78 per cent of the cropped area is under paddy.



As many as 130 cultivators out of 131 cultivator-respondents from Orathnad taluk and 57 out of the 58 cultivator-respondents from Thiruthuraipundi taluk reported that paddy was the main crop cultivated by them.

Alleppy district (Kerala), particularly the Kuttanad region, is within the Western low-land area of Kerala, around the shallow region of the Vembanad lake. The occurrence of alluvial soil along with abundant supply of water made Kuttanad one of the two rice bowls of Kerala. While paddy is cultivated in the fields, coconut trees are planted on the contours of the fields which yield substantial income to the farmers. The major paddy crop is cultivated in summer (*Punja*) between October and March; but in certain areas, a second long-duration paddy crop (*Mundakan*) is taken during the monsoon months. In the district as a whole, paddy is cultivated in 36 per cent of the cropped area, and coconut in 34 per cent of the cropped area<sup>3</sup>.

All the 79 cultivator-respondents from Kuttanad region cultivated paddy as the main crop. Thus paddy cultivation dominated the cropping pattern of all the four areas where the study was conducted.

### Religion and Caste

According to 1961 Census, Mandya district had a density of population of 480 persons per square mile. Ninety-six per cent of the population were Hindus, 3.5 per cent Muslims and 0.4 per cent Christians. The percentage of scheduled castes in the population of the district was 13, and that of scheduled tribes 0.06. Out of the 248 respondents from Mandya, two were Brahmins, 202 belonged to other higher castes, 22 to backward castes, and 22 to scheduled castes.

The density of population in Thanjavur was 868 persons per square mile. Ninety per cent of the population were Hindus, 6.26 per cent Muslims and 3.74 per cent Christians. The percentage of scheduled castes in the six eastern taluks of the district (East Thanjavur) was 30 as against 17 in the six western taluks (West Thanjavur).

Out of the 200 respondents in the sample from Orathnad, 166 (83 per cent) belonged to backward castes and the remaining 34 to scheduled castes. There were no higher caste respondents in the sample drawn.

Out of the 200 respondents from Thiruthuraipundi; 23 (11 per cent) belonged to higher castes, 92 (46 per cent) to backward castes and 83 (42 per cent) to scheduled castes, and two were Muslims.

Alleppy district has the highest density of population in Kerala with 2,558 persons per square mile. In the population of the district, 65 per cent were Hindus, 29 per cent Christians and 6 per cent Muslims.

In the sample of 250 respondents from Alleppy, 101 (40 per cent) belonged to higher castes (both Hindus and Christians), 63 (25 per cent) to backward castes, 85 (34 per cent) to scheduled castes, and one was a Muslim.

Among the respondents from the four study areas, the percentage of scheduled castes was distinctly more in Thiruthuraipundi and Alleppy.

### Occupation

The 898 respondents were divided into three broad occupational groups of cultivators, labourers and labour-cultivators. Cultivators were those who earned their livelihood by cultivating their own or rented land, with their personal labour or through hired labour. Those who earned their livelihood by selling their labour and working for others for a wage were classified as agricultural labourers. Those who earned their livelihood both by working for others and cultivating on their own, were classified as labour-cultivators.

Among the 248 respondents from Mandya, 168 (68 per cent) were cultivators, 27 (11 per cent) were labour-cultivators, and 53 (21 per cent) were labourers. The number and percentage of respondents belonging to these three occupations in Orathnad were 131 (66 per cent) cultivators, 18 (9 per cent) labour-cultivators, and 51 (25 per cent) labourers; and in Thiruthuraipundi 58 (29 per cent) were cultivators, 27 (13 per cent) were labour-cultivators, and 115 (58 per cent) were labourers. Among the 250 respondents from Alleppy, 79 (32 per cent) were cultivators and 171 (68 per cent) were labourers. There were no labour-cultivators in the Alleppy sample.

Among the four study areas, the percentage of cultivators was more in Mandya and Orathnad and that of agricultural labourers was more in Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi.

### Caste and Occupation

A caste and occupation-wise breakup of the respondents is given in Table 1. The large concentration of scheduled castes among the agricultural labourers and the large concentration of higher castes among the cultivators is noteworthy.

### Assets

Information collected to compute the total assets of the respondents comprised the extent of land owned by them, the value of their houses and household possessions, livestock and other movable assets. To understand the pattern of distribution of wealth among the respondents, they were classified on the basis of their total assets which included the extent of land owned by them.

Among the 53 labour-respondents from Mandya, only one possessed a house-site. All the cultivators and labour-cultivators reported ownership of not only house-sites but also land. The average sizes of the land held by them, respectively, were 4.08 acres and 1.37 acres.

Landlessness was not as acute among Orathnad labourers as it was among those from Mandya. Among the 51 labourers in the sample, only

TABLE 1: CASTE AND OCCUPATION OF THE RESPONDENTS

Caste	Mandya		Orathnad		Thiruthuraipundi		Alleppy				
	Cultiva- tor	Labour- er	Cultiva- tor	Labour- er	Cultiva- tor	Labour- er	Cultiva- tor	Labour- er			
Higher Castes	91	70	59	--	--	24	4	8	96	16	
Backward Castes	7	19	11	98	72	47	62	67	33	4	35
Scheduled Castes	2	11	30	2	28	53	14	29	59	--	49
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

eight were landless. The average size of the land held by the cultivators, labour-cultivators and labourers from Orathnad was 4.32 acres, 1.42 acres and 0.48 acres, respectively. Among the 115 labour-respondents from Thiruthuraipundi, 36 per cent did not possess even house-sites. The average landholding of the Thiruthuraipundi cultivators, labour-cultivators and labourers was 4.65 acres, 1.64 acres and 0.21 acres, respectively.

The average size of the land held by the cultivator and labour-respondents from Alleppy was 5.93 acres and 0.19 acres, respectively. Among the 171 labour-respondents, only 2 per cent were landless. It may be noted that even though landlessness was negligible among Alleppy labourers, the average size of the land held by them was less than the size of land held by labourers in Thiruthuraipundi and Orathnad. In contrast, the average size of the land held by the cultivators in Alleppy was more than the average size of the land held by the cultivators in the other three study areas.

By utilising the money value of all the assets of the respondents, the mean value of the assets of the cultivators, labour-cultivators and labourers in each of the areas was calculated and these were Rs. 58,048, Rs. 20,093 and Rs. 840 in Mandya; Rs. 29,980, Rs. 4,444 and Rs. 1,617 in Orathnad; Rs. 21,784, Rs. 6,518 and Rs. 943 in Thiruthuraipundi; and Rs. 94,367 and Rs. 5,833 for the cultivators and labourers in Alleppy. These figures show that the average value of assets of both cultivators and labourers is more in Alleppy. This is, mainly due to the high value of the land in Kerala.

The ratio of the value of assets of the labourers and cultivators is 1 : 69 in Mandya; 1 : 18 in Orathnad; 1 : 23 in Thiruthuraipundi; and 1 : 16 in Alleppy. This shows that the gulf between the cultivators and the agricultural labourers is the widest in Mandya and the narrowest in Alleppy.

### Tenancy

None of the respondents reported any leasing out of land. On the contrary, quite a few had leased in some land. Among the 248 Mandya respondents, only one (a labour-cultivator) had leased in some land. Among the Orathnad respondents, six cultivators and one labour-cultivator had leased in land, for which all of them paid an agreed rent (*Kuthakai*), mainly in kind. Among the Alleppy respondents, seven cultivators reported cultivation of leased in land, for which the rent was paid mainly in kind.

### Eviction

None of the Mandya respondents reported that they had been evicted either from their place of residence or from the land they cultivated. Among the Orathnad respondents, one labour-cultivator and one labourer reported having been evicted from the land cultivated, and two labourers reported eviction from the place of their residence. In Thiruthuraipundi, whereas five cultivators, seven labour-cultivators and 13 labourers were evicted from the land

cultivated by them, one cultivator and eight labourers were evicted from the place of their residence. In Alleppy, 24 labourers had experienced eviction from the place of residence while two labourers and one cultivator were evicted from the land cultivated by them. The incidence of eviction from place of residence and land cultivated had been more in Thiruthuraipundi and Alleppy.

### **Unemployment**

Unemployment was reported only by labourers and labour-cultivators. Among the 27 labour-cultivators from Mandya, none reported unemployment. Among the 53 labour-respondents from Mandya, only one reported to be unemployed and it was for four to six days in a month. The average monthly unemployment reported by Orathnad labour-cultivators and labourers was four days and eight days, respectively; and those reported by the labour-cultivators and labourers of Thiruthuraipundi was eight and nine days, respectively. The problem of unemployment, thus, is more acute in East Thanjavur. The average monthly unemployment reported by Alleppy labourers was 20 days in a month. One is not sure whether this is an exaggerated figure, but might be considered as an indication of the seriousness of the problem in this part of Kerala.

### **Level of Living**

The gross family income of the respondents was computed by combining the earnings of all family members from different sources per month. The average monthly family income of the cultivators, labour-cultivators and labourers, respectively, was Rs. 329, Rs. 165 and Rs. 135 from Mandya; Rs. 257, Rs. 133 and Rs. 145 from Thiruthuraipundi; and Rs. 354 and Rs. 164 of the cultivators and labourers from Alleppy.

For an understanding of the level of living of the respondents, information was obtained on their daily consumption of rice or ragi, dal, vegetables and tea or coffee; weekly consumption of eggs and fish; and monthly consumption of meat. The responses to these items were scored by giving a value of 1 for a time these items were consumed within the particular unit of time. The mean scores obtained on these items from Mandya, Orathnad, Thiruthuraipundi and Alleppy were 4.47, 5.82, 5.26 and 3.95, respectively. These figures indicate that consumption of essential food items is the lowest in Alleppy and a little more in Mandya. Compared with the two areas, the respondents from Orathnad and Thiruthuraipundi have a higher level of consumption. The low level of living of such a large proportion of respondents in Alleppy was probably due to the high incidence of unemployment observed there. Again, such a low level of food consumption among Mandya respondents, despite near full employment, was probably due to the low wage rate prevailing there,

### Exposure to Mass Media

To assess respondents' exposure to mass media, their responses were sought to the following four statements, each having five levels of exposure ranging from the least to the highest possible level. These were scored by giving a value of 1 for the least level of exposure, and one extra value for each additional level.

Statements	Levels of Exposure
1. How many times during the previous year had you been to the town?	Regularly (50 times and more)/Frequently (25/49 times)/Occasionally (19/24 times)/ Sometimes (1/9 times)/Never.
2. How often have you been to the cinema in the previous year?	Never/Once or twice a year/3-11 times a year/Once or twice a month/Once* or twice a week.
3. Do you read any newspaper? If yes, how frequently?	Every day/Few days in a week/Once a week/Less than once a week/Never.
4. Do you ever listen to the radio? If so, how often?	No/Sometimes/Occasionally/Frequently/ Never.

The mean scores were 12.63 for Mandya; 10.59 for Orathnad; 9.91 for Thiruthuraipundi; and 12.43 for Alleppy. Exposure to mass media was greater among respondents from Mandya and the least among those from Orathnad and Thiruthuraipundi.

### Education

Among the respondents, 64 per cent from Mandya, 37 per cent from Orathnad, and 41 per cent from Thiruthuraipundi were illiterate. However, among the 250 Alleppy respondents, only 2 per cent were illiterate. Literacy was particularly low among the agricultural labourers--92 per cent among those from Mandya and about 60 per cent among those from Orathnad and Thiruthuraipundi. Persons with even middle-school education were negligible among the labour-respondents from Mandya and Orathnad. However, among the 171 Alleppy labourers, 19 per cent had middle-school education and 20 per cent had high-school and post-matric education.

### Political Affiliation

The parties to which the respondents were reported to be affiliated were the Communist Party of India (CPI); Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM); Indian National Congress (Congress-R), Indian National Congress (Congress-O), Kerala Congress, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK). A few respondents were not affiliated to any political party. For convenience of analysis, respondents who reported to be affiliated to CPI and CPM were classed together; similarly, those who were affiliated to DMK and ADMK were also classed together. The percentages of cultivators, labour-cultivators and labourers affiliated to different political parties are given in Table 2.

TABLE 2 : PERCENTAGE OF CULTIVATORS, LABOUR-CULTIVATORS AND LABOURERS AFFILIATED TO DIFFERENT POLITICAL PARTIES

	Mandya		Orathnad		Thiruthuraipundi		Alleppy				
	Cultiva- tor for cultiva- tor	Labour for cultiva- tor	Cultiva- tor for cultiva- tor	Labour for cultiva- tor	Cultiva- tor for cultiva- tor	Labour for cultiva- tor	Cultiva- tor for cultiva- tor	Labour for cultiva- tor			
Congress (R)	44	59	66	2	—	—	7	—	1	52	10
Congress (O)	39	22	4	48	44	53	26	15	8	—	1
Communist Parties	—	—	2	2	—	2	9	15	65	10	86
DMK and ADMK	1	—	—	46	56	45	50	70	25	1	—
Kerala Congress	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	33	1
No affiliation	16	19	26	1	—	—	2	—	—	4	2
Other parties	—	—	—	1	—	—	6	—	—	—	—
No response	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Congress (O) and Congress (R) were the two parties popular in Mandya, where a large percentage of respondents is politically neutral. Among the Orathnad respondents, Congress (O) and DMK and ADMK were popular. It may be noted that the Communist Party did not have any following, even among the labour-respondents in Mandya and Orathnad. There does not appear to be any association between occupation of the respondents and their political affiliation in these two areas.

In Thiruthuraipundi, whereas DMK and ADMK were the most popular parties with the cultivators and labour-cultivators, the Communist Party was the most popular among agricultural labourers. In Alleppy, whereas 85 per cent of the cultivators were distributed mostly between Congress (R) and Kerala Congress, 86 per cent of the labourers were affiliated to the Communist Party. Thus, it seems that there developed a close association between occupation and political affiliation in Thiruthuraipundi and Alleppy, with the cultivators and labour-cultivators gravitating towards non-leftist parties like Congress and DMK, and the labourers gravitating towards left-oriented parties like the CPI and CPM.

### Union Membership

Agricultural labourers were not organised in Mandya. Labour union activities were very weak in Orathnad also, inasmuch as among the 51 labour-respondents from this area, none was a union member. However, among the 115 labour-respondents from Thiruthuraipundi, 51 per cent reported to be subscription-paying union members and 14 per cent were union sympathisers. Among the 25 labour-cultivators from Thiruthuraipundi, only 7 per cent were union members, and no sympathisers. Earlier, it was noticed that few labour-cultivators were affiliated to the Communist Parties.

Thus, it was noticed that in the matter of political party preference and labour union membership, the labour-cultivators and labourers belonged to distinct groups.

Among the 171 labour-respondents from Alleppy, 64 per cent were union members and 21 per cent were union sympathisers. It was noticed that most of the labourers were affiliated to the Communist Party. Thus, a close association was noticed between the extent of influence of the Communist Party among the labourers, and the level of development of labour unionism among them.

The foregoing examination of the social structural characteristics of the four study areas reveals that the extent of trade unionism among agricultural labourers differed from area to area on three important counts, viz., large concentration of scheduled castes, large proportion of agricultural labourers, and the influence of the Communist Party.



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## II: AGRICULTURAL LABOUR UNIONS IN THE STUDY AREAS

In this section a brief descriptive account of the agricultural labour unions in the study areas of Alleppy (Kerala) and Thanjavur (Tamil Nadu) is given. Since, as stated in section I, there were no agricultural labour unions in Mandya district (Karnataka), the narrative in this section is confined only to Alleppy and Thanjavur. In other words, the inclusion of Mandya in the study served as the control so that the developments and the impact of the agricultural labour unions in the other study areas could be put in a comparative frame of reference.

### ALLEPPY

Alleppy was the place where, for the first time, the agricultural labourers were organised into unions. There are three unions of agricultural labourers in this district and a brief account of each of them is given below:

#### 1. Travancore Agricultural Labour Union

By the third decade of the twentieth century, many important social and political developments had taken place in Alleppy. Education had reached the scheduled and backward castes. Newspapers and periodicals brought new ideas and values into the society. However, there was resistance from those in power to accept changes. Practices like the observance of untouchability, prohibition of members of depressed communities from public employment, etc. made leaders of castes like Izhavas and Pulayas to launch struggles for advancing their interests. *Shri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yagam* (SNDP) was formed by Izhavas; *Pulayar Maha Sabha* was formed by Pulayas, to conduct these struggles. The Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, opening the doors of public temples to members of backward and scheduled castes was the outcome of these struggles and represented a watershed in the social history of the region. After this achievement, the attention of these depressed people turned towards realization of political equality. In 1932, the Christians, Izhavas and Muslims came together in the Joint Political Congress, aimed at gaining responsible government and agitated for the achievement of adult franchise and 'responsible' government in Travancore.<sup>1</sup>

The thirties also witnessed the emergence of leftist political groups in Kerala. In Travancore, the radically oriented Youth League was formed in 1931. This group, working as a camouflage for the Communist Party of India (CPI), tried to organise labourers and peasants.<sup>2</sup>

The international communist movement, particularly Comintern, had already recognised the importance of Indian peasantry and had, in 1926, set up a special section of the Krestintern (Comintern's Peasant International) to carry on work among Indian peasants. The mandate of the Party in this

respect was that "The Party is not the only organisation of the working class. The proletariat has also a number of other organisations, without which it cannot properly wage the struggle against capitalism. These are trade unions, cooperative societies, factory workers' organisations, parliamentary groups, non-party women's associations, youth leagues, revolutionary fighting organisations (in times of open revolutionary action), etc.... The overwhelming majority of these organisations are non-party and only a certain part of them adhere directly to the Party, or represent its off-shoots. All these organisations, under certain conditions, are absolutely necessary for the working class".<sup>3</sup> Such mass organisations were conceived to act as transmission belts for bringing about revolutionary consciousness among the working class.<sup>4</sup> Guided by such a strategy, the communists started their activities in many parts of South India such as Alleppy, Malabar, Coimbatore, Salem, Tiruchirapalli, Thanjavur.

The centre of industrial activities in Travancore was Alleppy and this was the reason for the convergence of the leftist political workers on Alleppy. The Travancore Labour Association, the first labour union, was organised at Alleppy as early as in 1922. Initially, the union was led by social workers, but by the thirties it came into leftist hands and soon Alleppy became the centre of labour union and political activities.

*Origin of the Union.* By the end of the thirties, the economic difficulties caused by the Second World War were deepening and they aggravated the precarious food situation in Travancore. To cope with this, the state government introduced compulsory procurement of paddy from farmers and rationing of food items. Since agricultural labourers were receiving their wages in kind, they were excluded from the purview of rationing. However, because of the sharp increase in the price of paddy, farmers preferred payment of wages in cash and this created considerable difficulties to the labourers. At this critical moment in 1938, the Communist Party entered the scene with union message. The anxiety of the backward and scheduled castes, particularly the Izhavas and Pulayas, to move up in the social ladder; the prevailing political atmosphere; the deepening economic crisis; the achievements of the coir factory workers in the neighbouring Alleppy town were all the factors which motivated agricultural labourers to respond to the call for unionisation.

The principal organiser of the union in Alleppy was S.K. Das, a prominent labour union worker. According to him, the top leaders of the coir factory workers induced him to start organisational work among Kuttanad agricultural labourers. Under such pressure, Das called a meeting of agricultural labourers at Pallathuruthy near Alleppy in September, 1939 where a committee with him as convener was elected. Thus was born the Travancore Karshaka Thozailali Union (Travancore Agricultural Labour Union)<sup>5</sup>.

The history of this union, to a great extent, is the history of the Communist Party in rural areas of Alleppy. The union was conceived and in reality functioned as an organ of the Communist Party. The workers of the Party

visited various parts of Alleppy, met agricultural labourers individually and in groups, and exhorted them to form branches of the union. Very often, agricultural labourers warmly responded to the call for unionisation. In this connection, the following experience was reported by Das. Once he met a group of Christian Pulayas working as agricultural labourers and exhorted them to form their union. At the end of the meeting, the labourers were so much convinced of the cause that they concluded the meeting with prayers to protect "the messenger sent by Him" from the attacks of local landlords. Within a decade, the union could establish its branches in many parts of Alleppy.

In the early stages, the union activities were conducted clandestinely as the CPI was under ban. However, by 1939, the situation became more favourable for union activities and the Travancore Agricultural Labour Union was registered as a trade union in 1940. Besides S.K. Das, Verghese Vaidyan and K.M. George also played important roles in organising labourers in Alleppy. Many of these leaders belonged to wealthy middle caste families.

*Activities.* In the early stages, the activities of the Labour Union were aimed at indoctrinating the labourers with radical ideology and at bringing about change in the traditional pattern of labourer-cultivator relations. Conducting study classes was an important channel for indoctrination. The classes were generally conducted at the house of some local activist. With growth of union membership, separate classes were held for male and female labourers. Printed literature, drama, poetry, and other art media, public meetings, etc. were also used for dissemination of the new ideology. Through such concerted action, the union could bring about a radical change in the ideological orientation of agricultural labourers.

Whereas radical ideology provided the normative basis for changing the traditional farmer-labourer relation, many struggles were waged for its actual realisation. According to information available to us, the union conducted the first struggle in 1941 demanding the fixation of working hours, provision of a brief interval at noon, and use of standard measures for paying wages in kind. As farmers were not willing to accept these demands, the union organised 'strikes'. This action finally led to the granting of half-an-hour's rest for labourers at noon. This was the time when the farmers were so powerful that they used to beat the labourers, evict them from places of their residence, and harass them in many other ways. However, the radical ideology taught by the Communist Party provided them the necessary courage to withstand such oppressions and successfully conduct their struggles.

In 1947, the union participated, along with other communist organisations, in the political insurrections that the CPI conducted at Pumapra and Vayalar in the coastal area of Alleppy. Following this, the Party and all its associated organisations were banned. The registration of the union was cancelled, its offices were sealed, and its records were seized and destroyed. Thereafter, it was only in 1952 that the union could resume its activities publicly.

During the harvesting season of 1952, the union organised meetings and processions in various parts of Alleppy demanding a two-fold increase in the daily wages, and an increase in the wage for harvesting from one-twelfth to one-eleventh of the produce. Following this, a tripartite conference was held wherein it was agreed to increase the daily wage of women from two and a half measures (Idangazies) to three measures of paddy. However, the agreement could not be implemented immediately due to the reluctance of certain large farmers to pay the agreed rates. This made the union declare a strike in the fields of two of the leading farmers (Poopally Kutty and Akkarakalathil Appachan) at Nedumudy in Kuttanad. In the course of the strike, several labourers and their leaders were arrested, imprisoned, and brutally treated by the police.

There was again a struggle at the harvesting time of 1953. Following this a tripartite conference was held at which it was decided that (i) wage of a woman labourer would be three standard measures of paddy; (ii) working hours in *Kayal* (reclaimed fields away from village settlements) would be seven hours and in village settlements eight hours; and (iii) there would be half-an-hour's rest at noon. It was also agreed that farmers and labourers would solve their disputes through mutual consultations.

In 1954, the union participated in a struggle conducted by the Communist Party, demanding land reforms and immediate settlement of all landless agricultural labourers.

In 1954, the union conducted an important and prolonged struggle against Thoman Joseph Murikkan, a farmer with the largest holding in Alleppy, as he was not willing to pay the three hundred labourers in his employment at the rate agreed to at the tripartite conference of 1953. Demanding the payment of wages at the agreed rates, the union declared a strike in his fields in addition to a *satyagraha* in front of Murikkan's house. It was conducted from a flotilla formed with country boats, as the police did not allow labourers to squat on the land in front of his house. About hundred selected men and women volunteers conducted the *satyagraha* for 18 days. This compelled Murikkan to come to terms with the union and pay the labourers at the agreed rates. This incident had a big impact as it brought home to the labourers that through their collective action, they could make even the most powerful farmer in Kuttanad come to terms with them.

During harvest time labourers were given a sheaf as maintenance allowance (*Theerpu*) on every third day of work. In 1955, the union demanded that a sheaf should be given as *Theerpu* on every alternate day. The demand was first made to K.M. Kora, a leading farmer and till then the Minister for Agriculture in the state cabinet. As he refused to comply with the demand, a strike was declared in his field. When labourers picketed the workers who wanted to work, the farmer brought a large posse of police who arrested about 70 men and women labourers and their leaders. It was reported that on this

occasion the police resorted to very brutal beating of labourers, particularly those who were arrested and taken to prison. However, the union held fast and defeated the attempt of the farmer to resume harvesting. After making vain attempts for a few days to get his fields harvested, Kora agreed to pay *Theerpu* in accordance with the demand of the union. Soon, other farmers also had to pay *Theerpu* at this rate.

After the General Election in 1957, a Communist government came to power in Kerala. Till this time, the custom in the eastern part of Kuttanad was to pay one-eleventh of the harvested paddy as wage for harvesting. In that year the union demanded that the rate for harvesting should be increased to one-ninth of the harvested grain and organised strikes to press the demand. Farmers opposed the demand and tried to harvest the fields with loyal workers, fellow farmers and members of their families. This was opposed by the union and the resulting conflict led to the eruption of large-scale violence in many parts of Kuttanad. The Communist government fixed one-ninth of the produce as the minimum wage for harvesting under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. In 1958, the union demanded daily wages at Re. 1 for female labourer and Rs. 2.50 for male labourer. The union also demanded that the working time should be reduced from eight to six hours. The farmers agreed to pay the increased wage rates, but opposed the latter demand. However, the union decided that working hours would be between 9 a.m. to 12 noon and from 2.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. The union appointed its agents in different parts of Kuttanad to show red flags at these hours so that workers could start and stop work at the fixed hours. Labourers who worked beyond the fixed hours were 'punished' by union leaders. Even though farmers opposed the showing of red flags in their fields, soon it became a common symbol in Kuttanad.

The union demanded higher wage rates every year and practically every year it was able to achieve some increase in wages. In 1970, wages were Rs. 3.75 for a female worker and Rs. 6.50 for a male worker. Farmers felt that the wage rates were very high; but because of their dependence on labour for paddy cultivation, they had to concede the demands of labourers. Such demands were often accompanied by strikes and violence, sometimes resulting in loss of human life. By 1974, the wage rates reached the peak level of Rs.8 for a male worker. Wage for harvesting was increased to one-seventh of the produce in 1974; it was further raised to one-sixth in 1975—all under the threat of a strike.

In late fifties, there were attempts by farmers to introduce tractors in Kuttanad. But this was opposed by labourers, especially the Kuttanad Uzhayu Thozilali Union (Plougher's Union), an affiliate of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)--(CPM). In 1962, the union brought before the Kuttanad Industrial Relations Committee (IRC), a resolution prohibiting the introduction of tractors in Kuttanad. After much deliberation, the IRC

decided that "those who have their own tractors can plough their land with tractors. But taking into consideration the benefits of ploughing with animals, and the employment it provides to labourers, farmers should avoid the use of tractors. At the same time, the traditional ploughers should plough the fields properly, and on this expectation it is decided that under no condition should tractor be used in Kuttanad".

In 1964, the representatives of farmers again took up the issue of ploughing with tractors before the IRC on the ground that there was a shortage of animals and that the quality of ploughing with animals had deteriorated so much that it did not remove the weeds. After protracted investigation, the IRC found that there was a shortage of animals for ploughing the fields, and on that ground, it was resolved to allow farmers to do the first ploughing of the dry fields with tractors, subject to the condition that after this the farmers would plough the dry field once and, subsequently the wet field two times with animals. However, even after this decision, the union opposed the introduction of tractors and farmers could not make much progress in mechanisation of ploughing. The practice at present is that if a farmer wants to get his fields ploughed with tractors, he has to pay adequate 'compensation' to the 'plougher' for loss of work to him.

For a long time, the union was demanding an enactment providing for a certain amount of social security for agricultural labourers. It was in response to this that the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act was enacted in 1974. It provided for security of employment, regulation of hours of work and wages, introduction of provident fund scheme, and provision for settlement of labour-cultivator disputes.

After the split of the Communist Party of India into CPI and CPM in 1964, the Travancore Agricultural Labourers Union came under the leadership of the CPM. A peculiar feature of the split was that while many of the founder leaders of the union remained with the CPI, majority of the members accepted the leadership of the CPM.

*Formation of State-Level Union.* Before Independence, Agricultural Labour Union was the main agrarian organisation of the Communist Party in Travancore area, while the Kerala Karshaka Sangham comprising the tenants and agricultural labourers was its counterpart in Cochin and Malabar areas.

In 1957, and 1965, land reform laws containing radical provisions were enacted in Kerala. These laws facilitated the erstwhile tenants becoming the owners of land rented in by them. The transformation of erstwhile tenants into landowners created a kind of contradiction in the interests of the tenant and labour members of the Karshaka Sangham. While these reforms substantially improved the conditions of the tenants, similar benefits did not pass on to the labourers. The newly emerged peasant proprietors were not willing to pay the labourers wages at rates more than what was customary. At the same time the labourers were getting inspired by the increase in wages and

reduction in working hours achieved by their counterparts in Alleppy. Such a situation prompted the leaders of the CPM to organise the agricultural labourers separately, <sup>6</sup> and following it, a new organisation called the Kerala State Karshaka Thozilali Union (Kerala State Agricultural Labour Union) was formed in 1969 with Alleppy as its headquarters.

The union soon established its branches in all districts of the state save Idukki. Union membership grew fast, and between 1970 and 1973, it increased from 44,188 to 1,98,000 representing a 348 per cent increase. Till 1970, the largest membership was from Alleppy, but by 1973, this distinction was taken by Palghat, where there was a fourfold increase in union membership during this period.

Among the 171 labour-respondents, 146 were union members and sympathisers. Among these, as many as 108 belonged to Travancore Agricultural Labour Union. This is indicative of its dominant position and wide influence among the labourers.

As quoted earlier, the Communist Party had conceived Agricultural Labour Unions and other mass organisations as transmission belts for propagating its ideology. It aimed at achieving this through day-to-day struggles over economic issues. As a result, one could draw a distinction between the long-term and short-term objectives of the activities of the Labour Union. A lucid statement of the long-term objectives of the CPM on the trade union front is given in *Tasks on the Trade Union Front*.<sup>7</sup> It was envisaged here that "Our tasks on the trade union front are directly linked with our political objectives and with the role that we assign to the working class in the struggle for people's democracy". It was believed that the workers as a class can play their historic, political class role in the people's democratic revolution if the trade union struggle where it gains its initial consciousness, trains them, disciplines and raises their consciousness to discharge their political obligations. Therefore, the party wanted the union to organise a disciplined working class with revolutionary socialist consciousness, drawing it nearer the Party, with its best elements joining the Party in hundreds, enabling the class as a whole to play its historic political role in the revolutionary struggle"<sup>8</sup>. The success of the working class movement is to be measured by the level of revolutionary consciousness it has created during the course of the struggles conducted by it. For "it is class consciousness that the Party has to gradually create in the course of the trade union struggles. It is the task in the trade union movement to lead the worker from the elementary trade union consciousness to this higher consciousness"<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the long-term objective of the CPM on the union front is to create a revolutionary class-conscious group of labourers, through whom it can achieve its broader socio-political goals.

Distinct from the long-term goals are the immediate demands which the Labour Union raises at its public meetings, annual conventions and other platforms. The immediate demands of the union are the following :



1. Wages of agricultural labourers should be increased at the rate of 10 paise for every 10-point increase in the cost of living index in Kerala.
2. The wage for harvesting should be one-sixth of the produce in all parts of the state.
3. No mechanisation should be introduced for agricultural operations.
4. The provisions of the Agricultural Labourers Act should be immediately implemented with necessary amendments as suggested by the union.
5. Surplus land should be distributed among agricultural labourers.
6. Threshing-ground should be made in the agricultural field itself.
7. Agricultural labourers should be represented in the land distribution committees.
8. Agricultural labourers should be given interest-free loans for purchasing implements.
9. Measures should be adopted for expanding handicrafts in rural areas.
10. The ring-bunds in Kuttanad should be given to agricultural labourers for housing; government should also give necessary help for building houses.
11. Agricultural labourers should be given free ration during periods of unemployment.
12. Government should prepare and publish statistics pertaining to agricultural labourers.

## 2. Kerala State Karshaka Thozilali Federation

When the CPM separated from the CPI in 1964, agricultural labourers in most parts of Alleppy joined the CPM. This compelled the CPI to build up a new organisation of agricultural labourers and, as a beginning, it organised agricultural labourers in Palghat and Alleppy. In 1968, the Party formed a state-level organisation called the Kerala State Agricultural Labour Federation to guide and coordinate the activities of the local unions. Though the Federation is not a registered body, the district and taluk-level unions are encouraged to register themselves under the Trade Union Act and to get themselves affiliated with the Kerala State Trade Union Congress, and the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), working under CPI leadership, respectively, at the state and national levels. The federation is also affiliated to the Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union (BKMU).

It was claimed by the leaders of the CPI that branches of the Kerala State Agricultural Labour Union were organised in Trivandrum, Quilon, Alleppy, Kottayam, Ernakulam and Palghat districts.

The objective of the CPI on the trade union front is to spread its ideology among the masses and to have a grip over a section of the proletariat. While this is the long-term goal, its immediate demands were :

1. Land reform laws should be immediately implemented.

2. Government should initiate a housing scheme for agricultural labourers and must build 10,000 houses every year under this scheme.
3. Surplus and waste lands should be distributed among the landless.
4. Fifty per cent of the surplus land must be distributed among agricultural labourers.
5. In order to mitigate unemployment among agricultural labourers, a second crop may be cultivated in areas suitable for it.
6. Arrangements must be made for the provision of free medical facilities for agricultural labourers.
7. Compensation should be paid for accidents and death incurred by labourers in the course of work.
8. A proportion of appointments in public sector undertakings must be reserved for agricultural labourers.
9. Women who work as agricultural labourers for a particular number of days must be given the benefits which women labourers employed in industries enjoy.
10. Agricultural labourers must be given free legal aid in their dealings with land boards.
11. Measures should be taken for giving employment for unemployed Harijan youths.
12. Permanency of rights should be given to Harijans living in Harijan colonies.
13. Government must acquire land and provide house sites to those who live on roadsides.
14. Benefits which are provided for Harijans should be extended to Harijan converts to other religions also.

The CPI is against the policy of violent agitations followed by the CPM. Its leaders think that agricultural labourers were getting disenchanted with CPM, and that many of the struggles which CPM conducted did not merit description as trade union activities, but actions similar to those of decoits. Such unjust activities were against the interests of both the labourers and the country. It was also claimed that the CPM propaganda did not match with the realities of life. It was the expectation of the CPI that with appropriate propaganda and through the vantage position it enjoyed as a leading partner of the coalition government in the state, it would be possible for it to rapidly expand its influence among the agricultural labourers of the state.

Among 146 union members and sympathisers, 31 were affiliated to Kerala State Agricultural Labour Federation.

### 3. Deseeya Karshaka Thozalali Federation

When the Travancore Agricultural Labour Union resorted to strikes in different parts of Alleppy in 1957 the Indian National Congress (Congress) took certain measures to bring at least a section of the agricultural labourers

under its fold, and formed unions of agricultural labourers in certain villages. However, after the collapse of the Communist government, the Congress did not take much interest in nurturing these unions; nor did it make serious efforts to spread union activities to other areas. However, it decided in 1973 to organise agricultural labourers and the cultivators in different parts of Kerala. Following this, the Deseeya Karshaka Thozilali Federation was formed and the task of developing an all-Kerala organisation of the agricultural labourers was entrusted to Balan, President of the Palghat District Congress Committee. Nominal organisations of agricultural labourers were formed in all districts. Coordinating the activities of the district unions at the state level is the Deseeya Karshaka Thozilali Federation (National Agricultural Labour Federation). The thinking of the leaders of the Federation was to affiliate it in course of time to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). At the time of this enquiry (1973-74), the union's activities were very nominal, confined to a few villages in Alleppy and Palghat districts.

Among the 146 Labour Union members and sympathisers, only seven were members of the Deseeya Karshaka Thozilali Federation.

An attempt was made through Chi-square statistic whether the union membership of labourers was related to their assets, level of living, caste, exposure to mass media and political party affiliation (Table 3). This analysis indicated that labourers with union membership generally belonged to backward and scheduled castes, were affiliated to CPM and CPI, and had a lower level of living. Thus, by and large, it is the labourers belonging to poorer socio-economic strata who have a greater degree of union membership.

TABLE 3 : NATURE OF ASSOCIATION BETWEEN UNION MEMBERSHIP AND CHARACTERISTICS OF LABOURERS  
(Alleppy Respondents) Percentage

Characteristics	Mem- bers	Non- Mem- bers	Total		Results of X <sup>2</sup> tests
			N	Per cent	
<i>Assets</i>					
Up to Rs. 5,000	84	16	95	100	X <sup>2</sup> —2.9 Ns.
Rs. 5,000 and more	87	13	76	100	
<i>Level of living</i>					
Low	87	13	71	100	X <sup>2</sup> —3.67; S*
High	84	16	100	100	
<i>Caste</i>					
Higher	46	54	35	100	X <sup>2</sup> —59; S*
Backward	91	9	5	100	
Scheduled	99	1	81	100	

TABLE 3—(Contd)

<i>Exposure to Mass Media</i>					
Low	81	19	93	100	$X^2=3.66$ ; S
High	91	9	78	100	
<i>Party affiliation</i>					
Kerala Congress	35	65	5	100	
Congress	—	—	—	—	
C.P.I.	91	9	34	100	
C.P.M.	95	5	114	100	

Ns—Not significant; S—Significant at 5 per cent level; S\*—Significant at 1 per cent level.

### Participation in Union Activities

Mass organisations like Labour Unions grow normally through their activities. In Alleppy, the Labour Unions particularly the Communist-controlled unions organise a number of activities like study classes, processions, public meetings, to indoctrinate their members with Communist ideology and to demonstrate their power to the community. In this connection information on a few aspects of labourers' participation in certain important activities organised by the unions was obtained. Sixty-four per cent of the labourers paid union subscription; 81 per cent contributed to special collections periodically raised by unions; 67 per cent attended meetings organised by unions; and 53 per cent participated in demonstrations and strikes organised by the unions.

Labourers made special contribution to unions, both in cash (68 per cent) and kind (4 per cent). The average annual contribution made by them exceeded Rs. 7.

The unions organised frequent public meetings, and, on an average, the labourers attended four union meetings in a year. Thirty-two per cent of the labour-respondents mentioned that they attended all the meetings held in their respective areas.

Fifty-three per cent of the labour-respondents reported participation in demonstrations. The unions conducted about three demonstrations a year.

In this connection, it may be mentioned that demonstrations, strikes and similar activities have become so common in Alleppy that one could notice even children below five years of age conducting mock demonstrations and strikes. One could hear the uttering of words like *Samaram* (struggle), *Inklab Zindabad* by three and four-year old children. Thus one notices a wide participation of labourers in union activities.

Certain questions were put to the labourers to elicit their attitude towards Labour Unions. In this connection, we sought from labourers whether the union activities had benefited them individually and had promoted the interests of their class, and whether they would be willing to suffer imprisonment for adhering to union instructions. Details of the replies obtained to these questions are given in Table 4. It was noticed that almost all the labourers who

had a union in their village favourably perceived the union activities. Eighty-three per cent of them perceived that union activities had benefited them both individually and as a class. It was also noteworthy that 78 per cent of the labourers were prepared, at least verbally, to go to jail for adhering to union instructions. Labourers with a negative attitude towards union were extremely few. All this indicates a very high level of commitment of labourers to the labour unions.

TABLE 4 : OPINIONS OF LABOURERS ON UNION ACTIVITIES  
(Alleppy Respondents)

Questions	Responses				Total (N=171)
	Yes	No	No Response	No Union	
1. Do you think that the activities of the union had benefitted you?	83	2	0	15	100
2. Do you think that the activities of the union are useful in promoting the interests of your class?	83	2	0	15	100
3. Will you be prepared to go to jail adhering to the instructions of your organisation?	78	3	4	15	100

#### THANJAVUR

In Thanjavur (Tamil Nadu) the agricultural labourers are well organised in Thiruthuraipundi and there are five unions. In Orathnad, the unions remained only as formal ones without having conducted any type of agitation for advancing the interests of labourers in that area. Therefore, the descriptive account of the origin and activities of the labour unions given below relates to those in Thiruthuraipundi.

#### 1. Thanjavur Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham

By the thirties of the twentieth century, industrial labour organised itself in Madras city and other industrial centres in the Presidency. The importance of organising agricultural labourers and tenants, who constituted a significant segment of the rural population, was recognised by political parties. Consequently, some leaders of the Indian National Congress (Congress) like N.G. Ranga, made attempts to organise peasants in certain parts of the Madras Presidency<sup>10</sup>. However, their organisational work among the peasants was not fully appreciated by some top leaders of the party who felt that the peasants should be organised within the Congress, but not separately and preferred postponement of certain of their demands for economic reform until Independence had been won.<sup>11</sup> This resulted in the Congress adopting an ambivalent attitude towards the problems of tenants and agricultural labourers in Thanjavur.

The Communist Party made attempts in many parts of the Presidency such as Malabar, Coimbatore, Salem, Tiruchirapalli, Thanjavur to organise the tenants and agricultural labourers. In Thanjavur the activities of the Congress and Dravida Kazhagam for the upliftment of scheduled castes had already created some awakening among the tenants and labourers and made some of them conscious of their problems. It was in such a situation that the Communist workers entered Thanjavur with a radical message under the leadership of A.K. Gopalan, and supported by B. Srinivasa Rao and Manali Kannaswamy. Thenparai village in Mannargudi taluk was the first to respond to their call for forming an organisation of tenants and agricultural labourers.

In Thenparai, all the lands were owned by Thenparai and Panchatur *Mutt*s (Temples), and were cultivated by share-croppers who received 20 per cent of the produce. The ill-treatment meted out to the tenants and agricultural labourers by the temple authorities made a political worker of the village, Nattanikar Govindan, to welcome the Communist leaders to his village. The leaders canvassed their ideology among the *Kisans* and exhorted them to fight for a higher share of the produce and a higher wage. Most of the tenants and labourers in the village responded to this call and about 200 of them signed their names in a register and pledged their willingness to form an association. Based on this initiative, an organisation called the Share Croppers Association was formed at Thenparai in 1939. Soon after its formation, the Association made three demands on the temple authorities: (1) abolition of serfdom (bonded labour); (2) increase in wages; and (3) increase in tenants' share of the produce. The temple authorities responded to the formation of the association by intimidating its members through *goondas*. However, the Association continued with its demands and resorted to a strike. This was the time of the Second World War, and to avoid the adverse effects of the strike on agricultural production, the district officials asked the temple authorities to grant some increase in wages, and tenants' share of the produce. However, rather than accepting this suggestion, the temple authorities tried to break the strike by evicting the tenants and threatening to leave the fields fallow. This was followed by an attempt to get the fields ploughed by labourers from the nearby villages. However, the union leaders gathered a large posse of labourers and forced the 'outsiders' to withdraw. In the meanwhile, police and other government officials arrived and ordered the temple authorities to enhance the wage rates from one measure to one-and-a-quarter measure of paddy and to increase the share of the tenant in the produce from 20 to 25 per cent. Thus, the labourers and the tenants tasted, for the first time, the fruit of their collective action. This incident gave a fillip to the activities of the Association and led to rapid expansion of its branches in several parts of Mannargudi and Thiruthurai pundi taluks. It was mentioned that at most of these places, the Association encountered strong opposition from the landowners (*Mirasdhars*), leading to clashes between labourers and landowners.

[The choice of the Communist Party to call the movement as the Share Croppers Association was deliberate. The strategy was to achieve some measure of influence first among the tenants belonging to lower middle castes rather than among labourers belonging to the scheduled castes. They believed that from this vantage point, it would be easier to extend their influence to the labourers. Moreover, the Party did not like to be exclusively identified with the scheduled castes to whom most of the labourers belonged, as it had the possibility of giving it an image of being a scheduled caste organisation.

Between 1939 and 1940, strikes were conducted at several places in East Thanjavur under the auspices of the Share Croppers Association for achieving higher wages and higher share of the produce. In 1940, the government appointed the District Judge, Thanjavur, to arbitrate in the wage dispute between the labourers and the cultivators. In the court, the judge offered seats to representatives of both parties, including some labour leaders belonging to scheduled castes. The judge's treatment of cultivators and labourers as equals gave a tremendous boost to the morale of the labourers. After hearing both the parties, the judge awarded a higher wage for the labourers.

In 1943, the name of the Association was changed into *Tamil Nadu Vyavasayigal Sangam* (Tamil Nadu Cultivators' Association). In 1944, the Association demanded the abolition of bonded labour and liquidation of indebtedness. By custom, a labourer became the *Pannai Adimai* (bonded labour) of a farmer for receipt of certain benefits such as a place to build his hut, by agreeing to work for the latter throughout his life for a low wage. The labourers also took loans from their employers for celebration of certain ceremonies like marriage. This loan, called *Sugantha Kadam*, also tied them to a particular farmer. The Sangham demanded the abolition of bonded labour (*Adimai Sasanam*) and the writing off of the debts (*Sugantha Kadam*) of agricultural labourers. However, *Mirasdhars* strongly opposed these demands and many of them harassed labourers for making such demands. The Sangham also demanded that the inhuman forms of punishment like labourers being whipped and made to drink cowdung solution should be stopped. It also demanded that tenants should be entitled to a higher share of the produce and they should have the right to set threshing grounds at places convenient for them. It was also demanded that the sharing of the produce between the tenant and the landowner should be done on the threshing floor, instead of the tenant delivering it at the landowner's house.

The Sangham conducted several agitations to press the above demands and they led to the signing of two agreements by the representatives of the farmers and the labourers. The first agreement was signed in the presence of the Assistant District Superintendent of Police in 1944, at Kalappal, and its provisions were as follows :

1. Wage rate of a *Pannaiyal* would be two measures of paddy.
2. The practice of whipping of labourers with *chatta* (whip) and making them drink cowdung solution would be stopped.

3. Tenants can utilise threshing floors wherever they exist near a field.
4. For harvesting, casual labourers would be paid at the rate of three-fourths of a *Marakkal* for one *Kalam* (54 *Marakkals*) of paddy, in addition to one *Marakkal* of paddy paid on every working day.

The second agreement also was signed in 1944 at Mannargudi in the presence of the District Collector and the District Superintendent of Police. Its conditions were as follows :

1. The daily wage rate of a *Pannaiyal* would be three *Marakkals* (1½ *Madras Paddies*) of paddy.
2. Apart from the daily rates, the *Pannaiyals* would be paid one-seventh of the produce of a field, for the cultivation of which they were engaged.
3. Measurement of wages paid in kind would be with standard measures.
4. On receiving the rent, the landowner would give receipt to the tenant at the threshing floor itself.

In 1946, there was again a wage dispute between the farmers and the labourers. This dispute was settled through arbitration by the District and Sessions Judge, Thanjavur, wherein he awarded some increase in the wage rate of the labourers.

On the eve of India's Independence, there was a change in the policy of the Communist Party of India. Following its Second Congress at Calcutta in February, 1948, B.T. Ranadive became its secretary. It was concluded at the Congress that "a revolutionary upsurge was in motion in India and that the final phase of the revolution, the phase of 'armed clashes' had arrived".<sup>12</sup> Following adoption of this policy, the Party conducted armed insurrections in some parts of the country including Thanjavur. In Thanjavur, the agricultural labourers and peasants struck work for several weeks in 1948, and the granaries of a few rich farmers were pillaged, and arson on a large scale was perpetrated. In the course of the struggle, the CPI established its hegemony in some villages for a few weeks. In Thanjavur, landlords, police and bureaucrats remained in the area but obeyed the orders of the village committees (Communist).<sup>13</sup>

Following the insurrection, the Communist Party and its organs like the *Vyavasaya Sangham* were banned in the state. Most of its leaders were arrested, its offices were sealed and records and other materials confiscated. One union leader, Kadapal Kuppa, was sentenced to death. Following his death in jail, there were strikes and eruption of violence in many parts of East Thanjavur and, in a police firing in April 1948, one of the union leaders, Natesan, was killed. However, some top leaders like Manali Kannaswamy worked from underground spreading the activities of the Sangham to new areas like Nagapattinam, Nannilam and Mayuram.

Even though there was a ban on CPI and its Labour Union, the labourers conducted agitations in 1948 demanding higher wages. It was an evidence of the strength of the movement that its agitations compelled the farmers to



come to an agreement with the labourers on 28th October, 1948, on the following terms :

1. Pannaiyals would be paid daily wages at one *Marakkal* and women labourers at  $\frac{3}{4}$ th *Marakkal*.
2. For various harvesting operations, *Pannaiyals* would be paid one-seventh of the gross produce of the fields in which they worked.
3. Where outside labourers have harvested certain areas and the *Pannaiyals* certain other areas, the latter would get  $1\frac{1}{2}$  *Marakkals* out of a produce of 14 *Marakkals* as their share (*Kalavadi*) irrespective of the wage paid to outside labourers.
4. To prevent the *Pannaiyals* from working elsewhere and claiming their share, a penalty of two *Marakkals* for each day of wilful absence during the harvest season would be deducted out of their entitlements.
5. Each *Pannaiyal* would get as his share, the yield of not more than one *Veli* ( $6\frac{2}{3}$ rd acres) of land.
6. For *Poradi*, *Pannaiyals* would be paid only daily wages at one *Marakkal* and they should finish the *Poradi* work at this rate.
7. *Pannaiyals* would be given *Maniams* according to custom.

During the General Election of 1952, the Communist Party contested for 12 seats in the State Legislative Assembly from Thanjavur district. Even though the party was still under ban, it captured six seats and emerged as the second largest party in the district. The Communist victory in many constituencies prompted the Congress government to adopt certain measures which would improve the conditions of the tenants and agricultural labourers in the district and it led to the enactment of the Tanjore Tenants and *Pannaiyal* Protection Act, 1952.<sup>14</sup> The Act provided for fixity of tenure, regulation of rent at 60 per cent of the produce, which could be paid either in kind at the threshing floor or in cash, as it suited the tenant. For regulating the farmer-labourer relation, the Act laid down that whenever a *Pannaiyal* was dismissed from service, compensation had to be paid by the farmer to the labourer.

Following the Act, the *Pannaiyals* were evicted on a large scale by paying the compensation. This hastened the transformation of the traditional *Pannaiyals* into *Padiyals* (free labourers)—almost the opposite of the result expected of the Act. In this connection it might be mentioned that in the traditional situation, the *Pannaiyals* enjoyed certain privileges in their relation with the farmers, such as a share (usually one-seventh) of the produce of the field cultivated with their labour. In such a situation, their status was somewhere between that of a casual labourer and a share-cropper. However, neither the leaders of Vyavasaya Sangham nor government were conscious of and concerned with the protection of these rights. As a result, the *Pannaiyals* were lumped with the free labourers, and without getting adequate compensation, they lost the small privileges that they enjoyed in their relation with the farmers. So far as the share-croppers were concerned, there was no such loss resulting from the Act.

It seems that some conflict of interest developed between the tenants and agricultural labourers after the enactment of the Thanjavur Tenants and Pannaiyals Protection Act. The mitigation of their problems seems to have reduced the interest of the tenants in the Vyavasaya Sangham. It seems to be the reason for the division of the Sangham in 1956 into *Vyvasayigal Sangham* (Cultivators' Association) and *Vyvasaya Thozilar Sangham* (Agricultural Labourers' Association). Despite the division, both the Associations continued to work under CPI leadership and in many places under the same leader. This facilitated their continued cooperation and also prevented the drifting of the labourers and cultivators into two antagonistic groups.

After the enactment of the Tanjore Tenants and Pannaiyal Protection Act, there was some peace on the agrarian front. Major agrarian unrests again erupted in 1961 on account of CPI's agitations demanding ceiling on a family's landholding at 15 standard acres. It was reported that during the course of the agitation, about 16,000 workers were arrested.

The 1964 split in the Communist Party led to a split in the Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham, also. The leadership of the Sangham in most parts of Thanjavur came into CPI's hands. The CPM became popular in Nagapattinam taluk where it organised its activities with Tiruvarur as its headquarters.

The Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham conducted agitations in different parts of East Thanjavur in 1965 and 1966 for increase in wage rates. In 1967 also it conducted agitations for higher wages. These agitations led to the signing of an agreement between the leaders of the labourers and the cultivators at Mannargudi on 8th August, 1967 in the presence of the District Collector. Its main provisions were the following :

1. The wage for harvesting would be calculated with reference to the rates prevalent in the previous year.
2. In areas where the prevailing rate was less than six *Marakkals* for harvesting one *Kalam* (54 *Marakkals*) of paddy, the wage would be increased by half a *Marakkal*.
3. There would be no increase in wage in areas where the wage was six *Marakkals* of paddy for harvesting one *Kalam* of paddy.
4. There would be no reduction in the prevailing wage for harvesting in any area.
5. Imported labour could be utilised for harvesting provided local labourers are also used.
6. If any dispute over wage rates or employment arose, it would be referred to the local Tahsildar for settlement.

A special feature of the 1967 agreement was that it did not contain any special provision for the *Pannaiyals*. This was mainly due to the disappearance of the *Pannaiyals* as a class, which happened, as was noted earlier, without any corresponding gain for them.

The Labour Union conducted agitations in 1968 also for higher wages. This led to the signing of an agreement at Tiruvarur on 8th June, 1968. According to it, the wage rate of men was increased to six litres of paddy and Re. 1, total money value coming to Rs 2.68; and that of women to 5 litres of paddy and paise 25, total money value coming to Rs 1.65. It was also agreed that farmers had the right not to employ recalcitrant, inefficient and lazy labourers, and that farmers could employ 'outside labourers' on occasions when local labourers were insufficient or not willing to do the work.

Even though the Mannargudi and Tiruvarur agreements provided higher wage rates for harvesting and other agricultural operations, there were still agitations in different parts of East Thanjavur. These were either engineered by the CPI and the CPM to capture leadership of the labourers or because of the unwillingness of farmers in certain areas to pay the higher rates agreed to by them earlier. The CPM repudiated the Tiruvarur agreement entered into by the Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham of CPI with the representatives of farmers and started agitations in certain areas on Nagapattinam taluk demanding higher wages. The Vyavasaya Sangham declared a strike in Kilvenmani village for achieving higher wages. The local farmers opposed the strike under the leadership of the Paddy Producers' Association (farmers' organisation), and tried to harvest the fields with the help of farmers from the nearby villages. This was opposed by the labourers, and in the conflict that followed, one of the volunteers of the Paddy Producers' Association was killed on the 25th December, 1968. It was a measure of the antagonism of the labourers towards the farmers that the body of the dead person was chopped into pieces and hanged from a tree. The cultivators did not take kindly to this. They mustered their strength and in the night attacked the Harijan Cheri where the labourers lived. Most of the adult males escaped the attack, but those who could not, huddled themselves into a hut, which was set on fire, burning to death 42 persons.

Following this tragedy, the District Collector immediately sanctioned a marginal increase in wage rates. The Tamil Nadu government appointed Ganapatia Pillai, a retired High Court judge, as one-man commission to inquire into the problems of agricultural labourers in East Thanjavur and to recommend suitable measures for their amelioration. The Commission recommended higher wages for various agricultural operations,<sup>15</sup> and these were enforced in the six taluks of East Thanjavur through the Tamil Nadu Agricultural Labourers Fair Wages Act, 1969. These were in force for a period of three years and came to an end in August, 1972. The representatives of the labourers and the farmers negotiated a new agreement on 13th August, 1972 in the presence of the Agriculture Minister, by which the wage rates were enhanced to six litres of paddy and Rs. 1.50 or Rs 3.70 for men and five litres of paddy and paise 50 or Rs 2.25 for women.<sup>16</sup> Then on, the Labour Unions and Farmers Associations were able to make wage settlements every year.

Wage rates prevalent in East Thanjavur are the highest in the whole of Tamil Nadu. It is an indication of the strength of the movement that East Thanjavur was exempted from the purview of the Committee for the Revision of Minimum Wages for Agricultural Workers in Tamil Nadu, appointed in 1972.<sup>17</sup>

The Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham had a membership of about 45,000 in 1973 which was only 200 in 1939 when it was started.

According to the union leaders, the main goal of the union was to spread Communist ideology among the labourers and to win their sympathy and commitment for the creation of a new social order. Within this broad objective, are a number of other objectives like the elimination of caste oppression, increase in wages, distribution of surplus and vacant land to the landless, improvement of the working conditions of the labourers, etc. The demands made by the Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union at its meeting held at Tenali in 1974, could be considered as indicating the special goals which the union wants to achieve. They were :<sup>18</sup>

1. Immediate enactment and implementation of revised minimum wages by the Central and State Governments.
2. Amendment of existing land legislation of the Land Reform Panel of the National Commission of Agriculture and the Nine-man Committee of the AICC; i.e., restrict the land ceiling to not more than 10 to 15 acres of land with assured irrigation.
3. Land held by high officials, monopolists, big landlords and other affluent persons of the town should be distributed among agricultural and landless peasants.
4. Lands unutilised by plantations should be taken over for distribution.
5. All *benami* transactions and other methods adopted by landlords to evade ceiling laws should be nullified. The date of giving retrospective effect to the law should not be later than July, 1969.
6. All land reform laws should be included in the Nineteenth Schedule of the Constitution.
7. All ceiling laws must be implemented by December 31, 1974.
8. Popular Committees, with representatives of agricultural workers and poor peasants, vested with statutory powers to enforce ceiling laws and distribute surplus land, should be constituted.
9. All government land including land grabbed by landlords from agricultural workers and poor peasants must be distributed.
10. All outstanding debts of agricultural workers and landless people must be cancelled and they must be given cheap credit for cultivation of lands given to them.
11. The Untouchability Offence (Amendment) Bill pending before the Parliament should be enacted with suitable changes to make the law more effective in the fight against the practice of untouchability.

12. Social boycott should be declared a cognizable offence and exemplary punishment should be given to the organisers and abettors of such crimes.

These demands, though raised at a conference of agricultural labourers, are related more to the needs of small peasants and tenants than to the problems of agricultural labourers. It is interesting that, of the 12 demands, only two touched upon the immediate needs of agricultural labourers. No specific reference has been made about the adequacy or otherwise of the minimum wages prevailing in different parts of the country. Such an attitude, probably may be due to the ambivalence of the national leadership to problems of agricultural labourers. Or it may be due to the anxiety of CPI leaders to carry both small cultivators and agricultural labourers with the party, in which case the demand for higher wages cannot be overemphasised. Despite such ambiguity at the all-India level, the activities of the union have contributed to an all-round improvement of the living conditions of agricultural labourers in East Thanjavur.

Among the 115 labour-respondents from Thiruthuraipundi, 59 were subscription paying members and 16 were union sympathisers. Among these 75, 69 were either members or sympathisers of the CPI union. This, in a way, indicates the predominant influence of the Thanjavur Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham among the agricultural labourers in this area.

## 2. Thanjavur District Vyavasaya Sangham

After the separation of the CPM from the CPI in 1964, the CPM made strenuous endeavours to organise agricultural labourers and tenants in Thanjavur. It is the national policy of the CPM that both tenants and agricultural labourers should be organised under the same agency (except in Kerala). Following this policy, the labourers' and tenants' organisations under its leadership were amalgamated to become the Thanjavur Vyavasaya Sangham (Thanjavur Agricultural Association). At the time of its formation in 1964, the Sangham claimed a membership of 20,000 and it increased to 34,000 in 1967; 50,000 in 1970 and 48,000 in 1973. It was reported to have established 11 taluk and 650 village units in the district.

However, it was noted that among the 75 labour respondents who were either members or sympathisers of Labour Unions, only eight were affiliated to the Thanjavur District Vyavasaya Sangham.

The Vyavasaya Sangham has been collaborating with other unions in conducting strikes and negotiating agreements with farmers' organisations. Its demands are radical, and its policy has been to resort to violence wherever it thought it could succeed. Following such a strategy, the Sangham in December, 1968, repudiated the agreement arrived at between the labourers and farmers and conducted a strike at Kilvenmani leading to the Kilvenmani tragedy already referred to earlier. Similarly, in 1973, the Association disowned

the agreement arrived at between the Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham (CPI) and the farmers. However, as the state government had built up an elaborate police network in East Thanjavur to nip any violence arising from agrarian unrest in the bud itself, the Sangham could not repeat what it could achieve at Kilvenmani in December, 1968. One could observe considerable secrecy in the activities of the Sangham.

### 3. Dravida Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham

The Dravida Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham was formed in 1952, following the decision of the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) founded by Ramaswamy Naicker to organise agricultural labourers. Naicker believed that the main problem of agricultural labourers arose not from their economic backwardness but from their lower caste status and, therefore, the attention of a Labour Union should be towards removing caste discrimination practised by *Mirasdhars*, most of whom were Brahmins. Thus, Naicker gave a new dimension to the Agricultural Labour unions in that he made them to fight against the Brahmins in rural areas.

In Thanjavur, the Dravida Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham was first organised at Nagammiar Padipagam, Nagapattinam taluk, in 1952. The leaders of the DK claimed a membership of 40,000 for the Sangham, which was open to all non-Brahmins aged 18 years and more, irrespective of occupation.

However, among the respondents, none was a member of the Dravida Vyavasaya Thozilar Sangham, creating doubts in one about the veracity of the large membership claimed for the union.

The union seldom took initiative to start agitations for enhancing wages and promoting other interests of agricultural labourers. It believed that as the distinction between agricultural labourers and small cultivators was only marginal, labourers should try for amicable settlement of their disputes with cultivators, through discussions within the union itself. Some of the current demands of the union are :

1. Government should pay market price for the paddy it procures.
2. The variation in water rates charged in East and West Thanjavur taluks should be done away with.
3. As cash crops yield a higher profit, labourers should be paid a higher wage for working for the cultivation of cash crops.
4. Government should extend accident benefit scheme to agricultural labourers.
5. The wages of *Pannaiyals* should be increased by 50 per cent.

From all accounts, this union appeared to be a dormant organisation.

### 4. Dravida Vyavasaya Thozilar Munnetra Sangham

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) has been in power in Tamil Nadu since 1967. Since 1970, the party made attempts to organise the agricultural labourers under its fold and, as a first step, started the Dravida Vyavasaya

Thozilar Munnetra Sangham in 1971. A branch of this union was started at Agarakadambagnur in Nagapattinam. The union claims a membership of about 4,000 in Thanjavur district. However, none of the labour-respondents in the sample was affiliated to this union.

The union hopes that by having both cultivators and labourers in the union, it would be possible for it to settle their disputes through discussions. As a policy, the union is opposed to labourers resorting to strikes to achieve their demands as such strikes adversely affected agricultural production. Its leaders believe that Communist Unions are conducting too many strikes to achieve their selfish political interests and, therefore, such strikes should be opposed.

### 5. Anna Dravida Vyavasaya Thozilar Munnetra Sangham

After the split of the DMK into DMK and Anna DMK in April 1973, the splinter group (ADMK) formed an Agricultural Labourers' Organisation called the Anna Dravida Vyavasaya Thozilar Munnetra Sangham in May, 1973. At the time of this enquiry, the union was in an incipient stage, but its leaders were trying to carve out a following for them in Kumbakonam, Mayuram, Thiruthurai pundi and Nagapattinam taluks.

It was observed that about half of the labour-respondents from this area were union members and sympathisers. To ascertain their distinctive characteristics Chi-square tests of association were worked out between the union membership of the labourers and their assets, level of living, caste, exposure to mass-media and party affiliation. Among these, exposure to mass-media and political party affiliation were significantly related with labourers' union membership. The nature of their relation is given in Table 5.

TABLE 5 : NATURE OF ASSOCIATION BETWEEN UNION MEMBERSHIP AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LABOURERS

[Thanjavur (Thiruthurai pundi) Respondents]

Characteristics	Union Member	Non Member	Total %	N	Results of $\chi^2$ tests
1. <i>Mass-media</i>					
Low	56	44	100	63	$\chi^2=5.73$ ; $df=1$ . $p=.05$
High	77	23	100	52	
2. <i>Party Affiliation</i>					
Communist Parties	95	5	100	74	$\chi^2=86.4$ $df=1$ $p=.01$
Non-Communist Parties	10	90	100	41	

### Participation in Union Activities

The unions have been organising different kinds of activities, such as conducting of study classes, public meetings, processions and sometimes strikes. In this connection, a few questions were put to the labour-respondents to have an understanding of the extent of their participation in union activities, and the results are summarised in Table 6.

TABLE 6 : PERCENTAGE OF LABOURERS AND LABOUR-CULTIVATORS PARTICIPATING IN UNION ACTIVITIES  
[Thanjavur (Thiruthurai) Respondents]

Activities	Labour cultivator (N=27)	Labourer (N=115)
1. Member of Labour Union	7	51
2. Pay membership subscription	7	49
3. Pay special contributions	7	40
4. Attend meetings	7	48
5. Participate in demonstrations	7	41
6. Participate in strikes	7	38

Among the labourers, a little less than half, paid union subscriptions and attended its meetings; about one-third contributed to special collections and also participated in demonstrations, strikes, etc. sponsored by the union. The contributions from members are collected both in cash and kind. While 36 labourers paid it both in cash and kind (generally paddy), five labourers made their contributions only in kind and five others only in cash. The value of the mean annual contributions made by the labourers was about Rs. 5.

On an average, the unions conducted five meetings in an area. The percentage of attendance of union members at these meetings was 92. Union members reported participation in most of the demonstrations conducted by the union.

Labourers were asked a few questions about their opinion on the results of Labour Union activities (Table-7). It was found that about half of the labourers believed that they had benefited individually and as class through union activities. It is worth noting that a large section of them (44 per cent) were willing, at least verbally, to go to jail adhering to union instructions. This reflects a fairly high level of commitment to unionism on the part of the labourers. It may also be noted that 36 per cent of the labourers did not have unions in their villages and are, therefore, neutral in their attitude towards unions. The percentage of labourers having a negative attitude towards union activities, (i.e., those who report that they have not benefited from union activities) was negligible.



TABLE 7 : OPINIONS OF LABOURERS ON UNION ACTIVITIES  
 [Thanjavur (Thiruthurai) Respondents]

(Percentage)

Questions	Opinions				Total
	Benefited	No Opinion	Not Benefited	No Union	
1. Do you think that the activities of the union benefited you?	53	9	2	36	100
2. Do you think that the activities of the union are useful in promoting the interest of your class?	49	13	2	36	100
3. Will you be prepared to go to jail adhering to the instructions of your organisation?	44	12	8	36	100

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### III : IMPACT OF UNIONISATION

The unionisation of agricultural labourers and the struggles that they had conducted for higher wages had their impact on the traditional agrarian relation, particularly in Thiruthuraipundi and Alleppy. It was thought that an appreciation of this change could be had through a comparative study of some aspects of the social structure prevailing in the areas where labourers were unionised with the type of relations prevailing in areas where they were not unionised. We examined the pattern of relation prevailing between farmers and labourers and between farmers and various service castes (*Jajmani relation*). Another index that was used was the agencies preferred by agricultural labourers to settle different kinds of their disputes. In passing, it was also examined whether unionisation of labourers had any adverse effect on agricultural production.

#### Traditional Labour-Cultivator Relations

Employment of attached labourers was the most prominent feature in agriculture prevalent in most parts of South India. Called *Jeetha* in Karnataka, *Pannaiyal* in Tamil Nadu and *Paniyal* in Kerala, they became bonded servants of the farmers after they were emancipated from slavery in 1843. Generally they lived on their master's land, and did not own even such simple tools as spade or chopper. They were entirely dependent upon their masters for their livelihood.

As the cultivators generally belonged to higher castes and the labourers to lower castes, the relation between the two was structured within the framework of the relationship between higher and lower castes. The cultivators generally addressed the labourers in degrading terms or in third person, irrespective of age and other relational considerations. On the other hand, labourers addressed their masters in respectful terms like *Ayya*, *Thampuran*, *Pannikke*, etc. When a labourer met a cultivator, he showed utmost respect to the latter such as removing cloth from his head or shoulder and standing in a bent posture. A labourer usually did not wear a full cloth (*Veshti*) in the presence of a cultivator.

There were no fixed hours of work for the labourers. Usually they reported for work at the day-break and worked till sunset, or even into the night.

The labourers received their wages from the farmers. It was alleged that not only the wages were low but the grain given as wage was of the poorest quality, and the measure used for the purpose was of a sub-standard size. But the labourers could not dare to complain and those who dared met with severe punishments.

The *Pannaiyals* of Thanjavur and *Paniyals* of Alleppy were given a share in the produce of the field in which they worked. Usually it formed about 3 per cent of the produce in the cultivation of which one or more labourers were engaged. By custom, the threshing floor was not swept and the leftover grain was collected by the labourers. This, to some extent, compensated their low wage.

The attached labourers had a number of obligations to their masters. They and other members of their families were expected to be available for work whenever their services were required. On occasions like marriage or other ceremonies at the master's house, they worked for long hours without receiving any remuneration.

Even though benefits mainly flowed from the farmer to the labourer, the latter made certain gifts like beaten rice (*aval*), betel leaves, etc. to the master on occasions like marriage, symbolising his loyalty to the master.

Labourers were punished in different ways. For shoddy work, it might be only a scolding. But for more serious offences like absenting from work during busy seasons, absconding, stealing of coconuts, etc., they were harshly punished. Whipping, forcing one to drink cow's urine, or a solution made of cow dung or even human excreta were some forms of punishment that were prevalent in Thanjavur. In serious cases of disobedience and disloyalty, it was not uncommon for the farmers to evict labourers from their places of residence.

Labourers were given food only outside the house of a farmer. After eating their food, they washed the vessels before returning them. The relation between the farmers and labourers showed a few other signs of superiority of the farmer and inferiority of the labourer.

Against this background of the traditional relation prevailing between the farmers and the agricultural labourers, the currently prevailing relation may be examined so as to understand the changes that have come about.

### **Labour-Cultivator Relations**

To understand the pattern of labour-cultivator relations prevailing in Mandya, Orathnad, Thiruthuraiyandi and Alleppy, the answers of the respondents to a battery of 26 statements, touching on various aspects of the labour-cultivator relation were sought. These statements covered the areas of patron-client relation, inter-caste relation, inter-personal relation and working conditions. These statements and the percentage of respondents from each study area reporting the practice of egalitarian relations are given in Table 8.

It was observed that the traditional practices like exchange of gifts and services between farmers and labourers (Items 1 and 25) have drastically come down. Items 4, 12, 14 and 15 indicate that practices connected with the observance of untouchability in farmer-labourer relation, such as a labourer

TABLE 8 : QUESTIONS ON FARMER-LABOURER RELATIONS AND PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS PRACTISING EGALITARIAN RELATIONS

Questions*	Mandya (N = 248)	Orathnad (N = 200)	Thiruthurai- pundi (N = 200)	Alleppy (N = 250)
1. Does the labourer receive some gift from a farmer on some festive occasions (like Diwali)? (No)	0	0	1	0
2. Does the labourer present gift to the farmer on ceremonial occasions (like marriage)? (No)	90	60	85	95
3. Does a labourer render free service to a farmer on some ceremonial occasions ?(No)	39	58	76	79
4. Would a farmer and labourer take food together at a village tea shop? (Yes)	33	30	88	99
5. Do farmers victimise labourers for participating in union activities? (No)	100	97	92	94
6. Do farmers in this place prefer for employment, labourers with a particular ideology? (No)	99	51	54	93
7. Does the labourer address the farmers respectfully? (No)	7	4	11	85
8. Does the farmer address the labourer in third person? (No)	87	52	87	99
9. Would a farmer beat a labourer if the latter does a serious offence like stealing coconuts? (Punish in socially approved manner)	70	48	72	96
10. Does a labourer show any sign of respect when he meets a farmer? (No)	46	20	57	94
11. Does a farmer use degrading words while talking to a labourer? (No)	86	57	92	97
12. Would a farmer enter the house of a labourer for some ceremony at the latter's house? (Yes)	23	12	19	70
13. Are the labourers allowed to enter a farmer's house? (Yes)	40	9	28	85
14. Is the labourer required to wash the vessel after eating? (No)	17	1	27	19
15. Is the labourer given food outside at a farmer's house? (No)	22	6	17	91
16. Where is the labourer paid the wage? (Place of work)	48	9	16	90
17. When is the labourer generally paid the wage? (Immediately after work)	99	85	90	97
18. Is the wage rate decided by the farmers alone? (Farmer, labour, and public authorities jointly decides wages)	75	53	57	97

\* Responses considered to indicate egalitarian practice are given in brackets,

TABLE 8—(Contd)

	Mandya	Orathnad	Thiru- thurai- pundi	Alleppy
19. Has the farmer got the freedom to employ any labourer of his choice in his field? (No)	1	0	11	93
20. Is there a fixed time of work for the labourers? (Yes)	94	36	53	99
21. Is the hours of work carefully observed? (Yes)	63	24	33	96
22. Does the labourer get extra-pay, for doing a little extra work, for completing a particular work which they are doing? (Yes)	73	63	83	100
23. Do you think that a labourer would be concerned, if his master becomes seriously ill? (No)	74	63	75	99
24. Do you agree with the statement that farmers in the past took as much care in the welfare of their labourers, as they took for their own family members? (No)	6	59	63	60
25. Does the farmers render help to the labourers in cases of				
(a) Serious sickness at labourer's house (No)	27	68	74	76
(b) Education of labourer's children (No)	51	93	83	82
(c) Labourer building his house	66	77	85	82
26. If workers explain the reasons to increase the wage, do you think that the farmers will increase the wages? (Yes)	36	46	22	56

and a farmer not eating together at a village tea shop, the labourer being required to wash the vessel after eating or being given food only outside one's house, continue without much change in all areas save Alleppy.

Item 7 indicates that most of the labourers addressed their farmer-employers in respectful terms. However, labourers were not addressed in third person or in degraded terms as it was done in the past (Items 8 and 11).

Items 17, 20, 21 and 22 suggest the conditions under which labourers work. These items show that labourers are paid their wages immediately after the work, that the period of work is carefully observed, and labourers get some additional remuneration for doing work beyond the usual hours of work.

Responses to items 23 and 24 show that few respondents have any sentimental feeling about the type of relationship that prevailed between the cultivators and labourers.

The proportion of respondents practising egalitarian relation varied from area to area. In order to have a reliable comparison of the nature of farmer-labourer relations prevailing in the four study areas, a Guttman Scale of labour-cultivator relations was developed by utilising items 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24. Among these 17 statements, items

2, 7, 10, 11, 13, 19 and 22 were retained in the scale which has a coefficient of reproducibility of .89. Replies of the respondents to the seven items were scored by giving a value of 1 for a response indicating the practice of egalitarian labour-cultivator relation, and a value of 0 for a response indicating the practice of a traditional type of labour-cultivator relation. The mean scores obtained by the respondents from Mandya, Orathnad, Thiruthuraipundi and Alleppy on the scale, respectively, were 3.4, 2.1, 3.6 and 6.5. Since a higher score indicates the practice of more egalitarian labour-cultivator relation, the higher scores obtained by Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi respondents indicate the practice of more egalitarian labour-cultivator relations in these two areas than in Mandya and Orathnad.

### Jajmani Relations

*Jajmani* system was another important aspect of the traditional agrarian social structure which linked together different sections of the traditional village community through the exchange of essential goods and services. In order to understand the nature of *Jajmani* relations prevailing in the four study areas with distinct levels of labour union development, we studied the type of relation prevailing between the patron (farmer) and the client groups of barber, washerman, carpenter and blacksmith.

The relation between the patron and the barber is an important plank of the *jajmani* system. Apart from the utilitarian aspect of getting one's hair cut etc., it had ritual significance also. A person's hair was cut and he was given a shave before his marriage. After a funeral, it was common for the close male relatives of the dead person to get their heads shaved. Such services were usually rendered by a barber's family to a patron's family on a more or less continuous basis. By custom, the barber served his patron at the latter's house. For such services, the barbers were paid in kind (grain, coconut, jaggery, etc.). In contrast with the service received from the barber on *Jajmani* basis is the service of a barber obtained on a commercial basis, either from a barber's shop, or at the barber's house, for which payment is made immediately after the service is rendered.

The washerman's service also had both utilitarian and ritual importance. The washing of clothes by a washerman was not only to clean them but also to make them ritually pure, and only after wearing such clothes (*Mat*) could a woman shed her ritual impurity caused by menses, child birth, etc., and attain her normal ritual status. The washerman's service was so essential for a higher caste family that one way of punishing that family was to prohibit the washerman from serving it. The washerman visited the houses of his patrons, collected soiled clothes, washed them and delivered them back at the patrons' houses. For their service they were given a small cash remuneration at the time of delivering the clothes. In addition, they were given a certain quantity of paddy and other agricultural produce, as also gifts of coconuts, plantain, etc., on festive and ceremonial occasions.

The services of carpenters and blacksmiths are primarily utilitarian. Work connected with agricultural operations, such as fixing of a plough or a spade, making a sickle or a chopper, were done by village carpenter and blacksmith. For such works, they were paid in kind at the time of harvest. Generally there are a few families of carpenters and blacksmiths in a cluster of villages serving the cultivators in the surrounding areas.

For understanding the nature of *Jajmani* relations prevailing in the four areas, information was collected on the length of service, place of service, mode and time of payment of wage to the barber, washerman, carpenter, and blacksmith. This information was collected from cultivator-respondents only as customarily it was they who received such services. The responses of the cultivator-respondents to the 16 items were classified into one indicating the practice of the *Jajmani* relations, and on indicating its non-practice. Being served by the same client for nine years and more at patron's house, and making payment of wages in kind at intervals were considered as indications of the continuation of the customary practices; and being served by the same client for less than nine years, at a place other than the patron's house, and making in cash immediately after the service, were considered responses indicating the disintegration of *Jajmani* relations. The percentage of cultivators from the four study areas whose responses to the above queries indicated the continued maintenance of the *Jajmani* relations on different queries made to them is given in Table 9.

TABLE 9 : PERCENTAGE OF CULTIVATORS WHO MAINTAINED JAJMANI RELATIONS

Items	Mandya (N=168)	Orathnad (N=131)	Thiruthu- raipundi (N=58)	Alleppy (N=79)
<i>Barber's Service</i>				
Length of service (more than 9 years)	60	85	57	—
Place of servicing (patron's house)	49	43	57	52
Mode of payment of wage (kind)	63	87	59	8
Time of payment of wage (harvesting time)	64	87	59	8
<i>Washerman's Service</i>				
Length of service (more than 9 years)	62	93	59	—
Place of servicing (patron's house)	69	93	74	44
Mode of payment of wage (kind)	64	95	65	7
Time of payment of wage (harvesting)	64	98	67	7
<i>Carpenter's Service</i>				
Length of service (more than 9 years)	48	92	24	—
Place of servicing (patron's house)	31	25	17	—
Mode of payment of wage (kind)	51	95	25	—
Time of payment of wage (harvesting)	51	95	24	—
<i>Blacksmith's Service</i>				
Length of service (more than 9 years)	48	89	22	—
Place of servicing (patron's house)	30	24	16	16
Mode of payment of wage (kind)	52	93	22	—
Time of payment of wage (harvesting)	51	94	22	—

About half of the Mandya cultivators continue to maintain traditional *Jajmani* relation with the service castes. It is noticed that in Orathnad also, most of the cultivator-respondents maintained traditional relation with the service castes. Among Thiruthuraipundi respondents, while a little more than half of them continued to have traditional relation with barber and washerman, equally strong was the relation maintained by the farmers with the carpenter and blacksmith. Disintegration of *Jajmani* relation with all servicing castes is more or less complete in the case of Alleppy respondents, save for a few cultivators receiving the service of the barber and washerman at their house. The response of the cultivators to the above 16 items were scored by giving a value of 0 for a response indicating the continuation of a traditional practice, and a value of 1 for a response indicating its non-continuance. Utilising the median point of the scores obtained by the cultivator-respondents from the four areas, they were divided into two groups—those who observed *Jajmani* relations (those who obtained less than the median score) and those who have rejected *Jajmani* relations (those who obtained more than the median score). The percentages of cultivators from the four areas in the two categories are given in Table 10. The data show that while disintegration of *Jajmani* relation is of a very high order in Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi, a very large percentage of cultivators continue to maintain such relation with their clients in Orathnad and Mandya.

TABLE 10 : PERCENTAGE OF CULTIVATORS WITH HIGH AND LOW SCORES ON DISINTEGRATION OF JAJMANI SYSTEM

Level of Score	Mandya (N=168)	Orathnad (N=131)	Thiruthu- raipundi (N=58)	Alleppy (N=79)
Low	51	95	22	1
High	49	5	78	99
Total	100	100	100	100

### Settlement of Disputes

A third index used for understanding the impact of unionisation on the social structure was the agencies through which the villagers wanted to settle their local disputes. In the past, such disputes were settled within the village framework. It has been pointed out by Miller that in Kerala "Juridical authority nearly coincided with political authority and economic power".<sup>1</sup> Similar was the situation in Thanjavur, where "among their non-Brahmin and Adi Dravida servants, Brahmins had the power to forcibly interfere in disputes if they threatened the peace of the village."<sup>2</sup> In Mandya also, local disputes were generally settled through the village leaders. The exercise of power necessary on such occasions had made the settlement of disputes an important mechanism that strengthened the traditional social structure.



For understanding the agencies preferred by the respondents for settlement of disputes, they were requested to indicate the persons whom they would approach for settlement of husband-wife quarrel; misbehaviour of a farmer with a female relative; elopement of boy and girl; being beaten by a labourer; dispute over wage rates; dispute over working hours; and dispute between farmer and labourer over employment. The persons whom the respondents mentioned that they would meet for redressal of their grievances were village leaders, caste leaders, village panchayats, neighbours, governmental agencies, and leaders of political parties. Those respondents who mentioned that they would approach village leaders, caste leaders, village panchayat and neighbours were classified as those who preferred the settlement of disputes through a traditional agency; and those who reported that they would approach governmental agencies, leaders of political parties, or make self-efforts for settling the disputes were classified as those who opted "modern" agencies for dispute settlement. The percentages of cultivators, labour-cultivators and labourers preferring modern agencies for settlement of disputes are given in Table 11. It is noticed that few respondents from Mandya thought of meeting any modern agency for settlement of any of the disputes. Be it a quarrel between husband and wife or a dispute between a labourer and a farmer, it is settled in Mandya generally through the agency of traditional village leaders like village headman, caste headman, rich farmers. The continued faith of almost all respondents in the legitimacy of the traditional institutions is an indication of their resiliency.

In Thanjavur, it is noticed that the majority of both Orathnad and Thiruthuraipundi respondents preferred modern agencies for settlement of husband-wife quarrels. In respect of disputes centered around sex (Items 2 and 3), about one-fifth to one-fourth of the respondents from both areas preferred modern agencies for their settlement. It is noticed that while the respondents from Orathnad and Thiruthuraipundi have a similar preference in respect of these items, sharp difference was noticed in the agencies preferred by them for the settlement of disputes over working conditions, such as dispute over wage rates, working hours and employment (Items 6, 7 and 8). While few Orathnad respondents wanted to settle these disputes through modern agencies, about 40 per cent of the Thiruthuraipundi respondents preferred to settle them through modern agencies.

Almost all respondents from Alleppy preferred modern agencies for settlement of quarrels and disputes that arose in all aspects of life, save the husband-wife quarrel. The pattern of response of the Alleppy respondents confirm the trend that was noticed in the case of Thiruthuraipundi respondents that as labour unionises there would be a rejection of traditional leadership for settlement of inter-person disputes and there would be increasing preference of external agencies for settlement of such disputes. The fact that few respondents opted for traditional agencies for the settlement of any of the disputes seems to be an indication of the disintegration of the traditional social structure, within which such disputes used to be settled in the past,

The responses of individual respondents to the eight items of dispute (Table 11) were scored by giving a value of 0 for a response indicating the preference of a traditional agency for settlement of a dispute, and a value of 1 for a response preferring a modern agency for settlement of a dispute. The means of the scores obtained by the respondents from different areas are as follows : Mandya 0.3, Orathnad 0.9, Thiruthuraipundi 1.3, and Alleppy 5.6. Since a higher score indicates greater preference for modern agencies for a dispute settlement, the above data indicate a greater preference of modern agencies for dispute settlement in Thiruthuraipundi and Alleppy.

TABLE 11 : PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO PREFERRED MODERN AGENCIES FOR SETTLEMENT OF DISPUTE

Dispute	Mandya (N=248)	Orathnad (N=200)	Thiruthu- raipundi (N=200)	Alleppy (N=250)
1. Husband-wife quarrel	—	68	65	53
2. Misbehaviour of a farmer with a female relative	7	26	22	88
3. Elopement of a boy and girl	9	22	21	88
4. Being beaten by a labourer	—	20	8	95
5. Being beaten by a farmer	—	15	23	95
6. Dispute over wage rates	—	8	41	98
7. Dispute over working hours	—	8	41	98
8. Dispute over employment	1	8	38	98

### Impact on Production

One of the objectives of the study was to understand whether the unionisation of agricultural labourers had any adverse effect on agricultural production. Paddy being the most important crop cultivated in all the study areas, practices associated with its cultivation and per-acre output were adopted as two indices to understand the impact of unionisation on agriculture. In this connection, information was collected on practices associated with (1) improvement of the field; (2) preparation of the nursery, and (3) culturing of the main field for cultivation of paddy.

*Improvement of Field.* For understanding the efforts made by cultivators for development of their paddy fields, information was collected on the following : bunding, levelling, prevention of erosion, improvement of drainage, reduction of salinity, making of fences and bunds, digging of wells, bore-wells and filter-points; and making of other improvements of a permanent nature in the field. The percentage of cultivators who have made these improvements to their fields is given in Table 12. It may be noted that few cultivator respondents in Mandya and Orathnad made much efforts in improving their fields by digging wells, making boundary bunds and fences, etc. There have been greater efforts in its respect in Thiruthuraipundi and Alleppy.

TABLE 12 : PERCENTAGE OF CULTIVATORS WHO MADE IMPROVEMENTS IN PADDY FIELDS

Items of Improvement	Mandya (N=168)	Orathnad (N=131)	Thiruthu- raipundi (N=58)	Alleppy (N=79)
1. Bunding	3	1	24	62
2. Levelling	23	1	19	58
3. Prevention of erosion	—	—	—	3
4. Improvement of drainage	2	—	7	95
5. Reducing salinity	—	—	—	85
6. Making fences and compound wall	—	—	28	1
7. Digging of wells	—	1	—	0
8. Digging of filterpoints/borewells	—	—	—	0
9. Other improvements, if any	5	—	2	53

*Preparation of Nursery.* From those respondents who cultivated paddy, information was sought whether they followed the following practices for preparation of the nursery : hoeing of field, application of green-manure, application of compost manure, treatment of seed, use of high-yielding variety seed, application of chemical fertiliser, application of insecticide, use of improved irrigation practices, use of drainage and removal of weed. The percentage of cultivators who reported that they were following these practices is given in Table 13. The data reveal that the cultivators in the four study areas have adopted different practices in different degrees. For example, the practice of applying compost and organic manure in the nursery is followed widely in Mandya, Orathnad and Thiruthuraipundi, but not in Alleppy. Use of fertiliser is also more in the first three areas. On the other hand, practices like cultivation of high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds, use of insecticides, found greater acceptance in Alleppy.

TABLE 13 : PERCENTAGE OF CULTIVATORS WHO ADOPTED IMPROVED AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE CULTURING OF THE NURSERY

Practice	Mandya (N=168)	Orathnad (N=131)	Thiruthu- raipundi (N=58)	Alleppy (N=79)
1. Hoeing	41	1	9	30
2. Application of green leaves	33	25	48	0
3. Application of compost and organic manure	90	97	71	1
4. Treatment of seed	4	99	93	49
5. Use of HYV seed	8	62	33	99
6. Use of fertiliser	92	80	35	5
7. Use of insecticide	39	57	52	66
8. Use of improved irrigation	0	0	0	5
9. Use of drainage	0	0	0	100
10. Removal of weed	24	0	2	0

*Culturing of Main Field.* To understand the level of cultivation of the main field, information was sought whether the following practices were in use : hoeing of field, application of green-leaf-manure, compost and organic manure; Japanese method of transplantation; application of chemical fertilisers and insecticides; use of improved irrigation, drainage, improved weeding methods, mechanical threshing, and mechanical winnowing. The responses obtained are given in a summarised form in Table 14. The data show that the level of adoption of different practices in the four areas varied. Whereas certain items like use of chemical fertiliser, insecticides, etc. are universally followed, practices like the use of compost and organic manure, Japanese method of transplantation, etc. are not so widespread. It may also be noted that no respondent in the sample had adopted a mechanical device for threshing the sheaves or for winnowing the grain.

TABLE 14 : PERCENTAGE OF CULTIVATORS WHO FOLLOWED IMPROVED PRACTICES IN THE CULTURING OF THE MAIN FIELD

Practices	Mandya (N=168)	Orathnad (N=131)	Thiruthu- raipundi (N=58)	Alleppy (N=79)
1. Hoeing	34	1	26	18
2. Green leaves manuring	21	12	40	0
3. Use of compost and organic manure	74	96	79	20
4. Japanese method of transplantation	3	2	19	39
5. Use of fertiliser	94	98	95	100
6. Use of insecticides	52	97	88	99
7. Use of improved irrigation	1	5	12	0
8. Use of drainage	0	0	0	8
9. Removal of weeds	46	0	0	99
10. Mechanical threshing	0	0	0	0
11. Mechanical winnowing	0	0	0	0

In order to have a comparison of the extent of adoption of improved cultural practices in different areas, responses pertaining to adoption of different practices in the culturing of the nursery and the cultivation of the main field were scored by giving a value of 1 for the adoption of an improved practice, and a value of 0 for the continuation of a traditional practice. The mean scores of the respondents from the four areas on culturing of the nursery and the main field are as follows :

MEAN SCORES OBTAINED BY CULTIVATOR-RESPONDENTS ON CULTURING OF NURSERY AND MAIN FIELD

Item	Mandya	Orathnad	Thiruthurai- pundi	Alleppy
Culturing of nursery	6.45	8.53	5.86	14.95
Culturing of main field	8.09	10.29	9.72	9.96

On culturing of nursery, the highest average score was obtained by Alleppy respondents followed by those from Orathnad; the lowest average score has been obtained by Thiruthuraipundi respondents. The highest score on the culturing of the main field was obtained by Orathnad respondents, followed by those from Alleppy; and the lowest score in this respect was obtained by those from Mandya. Thus no association, particularly a negative association was found between the development of labour unionism and the level of cultivation of paddy.

Cultivator-respondents were asked about the optimum production possible and the actual production obtained from their fields. After subtracting the latter from the former, its percentage was calculated in relation to actual output. This was adopted as an index of formers' estimate of the deficiency of output. The percentage of cultivators and labour-cultivator reporting various levels of deficiency in the output of the main crop cultivated by them is presented in Table 15. Cultivators reporting no deficiency in output was the largest among Alleppy respondents.

TABLE 15 : PERCENTAGE OF CULTIVATORS AND LABOUR-CULTIVATORS WHO REPORTED DIFFERING LEVELS OF SHORT FALL IN THE PRODUCTION OF THE MAIN CROP

Levels of Deficiency	Mandya	Orathnad	Thiruthu- raipundi	Alleppy
1. No deficiency	19	9	5	46
2. 20 per cent and less	23	20	21	10
3. 21-60 per cent	—	51	52	28
4. 61-100 per cent	—	16	12	13
5. 101 per cent and more	—	4	10	3

Enquiries were made with the respondents about the causes, as perceived by them, that had led to such a shortage in production. The two main causes attributed to this by the Mandya cultivators were shortage of fertiliser (71 per cent) and shortage of water (9 per cent). The main difficulties expressed by Orathnad and Thiruhurtaipundi respondents were inadequacy of finance and scarcity of water. No respondent perceived the activities of labour unions as adversely affecting agricultural production. The main difficulties experienced by Alleppy respondents whose production fell short of the optimum level were the following : natural calamities (33 per cent); water scarcity, fertiliser scarcity, labour trouble (6 per cent each); financial difficulties (4 per cent). It is noteworthy that even though labourers are very strongly organised and conducted frequent struggles in Alleppy, only a very small proportion of the cultivators perceived labour problem as one which adversely affected agricultural production.

The foregoing examination of the level of cultivation of paddy does not give any evidence of the labour unionism adversely affecting agricultural production. In fact, even in Alleppy, where agricultural labourers are most strongly organised, there was no indication of union activities adversely affecting agricultural production.

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#### IV: CONCLUSION

The data and analysis presented in the earlier sections leave one in no doubt that it was the Communist Party that had taken advantage of the presence of a large proportion of agricultural labourers belonging to scheduled castes in the two areas of Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi and organised them for united action against the farmers for obtaining better working conditions, higher wages and other benefits to make their life a better proposition. But the same party could not achieve any success in Mandya and Orathnad, the two other areas where the study was conducted, where the people belonging to scheduled castes constituted a minority of the total agricultural labour force.

1. It was significant to note that the level of unionisation among agricultural labourers was high in Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi in that order, where the scheduled castes population was also very high. In Mandya, there were no unions of agricultural labourers at all. In Orathnad, though a few unions existed, they remained more or less dormant and ineffective largely because the agricultural labourers did not join them in large numbers to lend it any measure of strength to fight for their cause.

In Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi where the agricultural labourers remained organised, they have achieved higher wages, regulated hours of work, elimination of inhuman forms of punishment that were meted out to them earlier, and greater bargaining power with the farmers. But in Mandya (Karnataka) where the labour unions did not exist and in Orathnad where they existed only in form, the agricultural labourers could not register significant gains in their relations with the farmers. If they had achieved any improvement in their working conditions or enhancement in wages, it was only because of the awakening that had come about in the administration and the resultant measures that were adopted for agricultural labourers as a whole.

The organised strength of the agricultural labourers in Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi brought in significant changes in the traditional *Jajmani* relationship between the service castes like washerman, barber, blacksmith and carpenter and their patrons who have been the farmers. The system totally collapsed in these two areas. Here, the present relationship is based on market system. No more sentiments are attached to services that are rendered by these castes to their patrons. It is purely a business relationship. But in Orathnad and Mandya, the *Jajmani* system is continuing without much of a disturbance largely because of the unorganised nature of the agricultural labour.

The impact of unionisation of agricultural labourers on traditional social structure has been profound in Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi but little in Orathnad and Mandya. In the former two areas, in case of a dispute, the disputants preferred to settle them through the non-traditional agencies like the government officials and its agencies. In the latter two areas, the disputants

carried their issues to traditional agencies like the village headman, caste leaders and other elders in the village whose opinions still counted.

Our interviews with the respondents in Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi revealed that they preferred the non-traditional agencies because they thought those agencies would be impartial and decide the issues on the basis of justice and fairplay. Also, thanks to the Labour Unions, the labourers did not suffer from fear psychosis of reprisals from the traditional leaders or elders of the village if they did not heed their advice in any matter. If this preference for non-traditional agencies for solving the disputes has not been expressed by the respondents in Mandya and the Orathnad, it was largely because of the lurking fear of retaliation from the dominant section of the village community.

The generally-held view that organisation of agricultural labourers as a strong force to contend with, would adversely affect the agricultural production was also checked with the respondents. Contrary to this generally-held view, 94 per cent of the farmer-respondents in Alleppy and *all* the farmer-respondents in Thiruthuraipundi expressed the view that unionisation of agricultural labourers did not affect the level of agricultural production.

Even in regard to adoption of improved agricultural practices in paddy cultivation, it was found that Alleppy was in the forefront in spite of the fact that the agricultural labour unions were quite strong in that area.

### Implications

1. The chances for organisation of agricultural labourers are more in areas where people belonging to scheduled castes constitute the dominant group among this category of workers. An examination of the Census data reveals that the rural areas where the people belonging to scheduled castes constituted the dominant majority among the agricultural labourers are very few. It appears that it is not the commonness of occupational interest that would spur people into unionisation but the homogeneity in terms of caste that helps unionisation.

2. It is only through strong unionisation that egalitarian relations could be ushered in between the agricultural labourers and the farmers. It would also ensure a fair and just distribution of the fruits of productive effort among different sections engaged in agriculture.

3. The umbrella approach for organising the rural poor does not seem to yield the desired results. Organisation of different interest groups separately appears to enhance the chances of ensuring peace and prosperity in the agrarian economy of our country.

4. The fact that some political parties remained in the vanguard of the movement for organising agricultural labour and achieved spectacular success, as is illustrated in Alleppy and Thiruthuraipundi, underlines the role of these parties in this regard.

