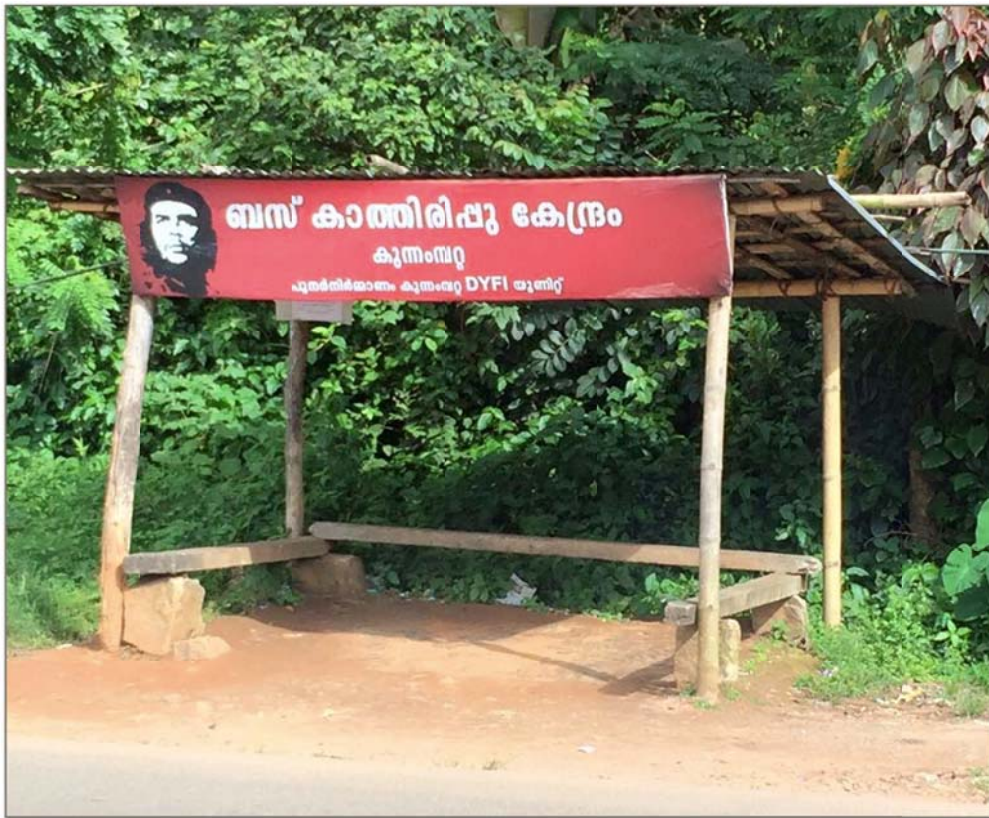


# Radical Fields

## Communism and Agriculture in Kerala State



Maxwell Fenton

Des Moines, Iowa

The World Food Prize Foundation

2015 Borlaug-Ruan Internship

MS Swaminathan Research Foundation

Chennai, India

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	3
Personal Introduction.....	4
The MS Swaminathan Research Foundation.....	4
Abstract.....	5
Findings.....	5
I. A Brief History of Keralite Radicalism.....	5
II. Stagnation: Kerala’s Economic Development in the 21st Century....	9
III. Strides: Social-Agrarian Development Under Communism.....	13
IV. Keralite Communism as Radical Agrarian Democracy.....	15
V. Concluding Remarks and Policy Recommendations.....	17
Personal Reflection.....	19
Photographs.....	20
Bibliography.....	21

## Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank Dr. Norman Borlaug and John Ruan III. Their faith in youth as the future leaders of global agriculture was the inspiration for this program, and their continued legacies can still be felt not only through agriculture but the world itself.

Lisa Fleming, Ambassador Kenneth Quinn, and the whole of the World Food Prize Foundation staff also deserve my hearty thanks for their logistical, practical, and general support. I could not have had this opportunity without their great assistance.

Thank you to all of the staff (that are too numerous to name here) at the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation. All of you assisted me in my endeavors in India. Without your support, my project would not have had the same depth in writing or in topic.

I would like to thank my supervisors at the MSSRF, Drs. Rajalakshmi Swaminathan and CS Chandrika for their assistance in organizing both practical and cultural excursions. Both of your analyses were essential in forming my paper.

My greatest thanks go to MS Swaminathan himself, who was kind enough to let me come to Chennai after my first internship assignment to Nepal fell through due to the tragic earthquake. His kindness, generosity, vivacity, and intelligence remain an inspiration.

Thank you to Neena Hayreh, Barbara Hemann, Nancy Holsapple, and Erin Pommrehn for their assistance in teaching me how to write academically and providing excellent recommendations, both in this program and elsewhere.

Thank you to all of my friends. You were very supportive and encouraging of my participation in this program, and were always interested in my adventures in India.

And finally, I thank my staunchest allies and harshest critics - my family. Without your emotional, moral, and economic support, I could not be where I am today.

## **Personal Introduction**

I do not come from a farm. The closest that actual agriculturalists of any sort are to my bloodline goes back several generations to hardscrabble pioneers on the Colorado prairie and poultry farmers in southern Iowa. In contrast to this dearth of a close agricultural background, I have always found the subject fascinating, especially as it pertains to global development issues and political movements. When I heard about the World Food Prize program, I was only tangentially aware of the great opportunity that it provided to students from across the United States to study agriculture overseas. I'd always enjoyed *talking* about the world's issues, but the Borlaug-Ruan program provides the opportunity to *see* them up close.

I feared during the application process, however, that I would be pigeonholed into researching a scientific or technological topic - something that is by no means my forte. However, I was pleasantly surprised that my policy studies background was not only appreciated at the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, but encouraged. This paper is the culmination of my several research interests colliding at once - labor history, critical theory, political ideologies, and, of course, agriculture. It is very cliché, but if someone had told me that when I applied for this program junior year of high school that I'd have the opportunity to construct a project of this magnitude, I'd have laughed in their face. But it is for that very reason why the Borlaug-Ruan Program is so important to me - that it not only encourages the development of these interests, but expects it. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

With that, the academic section of this paper begins.

## **The MS Swaminathan Research Foundation**

The MS Swaminathan Research Foundation was developed in 1988 by its namesake, MS Swaminathan. An agriculture scientist by profession, he used the money he received from winning the first World Food Prize to found his organization. It has a multitude of regional programs in Chennai, Kerala, Puducherry, and Orissa, among smaller local efforts. It follows a "pro-poor, pro-woman, pro-sustainable development" approach in its recommendations in the scientific and policy worlds. It plays a significant role in promoting positive agricultural change in India, specifically targeting that nation's most marginalized groups - tribal people, dalits, and women to name a few. Researchers at the MSSRF have made significant strides in combatting continued food scarcity and security issues not only in India, but worldwide.

## Abstract

The Indian state of Kerala is noted by experts as a sort of “puzzle” in the field of global development. While its social development is often on par with that of the developed world, the economy continues to lag far behind many of its less advanced neighbors. In contrast to other Indian states, Kerala’s specific model of development was representative of a great decentralization of power into local hands. Particularly “left-wing” sentiments – notably, sponsorship of trade unions and extensive land reforms – were a major aspect of this political-economic model. With this decentralization came the rise of militant trade unions and rural organizations as sources of power and legitimacy for disenfranchised and disaffected sectors of Keralite society. Groups like agricultural workers, dalits, and landless people all used organizations such as these to broadcast their demands to the society at large. However, such militancy has often led to open revolts and a breakdown of rural labor relations. Even as organizations have abandoned their confrontational pasts, the commonplace nature of labor militancy in Kerala has had substantial effects on the socio-economics of the state. But can labor militancy be exclusively blamed for this puzzling development crisis? And can Kerala be considered a “radical democracy” as a result of its insurgent politics? Through the dual lenses of political philosophy and analysis, a meaningful study of Kerala’s agrarian revolts shall be created.

### I. A Brief History of Keralite Agrarian Radicalism

Kerala’s history as a hotbed of rural militancy is not a particularly recent occurrence. Among the earliest sentiments of such direct action come from the British Raj and a peasant<sup>1</sup> revolt known as the Malabar Rebellion. In 1921, fed up with repressive British rule and the intransigence of their higher-caste Hindu Brahmin *jenmi* (landlords), thousands of Mappila Muslims, the majority of which were *kudiyaan*, (tenants), rose up in massive scale to throw off this oppressive yoke. Government offices and treasuries were sacked, courts were held hostage, and landlords’ records were burned. Mappilas attacked Hindu tenants, believing they were in league with British-sponsored police forces. Revolting Mappilas were reported to have forced at least 100,000 Hindus to convert or face

death<sup>2</sup>. Smaller demonstrations had certainly occurred, but the Malabar Rebellion was the culmination of a series of riots in the area that were largely for the same purpose<sup>3</sup>. It was the first such large-scale revolt in Kerala’s history, and a tough act to follow – no demonstration since has captured the following of so many people. While actions against Hindus must be considered atrocities, and the true nature of Malabar as a religious or agrarian conflict is up for debate, no historian can deny the impact of the Malabar Rebellion on Kerala’s labor history. It set the stage for a history of open rural revolts, and is still considered a touchstone for many peasant leaders. In fact, in 1971, the Kerala state government recognized the Mappila revolutionaries as

---

<sup>1</sup> “Peasant” is not used here as a disparaging term. Modern historians and professionals specializing in rural studies use it as a term referring to poor landless people. Examples include the respected *Journal of Peasant Studies*.

---

<sup>2</sup> Besant, Annie. *The Future of Indian Politics: A Contribution to the Understanding of Present-Day Problems*. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2006. Reprint.

<sup>3</sup> Panikkar, K. N., *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar 1836–1921*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

“freedom fighters.”<sup>4</sup> Malabar’s impact is still resonating throughout modern religious and class conflicts in Kerala, and its legacy is still a matter of concern.

But at its core, Malabar was an illegal action of class warfare. Such a massive uprising was by no means sanctioned by the ruling British-Brahmin bourgeoisie. It was nearly 40 years later that class conflicts became “institutionalized” – essentially, incorporated into policy implementation. In 1957, the voters of Kerala became the first people in the world to democratically elect a Communist government<sup>5</sup>. Led by E. M. S. Namboodiripad, the Party’s victory represented the convergence of a number of social and political movements among peasants and the rural poor<sup>6</sup>. Multiple small parties with hazy ideologies were formed representing the needs of low-caste, landless, and rural people, including groups like the All India Kisan Sabha (All India Peasant Union), founded in 1936 by a group of landless workers. More general parties, like the Congress Socialist Party founded in the early 1930’s, sought to emulate the socialist revolution that had swept the Soviet Union a decade earlier<sup>7</sup>. These parties, along with other, more regional factions in Kerala, became the foundations for political organization on the behalf of the Communists.

Another inspirational movement was found in Kerala’s early trade unions. With the

stock crash in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, India’s economy was still lashed to a poorly performing British Empire. Similar economic problems faced India’s workers. In response, laborers began to organize and founded regional groups for a variety of industries, including agriculture. A plethora of organizations, including the newly-founded Travancore Agricultural Labourers’ Union and Cochin Sterling Workers’ Union became particularly militant as time went on, sponsoring the idea of “labour brotherhood” and agitating for better working conditions<sup>8</sup>. These unions were in large part recruiting centers and “vote banks” for the Communists – the CPI was seen in large part as the only party to sponsor organized labor and gained massive amounts of votes from labor sponsorship<sup>9</sup>. Third and perhaps most important was the socioeconomic situation that existed in Kerala at this point. Kerala had the most internecine caste system of any province in India. A tiny priestly ruling class of Brahmin considered all others outside of their caste to be untouchable<sup>10</sup>. This complex system grew into outright exploitation under the Raj, as superior British military firepower alleviated any anxieties about a peasant uprising<sup>11</sup>. The caste system grew into landlordism and abuse of tenants, using the already thin patina of caste to add a sense of legitimacy to this victimization. The colonial abuses of the past were coupled with rampant inequality as well, especially among agrarian communities. Kerala in the 1950’s

---

<sup>4</sup> Miller, Roland. *The Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. VI*. Leiden: Brill Publishers, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Patel, Raj. *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World Food System*. London: Portobello Books Ltd., 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Heller, Patrick. *The Labor of Development*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> “Party History”. Communist Party of India (Marxist). <http://www.cpmkerala.org/eng/history-2.php?n=1> Accessed 20 July 2015.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Menon, Ramesh. “Labour pangs - Militant trade unionism drives companies out of Kerala” March 15, 1990. *IndiaToday*.

<sup>10</sup> Nossiter, Thomas Johnson. *Communism in Kerala: a study in political adaptation*. Oakland: University of California Press, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Barendse, Rene J., *Arabian Seas 1700-1763: The Western Indian Ocean in the eighteenth century*. Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2009.

had the highest proportion of low-caste agriculture workers anywhere in India, who tended to be in crushing poverty. This substantial majority of Keralites stands in direct contrast to the tiny Brahmin landlord community, who tended to be fabulously wealthy by Indian standards<sup>12</sup>. Such is the situation in many jurisdictions with a substantial Communist presence. Simple electoral calculus prevailed, and as the primary platform of the CPI was to reduce income inequality, the overwhelming majority of agrarian workers supported their cause. It was a perfect storm for far-left victory.

In 1957, with a Communist government freshly elected, the institutionalization of class warfare and labor militancy was in full swing. Riding into power on a tsunami of rural discontent, the Communist government swiftly enacted a number of substantial land and social reforms. First among them was the controversial Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill, passed in 1957<sup>13</sup>. Using the slogan “Land for the Tiller!” the Act accomplished a number of very radical goals. First, the eviction of people and collection of rents was made illegal. Second, a ceiling was placed on the amount of land any given family or individual could own. Finally, surplus lands were assigned and their owners were granted proprietary rights<sup>14</sup>. Such a drastic series of reforms sent seismic shockwaves through the wealthy landlord community. A coalition of decidedly bourgeois forces was formed to end Communist rule. It involved major opposition parties like the Indian Congress,

religious forces like the Catholic Church and wealthy Syrian Christians<sup>15</sup>, a number of Nair<sup>16</sup> rights groups, and even the CIA, which sought to prevent “additional Keralas” sprouting from Indian rural discontent<sup>17</sup>. Social strife ensued for a brief period, and the Nehru government invoked Article 356 of the Indian Constitution, which allows the central government to dismiss the government of a state if it is determined to be unfit to rule<sup>18</sup>. Kerala was ruled directly by the then-Presidents of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad and his successor Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan until 1967, excepting the relative quiet of 1960-1964. Abortive elections resulted in further strife, and the state was yet again put under President’s Rule in 1965<sup>19</sup>. In 1967, a Communist government under E.M.S. Namboodiripad was yet again elected, and began the process of reworking many of the land reforms that it had passed a decade earlier. By 1969, an updated version of the earlier Agrarian Relations Bill had been passed. Due to a number of political scandals and the split of the Communist Party into two separate entities (CPI (Marxist) and CPI), Namboodiripad resigned later that year. He was replaced by C. Achutha Menon, head of the CPI wing of India’s Communists<sup>20</sup> who headed a

---

<sup>12</sup> Nossiter, *supra* at 10.

<sup>13</sup> The government issued the law as an ordinance – essentially an executive order. The state parliament later debated it and passed it as a Bill. It shall be referred to as the latter here.

<sup>14</sup> *The Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill*. Kerala, India. Government of Kerala. Passed 1957. [http://kerala.gov.in/docs/pdf/agrn\\_rln.pdf](http://kerala.gov.in/docs/pdf/agrn_rln.pdf). Accessed 21 July 2015.

---

<sup>15</sup> Nair, K. Ramachandran. *The history of trade union movement in Kerala*. Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment. Delhi: Manak Publications. 2006.

<sup>16</sup> The Nair are a small caste in Kerala with unique family structures. Their concern was in preserving their traditions.

<sup>17</sup> Moynihan, Sen. Daniel Patrick. *A Dangerous Place*. New York City: Little, Brown, and Company. 1978

<sup>18</sup> Nossiter, *supra* at 10.

<sup>19</sup> “History of Kerala Legislature”. Government of Kerala. [http://kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3776:history-of-kerala-legislature](http://kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3776:history-of-kerala-legislature). Accessed 21 July 2015.

<sup>20</sup> “Political Background”. Government of Kerala. [http://kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3064&Itemid=2378](http://kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3064&Itemid=2378). Accessed 21 July 2015.

coalition government with India's Congress Party.

By the late 1970's, labor militancy was at its absolute zenith in Kerala. Relations between farmers and laborers had reached a nadir, largely in part to a number of shifting labor dynamics. Farmers began to cultivate less labor-intensive crops – trees like coconut and rubber became more commonplace than rice paddies<sup>21</sup>. In response, laborers took to agitation and radical strategies meant to disrupt these changing economies of scale. Conflicts and violence became increasingly commonplace as the disputes between labor and managers grew. State attempts to mediate the conflict only worsened the economic impacts of this provocation, and created a business-hostile environment that persists into the 21<sup>st</sup> century through failed central economic planning and poorly managed Keynesian strategies<sup>22</sup>. Nonetheless, class mobilization in large part only led to stalemates with managerial concerns, and organized labor had to adapt itself for the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>23</sup>. By 1981, the Communist Party and its many unions had accepted the politics of class compromise. Militancy was on a slow downswing for the next two decades<sup>24</sup>. Since the apex of labor violence in the 1970's, the number of strikes and days lost due to labor activity has dropped steeply.

At this point, labor militancy was abandoned in large scale by 2000, but its impacts continued to reverberate throughout

Kerala<sup>25</sup>. Policymakers attempted to draft solutions to put the final nail in the coffin for radical labor. In 2001, the government sought to force unions to abandon many of the more drastic policies, like occupying workplaces and attacking managers' houses<sup>26</sup>.

While the sheer number of strikes went down from 1970-1996, militant labor activity is persistent in Kerala nearly two decades later. Bellicose unions continue to push radical ideologies and refuse to change with the prevailing notions of labor markets, especially in agricultural areas. Because agriculture is an especially job-heavy sector, union militancy continues to have a profound effect<sup>27</sup>. As there are (a) more workers, (b) less income, (c) and a tradition of agrarian organization, militant unions have been able to hold back progress in agricultural development, and in some cases, downgrade it. Many also argue that labor militancy is back and here to stay in Kerala. As a matter of fact, from 2005-2012 there were 363 *hartal* - large scale labor strikes – pushed both by the Communists and trade unions. On average, this means about one such action per week<sup>28</sup>. A recent *hartal* in April of 2015 by the farming and fishing industry succeeded in grinding Keralite business to a screeching halt. In spite of 2001-era efforts to curtail the rise of radical labor, multiple accounts exist of strikers throwing rocks and damaging property in

---

<sup>21</sup> Heller, *supra* at 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Payaril, Govindra “Kerala: the Development Experience: Reflections on Sustainability and Replicability”. London: Zed Books. 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

---

<sup>25</sup> “Kerala's trade unions begin to shun labour militancy”. New Trade Union Initiative. 20 August 2010. <http://ntui.org.in/labour-news/item/keralas-trade-unions-begin-to-shun-labour-militancy/>

<sup>26</sup> “Kerala to take steps to end labour militancy”. The Times of India. 2 December 2001. Accessed 21 July 2015.

[timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/Kerala-to-take-steps-to-end-labour-militancy/articleshow/753838513.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/Kerala-to-take-steps-to-end-labour-militancy/articleshow/753838513.cms)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “363 hartals in 7 years in Kerala!” AsianAge. 16 September 2012. Accessed 21 July 2015. [archive.asianage.com/india/363-hartals-7-years-kerala-357](http://archive.asianage.com/india/363-hartals-7-years-kerala-357)



this particular action<sup>29</sup>. Whatever the circumstances, radical labor continues to have a presence in Kerala regardless of an earlier statistical downswing. Even when the Communists are not in power, their pervasive legacy of promoting rural militancy has lasting impacts on Kerala's development and its organized labor. Kerala's modern history is one of great upheaval. From the Malabar Rebellion to the Communists to the distress of the 1970's, Keralite labor is certainly still the best organized of any Indian state. While many argue the Keralite organization and development dream has failed, one cannot discount the impact radical, meaningful, organized labor has had on the socioeconomic trends of what was once a colonial rural backwater.

## II. Stagnation: Kerala's Economic Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Kerala's labor unions have played a significant role in fostering the major agro-economic programs that plague the state even today. Through their strident politics and distrust of modernization, they have significantly crippled agriculture in that state. An over-reliance upon cash crops has been compounded by a significant decline in the production of rice. A hostility to modern agricultural practices has caused massive labor shortages for those that can find work. The vast unemployed population has turned to remittances as a source of income, and the state's budget remains reliant upon foreign money.

Much of the Keralite economy is hugely reliant upon agriculture, especially in the production of spice and tree crops. At least

50% of the state's population is directly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood<sup>30</sup>. Kerala produces 97% of Indian pepper. 85% of rubber output comes from Kerala as well. Spice crops like vanilla, nutmeg, and cardamom are the locus of much of Kerala's agricultural activity<sup>31</sup>. A major agricultural staple is rice, with over six hundred separate varieties grown in the state alone<sup>32</sup>. Rice is also a huge part of the Keralite diet, typically served with a variety of side dishes and eaten with the hands<sup>33</sup>. But the underlying issues with agriculture in Kerala are not with the crops *per se* – they primarily lie with the means in which crops are grown. Under the terms of the Agrarian Relations Bill in 1957 and its update a decade later, ceilings were placed on the amount of land that a given family or individual could own. 15 acres was set as the limit for the former and 7.5 acres for the latter<sup>34</sup>. These limitations, coupled with the redistribution of surplus lands and the relative poverty and size of the agricultural worker base, created a situation in which Keralite farms are desperately fragmented. The average farm size in Kerala in general is 0.24 hectares – about 0.6 acres. This stands in direct contrast to the Indian state of Gujarat, which has experienced huge growth

---

<sup>29</sup> "Strike, hartals to shut down Kerala today". The Hindu. 8 April 2015. Accessed 21 July 2015.

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/strike-hartals-to-shut-down-kerala-today/article7079389.ece>

---

<sup>30</sup> Williams, Michelle. *The Roots of Participatory Democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2008.

<sup>31</sup> "Agriculture". Government of Kerala.

<http://www.kerala.gov.in/economy/agri.htm> . Accessed 22 July 2015

<sup>32</sup> Sreedharan, TP. "Biological Diversity of Kerala: A survey of Kalliasseri panchayat, Kannur district" Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development (Centre for Development Studies). 2004.

<sup>33</sup> "Why People Eat With Their Hands in Kerala". NDTV Food. 16 Feb 2015. <http://food.ndtv.com/opinions/why-people-eat-with-their-hands-in-kerala-694675> Accessed 22 July 2015.

<sup>34</sup> *Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill, supra* at 14.

rates in agriculture. Its average farm size is closer to 2.33 hectares – roughly 5.3 acres<sup>35</sup>. But how specifically does the fragmentation of farms impact agriculture? The presence of too many small farms with little consolidation has a number of severe repercussions not only on agricultural productivity, but food security as well. The vast majority of these small landholdings are owned by families, who rely upon their own labor to harvest and produce crops for market. While the families on these small farms are able to harvest all their crops and do not experience labor shortages, the sheer tininess of their farms prevents meaningful harvests due to the shortage of land. This hypothesis has been noted in many Indian states, including the economically and politically similar state of West Bengal<sup>36</sup>. Because these farmers have such little land, they are unable to focus on multiple crops. In an attempt to make more money (despite the efforts of the government at developing a welfare state), many farmers focus almost exclusively on growing cash crops like rubber, coconut, or spices. Also, as they are so reliant upon a single crop for their livelihood, and are often in extreme poverty anyway, they are especially affected by massive fluctuations in volatile commodity prices. A sharp drop in rubber prices by the year 2014 in response to cheaper crude oil distressed many Indian smallholders, especially in places like Kerala<sup>37</sup>. Because cheaper oil means synthetic rubber is easier to produce, auto companies were

abandoning organic rubber in favor of its artificial counterpart. Prices dropped 24% as a result of shifting demands, and natural rubber's share of the market fell from 75% to 66%<sup>38</sup>. Without a sufficient demand relative to the toil of harvesting rubber, Kerala's rubber farmers were left without a leg to stand on. Regi Paul, a rubber farmer, was interviewed by the *Wall Street Journal* during the crisis in 2014. He said: "We never faced this kind of situation. I am planning to give up most of my rubber plantation and switch to banana, nutmeg or coconut." Fortunately for Mr. Paul, he owns a fairly large rubber plantation<sup>39</sup>. He was able to stave off much of the crisis simply by switching crops or utilizing fallow land. Unfortunately for many of Kerala's rubber growers, smallholder farmers who likely grow nothing else but a home garden, there are few options. In July of 2015, the Kerala state government approved a law creating a minimum price support and subsidy for impoverished small scale rubber growers, including repealing the value added tax on natural rubber to spur domestic tire makers to buy Keralite product<sup>40</sup>. Unfortunately, that will not tackle the underpinning issues that rubber growers in Kerala face. Despite the apparent advantages the government has granted rubber farmers in marketing to tire manufacturers, companies still may not purchase natural rubber, considering it inferior to synthetic. The government also has to pay more out of an already stretched budget due to the repeal of the VAT<sup>41</sup>. And there is no guarantee prices will improve – the plan was drafted in the first place to *encourage* the continued growth of rubber

---

<sup>35</sup> Dev, S. Mahendra. "Small Farmers in India: Challenges and Opportunities." *Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research*. June 2012. <http://www.igidr.ac.in/pdf/publication/WP-2012-014.pdf>. Accessed 22 July 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Ghosh Madhusudan "Changes in the Agrarian Structure of West Bengal", *Productivity*, Vol.30, October-December, No.3. 1989.

<sup>37</sup> Nayak, Depiprasad. "Falling Crude Upsets India's Rubber Farmers". *Wall Street Journal*. 14 November 2014. Accessed 22 July 2015. <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2014/11/17/falling-crude-upsets-indias-rubber-farmers/>

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Krishnakumar, PK. "Kerala government's Rs 300 crore subsidy to rubber farmers may increase production". *The Hindu*. 9 July 2015. Accessed 22 July 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

crops. Because more rubber will flood the market as a result of these plans, prices will likely remain stagnant, or more likely, drop again. While this policy may seem useful in an agrarian and humanitarian sense, its hamhandedness in remedying the concerns of Keralite rubber growers is obvious. Rubber growers – and farmers in general – face a number of issues that tie back to Kerala’s original land reform package. Because farmers are on such fragmented parcels of land and are still facing problems with rural poverty and economic disenfranchisement, they are largely unable to escape their situations despite the best efforts of government policy and business cooperation. In Wayanad District alone, 30% of the population lives in abject poverty<sup>42</sup>.

But the issue does not lie solely with smallholders. Larger growers face issues with radical labor unions meddling in labor markets. In contrast to smaller growers, larger growers have enough land but not enough labor to harvest substantial rubber crops. Radical unionization has prevented large-scale rubber growers from obtaining necessary labor to work their fields. While the worker protections that such unions have created have resulted in a humanitarian net positive, their tightening of labor markets and unreasonable requests have hurt larger growers that cannot afford to keep up with union demands<sup>43</sup>.

Rubber is not the only crop affected by this stripe of labor extremism, however. Even Kerala’s primary food crop, rice, has not been spared from these static views.

---

<sup>42</sup> Spatial poverty in Kerala”. LiveMint. 24 November 2014. Accessed 22 July 2015.

<http://www.livemint.com/Politics/FJwyzCLIJU1DrOR00aFmDK/Spatial-poverty-in-kerala.html>

<sup>43</sup> Ghosh, *supra* at 36.

Because the primary motive of survival for unions is to maintain substantial membership rolls, they need as many workers as possible to have jobs in a certain field. Thus, unions often will oppose necessary technological and social developments in order to maintain an artificially larger membership. The key example of this in Kerala is rice production. The central government often stresses the importance of agricultural mechanization to increase the size of yields, especially with a dwindling number of people interested in agriculture due to its drudgery<sup>44</sup>. Despite the best efforts of the central government and its agricultural policymakers in introducing new technologies, Kerala’s agricultural unions have strangled any hope of progress in rice production. Considering rice harvesters to be "bourgeois farm machines", these organizations have pressured rice growers into maintaining the use of sickles to harvest rice – the same practice used for hundreds of years<sup>45</sup>. Until 2004, the Communist Party and its allied unions were able to prevent the use of *any* farm machinery<sup>46</sup>. By 2008, however, their grip had weakened and some farmers introduced technology like basic threshing machines to their rice farms. Unfortunately, the farmers either had to stop using or sell their new

---

<sup>44</sup> Jaiswal, Binita. “Agri mechanization stressed”. *The Times of India*. 3 March 2013. Accessed 23 July 2015.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhubaneswar/Agri-mechanization-stressed/articleshow/18771792.cms>

<sup>45</sup> Rajeev, PI. “In Kerala’s rice bowl, comrades hammer it to farmers: stick to sickle, machines make profits”. *The Indian Express*. 10 April 2007. Accessed 23 July 2015.

<http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/in-kerala-s-rice-bowl-comrades-hammer-it-to-farmers-stick-to-sickle-machines-make-profits/27959/0>

<sup>46</sup> Balachandran, Pillai G. Constraints on Diffusion and Adoption of Agro-mechanical Technology in Rice Cultivation in Kerala. 2004. Centre for Development Studies.

equipment because of union threats to destroy them<sup>47</sup>.

The result of this radical activity is twofold. First, farmers are unable to obtain the labor they need to harvest rice. The crop is an especially difficult one to grow due to the intensity of its growth and harvest – flooding paddies and threshing grains from rice plants is an especially hard task, even by agricultural standards<sup>48</sup>. Because few people want to work in this drudgery, especially using old-school technology like sickles, unemployed or landless people have taken to other jobs, like laying down roads or construction. These jobs will often pay more (albeit due to radical union activity in other sectors) and are less strenuous<sup>49</sup>. This is especially ironic considering the unemployment rate in Kerala is the highest of any major Indian state, at 7.4%<sup>50</sup>. Even more shocking is that the same rate among youth sits closer to 22%<sup>51</sup>. Even jobless people living in rice growing areas are avoiding the drudgery associated with rice work. The blame can be laid upon union pressures to fight mechanization, which has led to a downturn not only in productivity but in agricultural jobs. Even as young people abandon agriculture for other professions, unions cling to traditional

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Jaiswal, *supra* at 44.

<sup>49</sup> Rajeev, *supra* at 45.

<sup>50</sup> Binduraj, J. “Kerala unemployment rate falls, but still highest among larger states: Economic Review”. IndiaToday. 23 January 2014. Accessed 23 July 2015.

<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/kerala-leads-in-unemployment-60-percent-of-them-are-women-says-state-economic-review/1/339218.html>

<sup>51</sup> Rao, Kirthi V. “Unemployment among rural youth at highest level since 93-94”. LiveMint. 31 January 2014. Accessed 23 July 2015. <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/rmxquBMhnmzwwXtxWm9m1H/Unemployment-among-rural-youth-at-highest-level-since-9394.html>

means of harvest to swell their own membership rolls, failing all the while<sup>52</sup>. Second, the production of rice has fallen steadily. The crop is Kerala’s primary food staple, and union actions to discourage modernization in agriculture have resulted in a striking decline in the sheer amount of rice produced. Owing to a lack of modern agriculture practices and labor, the state can only produce enough rice to last itself two months<sup>53</sup>. The state receives 84% of its rice from other Indian states, notably Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The gap between production and necessity continues to starkly grow, and prognosis for food security in the future is incredibly grim<sup>54</sup>. In addition to issues of antiquated practices and labor shortages, the drive to remain a farmer is practically zero. In 1981, 41% of the state’s population was made up of agriculture laborers and farmers. By 2001, that number stood at 23% and continues to drop<sup>55</sup>. Radical labor activity, despite its interest in promoting egalitarianism and social justice, has an inverse effect on protecting basic rights to food security. Since the state has become so reliant upon other parts of India for food, it is widely speculated that if agriculture suffers elsewhere, Kerala may be hit the hardest as it has no food reserves of its own<sup>56</sup>. Radical labor militancy continues to hamstring food production, and the state may be forced into starvation if agriculture collapses elsewhere in India.

But how does Kerala create revenue, even in the face of decaying agriculture? The

---

<sup>52</sup> Rajeev, *supra* at 45.

<sup>53</sup> “Kerala Faces Grim Food Scarcity.” OWSA. Accessed November 1, 2015. <http://southasia.oneworld.net/news/kerala-faces-grim-food-scarcity#.VjWMHq6rQgp>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

economy of the state has become a “money order” system, reliant upon remittances from migrant workers. By the early 1980’s, a substantial number of Malayalis, the dominant ethnic group in Kerala, left their state for the Persian Gulf in search of greener economic pastures<sup>57</sup>. By 2008, the number of so-called “Gulf Keralites” had reached 2.5 million, spread out among Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. This number remains constant even in 2015<sup>58</sup>. Combined, they sent back nearly ₹44.6 billion (\$6.81 billion) that was promptly pumped into the economy<sup>59</sup>. The money these workers send home makes up roughly 36% of the state’s GDP<sup>60</sup>. The majority of these migrants served in menial positions, either as domestics or manual laborers. Many of the new buildings constructed in Dubai’s real estate boom were built by Keralite laborers, who face human rights abuses and a lack of ability to organize<sup>61</sup>. The vast majority of these workers are from agricultural areas, unwilling to work in agrarian drudgery forced by the radical labor activists. Thus, the Keralite economy is lashed to the unfair and abusive labor practices of Arab Gulf states. The irony of Communist activists

---

<sup>57</sup> Gulf Dream: For Indians The Golden Beaches Still Gleam. Malayala Manorama Yearbook 1990.

<sup>58</sup> "Like Manna from Heaven." The Economist. September 5, 2015. Accessed October 28, 2015.

<http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21663264-how-torrent-money-workers-abroad-reshapes-economy-manna>.

<sup>59</sup> Govind, Biju. GCC residency cap may force lakhs to return. The Hindu. August 19, 2008 Accessed 30 October 2015. <http://www.hindu.com/2008/08/19/stories/2008081954710500.htm>

<sup>60</sup> "Like Manna from Heaven", *supra* at 58.

<sup>61</sup> Malik, Nesrine. "Dubai's Skyscrapers, Stained by the Blood of Migrant Workers." The Guardian. May 27, 2011. Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/27/dubai-migrant-worker-deaths>.

promoting labor rights while forcing their own into abusive situations is palpable. Given the deep economic ties between the Gulf and Kerala, any given economic slowdown in the former will have drastic effects on the latter<sup>62</sup>. The International Monetary fund predicts a significant slowdown in the economic growth of Gulf nations due to conflict and oil price fluctuations in the near future<sup>63</sup>. This economic lifeline will dry up, as building booms slow down and Gulf states tighten their belts, they’ll require fewer migrant workers. The decline of agriculture in the state has had a pointed effect on this economic phenomenon, as a pervasive dearth of modernization and radical union activity have culminated in the decline of opportunity for unskilled agricultural work in Kerala.

### **III. Strides: Social-Agrarian Development Under Communism**

Radical labor militancy’s continued presence in Kerala certainly has hamstrung a number of major economic sectors. Nonetheless, the presence of well-organized radical groups has promoted a number of beneficial social causes, especially in rural areas. In contrast to other rural Indian states, Kerala has multiple development indicators on par with the developed world. Women’s/reproductive rights are significantly better in Kerala than other Indian states. Communist labor-agrarian unions have agitated for large-scale literacy, education, and health programs and the construction of a well-butressed welfare state.

---

<sup>62</sup> Govind, *supra* at 59.

<sup>63</sup> Kerr, Simeon. "IMF Warns on Gulf States Growth amid Oil Price Fall and Conflict - FT.com." Financial Times. October 21, 2015. Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/863d2112-774b-11e5-933d-efcdc3c11c89.html#axzz3qD7VgMPK>.

The state of women's rights in modern India is truly deplorable. Across the nation, honor killings, dowry practices, rape, and child marriage remain endemic problems<sup>64</sup>. Hardly a day goes by that Indian media reports on a new instance of violence against women in rural areas. However, Kerala is one of a few beacons of hope for women's rights. Thanks to the radical activities of labor unions in promoting social change, the women of Kerala enjoy substantially better rights than those in other states, especially in rural areas. Communist-tailored social programs promote the social and economic rights of women. The noted "Kudumbashree" program, specifically aimed at improving the standing of rural women and families, is one such example. The policy, implemented in 1998, has created a number of women's self-help groups with the purpose of poverty reduction through empowerment<sup>65</sup>. It seeks to promote collective action as a means of bettering the state of women in Kerala. So far, it has been successful - through its implementation, women are more engaged in communities and have acted as a powerful panacea to absolute poverty in rural areas. Unlike many other government schemes that throw money at the poor without tailoring them to specific development goals, Kudumbashree has architected a specific program of empowerment of rural women to achieve self-development<sup>66</sup>. So far, they have had

marked success. The program has allowed for significant decentralization of development to a women-centric community based system, as opposed to other Indian development initiatives that did not take gender or centralization into account<sup>67</sup>. It has resulted in a long-lasting system of development for rural women who otherwise could not find work in farm labor. Inversely, self-help organizations under the program often utilize agricultural products grown in Kerala to generate revenue through the manufacture of products. The program also is essential in educating rural women who otherwise likely would have no recourse<sup>68</sup>. The program itself was the direct result of Communist political activity. In 1998, when Kudumbashree was enacted, the then-Chief Minister of Kerala, E.K. Nayanar, was a member of the Communist Party. Communist rule and labor agitation has had other significant benefits to the women of Kerala. The state boasts an impressive 91.8% literacy rate for women, in contrast to the 65.5% same rate for India in general<sup>69</sup>. Maternal health and reproductive rights are a priority, and the state has a significantly lower infant mortality rate than an aggregate of other developing countries - 12 per 1,000 as compared to 91 per 1,000<sup>70</sup>. While the state, like the rest of India, has a significant way to go on women's rights issues, it is certainly a ray of hope in an otherwise bleak set of prospects.

---

<sup>64</sup> Kumar, Sanjay. "India's Shame: Women's Rights." *The Diplomat*. June 6, 2014. Accessed October 24, 2015.

<http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/indias-shame-womens-rights/>.

<sup>65</sup> "The Mission of Kudumbashree." Accessed November 1, 2015.

<http://www.kudumbashree.org/?q=vision>.

<sup>66</sup> John, Jacob. "A Study on Kudumbashree Project A Poverty Eradication Programme in Kerala Performance, Impact and Lessons for Other States." May 1, 2009. Accessed October 24, 2015.

---

[http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/sereport/ser/ser\\_kudu.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/sereport/ser/ser_kudu.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> "Mission of Kudumbashree", *supra* at 65.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>69</sup> "Literacy Rate of India 2011." *Indiafactsin*. 2011. Accessed October 29, 2015. <http://indiafacts.in/india-census-2011/literacy-rate-india-2011/>.

<sup>70</sup> "State-Wise Infant Mortality Rate." 2011. Accessed October 27, 2015. <http://indiabudget.nic.in/es2006-07/chapt2007/tab95.pdf>.

In the package of legislation proposed by Kerala's first Communist government in 1957 was the *Kerala Education Act 1958*, a sweeping reform of school policy in that state. It proposed a standardization of education and pay, among other substantial changes. Although it did not pass through the state legislature, a myriad of its policies were implemented later under further legislative acts<sup>71</sup>. Specifically, provisions for rural education initiatives have been introduced in Kerala. A major problem in rural India as a whole is the phenomenon of dropping out. Children are needed as labor on family farms, and leave school before secondary education to pursue agricultural work. Among the poorest 40% of Indians, the majority of whom are rural dwellers, this problem is exacerbated. However, Kerala's strongly-reinforced rural education initiatives have largely prevented this issue. Primary education, especially in rural areas, has created a strong foundation for learning and has cemented schooling as an essential for Keralite families<sup>72</sup>. In rural areas, Kerala's fifth grade students, on average, could answer 81% of standardized testing questions<sup>73</sup>. This owes to a number of strongly backed rural education programs agitated by the Communists as a means of rural uplift. Even more striking is the rate of rural literacy in Kerala - in every single one of its 14 districts, the rate is above 85%<sup>74</sup>. But why is this so? In my interview with

---

<sup>71</sup> *Kerala Development Report*. New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Pritchett, Lant, and Varad Pande. *Making Primary Education Work for India's Rural Poor*. Vol. 95. Washington, District of Columbia: South Asia Development Papers, 2006.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* Indian standardized testing operates differently than American programs. Students are given a battery of questions to answer in a given time instead of filling in multiple-choice questions.

<sup>74</sup> "State of Literacy of Rural-Urban Population." 2011. Accessed October 21, 2015. [http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2-vol2/data\\_files/kerala/Chapter\\_VI.pdf](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2-vol2/data_files/kerala/Chapter_VI.pdf).

P.A. Mohamed, a noted trade union activist, he explained that Communists pushed for literacy because education was originally a means of dividing caste. Given Kerala's complex colonial caste system, the Communists sought to destroy it by pushing for universal education, thereby stripping the bourgeoisie of its power in one respect<sup>75</sup>. Perhaps a more nuanced view comes from noted developmental expert Robin Jeffrey's interview with the former maharajah of Travancore, a princely state that now makes up part of southern Kerala. He explained: "a government which has to deal with an educated population is by far stronger than one which has to control ignorant and disorderly masses. Hence education is a twice-blessed thing – it benefits those who give it and those who receive it."<sup>76</sup> Whatever the case, Communist initiatives in education policy have proven extremely beneficial to rural Keralites in the long run.

The final key social development that occurred under Keralite Communism has taken place in rural health initiatives. Through the application of extensive social programs, healthcare in rural Kerala is significantly better than in the rest of India. Rural healthcare indicators are on par with much of the developed world. For example, the life expectancy at birth in Kerala is 75 years old. This stands in contrast to 64 years in the rest of India and compares to 77 years in the US<sup>77</sup>. As previously mentioned, infant mortality rates are low owing to decent maternal health practices<sup>78</sup>. Perhaps most striking is Kerala's low fertility rate - 1.8

---

<sup>75</sup> Mohamed, P.A. "Interview with Trade Union Official." Interview by author. July 30, 2015.

<sup>76</sup> Jeffrey, Robin. *Politics, Women, and Well-being: How Kerala Became "a Model"* New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1992. Print.

<sup>77</sup> McKibben, Bill. "Kerala: A Case Study." *Kerala: A Case Study*. Accessed October 13, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> "State-Wise Infant Mortality Rate", *supra* at 70.

average per woman. This compares to Finland, a nation noted for its strong social development<sup>79</sup>. Kerala is the only state in India that offers palliative care as well, funded by a well-structured healthcare system<sup>80</sup>. These are just a few of the positive health indicators present in the Keralite development model. Similar to education and women's rights, Kerala's Communists have agitated for beneficial healthcare policies. The state's healthcare professionals are under the watchful eye of government monitors constantly to ensure there is no discrimination in who receives care, especially in rural areas that face issues with accessibility elsewhere in India<sup>81</sup>. Perhaps most radical was a 1996 Communist-proposed policy that decentralized healthcare and governance and made local communities responsible for its implementation. Regional healthcare initiatives are better suited to tailor their resources to specific problems. Huge amounts of funds have been earmarked by Communist local governments to ensure universal healthcare, and the central government has guaranteed effective rural healthcare through a similar process<sup>82</sup>. Again, Communist rule has been the catalyst to meaningful social development in Kerala.

---

<sup>79</sup> Vital Statistics of India, Estimates of Fertility Indicators, Census of India, Government of India. 2013

<sup>80</sup> Mehta, Jubin. "Why the Palliative Healthcare Model of Kerala Needs to Be Extended to Other States." Ashoka India. 2011. Accessed October 24, 2015. <http://india.ashoka.org/why-palliative-healthcare-model-kerala-needs-be-extended-other-states>.

<sup>81</sup> Filmer, Deon, Jeffrey Hammer, and Lant Pritchett. "Weak Links in the Chain: A Diagnosis of Health Policy in Poor Countries." 2000. Accessed October 22, 2015. <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/LearningProgram/PEAM/Hammer1.pdf>.

<sup>82</sup> Nabae, Koji. "The Health Care System in Kerala - Its Past Accomplishments and New Challenges." Journal of the National Institute of Public Health 52, no. 2 (2003): 140-45. Accessed October 28, 2015. <https://www.niph.go.jp/journal/data/52-2/200352020010.pdf>.

Unfortunately, Kerala is an exception to the general development rule of joint social-economic growth. Communist rule has certainly inspired substantial strides in the former, but has disabled the latter.

#### **IV. Keralite Communism as Radical Agrarian Democracy**

As with any large-scale rural movement of note, Kerala's agrarian labor struggle is worthy of a significant critical analysis through the lens of several political, social, and developmental theories.

Keralite Communism fits into a long tradition of radical social movements as proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their seminal 1985 work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*<sup>83</sup>. Their conception of radical democracy was that it rejects both neoliberal and neoconservative ideals in favor of meaningful leftist discourse and a decentralized system of radical governance.

But first it is important to explore the explicit notion of the radically democratic system as defined by Laclau and Mouffe. They see the radical democracy as a system that stands in direct opposition to the modern hegemony of oppressive state structures. The authors propose a "radical and plural system" - that is, one that ensures social and political liberties without giving into consensus-style liberal democratic procedures that smother meaningful guarantees of rights. Kerala's agrarian radicals and the Communist Party's electoral history fits well with this idea of the democracy.

Specific policies implemented by the Keralite Communists have ensured local liberties while promoting an effective

---

<sup>83</sup> Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985.



radically democratic system. As previously mentioned, in 1996, the government allowed a massive decentralization of power to local communities<sup>84</sup>. What this ensured was a Laclau-Mouffe movement towards the radical democracy, in that it removed an oppressive system of state hegemonic authority. By allowing more local community decisions, the Communists ensured a greater leftist discourse by allowing a significant move towards inclusive politics. When power is decentralized to a local level, Laclau and Mouffe believe that it inherently becomes more democratic as a system<sup>85</sup>. Community engagement sponsored by formerly dominant central authorities devolving their power to local government systems has since ensured a great deal of participation in the Keralite political system, especially in rural areas.

Insurgency and institutionalized class warfare has been the basis of radical political-social-agrarian reforms in Kerala. From the earliest incarnations of peasant rebellion in the Malabar Revolt to contemporary labor actions, radical conceptions of democracy remain alive in a local sense through direct action. These political-social measures contain loaded and substantial challenges to colonialism, landlordism, and other oppressive practices all suggest a casting-off of hegemonic power structures in favor of a more democratic system<sup>86</sup>. Belief systems are asserted through overtly radical actions - the destruction of farm machinery and hardline labor strategies are but a few examples<sup>87</sup>. In his controversial *Reflections on Violence*,

theorist Georges Sorel offers a vindication of extreme measures such as these to birth a democratic, radical workers' state<sup>88</sup>. He argues that violence and radical behavior in would-be insurgents assists in the formation of radical, revolutionary "syndicates" - essentially, labor unions with significant political power. Radical policy choices - land reform, power decentralization, and substantial government programs are a product of this stripe of labor activism in rural areas<sup>89</sup>. The Keralite labor activists fit into these traditions of radicalism in that their radical measures have ensured the political-social say of unions in the leftist discourse, for better or worse.

These strident conceptions of the radical democracy can be seen within Kerala's contemporary politics, as radical union action coupled with a decentralization of authority to local governance have ensured a great role for organizations and people in the political system. Continued activity by Communists and labor unions has ensured a radically democratic politics is here to stay in Kerala, at least for the time being.

## **V. Concluding Remarks and Policy Recommendations on the Struggle**

It is certainly difficult to close any work on a topic of such incredible breadth. Nevertheless, a number of policy recommendations and general statements are true concerning Kerala's continued labor struggle. Despite their best efforts, Kerala's Communists do not have a particularly good electoral future. Globalization has opened huge portions of the state to the rest of the world, and has introduced a desire for consumer goods to which the Communists

---

<sup>84</sup> Nabae, *supra* at 82.

<sup>85</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *supra* at 83.

<sup>86</sup> Desai, Manali. *State Formation and Radical Democracy in India*. London: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Balachandran, *supra* at 46.

---

<sup>88</sup> Sorel, Georges, and Jeremy Jennings. *Reflections on Violence*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>89</sup> Desai, *supra* at 86.

stand in direct opposition<sup>90</sup>. The probable political and economic direction for India is one of immense deregulation and modernization, especially in agriculture. Facing an increasingly globalized world, the Communists can either reform themselves or become irrelevant. In the interest of pragmatism, the former choice is inarguably the better one.

To maintain the social development dream in Kerala, a number of very hard choices must be made. The well-organized social welfare programs has inarguably bettered the lives of all Keralites, but it is unsustainable given current economic-political trends. The state is hemorrhaging money. Because of the state's inability to collect enough revenue to fund social welfare programs – not only due to a failing domestic economy, but also because of a future without remittances<sup>91</sup> – it will no longer be able to foot the bill for its extensive social developments. In order to improve the economy in their state, Kerala's Communists must make a number of political concessions regarding agriculture. As a result of particularly radical elements within the party, harvest practices are not modernized. The disallowing of mechanization and other such practices has inarguably wounded Kerala's agricultural prospects<sup>92</sup>. The primary concern of the Communists in allowing such programs is that less people will be able to work. However, this is certainly not the case. In the Philippines, when mechanization was introduced in regions with similar geographical and political climates, it caused

---

<sup>90</sup> "Red and Buried; India's Vanishing Communists.(the Decline and Fall of India's Communist Party in Kerala and West Bengal)." The Economist, April 23, 2011.

<http://www.economist.com/node/18587059>

<sup>91</sup> Kerr, *supra* at 63.

<sup>92</sup> Rajeev, *supra* at 45.

a resurgence of new jobs in agriculture<sup>93</sup>. While it is generally true that less people are needed to work unmechanized farms, given the already bleak economic prospects of the state, getting people legitimate jobs must be a priority. In general, however, Kerala must undergo the same sort of agricultural reforms other Communist Indian states have experienced. West Bengal, which was also ruled by Communists for several decades, chose a more center-left path to its agricultural development. In 1979, the so-called "Operation Barga," a series of tenancy reforms, was enacted. It proposed a more nuanced method of land policy - tenants would be protected from eviction, and would receive their fair share of produce they grew<sup>94</sup>. It did not severely redistribute land in the same way Keralite policy did, but merely ensured that tenants would be safe from abuse and allowed for modest shuffling of land rights<sup>95</sup>. Since, West Bengal's programs have been hailed as a success, and a major reason why that state experienced such spectacular growth in the 1980's<sup>96</sup>. Kerala's Communists must look to more balanced agricultural programs as a solution to their state's economic struggles.

But all of these pragmatic political changes must be accompanied by the birth of a new kind of politics in Kerala - one that is not reliant upon shocking strategies or labor unrest. Specific policy recommendations are

---

<sup>93</sup> Carino, Conrad. "Farm Mechanization to Create New Jobs." The Manila Times, October 26, 2013.

<http://www.manilatimes.net/farm-mechanization-to-create-new-jobs/47956/>

<sup>94</sup> Hanstad, Tim and Robin Nielsen, West Bengal's Bargadars and Landownership, Rural Development Institute, 21 February 2004.

<sup>95</sup> Bandyopadhyay, D. "Land Reforms and Agriculture: The West Bengal Experience." Economic and Political Weekly 38, no. 9 (2003): 879-84. Accessed October 21, 2015.

[http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413274?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413274?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

not enough to remedy Kerala's continued economic struggles. Rather, a softening of edges and political compromise must be achieved for the state to function properly. Its leftist ideologues can ill afford to continue speaking of class warfare amidst national economic reforms that have lifted millions from rural poverty<sup>97</sup>. In the interest of political pragmatism, politicians and leaders in Kerala must be more diplomatic if they wish for the amazing strides they have made to continue. While they have achieved in promoting meaningful social reforms, especially in agrarian areas, economic development has fallen by the wayside as a result of this stripe of hard-leftism. This is not to say that Keralite Communism has been an abject failure, but merely to critique its ideological underpinnings that have drastically affected domestic affairs in that state. Their continued efforts in promoting the radical conception of democracy are noble. The belief for a better future is a universal one. But in order for Kerala's development to avoid the reliquary of history, its leaders must learn to change for the better.

---

<sup>97</sup> Ninan, KN. "Economic Reforms in India: Impact on the Poor and Poverty Reduction." Institute of Development Studies, 2000. 29 Oct. 2015. <https://www.ids.ac.uk/files/Wp102.pdf>

## Personal Reflection

Few experiences are more life-changing than international travel. Seeing the world as it truly is rather than how it is perceived through the lens of media or stereotypes changes one's entire perspective not only on world affairs, but on life in general. Before I went to India, I tried to immerse myself in the culture through reading. All of the Salman Rushdie and travel guides in the world could not prepare me for the shock of the *real* India as opposed to the stylized one. When I first landed after a 10-hour flight, I was greeted with a swelling of pure humidity. Exiting the airport in to the torrid Chennai air, I was immediately struck by the noise and clamor of millions of Indians living their own lives. The sheer vastness of population halfway around the world was a shock in and of itself. As I climbed into the MSSRF's company car, I saw the two halves of India for the first time: crushing poverty and fabulous wealth. A man with no legs sleeping in a cardboard box next to a massive billboard for Coca-Cola. Children pushing shopping carts of rags past the glittering edifices of new technology firms. I knew the statistics of India's social-economic divides by heart, but seeing them in the first person – the *people* that had been analyzed rather than blurry pictures or statistical data was at first shocking. It would take some time to realize the import of what I was seeing through my excursions within India.

At one point or another this summer, I was in four separate Indian states. Most of my time was spent at the MSSRF's headquarters in Tamil Nadu, but my research was done in Kerala. I also spent some time in Puducherry and a brief spell in Karnataka. In each of those states, I experienced a starkly different culture. The best explanation I heard for this came from my supervisor, Dr. Rajalakshmi, who compared India's states to Europe. The moment one crosses a border, they enter into an entirely different value system, language, and experience. My time in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Puducherry was almost exclusively urban, but life in rural Kerala was the most rewarding. Speaking to actual Communists and radicals about their ideologies was an experience in and of itself – all of them were quite surprised that I, a white American, would be interested in their story. Nonetheless, every single activist that I spoke to treated me with true kindness and authenticity, even when I asked them a pointed question or two.

But perhaps the greatest influence on me was Professor Swaminathan. His deep love of the world has been a constant source of inspiration since meeting him in June. At the World Food Prize events, he met my mother and World Food Prize coordinator. He told them that I was a “beautiful human being” and that I was one of the best interns that he had seen at the Foundation. When my mother told me this, I foolishly chalked it up to his natural kindness. But I was quickly proven wrong in a private conversation after he watched my final presentation. He was bound for his hotel, but beckoned me over to talk to me. He held my hand and told me that I must come back to the Foundation. After finishing this work of scholarship and reflecting on my visit I now know that he was correct. The MSSRF has had a lasting impact on my life and my understanding of global agricultural issues that I'll carry with me into my future career and view of the world.

And two and a half months later there's nothing I'd like to do more than return.

## Photographs



## Bibliography

- “363 hartals in 7 years in Kerala!” AsianAge. 16 September 2012. Accessed 21 July 2015. [archive.asianage.com/india/363-hartals-7-years-kerala-357](http://archive.asianage.com/india/363-hartals-7-years-kerala-357)
- “Agriculture”. Government of Kerala. <http://www.kerala.gov.in/economy/agri.htm> . Accessed 22 July 2015
- Balachandran, Pillai G. Constraints on Diffusion and Adoption of Agro-mechanical Technology in Rice Cultivation in Kerala. 2004. Centre for Development Studies.
- Bandyopadhyay, D. "Land Reforms and Agriculture: The West Bengal Experience." *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 9 (2003): 879-84. Accessed October 21, 2015. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413274?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413274?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).
- Barendse, Rene J., *Arabian Seas 1700-1763: The Western Indian Ocean in the eighteenth century*. Leiden: Brill Publishers. 2009.
- Besant, Annie. *The Future of Indian Politics: A Contribution to the Understanding of Present-Day Problems*. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2006. Reprint.
- Binduraj, J. “Kerala unemployment rate falls, but still highest among larger states: Economic Review”. IndiaToday. 23 January 2014. Accessed 23 July 2015. [htindiatoday.intoday.in/story/kerala-leads-in-unemployment-60-percent-of-them-are-women-says-state-economic-review/1/339218.html](http://htindiatoday.intoday.in/story/kerala-leads-in-unemployment-60-percent-of-them-are-women-says-state-economic-review/1/339218.html)
- Carino, Conrad. "Farm Mechanization to Create New Jobs." *The Manila Times*, October 26, 2013.
- Desai, Manali. *State Formation and Radical Democracy in India*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Dev, S. Mahendra. “Small Farmers in India: Challenges and Opportunities.” Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research. June 2012.
- Filmer, Deon, Jeffrey Hammer, and Lant Pritchett. "Weak Links in the Chain: A Diagnosis of Health Policy in Poor Countries." 2000. Accessed October 22, 2015. <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/LearningProgram/PEAM/Hammer1.pdf>.
- Ghosh Madhusudan “Changes in the Agrarian Structure of West Bengal”, Productivity, Vol.30, October-December, No.3. 1989.
- Govind, Biju. GCC residency cap may force lakhs to return. The Hindu. August 19, 2008 Accessed 30 October 2015. <http://www.hindu.com/2008/08/19/stories/2008081954710500.htm>
- Gulf Dream: For Indians The Golden Beaches Still Gleam. Malayala Manorama Yearbook 1990.
- Hanstad, Tim and Robin Nielsen, West Bengal's Bargadars and Landownership, Rural

- Development Institute, 21 February 2004.
- “History of Kerala Legislature”. Government of Kerala. [http://kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3776:history-of-kerala-legislature](http://kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3776:history-of-kerala-legislature) . Accessed 21 July 2015.
- Heller, Patrick. *The Labor of Development*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Jaiswal, Binita. “Agri mechanization stressed”. *The Times of India*. 3 March 2013. Accessed 23 July 2015. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhubaneswar/Agri-mechanization-stressed/articleshow/18771792.cms>
- John, Jacob. "A Study on Kudumbashree Project A Poverty Eradication Programme in Kerala Performance, Impact and Lessons for Other States." May 1, 2009. Accessed October 24, 2015. [http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/sereport/ser/ser\\_kudu.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/sereport/ser/ser_kudu.pdf).
- The Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill. Kerala, India. Government of Kerala. Passed 1957. [http://kerala.gov.in/docs/pdf/agrn\\_rln.pdf](http://kerala.gov.in/docs/pdf/agrn_rln.pdf) . Accessed 21 July 2015.
- Kerala Development Report*. New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2008.
- "Kerala Faces Grim Food Scarcity." OWSA. Accessed November 1, 2015.
- “Kerala to take steps to end labour militancy”. *The Times of India*. 2 December 2001. Accessed 21 July 2015. [www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/Kerala-to-take-steps-to-end-labour-militancy/articleshow/753838513.cms](http://www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/Kerala-to-take-steps-to-end-labour-militancy/articleshow/753838513.cms)
- “Kerala’s trade unions begin to shun labour militancy”. *New Trade Union Initiative*. 20 August 2010. <http://ntui.org.in/labour-news/item/keralas-trade-unions-begin-to-shun-labour-militancy/>
- Kerr, Simeon. "IMF Warns on Gulf States Growth amid Oil Price Fall and Conflict - FT.com." *Financial Times*. October 21, 2015. Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/863d2112-774b-11e5-933d-efcdc3c11c89.html#axzz3qD7VgMPK>.
- Krishnakumar, PK. “Kerala government's Rs 300 crore subsidy to rubber farmers may increase production”. *The Hindu*. 9 July 2015. Accessed 22 July 2015.
- Kumar, Sanjay. "India's Shame: Women's Rights." *The Diplomat*. June 6, 2014. Accessed October 24, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/indias-shame-womens-rights/>.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985.

- "Like Manna from Heaven." *The Economist*. September 5, 2015. Accessed October 28, 2015.  
<http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21663264-how-torrent-money-workers-abroad-reshapes-economy-manna>.
- "Literacy Rate of India 2011." *Indiafactsin*. 2011. Accessed October 29, 2015. <http://indiafacts.in/india-census-2011/literacy-rate-india-2011/>.
- Malik, Nesrine. "Dubai's Skyscrapers, Stained by the Blood of Migrant Workers." *The Guardian*. May 27, 2011. Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/27/dubai-migrant-worker-deaths>.
- Miller, Roland. *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. VI. Leiden: Brill Publishers, 1988.
- McKibben, Bill. "Kerala: A Case Study." *Kerala: A Case Study*. Accessed October 13, 2015.
- Mehta, Rubin. "Why the Palliative Healthcare Model of Kerala Needs to Be Extended to Other States." *Why the Palliative Healthcare Model of Kerala Needs to Be Extended to Other States*. 2011. Accessed October 24, 2015. <http://india.ashoka.org/why-palliative-healthcare-model-kerala-needs-be-extended-other-states>.
- Menon, Ramesh. "Labour pangs - Militant trade unionism drives companies out of Kerala" March 15, 1990. *IndiaToday*.
- Mohamed, P.A. "Interview with Trade Union Official." Interview by author. July 30, 2015.
- Moynihan, Sen. Daniel Patrick. *A Dangerous Place*. New York City: Little, Brown, and Company. 1978
- Nabae, Koji. "The Health Care System in Kerala - Its Past Accomplishments and New Challenges." *Journal of the National Institute of Public Health* 52, no. 2 (2003): 140-45. Accessed October 28, 2015.  
<https://www.niph.go.jp/journal/data/52-2/200352020010.pdf>.
- Nair, K. Ramachandran. *The history of trade union movement in Kerala*. Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment. Delhi: Manak Publications. 2006.
- Nayak, Depiprasad. "Falling Crude Upsets India's Rubber Farmers". *Wall Street Journal*. 14 November 2014. Accessed 22 July 2015. <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2014/11/17/falling-crude-upsets-indias-rubber-farmers/>
- Nossiter, Thomas Johnson. *Communism in Kerala: a study in political adaptation*. Oakland: University of California Press, 1982.
- Ninan, KN. "Economic Reforms in India: Impact on the Poor and Poverty Reduction." *Institute of Development Studies*, 2000. 29 Oct. 2015. <https://www.ids.ac.uk/files/Wp102.pdf>



- “Party History”. Communist Party of India (Marxist). <http://www.cpimkerala.org/eng/history-2.php?n=1>  
Accessed 20 July 2015.
- Panikkar, K. N., *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar 1836–1921*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Patel, Raj. *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World Food System*. London: Portobello Books Ltd., 2008.
- Payaril, Govindra “Kerala: the Development Experience: Reflections on Sustainability and Replicability”. London: Zed Books. 2000.
- “Political Background”. Government of Kerala. [http://kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3064&Itemid=2378](http://kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3064&Itemid=2378) . Accessed 21 July 2015.
- Pritchett, Lant, and Varad Pande. *Making Primary Education Work for India’s Rural Poor*. Vol. 95. Washington, District of Columbia: South Asia Development Papers, 2006.
- Rajeev, PI. “In Kerala’s rice bowl, comrades hammer it to farmers: stick to sickle, machines make profits”. *The Indian Express*. 10 April 2007. Accessed 23 July 2015. <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/in-kerala-s-rice-bowl-comrades-hammer-it-to-farmers-stick-to-sickle-machines-make-profits/27959/0>
- Rao, Kirthi V. “Unemployment among rural youth at highest level since 93-94”. *LiveMint*. 31 January 2014. Accessed 23 July 2015. <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/rmxquBMhnmzwwXtxWm9m1H/Unemployment-among-rural-youth-at-highest-level-since-9394.html>
- "Red and Buried; India's Vanishing Communists.(the Decline and Fall of India's Communist Party in Kerala and West Bengal)." *The Economist*, April 23, 2011.
- Sreedharan, TP. “Biological Diversity of Kerala: A survey of Kalliasseri panchayat, Kannur district" Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development (Centre for Development Studies). 2004.
- Sorel, Georges, and Jeremy Jennings. *Reflections on Violence*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- "State of Literacy of Rural-Urban Population." 2011. Accessed October 21, 2015. [http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2-vol2/data\\_files/kerala/Chapter\\_VI.pdf](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2-vol2/data_files/kerala/Chapter_VI.pdf).
- “Spatial poverty in Kerala”. *LiveMint*. 24 November 2014. Accessed 22 July 2015. <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/FJwyZCLIJU1DrOR00aFmDK/Spatial-poverty-in-kerala.html>

"State-Wise Infant Mortality Rate." 2011. Accessed October 27, 2015. <http://indiabudget.nic.in/es2006-07/chapt2007/tab95.pdf>.

"Strike, hartals to shut down Kerala today". The Hindu. 8 April 2015. Accessed 21 July 2015. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/strike-hartals-to-shut-down-kerala-today/article7079389.ece>

"The Mission of Kudumbashree." Accessed November 1, 2015. <http://www.kudumbashree.org/?q=vision>.

"Why People Eat With Their Hands in Kerala". NDTV Food. 16 Feb 2015. <http://food.ndtv.com/opinions/why-people-eat-with-their-hands-in-kerala-694675>  
Accessed 22 July 2015

Williams, Michelle. *The Roots of Participatory Democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2008.