A Short History of the Cooperative Movement in Northern Malabar, Kerala

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Despite the pervasive presence of cooperatives in Kerala's society, scholarly accounts of the cooperative movement's history are limited. Synthesising archival and field research conducted in northern Malabar between 2018 and 2022, this history is traced. The contributions of social reform movements, social service organisations, and anti-feudal and anti-colonial movements to Kerala's cooperative movement are explored. The paper highlights the sociopolitical history of the cooperative movement and its ties to oppressed caste communities and labour resistance.

The author would like to thank Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya and V Bijukumar at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, for their invaluable support and guidance throughout this research.

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Kerala is renowned for its vibrant and successful cooperative movement, boasting over 23,000 cooperatives in 2023 administered through various governmental departments such as cooperation, industries, and agriculture. Despite comprising less than 3% of India's total population, Kerala boasts a substantial 17% share of cooperative membership nationwide, underscoring the pivotal role cooperatives play in the state's social and economic fabric (Kuruvilla 2019). This success can be attributed to a vibrant and dynamic tradition of public action, adequate state support, and a dense network of social organisations at the grassroots level (Isaac and Williams 2017; Thuppilikkat and Sarma 2021).

Cooperatives in Kerala serve both rural and urban areas, addressing people's needs, such as agricultural credit, consumer goods, healthcare, housing, education, public distribution, and development initiatives for marginalised communities, including the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women. Renowned cooperatives in Kerala, such as the Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society (ULCCS), embody the legacies of anti-caste social movements, whereas the Indian Coffee House and Dinesh Beedi are associated with militant labour movements. Notably, Kerala's ULCCS ranks in the top five industry and utilities worker cooperatives globally, while the Kerala State Cooperative Bank tops Asia in the financial services sector as per the World Cooperative Monitor 2023. Over the years, cooperatives in Kerala have also successfully entered capital-intensive cyber parks and technology-related services.

Despite the ubiquity of cooperatives in the everyday life of Keralites, scholarly accounts of the history of Kerala's cooperative movements are sparse and splintered. An existing scholarship primarily focuses on specific cooperatives, such as Dinesh Beedi, ULCCS, and Indian Coffee House (Isaac et al 1998; Isaac and Williams 2017; Plys 2020). Sociologist B S Baviskar (1968, 2007) has made significant contributions to exploring the intersection of cooperative movements, history, and politics in Maharashtra. However, similar research in Kerala's context and elsewhere is notably lacking. Despite cooperatives being politically malleable institutions with involvement from diverse social movements and political parties spanning the ideological spectrum, there is also limited documentation of their contributions to the movement. Furthermore, the majority of PhD and MPhil theses on the subject, both within and outside Kerala (Kurien 1993; Padmini 2003; Vasanthakumari 2002; Vijayaraghavan 2005), primarily focus on performance analysis of cooperatives, concerning management and financial feasibility.

In this context, this paper briefly attempts to weave together the fragments and evidence gathered by the author during archival and field explorations conducted primarily in northern Malabar between 2018 and 2022. The paper mainly focuses on the contributions of the social reform movements and social service organisations taken amid anti-feudal and anti-colonial agitations to the cooperative movement. The research is grounded in primary data sourced from old souvenirs and magazines of various cooperatives amid field visits, archival repositories such as the Appan Thampuran Smaraka Library, Thrissur, digital archives of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, the P C Joshi archive at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and the library of the National Cooperative Union of India also in New Delhi. Furthermore, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders of the cooperative movement, including trade union leaders, cooperative leadership, and government officials from the Department of Cooperation.

Resisting Feudal Landlords

The early impetus for the cooperative movement emerged from Malabar's encounter with British colonialism.[1] While colonial governance entrenched feudal landlordism in the region, it also introduced modern organisational structures and new legal and political institutions, such as cooperatives. The Cooperative Credit Societies Act, 1904 and the Cooperative Societies Act, 1912, part of British India's efforts to address peasant indebtedness, set the groundwork for the emergence of cooperatives in Malabar. The Koduvayoor Aikya Nanaya Sangham, registered in 1912, was among the pioneering cooperatives in the region.

The Aikya Nanaya Sanghams (ANS), "community-based thrift societies run on cooperative lines" (Ramakumar 2014), served as the earliest form of cooperative credit society in Kerala. These were small money banks aimed to rescue peasants from the liabilities of indebtedness to feudal landlords and other practitioners of usury. In northern Malabar, at the turn of the 20th century, the prevalence of garden-cropping cultivation led to the widespread adoption of money rent and cash wages (Karat 1973: 36). Alongside oppressive taxes and feudal levies imposed by landlords, the imposition of British land taxes on the labouring classes escalated the need for borrowing money.

Even in the early 19th century, barely 5% of Malabar's population was engaged in non-agricultural activities (Prakash 1988: 52). The region faced frequent famines and extensive unemployment during this period, exacerbating its socio-economic challenges. The looming threat of feudal evictions and escalating rents added to the misery of agrarian castes. Unlike regions with specialised moneylending castes, such as the Chettiars and Banias, feudal landlords, wealthy peasants, and agricultural traders in Malabar filled the role of moneylenders (Karat 1973: 33). Workers from oppressed castes often resorted to borrowing small sums of money for their daily needs, using metal vessels and ornaments as collateral. However, once surrendered, the return of these items was subject to the landlords' arbitrary discretion, perpetuating vicious cycles of exploitation.

The formation of ANS represented a modest effort to disrupt this cycle of feudal oppression. Despite their attempts to sever microeconomic ties with feudalism, their impact was limited, given feudalism's entrenched social and economic power within caste hierarchies and monopoly over land resources. A significant impetus for the early cooperative movement came from leaders within the privileged class who were sympathetic to the empowerment of rural communities. In one such initiative, Nallakandy Damu, E Krishnan Nambiar, Choorai Kanaran, and 11 others successfully established the Dharmadam ANS. They submitted an application to the Registrar of Cooperatives of Madras Presidency on 26 October 1914 (Mohanan 2015: 18). By 1 January 1915, the Dharmadam ANS in northern Malabar commenced operations, primarily aiming to promote savings among the rural masses, foster self-reliance among members, and facilitate agricultural loans (Mohanan 2015: 18).

Following the British Malabar, Raja Ramavarma of the Cochin princely state and Maharaja Moolam Thirunal Rama Varma of the Travancore princely state also introduced legal frameworks for cooperative societies in their respective regions. In 1913, a cooperative regulation act was passed in Cochin, leading to the registration of the Edavanakkad Paraspara Sahaya Sangham (mutual aid society) as the first cooperative under this act (Raveendranath 2014). The primary focus of the cooperative movement in the princely state of Cochin centred around agriculture and fishing, enjoying significant royal support. In Travancore, cooperative society regulation was enacted in 1914, leading to the formation of the Travancore Central Cooperative Society (Raveendranath 2014). However, the presence of cooperative entrepreneurship predates the royal regulations. In 1909, the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam established weaving and trading associations in Travancore to assist weavers in overcoming exploitation by powerful intermediaries (Chandramohan 2016: 106).

Vehicles of Social Reform

Since the early 20th century, evidence suggests the formation of various community-based cooperatives in both the Travancore and Cochin princely states, known as hotspots of anti-caste social reform movements. In 1917, Kerala's first fishermen's cooperative was established in Travancore by fishermen from the Arayan and Valan castes (Kurien 1980). In both regions, Rao Bahadur V Govindan, a bureaucrat in the fisheries department of the Madras Presidency, played a pivotal role in establishing the same (Houtart and Lemercinier 1978: 27). For Govindan, fostering cooperatives was a strategy to empower the fishermen's community and liberate them from the grasp of exploitative intermediaries.

The SNDP, an organisation formed by the joint efforts of the emerging Ezhava middle class and Sree Narayana Guru to enhance the moral and material well-being of the lower castes, sought to establish a more extensive network of cooperatives compared to other community organisations.[2] Recognising the precarious economic situation of the Ezhava community, Sree Narayana Guru actively promoted the formation of cooperatives for community advancement. However, the SNDP Yogam gained momentum in its membership and cooperative expansion only after T K Madhavan, a prominent Congress leader,

assumed leadership in 1927. Under Madhavan's guidance, the SNDP Yogam effectively established 60 cooperatives by the late 1930s (Chandramohan 2016: 94). However, the influence of the Sree Narayana Guru movement was predominantly confined to Travancore and Cochin.

In Malabar, the social reform movement led by Vagbhatananda garnered significant support. Vagbhatananda advocated self-knowledge and directed his efforts against practices such as idol worship, untouchability, superstition, and temple construction (Madhavan 2010: 49–51).[3] In 1917, along with a few progressive Tiyya (low caste) radicals, Vagbhatananda established the Atma Vidya Sangham (society for self-knowledge) in Karakkad and Cheruvanoor in Calicut. The Atma Vidya Sangham challenged feudal customs and caste rituals, resulting in physical abuse and severe social and economic boycotts. In response to this adversity, the ANS was formed in 1924, followed by the establishment of the Uralungal Koolivelakarude Paraspara Sahaya Yogam (wage labourers' mutual aid society) in 1925.

Although Vagbhatananda and his followers conceived the idea of forming cooperatives to combat feudal caste oppression by organising labour, this effort remained localised to Karakkad in northern Malabar (present-day Kozhikode district). Unlike the Sree Narayana Guru movement in south Kerala, Vagbhatananda never developed a robust institutional structure for a social renaissance in his stronghold of northern Malabar. Apart from the localised response in Karakkad, the Vagbhatananda movement neither attempted to build a network of cooperatives nor inspired a broader cooperative movement for supporting anti-caste social reforms.

Another significant contribution to the cooperative movement in Malabar came from the Servants of India Society, an organisation initiated by Gopal Krishna Gokhale in Pune to train "national missionaries" in constitutional means for the "social, moral, and educational up-building" of Indian society (Devadhar 1913: 3–5). Following the Malabar peasant rebellion of 1921–22, Gopal Krishna Devadhar, a founding member of the Servants of India Society (SIS), visited Malabar with a team of university-educated youth committed to constructive politics.[4] He formed the Devadhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust (DMRT) to support bereaved families, education for the dispossessed, and relief activities for the wounded in Malabar. The DMRT's activities were primarily focused on southern Malabar, with its headquarters at Chalappuram in Calicut. Alongside financial aid, the DMRT established India's first weavers' cooperative in Thanoor (Malappuram district, south Malabar) to involve the local population in constructive endeavours (Vijayan 2013: 94). Additionally, they initiated cooperative credit societies, cooperative stores, and potters' cooperative societies in both the southern and northern parts of Malabar. Notable contributions include labour cooperative stores in Feroke (Kozhikode district, south Malabar) and Adi Dravida Cooperative societies in Azhikode (Kannur district, north Malabar), among others in Kannur and Palakkad (Vijayan 2013: 94–95).

In the 1920s, activists from the Servants of India Society were quick to leverage colonial policies favouring cooperatives, particularly weavers' cooperatives. In response to recommendations from expert committees on the textile industry, the Madras government decided to promote weavers' and handloom cooperatives in the province (Raghavan 1995: 177). The moderate constitutionalist politics of the SIS posed no significant threat to the colonial state, thus experiencing limited administrative hindrances. By 1922, the DMRT facilitated the establishment of two handloom cooperatives in south Malabar. Colonial patronage also facilitated the establishment of other handloom cooperatives in north Malabar, leading to the formation of initiatives such as the Neeleshwar Handloom Workers Cooperative Society in 1924 and the Panthalayani Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society in 1925 (Raghavan 1995: 178).

Anti-colonial and Anti-feudal Movements

As early as 1916, an exclusive resolution on cooperatives was passed in the first Malabar district political conference presided over by Annie Besant, a British social reformer and theosophist, at Palakkad. The resolution demanded the withdrawal of excessive British bureaucracy from the realm of Paraspara Sahaya Sanghams (mutual aid cooperatives) (Warrier 2018: 22), indicating the Congress party's recognition of cooperatives as a tool for the socio-economic empowerment of the rural masses in British Malabar and highlighting the importance of their autonomy.

Following the ruthless suppression of the Malabar peasant rebellion by the British and the subsequent revocation of the non-cooperation movement in 1922, the political activities of the Congress party in Malabar remained largely dormant for an extended period. However, during this time, many Congress party members began to explore constructive politics. Initiatives such as anti-untouchability campaigns, the promotion of *khadi* (handwoven cloth), and the dissemination of Gandhian ideals gained momentum under the leadership of upper-caste Congress leaders. In this context, Congress leader K Kelappan established an exclusive Adi Dravida School in 1925 at Moodadi, followed by the Pakanarpuram Sradhananda Vidyalaya in 1927 at Nallambrakunnu, both in present-day Kozhikode district (Madhavan 2010: 245–46). These schools aimed to mobilise untouchable families in Malabar and provide them with education to enable their participation in anti-colonial nationalist politics.

However, as anti-imperialist consciousness rose, oppressed caste communities also developed militant anti-feudal politics, which posed a challenge to the material interests of upper-caste landlords. This resulted in the enforcement of socio-economic boycotts by ruling caste communities against the untouchables. To overcome this perilous situation, the Adi Dravida committees of the Congress party in Malabar played a crucial role by establishing various cooperative societies. Additionally, in the Kerala provincial committee meeting of the Congress party held in Calicut in 1927, Kelappan amended the anti-untouchability resolution to include efforts for establishing new schools and cooperatives among the untouchable communities (Madhavan 2010: 248). Hence, from the early 20th century onwards, the political leadership of the Congress party in British Malabar showed a greater receptiveness to the idea of cooperatives compared to their national leadership. Colonial patronage in the cooperative sector scarcely discouraged them from pursuing the movement.

In the early 20th century, the oceanic trade of pepper and dry coconut thrived in northern Malabar, leading to expanded cultivation. This boosted the wealth of Muslim and Tiyya traders, some of whom invested in weaving, sawmill, and brick factories (Menon 1994: 7–8). During World War I, the demand for Malabar cloth surged, prompting the region's proliferation of weaving factories (Sheeja 2013: 123). However, this emerging prosperity was swiftly shattered by the Great Depression of the 1930s and plummeting prices of cash crops, such as pepper and coconut (Prakash 2017: 8). The era also saw a decline in paddy cultivation, exacerbating economic hardships. Acute poverty and food shortages made living conditions unbearable. Moreover, the colonial government's decision to enforce an 18.75% rent hike for all types of lands in 1929 (Desai 2007: 32) further intensified the suffering of the rural masses.

Badly affected by the Great Depression, harsh taxation policies, and prolonged agrarian crisis, rural communities turned to extensive moneylending for survival. Consequently, numerous Vividodheshya ANS (multipurpose credit cooperatives) and Paraspara Sahaya Sanghams were formed to combat the crisis. The severity of debt was so alarming that even property-owning members of the 11 agricultural cooperatives in Malabar faced debts amounting to 15% of their total landed property (Karat 1973: 34).

In the 1930s, amid fervent anti-imperialist agitation, a militant leadership emerged within the Congress party following waves of the Civil Disobedience Movement and Guruvayur Satyagraha.[5] With the enactment of the Malabar Tenancy Act, 1930, non-cultivating Kanam tenants mostly disengaged from the Congress movement.[6] Concurrently, leftist factions within the party aimed to represent the oppressed classes and transform them into a mass political force. P Krishna Pillai famously stated, "there are two types of Congress party; one for the poor and the other for the rich" (Balan 2019: 37), urging alignment with the former to mobilise peasants and workers in villages. By 1933, the Kerala Karshaka Sangham (peasants' organisation) was established in Calicut to combat caste oppression and economic exploitation. In December 1934, the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee formed a sub-committee led by Krishna Pillai to organise workers in emerging industries (Balan 2019: 39). Furthermore, in 1934, the leftist faction of the Congress party formed the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), advocating for class demands through militant mass movements. They supported the formation of beedi trade unions in Malabar, contributing to increased workers' militancy.

In 1934, the Sree Narayana Beedi Thozhilali Sangham was established in Thalassery, marking the first beedi (handmade cigarettes) workers' association in northern Malabar (Bhaskaran 2004: 40). Within a month, the abysmal wages and exploitative labour conditions in the beedi industry led the union to explore the formation of a workers' cooperative (Raghavan 1995: 237–40). The Thozhilali Beedi Works became the new symbol of workers' resistance against labour exploitation. Nonetheless, the cooperative failed to last long. During the beedi workers' strikes of 1937, the idea of cooperatives as a potential tool for workers' resistance gained prominence among socialist trade unions (Raghavan 1995: 240). However, despite the embrace of cooperatives as an official policy by most trade unions in the post-World War II period,[7] northern Malabar saw little development of beedi cooperatives for about a decade.

With the onset of World War II in 1939, the plight of the ordinary masses worsened. The leftist faction, fully geared for the militant mass struggle to end British colonialism, found the political compromises within the Congress party outdated. Thus, the communists emerged out of the CSP in Kerala.

To Fight Hunger

After the devastating World War II, the Malabar region was ravaged by famines, food shortages, and outbreaks of cholera and plague. Mass starvation and rising death tolls inflicted dreadful hardships on villages. The hoarding and black-market sales of essential commodities like foodgrains, sugar, and kerosene exacerbated the rural poor's distress. Faced with the imminent threat of food riots, trade unions and peasant organisations recognised the urgency of public food distribution. The All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), the peasant wing of the CPI, emphasised the immediate need to boost agricultural production and initiated a "Grow More Food" campaign (Namboodiripad 1943a).

The Bihar session of the AIKS (29–31 May 1942) advocated for the takeover of all foodgrains by cooperative societies at the village and taluk levels (Namboodiripad 1943a: 15–16). This measure was seen as crucial for ensuring a cheap supply of foodgrains, combating hoarding, and regulating price inflation. In the Kasaragod region, approximately 300 acres of land were made cultivable through collective labour efforts. Further, the Grow More Food campaign garnered support from some feudal landowners too in the Chirakkal and Calicut taluks (Namboodiripad 1943a: 21).

At the Bhakna Kalan session of the AIKS held in Punjab (2–4 April 1943), a call was made for a detailed study on cooperatives to assist the distressed peasantry (Namboodiripad 1943b: 5). The conference emphasised the need to stock foodgrains in public storehouses managed by food committees, establish a public distribution system and government-owned food stores, and develop an extensive network of cooperative stores in rural areas for purchasing and distributing foodgrains and essential commodities (Namboodiripad 1943b: 12). To uphold the resolutions of the AIKS, communists played a proactive role in establishing Producers and Consumers Cooperatives (PCCs) in Malabar. Organised peasantry seized foodgrains from the storehouses of feudal landlords and distributed them at fair prices through PCCs. The formation of the Malabar PCC Society was one such attempt to resist the hoarding and black-market sales of foodgrains.

During the post-war food crisis, Kelappan and the Congress party played a significant role in expanding the cooperative movement in Malabar. Kelappan emphasised the need for constructive politics beyond the provincial Congress government in the Madras legislature to alleviate the suffering of the impoverished masses (Manmathan 1984: 254). To address issues like hoarding, corruption, and black-market activities related to foodgrains, Kelappan proposed that cooperatives should manage ration shops and facilitate the procurement and distribution of paddy in each village. In 1946, Kelappan, along with Congress leaders C K Govindhan Nair and A K Damodharan, met with T Prakasham, the Prime Minister of the Madras Presidency at

the time, to seek approval for a comprehensive plan for the co-operative movement in Malabar (Manmathan 1984: 257). Prakasham viewed the cooperative movement as a crucial tool in the fight against poverty and hunger and offered his warm support to the Congressmen's efforts to promote cooperatives. With the support of Prakasham's Congress ministry and the efforts of P R Kapoor, the district collector of Malabar, significant progress was achieved. Within just 15 days, Kelappan and his associates mobilised ₹40 lakh and enlisted five lakh members for various cooperatives (Manmathan 1984: 259).

Challenges and Conflicts

However, not all members of the Congress party were enthusiastic about the cooperative formations. Wholesale merchants and traders, who felt threatened by the emerging cooperative movement, collaborated with certain Congress leaders to petition Prakasham for an inquiry into the alleged irregularities of PCC societies in Malabar. Additionally, the All India Muslim League raised concerns about the lack of Muslim representation in cooperative leadership positions in Malabar (Manmathan 1984: 258).

The new beginning in the cooperatives certainly had several limitations. The dominance of privileged castes/classes in leadership positions and accounts of rampant corruption were serious inhibiting factors for an impressive cooperative future. Nevertheless, Kelappan's faction in the Congress party viewed support for the cooperative movement as an ideological responsibility of an organisation committed to socialism. Incensed by the propaganda against cooperatives within the Congress party and the Madras government's readiness to investigate PCC societies in Malabar, Kelappan decided to launch a mass agitation against the Congress government (Manmathan 1984: 288). His political leadership and mobilisation efforts ensured that the cooperative movement did not falter in its initial stages.

Towards the latter half of the 20th century, the influence of the Calcutta thesis of the CPI, coupled with tales of the Telangana armed struggle and the rallying cry of "land to the tiller," profoundly bolstered the morale of the peasantry in northern Malabar (Radhakrishnan 1980: 2100).[8] This era saw significant mobilisations by Verumpattaam tenants (see note 6) and agricultural labourers, primarily under the leadership of communist peasant organisations. The AIKS's advocacy for forming PCCs to combat food shortages was viewed as a direct challenge to feudal oppression and garnered enthusiastic support among the peasantry. On 16 November 1946, the communist worker–peasant alliance formed in Calicut resolved to establish PCC societies to distribute foodgrains obtained from the storehouses of feudal landlords. Unlike the Congress party, the communists refrained from advocating non-violence in the face of social violence perpetrated by feudal landlords against the impoverished peasantry and workers. In cases where landlords cooperated by relinquishing stocked foodgrains, the Karshaka Sangham paid fair prices for their procurement. However, in other instances, northern Malabar witnessed significant bloodshed during these agitations.

In 1946, the Karshaka Sangham requested the Rama Varma Valiya Raja, feudal landlord of Karivellur village in Kannur, north Malabar, to sell the 10,000 seers (a unit of measure, close to 1 kg) of paddy he had stocked at his granary at a fair price (Vijayalakshmy 2008: 200). However, the Raja, known for charging high rents from tenants, refused to comply against pressure from the Karshaka Sangham. Instead, he attempted to transfer his granary from Karivellur to the storehouse in Chirakkal, about 40 km away. The Karshaka Sangham resisted, leading to brutal repression by the Malabar Special Police, resulting in the tragic deaths of two Karshaka Sangham activists, Keeneri Kunhikannan and Thitil Kannan (Vijayalakshmy 2008: 201).

Furthermore, during World War II and its aftermath, the hoarding and black-market sale of yarns prompted communist and socialist intervention in weaving cooperatives in northern Malabar. Amid wartime, the colonial government imposed restrictions on the supply of yarns, leading to a severe shortage of raw materials for the weaving industry in northern Malabar. While the formation of these cooperatives revitalised employment in the weaving sector, the acute shortage of capital posed significant challenges. Many of these cooperatives relied on workers' solidarity and sacrifices to survive. For example, the Chirakkal Weavers Cooperative Society, registered on 17 December 1946, became fully operational in less than two months. Demonstrating remarkable solidarity, 37 *Kuzhithari* weavers risked pawning their ration cards to facilitate the cooperative, mobilising a total share capital of ₹1,048 from 99 members (Nalini 1997).[9]

Apart from bottom-up initiatives, the colonial administration also promoted numerous cooperatives to ensure an adequate supply of yarn for the handloom industry. However, once the wartime restrictions were lifted, many of these cooperatives became ineffective, and several of them transitioned into handloom production cooperatives. The weaving industry in northern Malabar experienced a surge during World War II due to increased domestic demand caused by the redirection of European mill clothes for military purposes. However, the expansion of cooperatives in this sector remained limited, primarily due to the dominance of private players.

The well-established private handloom industry in Malabar faced a crisis in the subsequent decade when mill cloths returned to the market. As a result, many private players were forced to shut down, leaving thousands of workers unemployed. To address this crisis, handloom weaver industrial cooperatives emerged in 1955 as a new form of cooperative enterprise aimed at rehabilitating these unemployed workers (Raghavan 1995: 181).

Conclusions

The cooperative movement in northern Malabar, Kerala, is historically intertwined with anti-feudal, anti-caste, and anti-colonial struggles. While social reformer Vagbhatananda saw cooperatives as a tool to combat caste oppression, social service organisations like DMRT viewed them as a means to link relief activities with constructive endeavours. Similarly, the Congress movement engaged with cooperatives to revitalise participation in the anti-colonial struggle as part of their socialist vision. The dominance of privileged communities in cooperative leadership and the influence of vested interests presented challenges to the movement. The communists in Kerala, stemming from the

Congress socialist faction, sustained their involvement in the cooperative movement, especially during the wartime crisis and the post-World War II period. Despite their efforts, the communists faced challenges in establishing an extensive network of (mainly credit) cooperatives, which is attributed to factors such as their late emergence as a distinct political entity, aggressive agitations drawing state scrutiny, and limited access to state support from the Madras Presidency compared to the Congress. Moreover, their involvement in the cooperative sector in the colonial era was part of intensifying anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggles rather than an end in itself. Future research could explore how, in the postcolonial period, the communists emerged as pivotal figures in Kerala's cooperative sector and examine their engagement with the diverse legacies of the cooperative movement, including colonial patronage.

NOTES

1 Before independence, Kochi and Travancore were princely states, while Malabar was directly under British rule. After the State Reorganisation Act of 1956 in independent India, the Malayalam-speaking areas of Travancore–Cochin, the Kasaragod taluk (in South Canara district), and the Malabar district became part of Kerala state.

2 The Ezhavas are a lower caste in Kerala, whose traditional occupation was toddy tapping from coconut and palm trees. The Ezhavas were considered untouchable and even unapproachable, and prohibited from approaching the Nair, Brahmin, Namboodiri, and Vellala upper castes. Sree Narayana Guru is a social reformer and philosopher from the Ezhava community. He gave the slogan "one caste, one religion, one god for humanity" and worked to end the caste-based oppression in Kerala.

3 Vagbhatananda, originally named Kunhikannan, was a key figure in the renaissance history of Malabar. He advocated self-knowledge and universal brotherhood, making significant contributions to social reform and philosophy during Kerala's transformative period.

4 The SIS, founded in 1905 by Gokhale and Devadhar, aimed to train "national missionaries" in constitutional means for the social, moral, and educational upliftment of Indian society.

5 In September 1932, the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee, supported by national leaders, initiated the Temple Entry Movement at Guruvayur temple culminating in hunger strikes by Kelappan and A K Gopalan against the exclusive entry of (upper-)caste Hindus to the temple.

6 Kanam tenant refers to a person holding land on kanam tenure, typically lasting 12 years. The non-cultivating kanam tenants, had successfully secured their class interest—to reinstate the traditional tenancy rights enjoyed by kanam tenants during the precolonial era through the enactment of the Malabar Tenancy Act (1930). Thus, the ex-kanam tenants (mostly the upper-caste Nairs) on becoming the "new class of landlords" continued the oppression and harassment of the lower-caste *Verumpattaam* tenants, who before the Malabar Tenancy (Amendment) Act of 1951, had the right under local custom to possess land for a specific period, with the requirement to pay a renewal fee to the landlord for continued tenure thereafter.

7 During the 1940s, the Beedi and Cigar Workers Union presented their demand for a cooperative to candidates contesting from Chirakkal Taluk to the Madras legislative assembly. Manikkoth Kumaran (Congress) and K P Gopalan (Communist Party of India) were the prominent contenders. The Communist Party of India (CPI) candidate openly embraced the proposal, incorporating cooperatives into his campaign agenda. Additionally, ahead of the 1946 Madras legislative assembly elections, communist leader Krishna Pillai actively advocated for organising the beedi industry cooperatively with adequate state backing.

8 Inspired by a peasant movement in Telangana, the Calcutta thesis, championed by B T Ranadive at the Second Party Congress of CPI in 1948, viewed India's independence as a bourgeois sham. It called for people's uprisings to replace the existing state with a People's Democratic Republic representing the interests of workers and peasants.

9 Kuzhithari is a traditional weaving machine. Before the advent of power looms, kuzhithari was prominent in northern Malabar.

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