



# HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONS IN KERALA TEA PLANTATIONS

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**Abstract:** This study mainly focusses on the development and emergence of trade unions in tea plantations in Kerala. The study explores the early trade union activities, the socio-political factors that contributed to the growth of the trade union movement, and the major trade unions that emerged and evolved. The study mainly focused on the trade union activities in Wayanad and how the workers resisted the control of various colonial masters and plantation owners to organize themselves into unions.

**IndexTerms - Colonial Masters, Trade Union, Tea Plantation.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

### INTRODUCTION

In India trade union act was passed in 1926. The registered trade union could engage in trade union activity as laid down by the law. Kerala witnessed the first Trade union movement in 1922 named Travancore Labor Association (TLA) IN. The rise of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was in early 1950, and All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1952. In 1964 the split that took place within the CPI (Communist Party of India) led to the formation of the CPI(M) Communist Party of India, resulting in the Construction of CITU. AITUC, STU (Swathanthra Thozhilali Union of Muslim League), CITU, INTUC and BMS (Bharatheeya Masdur Sangh of BJP) are the central trade unions of Kerala, especially in Wayanad.

In the year 1926 The Indian trade union act was passed. Since then, registered trade unions could engage in trade union activity as laid down by law in India. All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the first central trade union in India was formed in October 1920 in Bombay under the national movement's leaders' initiative. Planters/owners were organized throughout India, while the workers remained unorganized across plantations in India. The protest started as boycotting the colonial market set-up of plantations in Assam and parts of south India.

### NEED OF THE STUDY.

The study of the history of trade unions in tea plantations in Kerala is essential for understanding both historical and contemporary labour dynamics. This research sheds light on the origins and evolution of trade unions within a sector that was pivotal in shaping industrial labour in the state of Kerala. By examining how workers in tea plantations, initially under colonial control, mobilized to form unions, we gain insights into the socio-political influences that shaped their efforts and the broader labour movement. The formation and activities of these unions were instrumental in negotiating labour rights and improving working conditions, thus contributing significantly to labour reforms in Kerala. Furthermore, analyzing the strategies and struggles of early trade unions provides valuable lessons for current and future labour movements, helping to address ongoing challenges in labour rights and unionization. Documenting this history also preserves the experiences of workers and union leaders, ensuring that their contributions are recognized within the broader historical narrative. Overall, this study aims to bridge gaps in our understanding of labour history and offer relevant insights for both historical scholarship and contemporary labour advocacy.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Theoretical framework

#### Trade Unions in Kerala

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

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

The trade union activities in Kerala began in the high ranges by the Congress-led trade union INTUC. Around the same time, within INTUC, a left-supported group emerged due to differences in opinion, forming a trade union called AITUC in Kerala. CPI (The Communist Party of India) came to power in Kerala in 1957, that was when the AITUC union became the most major trade union across plantations in Kerala. Later in 1964, the split within the CPI and the formation of the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM) resulted in the formation of the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU). This resulted in many AITUC members becoming part of CITU.

### Wayanad Trade Union activities

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

The protest against management was at a gradual pace. There was early resistance from workers with leftist inclinations within the Indian National Congress's (INC) trade union organization, the INTUC. They started engaging with workers through different channels, successfully created a network within them, and formed a collective that met frequently. Through reading clubs, football clubs, drama clubs, musical troops, etc., they discovered and organized the activists to work for the trade union among the workers. By reliable sources, it is said that the veteran communist leader, C H Kanaran who came to Harrisons Malayalam Limited (HML) to Wayanad in 1946 and observed the activities of the plantation workers at the place where the workers used to weigh the tea leaves. He understood the issues faced by the plantation workers. In the evening, he met the estate manager and told him that he had come on behalf of the plantation workers to talk about their issues and insisted that the manager listen to him. The workers were astonished that after listening to C.H. Kanaran, the manager had invited him inside. Workers couldn't stand before a manager during those days and talk to him. While going to speak to the manager, C.H. Kanaran had also taken some of the workers along with him with whom he already had made acquaintance. The discussion with the manager addressed some of the fundamental issues of the workers, such as accommodation facilities, usage of toilets, and the timing of tea breaks, etc. They also addressed the issues concerning female workers. The manager had agreed with the concerns raised by C.H. Kanaran and other people who went along with him. C.H. Kanaran who came out after the meeting, a huge crowd awaited him. Before them, he read out the major decisions from that meeting. This is how initial activities were carried out in the plantation sector. Later on, C.H. Kanaran contacted the major Congress leaders and the preparations for organizing the workers union began. The Malabar Plantation Workers Union was established as a result of this. (This union is still active under INTUC). Though the collaboration could not lead to significant struggles, they could initiate discussions with the management and organize the work. C.K. Govindan Nair was the president, and A.V. Radhagopi Menon was the secretary. From Thalappuza (a plantation in north Wayanad) the first strike demanding wage increase started, and later on the protest by plantation workers spread over different parts of Wayanad, including the Arappatta near Meppadi. With the negotiations with the management, union leaders increased the daily wage rate of plantation workers, although the administration was against this settlement. With the help of the British police, union activities were suppressed by management, and all kinds of workers' mobilization were banned. Even though participation in this wage strike was minimal, this is considered the beginning of the trade union movement in the plantations of Wayanad. After this strike, workers learned more about the union and started participating in the activity in different forms. Many leaders were assigned by the Communist parties to work in the plantations of Wayanad. Leaders from outside the plantation made severe efforts to find sympathizers among the plantation workers recruited from different parts of Kerala.

The plantation union leaders expressed their solidarity towards the coir workers of Alappuzha by sending them rice during the Onam festival. It was as per the appeal of A.K. Gopalan, the prominent leader of the communist. Plantation labour union (STU) state secretary T Hamsa has said, as per the norms of the labour act of 1951, wages should be increased every three years. But no action had been taken by management for a very long time. STU is a trade union of the Indian Union Muslim League and is also very influential among the tea plantation workers of Wayanad.

In the year 1948, the ban on the Communist party also affected the growth of A.I.T.U.C in the district of Wayanad. At the same time, however, it provided INTUC a chance to strengthen their trade union activities within the plantations of Wayanad affiliated with the Malabar District Estate Workers Union. K. Kumaran, K. M Krishnan, and Radha Gopi Menon were the prominent INTUC leaders during its early days. AITUC started their unions in Wayanad in 1946, and N E Balaram, C. H Kanaran, A. K. Gopalan, Gandhi Gopalan and T Rama Warriar reached Thalappuza in Wayanad from different parts of Kerala to work alongside the plantation workers through small meetings and campaigns. Chathu Master, VN Sivaraman, Mathai Master and Damodaran Nambiar are the prominent leaders of AITUC.

M.K. Raman Kutty was another prominent Trade Union leader of Wayanad. In Chembra Peak Estate, there was another trade union affiliated with AITUC which was registered in 1952 named General Estate Workers Union based in Meenangady. Vylpilly Ramankutty Menon, K.A. Beerankunj, P. V. Varghese Vaidyan, and N.V. Sivram were the major faces of this union. Around the same time, at Pozhuthana, another union named Kurichayamala Plantation Workers Union was formed by P. Koya Master. Over time all these small unions became affiliated with AITUC. Union leaders had to face brutal treatment from Kanganies.

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

### Conclusion

The emergence of trade unions in India and Kerala is closely associated to the socio-political atmosphere of the respective regions. In India, the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed in 1920 by national movement leaders. Travancore Labour Association (TLA) was established in Kerala in 1922 among workers in the weaving industry. The trade unions activities in the plantations of Kerala began to gain momentum after the entry of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in the 1950s and the establishment of AITUC in 1952. In 1964, the split within the CPI led to the formation of the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM), resulting in the construction of the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU). In Wayanad, organized trade union activities were banned by colonial masters, and workers who tried to organize themselves were subjected to disciplinary and correctional action from the administration. The UPASI (United Planters Association of South India, a major association of plantation owners, held significant influence over the workers and the management. However, through different channels such as reading clubs, football clubs, drama clubs, musical troops, etc., the leftist inclinations within the Indian National Congress's (INC) trade union association, INTUC, successfully created a network and formed a group that frequently met to work for the trade union among workers. Seasoned communist leader C.H. Kanaran had come to Wayanad in 1946 and organized the plantation workers.

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