Modern Asian Studies (2023), **57**, 1495–1529
doi:10.1017/S0026749X21000706

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A forgotten famine of '43? Travancore's muffled 'cry of distress'

Aditya Balasubramanian

School of History, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
Email: aditya.balasubramanian@anu.edu.au

(Received 22 January 2021; revised 8 November 2021; accepted 8 November 2021)

Abstract

Mass disease and starvation in the princely state of Travancore during the Second World War claimed some 90,000 lives. However, this episode has never received much prominence, especially when compared to the simultaneous crisis in Bengal. It is, in many ways, forgotten. Instead, Travancore's wartime food management apparatus appears in some accounts as a success story. How did this happen? Integration into the world economy, the reordering of a rigid social structure, and popular political pressures on an autocratic princely regime created a unique set of conditions that left Travancore vulnerable to food scarcity and conflict during the Second World War. A particularly draconian princely regime that suppressed civil liberties prevented the gravity of the situation from being understood. This culminated in vastly unequal suffering and disease-related deaths. But the story is not merely one of despair. The Indian communists took advantage of war conditions to bring together agricultural and factory labourers and contribute to improving the food situation in this 'People's War', while mainstream nationalists sought to obstruct the war effort and have the British 'quit' India. Wartime activities would shape the unique post-colonial politics of what became the state of Kerala in 1956. Intervening at the intersection of the historiographies of food and the princely states, this article adds a regional perspective to the nation-centric social history of the Second World War in South Asia. Hunger was a constitutive experience of this period across various parts of India, but the post-colonial political legacies of war could be regionally distinct.

Keywords: Communism; war; famine; princely states

Wartime hunger in princely India

Covering the food shortage across the country for the *Hindustan Times* in late 1943, journalist and nationalist politician K. Santhanam (1895–1980) lamented that, despite India's considerable natural resource endowments and successful avoidance of enemy invasion, 'the cry of hunger and distress is heard from Trivandrum to Chittagong, One

Figure 1. 'Why Doesn't Somebody Cry for Us Also, Amma?'. *Source: Hindustan Times*, 16-10-43, reproduced in Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*.

feels angry and bitter at this inexplicable tragedy.'[1] Santhanam's booklet of collected articles from that year, *Cry of Distress*, captured the experience of hunger across India. Accompanying an article on the princely state of Travancore—the capital of which was Trivandrum—was an image by the country's most famous cartoonist and Travancore native, Shankar (Figure 1).[2] Whereas 'other distressed areas', as Shankar dubbed them, were being practically inundated with stocks of food from people of different communities (delineated by dress), Travancore was receiving nothing. At the centre of the image, a corpulent waiter dressed in the Western style brings a drink on a platter towards these areas. Outside the hut, an undernourished mother sits with her hand on her head alongside scattered and empty pots and pans. An emaciated child, grabbing her by the arm, asks 'Why doesn't somebody cry for us also, Amma [Mother]?'

[1]K. Santhanam, *Cry of Distress* (New Delhi: Hindustan Times, 1944). Thanks to Cherian Kunjeria for this reference. K. Santhanam (1895–1980) was a leading Congress politician from the Madras presidency in South India (later Madras state). During the 1930s and 1940s he worked as a journalist for the *Indian Express and Hindustan Times*. From 1948–52, he served in the Constituent Assembly and became Union minister of state for railways before taking up a largely symbolic position as governor of Vindhya Pradesh (1952–5). Most famous for chairing the Committee on the Prevention of Corruption in the early 1960s, Santhanam also wrote several books about the procedures laid down by the Constitution for parliament. K. Santhanam, *Looking Back* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2001).

[2]From the 1930s K. Shankar Pillai (1902–89) was a Travancore native and staff cartoonist for the *Hindustan Times* which was run by Gandhi's son Devdas. He was able to parlay the visibility he gained from this job into a separate periodical, *Shankar's Weekly* in 1947. The featured cartoons are symbolic of Nehruvian India and Shankar became the country's most popular cartoonist. Ritu Khanduri, *Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 92–4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The slight hyperbole of the image notwithstanding, it is true that while Chittagong's distress (and that of Bengal, more broadly) is remembered, that of Trivandrum is forgotten. This is in part because the casualties suffered in Bengal were on a scale greater than those endured in Travancore: three million people out of a population of approximately 60 million—about 5 per cent—compared to what the social worker K. G. Sivaswamy estimated as 90,000 deaths in a population of approximately 6 million (or about 1.5 per cent of the population).[3] The Famine Enquiry Commission did not use the terminology of famine to describe the events there, although it was unaware of these numbers at the time.[4] Even Travancore's diwan (prime minister) C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar (1879–1966), whom we shall see was far from incentivized to exaggerate the gravity of the situation, would draw comparisons to Bengal, asserting that Travancore's needs were just as great.[5] Another major difference was the extent of the food deficit. Whereas the shortage in Bengal was estimated at about 3 per cent, Travancore's was in the order of 60 per cent as it relied far more on the supply of rice from Burma.[6] The contrast between this relatively small shortage and the substantial starvation experienced has been an important empirical fillip to Amartya Sen's celebrated entitlement approach to famine, which has asserted that it was decline in the *exchange entitlement* to food, or purchasing power, rather than food availability decline that led to Bengal's distress.[7] Travancore's distress was related to the more straightforward—and perhaps less immediately surprising—problem of food availability, although the decline in purchasing power of even the limited available food among certain sections of the population exacerbated the suffering.

Some of the reasons why the 'cry of distress' from Travancore was muffled during the Second World War can be gleaned through a comparison with the more well-known events of Bengal. Unlike in Bengal, where Ian Stephens, the editor of Calcutta's *Telegraph* newspaper, took the courageous decision to abandon voluntary self-censorship and lay bare the consequences of the unfolding Bengal Famine from August 1943, no equivalent periodical with international circulation reported on

[3]Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), Appendix D, pp. 195–216. K. G. Sivaswamy, 'Vital Statistics and Public Health', in K. G. Sivaswamy et al., *Food Famine and Nutritional Diseases in Travancore, 1943–4* (Coimbatore: Servindia Kerala Relief Centre, 1945), pp. 81–122. On Sivaswamy and how he calculated this estimate, see the third section of this article. The death rate is calculated from the population figures of the 1941 Census. A. N. Tampi, *Census of India*, *1941*, Vol. XXV (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1942).

[4]*The Famine Enquiry Commission Report* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1945).

[5]'Dewan—President's Statement Re: Food Situation', *Proceedings of the Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly* (hereafter TSMA), Vol. 23, No. 1 (10 January 1944), p. 36.

[6]*Famine Enquiry Commission Report*, pp. 1–10.

[7]Sen, *Poverty and Famines.* Another work, compatible with Sen's approach, but more focused on the historical and anthropological context of the Bengal event, is Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–44* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Sen's hypothesis has been contested by Cormac O'Grada. Based on his reading of a wider range of historical sources than Sen, O'Grada argues there was little evidence of hoarding and that both a cyclone and an indifferent harvest did reduce food availability (although the extent is unclear). As such, there is no complete scholarly consensus on the issue. C. O'Grada, *Eating People is Wrong: And Other Essays on Famine, Its Past, and Its Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 37–91. A similar line of critique appeared in Mark Tauger, 'Entitlement, Shortage and the 1943 Bengal Famine: Another Look', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 31:1 (2006), pp. 45–72.

Kerala's food shortage and its consequences.[8] By contrast, all literature that was possibly offensive to the government was banned in Travancore. Next, migration patterns differed. Travancoreans went to rural and forested Malabar and had no metropolis, like the city of Calcutta, in which to seek refuge. Migration was not necessarily from rural to urban areas. It would have been harder for the casual urban periodical reporter to perceive the extent of the suffering based on arrivals from other parts of the state. Perhaps most obviously, as a princely state generally left to itself, Travancore never had the importance to imperialist or nationalist affairs commanded by Bengal.

The devastation wrought by the Bengal Famine has overshadowed the transformative impact of the food shortage, hunger, and starvation on other parts of the subcontinent during the Second World War. In addition to Travancore and Cochin, food deficit districts sprung up across the Northwest Frontier Province, Bihar, the United Provinces, and the presidencies of Bombay and Madras.[9] This article builds on recent work that locates the origins of the large-scale management of food procurement and distribution by the Government of India and a point of inflection for a powerful dimension of nationalist discourse during this period.[10] It suggests that the physical experience of hunger itself was a constituting feature of the Second World War across the subcontinent. Such a regional perspective on the Second World War in South Asia focused on food, disease, and princely politics provides granularity to a nascent historiography focused on the larger units of the nation-state or the Asian empire.[11]

Other than Cochin, its neighbouring princely state, Travancore had by far the greatest proportion of food imports relative to consumption of any region in India.[12]The following pages explore how and why it came to rely on such a substantial amount of imported food to meet its requirements, the manner in which it dealt with wartime supply disruption, and what effects this management had both on its population and the distinctive political future of the region. Princely states shaped their own destinies in domains other than law, language, politics, and health policy during the early twentieth century, the focus of much regional scholarship.[13] Other such powerful areas

[8]Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, and the End of the Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 125–6; see also Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, pp. 80, 195.

[9]*Famine Enquiry Commission Report*, p. 4.

[10]Diya Gupta, 'Bodies in Hunger: Literary Representations of the Indian Home-Front During World War II', *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 13:2 (2020), pp. 196–214; Benjamin Siegel, *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine and the Making of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Taylor Sherman, 'From "Grow More Food" to "Miss a Meal": Hunger, Development and the Limits of Post-Colonial Nationalism in India, 1947–57', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 36:4 (2013), pp. 571–88; Sunil Amrith, 'Food and Welfare in India c. 1900–50', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50:4 (2008), pp. 1010–35.

[11]Srinath Raghavan, *India's War, 1939–45: The Making of Modern South Asia* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2016); Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War* (London: Bodley Head, 2015); Johannes Voigt, *India in the Second World War* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1988); C. A. Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–5* (London: Allen Lane, 2003); Indivar Kamtekar, 'A Different War Dance: State and Class in India, 1939–45', *Past and Present* 176 (2002), pp. 187–221. Mark Tauger makes a plea for thinking about an all-India food shortage as constitutive of the Second World War in M. Tauger, 'The Indian Famine Crises of World War II', *British Scholar* 1:2 (2009), pp. 166–96.

[12]Henry Knight, *Food Administration in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), pp. 26–8.

[13]Guy Attewell, 'Making Institutions and Indigenous Medicine in Mysore State, circa 1908–1940', *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 38 (2014), pp. 369–86; Eric Beverley, *Hyderabad, British India and the World:*

include agriculture, food, and industrial policy.[14] Despite their speedy incorporation into the Indian Union after 1947, these states remained powerful actors well into the 1940s.[15]

This princely unit of analysis is also important in understanding the subsequent history of Kerala, the linguistic state of Malayalam speakers forged out of Travancore, Cochin, and the British-administered Malabar district in 1956. Kerala-level analyses of wartime food management compare the response to Bengal as an instance of great success through popular pressure for rationing. This involves putting together the princely states of Travancore, Cochin, and the British-administered Malabar district and implicitly neglecting the heterogeneity of their challenges and responses.[16] Such an approach obscures the ways in which taking up the cause of food helped communists to consolidate their legitimacy in Travancore between 1942 and 1945, a region in which they would hold lasting influence and mobilize revolts. Since the 1950s, Communist Party-led coalition governments in Kerala have alternated with those led by the Indian National Congress (INC) and defined a uniquely progressive state policy.[17] Their history of ascent in Travancore has been distinct from other areas of Kerala.

Whether or not the events of 1942–3 constitute a famine according to the definition of social scientists today is perhaps impossible to ascertain.[18] There is simply inadequate quantitative evidence to make an assessment one way or another. Instead, the pages that follow seek to capture the events, experiences, and historical memory

Muslim Networks and Minor Sovereignty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Kavita Datla, *The Language of Secular Islam: Urdu Nationalism and Colonial India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).

[14]In that respect, this article follows in the vein of the path-breaking book by Janaki Nair, *Mysore Modern: Rethinking the Region under Princely Rule* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), which looks at how industrial development and bureaucratic governance created regional modernity in princely Mysore.

[15]V. P. Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

[16]Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a 'Model'* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 83–7; V. K. Ramachandran, 'On Kerala's Development Achievements', in *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*, (eds) Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 205–356, 245.

[17]The Indian National Congress (1885–) was India's chief political organization and stood at the forefront of the nationalist movement. During the transfer of power in 1946–7, it took over the Government of India and formed the government after the first elections in 1951–2. The Congress also won every state election conducted at that time. Although it began to lose individual states from 1957, the party remained in power at the centre until 1977. Stanley A. Kochanek, *The Congress Party of India: The Dynamics of One-Party Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

[18]The term 'famine' evokes a range of situations and its usage is contested. Contemporary social scientists' intensity scales for the measurement of famine are based on daily crude mortality rates of over 1 per 10,000 people and over 20 per cent of children under six being underweight. Magnitude scales measure excess mortality, with anything over 10,000 deaths being classified as a major famine. The British presidency-wide Famine Codes of colonial India distinguished between 'near-scarcity', 'scarcity', and 'famine' events, in increasing order of severity, and were primarily concerned with the incidence of mass starvation. This definition is primarily event-based. While the Travancore event may have been classified under either of these kinds of definitions as famine, there was no formal data collection on mortality and wasting, and Travancore did not have its own famine code. Paul Howe and Stephen Devereux, 'Famine Intensity and Magnitude Scales: A Proposal for an Instrumental Definition of Famine', *Disasters* 28:4 (2004), pp. 353–72.

of an event described by certain parties as a famine.[19] To do so, this article employs a wide range of sources. Woven together with materials from formal archives and newspapers, assembly debates, contemporary economic surveys, and biographies are observations from memoirs and translations of historical fiction from writers with intimate knowledge of these times.

The five sections of this article proceed in a broadly chronological fashion. Informed by Utsa Patnaik's injunction to take a long view in understanding how food availability shapes groups' vulnerability to starvation, the first section suggests that the long-term causality of Travancore's wartime food shortage lies in the transformation of Travancore into a cash crop economy dependent on Burma for its rice supply.[20] Next, the article shows how the politics of the region developed in the early twentieth century, profoundly informed by its distinctive social structure and monarchy. The following two sections illustrate how the food shortage was handled and what consequences it created. They suggest that the particular, centralized pattern of governance in Travancore and the tense political dynamics contributed to the failures of wartime food policy. Disease, corruption, and starvation ensued. Finally, the article points to how the wartime and immediately postwar food situation contributed to the consolidation and agenda of Kerala's communist politics and the eclipse of princely rule.

European contact and socioeconomic change: A local history of global capital?

Wedged between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, the princely state of Travancore measured approximately 7,600 square miles. It was blessed with a tropical climate and heavy rainfall (see Figure 2) that allowed the pursuit of a thriving agriculture. By the 1930s, the state sustained a population of approximately six million.[21] Christianity came to the state in the first century CE, and Islam traced its origins to the early modern period.[22] As of the 1931 Census, the population was 62 per cent Hindu, 31 per cent Christian, and 7 per cent Muslim.[23] From the early nineteenth century, the maharaja of Travancore recognized British paramountcy, which constituted the payment of a subsidy in exchange for military protection. After Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1857 recognizing the dignity of princes, the state moved to a pattern of

[19]The Famine Enquiry Commission made no estimate of excess mortality for Travancore as they had in a separate *Report on Bengal* (Madras: Government of India, 1945). The main report praised monopoly procurement of food supplies by the government, introduced in 1944. It suggested that tapioca planting and consumption as a substitute for rice 'came to the rescue of Travancore'. Missing from its pages is any discussion of starvation, disease, or death. *Famine Enquiry Commission—Main Report* (Madras: Government of India, 1945), pp. 9–10, 21 304.

[20]Utsa Patnaik, 'Food Availability and Famine: A Longer View', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19:1 (1991), pp. 1–25.

[21]*Travancore Administration Report*, 1943–4 (Trivandrum: Government of Travancore, 1944).

[22]Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian* Society, *1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1–15; Robert Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[23]*Census of India* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1931).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

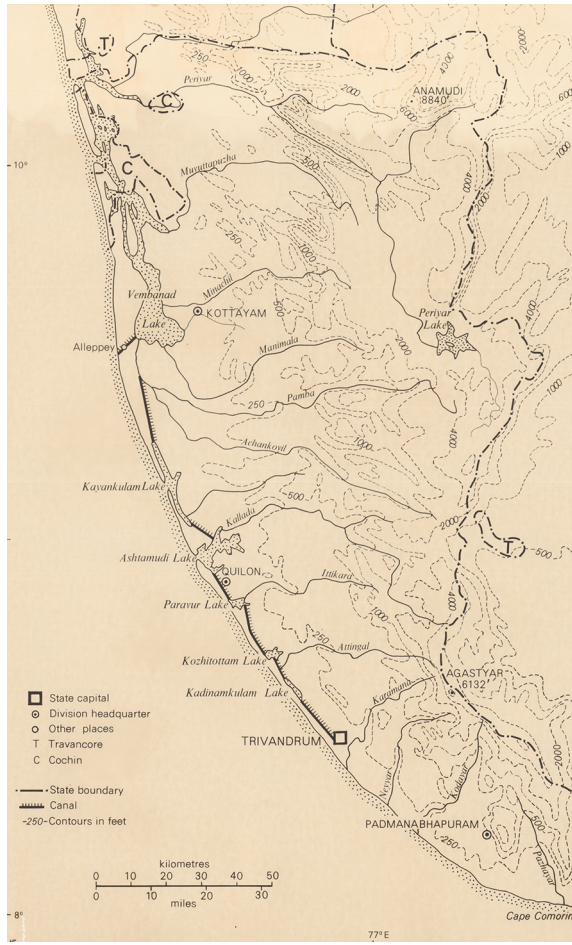

Figure 2. Map of Travancore, *circa* 1900. *Source:* 'Map of Travancore, India', 1974, National Library of Australia nla.obj-232913637.

indirect rule. The British evinced less interest in the specific concerns of local administration.[24] In this way, Travancore continued to fit into the logic of Anglobalization, abetted by state policy.

Travancore's integration into the world economy as an agricultural exporter from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries profoundly reordered the state's social and economic relations. The state became wealthy, although its fortunes rose and fell with the tide of global markets. Equally, some communities in its multi-religious society prospered while others declined. Even though much of Travancore's

[24]Louise Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja: Social and Political Change in the Princely State of Travancore, (1921–47)*, edited with an introduction by Dick Kooiman (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), p. 2; Barbara Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

export produce went to other parts of British India, goods like coir had overseas markets as far away as Europe and North America.[25] Furthermore, the price determination of its cash crops, even in the subcontinent, was tied to the forces of global supply and demand. Thus, Travancore experienced its own distinctive version of what Tariq Omar Ali has called 'local histories' of global capital.[26]

Distinct from neighbouring Madras presidency and princely Cochin, in Travancore the state owned almost half of cultivated (*sircar*) lands. Two crucial pieces of legislation helped create a broader basis for prosperity. The Edict of 1818 freed waste lands from tax for the first ten years and granted favourable tenure thereafter. It was hardly a coincidence, then, that between 1821 and 1911, the area under cultivation increased by 166 per cent.[27] The second piece of legislation, the Proclamation of 1865, granted senior tenants on *sircar* lands effective property rights and reduced the land tax.[28] This broader base for ownership and cultivation limited the number of agricultural labourers to just about 10 per cent of the population by the turn of the twentieth century.[29] Travancore became '*par excellence* a land of smallholders'.[30] This is not to say, though, that the region was free of caste-patterned exploitation of labour. Although formal slavery was abolished in the 1850s and forced labour in 1865, agriculture continued to rely on the dependent labour of workers typically hailing from the lower-caste Ezhava and Untouchable Pulaya or Parayar castes.[31]

British contact in the nineteenth century contributed both to the development of cultivation for export and the emergence of Christianity as a proselytizing faith.[32] Cash crop cultivation began seriously from about the 1850s. It expanded substantially after the maharaja cancelled the duty on various state trading monopolies and abolished trade restrictions with the British signed under the terms of the 1865 Inter-Portal Trade Convention.[33] Subsequently, both the British and natives began to cultivate a range of crops for export. Coconut and its related products like coir became the chief

[25]V. Y. Aswathy, 'Studying Famine as a Fallout of the Economic Crisis in Travancore in the Interwar Period: A Historical Perspective', PhD thesis, Mannonmaniam Sundaranar University, 2018, p. 201.

[26]Tariq Omar Ali, *A Local History of Global Capital: Jute and Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[27]Uma Devi, *Plantation Labour in the Third World* (Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House, 1989), p. 59.

[28]Dharma Kumar, 'South India', in *The Cambridge Economic History of India. Volume 2: c. 1757–c. 1970*, (eds) D. Kumar and Tapan Raychaudhuri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 207–41, 238.

[29]T. C. Varghese, *Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences: Land Tenures in Kerala, 1850–1960* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1970); Abraham Vijayan, *Caste, Class and Agrarian Relations in Kerala* (New Delhi: Reliance Publishing, 1998), p. 35.

[30]*Unemployment Enquiry of 1928* (Trivandrum: Government of Travancore, 1929), quoted in Robin Jeffrey, 'A Sanctified Label: Congress in Travancore, 1938–47', in *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle 1917–47*, (ed.) D. A. Low, 2nd edn (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 435–72, 435.

[31]Malarvizhi Jayanth, 'Abolishing Agrarian Slavery in Southern Colonial India', PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2020. K. Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore, 1922–1949', PhD thesis, Goa University, 1989, p. 12. On Pulaya labour in the paddy cultivating regions, see K. T. Rammohan, *Tales of Rice: Kuttanad, Southwest India* (Trivandrum: Centre for Development Studies, 2006), pp. 23–34.

[32]A. Padmanabha Aiyar, *Modern Travancore: A Handbook of Information* (Trivandrum: Sridhara Printing Press, 1941), p. 314.

[33]E. N. Lakshmanan, 'Problems and Prospects of Unequal Development of Agriculture in Kerala', PhD thesis, SS University of Sanskrit, Kalady, 2004, pp. 105–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

export.[34] Other major export crops included tapioca, rubber, rice, paddy, coffee, tea, ginger, and pepper.[35] Travancore also became the major plantation district in South India, with over 62,000 acres of rubber, 75,000 acres of tea, and 48,000 acres of cardamom plantations in the state by 1931.[36] A large migrant workforce from the Madras presidency worked on these chiefly British-owned holdings.[37]

The export statistics given in Table 1 indicate the scale of the change that integration into the world economy through cash agriculture brought to Travancore.[38] By the 1920s, Travancore was exporting 23 times as much coconut oil, 15 times as much coir, and almost five times as many coconuts as in the mid-1850s. Millions of pounds of tea and rubber, and millions of yards of coir mats left the state each year. This brought greater revenue (see Table 2) that more than paid for import requirements. Led by agro-processing, Travancore began a process of state-facilitated industrialization. An ambitious series of public works financed from tax revenues complemented this process.[39]

The transformation of Travancore's political economy was part of wider processes of regional differentiation based on comparative advantage that developed in a connected imperial economy across the Bay of Bengal, linked by flows of capital, commodities, and labour.[40] Not all the consequences of this interdependence were salutary.[41] The expanding volume of trade left Travancore more vulnerable to the volatility of global market prices and demand, and altered the composition of the export basket over time. For example, after the opening of the Suez Canal, competition from Brazilian coffee and favourable prices for tea led to the substitution of the former for the latter.[42] Compared to Malabar (34 per cent) and Cochin (20 per cent), the adjacent regions, cash crops consumed a larger percentage of the area under cultivation in Travancore (46 per cent).[43] The quantity of land under wet cultivation began to approach available limits.[44] A growing population and cultivation for export markets left Travancore a food deficit region. Cash crops were traded for currency, and in turn for rice. Subsistence was therefore tied to global market prices. The state managed to weather the 'Long Depression' of the late nineteenth century because large-scale plantation activity for exports had only just started. As the decades went

[34]P. K. Michael Tharakan, 'History as Development Experience: Desegregated and Deconstructed Analysis of Kerala', PhD thesis, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 1997, pp. 155–70.

[35]*Statistics of Travancore* (Trivandrum: Government of Travancore, various).

[36]Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', p. 86.

[37]Paul E. Baak, 'Planters' Lobby in Late Nineteenth Century: Implications for Travancore', *Economic and Political Weekly* 27:33 (1992), pp. 1747–53.

[38]The choice of years was related to the availability of records.

[39]Aiyar, *Modern Travancore*, p. 54.

[40]Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Fortunes of Migrants and the Furies of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[41]Christopher Baker, 'Economic Reorganisation and the Slump in South and Southeast Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23:3 (1981), pp. 325–49.

[42]Rani Vasudevan, 'Disintegration of Matrilineal System and its Impact on Production Relations of Travancore (Twentieth Century)', PhD thesis, University of Calicut, 2002, pp. 155–60, 157.

[43]Varghese, *Agrarian Change*, p. 108.

[44]Lakshmanan, 'Problems and Prospects of Unequal Development', pp. 105–20.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1: Exports from Travancore (quantities).

		Year in question	
Commodity	Unit of measure	1856–7	1926–7
Copra	cwts	144,837	456,818
Coconut oil	cwts	18,500	419,788
Coconut husk	cwts	0	10,379
Coir	cwts	51,831	762,068
Pepper	cds	2,279	42,827
Coconut	numbers	3,879,215	18,975,640
Betel nut	cds	2,324	9,789
Coffee	cwts	1,132	756
Ginger	cwts	9,851	87,489
Coir fibre	cwts	36	3,404
Paddy	cwts	17,418	51,669
Rice	cwts	1,354	2,986
Cardamoms	cwts	_	15084
Tea	lbs	_	26,311,860
Rubber	lbs	_	7,656,306
Coir mats	yds	_	213,175
Coir matting	yds	_	3,621,503
Tapioca	cwts	_	103,434

Source: *Travancore Administration Report; Statistics of Travancore.*

on, and especially from about the 1910s, entwinement with global market conditions increased.[45]

Travancore prospered, especially during the price boom period from 1925–8.[46] However, from these highs, the advent of the Great Depression the following year reversed the trend. The decline in the prices of its coconut and coconut products was the most significant price movement for Travancore. Instead of reducing its output, the sector responded by increasing production to secure as much cash as possible. Travancore employed an increasing number of labourers but paid them lower money

[45]Baak, 'Planters' Lobby', p. 1747. On the 'Long Depression', see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (London: Vintage, 1989), pp. 34–55.

[46]*Travancore Economic Depression Enquiry Report, 1931* (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1931), p. 18.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 2: Trade balance of Travancore (decadal averages).

Period	Exports (Rs)	Imports (Rs)	Trade balance
1870–71 to 1880–81	7,731,025	5,423,940	2,307,085
1880–81 to 1890–91	11,216,767	7,737,468	3,479,299
1890–91 to 1900–01	14,864,429	8,734,941	6,129,488
1900–01 to 1910–11	21,197,761	12,865,370	8,332,391
1910–11 to 1920–21	88,999,722	26,846,874	62,152,848
1920–21 to 1930–31	84,758,309	59,553,701	25,204,608
1930–31 to 1940–41	88,603,588	73,816,507	14,787,081

Source: P. G. K. Panikar, T. N. Krishnan and N. Krishnaji, *Population Growth and Agricultural Development: A Case Study of Kerala* (Rome: FAO, 1977), p. 11.

Table 3: Import of rice into Travancore.

	Annual imports,	
Period	Quantity (cwts)	Value (Rs)
1890–1 to 1900–1	NA	2,816,521
1900–1 to 1910/11	NA	3,629,843
1910/11 to 1920/1	1,700,487	13,214,706
1920/1 to 1930/1	2,912,558	26,901,182
1930/1 to 1940/1	5,468,967	25,574,182

Source: Panikar et al., *Population Growth*, p. 16.

wages.[47] More straightforwardly, the fall in prices created distress for its rice-growing regions. Agriculturists no longer able to meet their expenses from selling harvest produce entered into debt. Debtors saw the real value of their obligations increase thanks to deflated price levels. Luckily, though, the Depression did not impact on the food security of Travancore at large. A relatively greater decline in rice prices allowed the state to increase external procurement by over 80 per cent (see Table 3). Thus, by the time the Second World War broke out, over half of the state's rice requirements came chiefly from Burma.[48]

Indebtedness and population increase contributed to a subdivision and fragmentation of landholdings in Travancore, paralleling the Bengal case described by Tariq Omar Ali for Bengal.[49] Uniquely for Travancore, it was changes in inheritance law that

[47]R. Jeffrey, '"Destroy Capitalism!" Growing Solidarity of Alleppey's Coir Workers, 1930–40', *Economic and Political Weekly* 19:29 (1984), pp. 1159–65.

[48]P. G. K. Panikar, T. N. Krishnan and N. Krishnaji, *Population Growth and Agricultural Development: A Case Study of Kerala* (Rome: FAO, 1977), p. 16; Baker, 'Economic Reorganisation', p. 338.

[49]Tariq Omar Ali, *A Local History of Global Capital: Jute and Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 26–35.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were mainly responsible for this process. Laws passed in the early twentieth century allowed partitioning of the assets of the matrilineal joint family or *tharavad* system of the dominant landowning community of Nairs, and parallel practices by other landowning communities. In time the nuclear family became the property-owning unit of the family, and the husbands and fathers in the families, rather than the maternal uncles, became proprietors.[50] Between 1925 and 1940, division of property was greater than ever before, with a majority of landholdings between just a tenth and half of an acre in size. By the eve of the Second World War, the average plot size in Travancore of 3.23 acres was lower than those of the provinces of British India by at least full acre.[51]

The decline of the *tharavad* system reoriented Nair social life along more patriarchal lines and accelerated the subdivision of plots of land, causing them to become increasingly uneconomic. Thus, the period between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century is seen as one of Nair decline. It is also one of the rise of the lower-caste Ezhavas and the Syrian Christian communities. The Ezhavas' cultivation of waste land led to their prosperity. The Syrian Christians became major cultivators and purchasers of land.[52] Social conflict in Kerala emerged within religious communities of the same faith (based on caste among Hindus) and between faiths. In contrast to the Hindu–Muslim tensions that resulted in conflict in much of the rest of India, anxieties about Christianity fuelled inter-religious conflict in Travancore.[53]

The growing prosperity of Syrian Christian families who occupied and improved reclaimed land is among the major themes of Part II of the epic 1978 novel *Kayar* (Coir) about village life in Travancore's rice-growing region of Kuttanad: 'The Christians had taken over,' its narrator observes.[54] Named after one of the region's key agricultural exports, the book's title also refers to an idiomatic usage of the term 'coir', akin to the

[50]The role of the educated male Nair community in steamrolling a process of patriarchal reforms that alienated women from property and regulated marriage procedures in the process is explored in K. Saradamoni, *Matriliny Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999), pp. 90–110. In the context of adjacent Malabar, where landholding was less diffuse than Travancore, G. Arunima argues that this process was part of the crystallization of a single Nair identity and helped overcome tensions that related to the *tharavad*/non-*tharavad* distinction. G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala: Malabar c. 1850–1940* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003).

[51]*Enquiry into the Subdivision and Fragmentation of Agricultural Holdings* (Trivandrum: Government of Travancore, 1941), pp. 10, 13, 31–2.

[52]Members of this community considered themselves to be descended from Brahmans and traced their origins to Saint Thomas the Apostle's visit to Kerala in the first century CE. R. Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847–1908* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 1976); Varghese, *Agrarian Change*, pp. 98–101.

[53]Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, pp. 73–90.

[54]A trained lawyer from a Nair family, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (Thakazhi) was one of Kerala's most well-known men of letters. The author of over 20 novels and hundreds of short stories, Thakazhi became renowned for the realism and historicity of his work, especially those focused on his native Kuttanad region. His legal practice brought him into contact with the labouring classes. He was associated with Kerala's Progressive Literature, writing on the plight of the poor and on themes of social justice and progress. By the late 1950s, Thakazhi had attained nationwide fame thanks to the publication of the novel *Chemmeen* (Prawns), which was translated by UNESCO. After this literary success, Thakazhi left his legal practice and became a full-time writer. Ayyappa Panicker, *Thakazhi Sivasankara*

English 'yarn', to connote a story: it has multiple threads and keeps going. Written by the renowned Travancore author Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912–1999) (Thakazhi), the book provides a fascinating perspective on economic and social change from the 1860s to the 1970s from the vantage point of six Nair families and their interlocutors. The transition to commercial agriculture, movements for social reform, and the development of popular politics all feature in the book, which unfolds across several generations. The source material for *Kayar* came not just from Thakazhi's life experiences, including his work as a small-town litigator reading *tharavad* partition documents and property deeds.[55] A persistent motif of the book is the understanding among Nair families that they were living in the era of the goddess Kali, 'an era of supremacy for the underdog and the low castes' when 'things would go topsy-turvy'.[56]

Christian society's power grew both because of Syrian Christian enterprise and missionary activity. The Church and London Missionary societies established a presence in Travancore from the early nineteenth century onwards, thanks to the intervention of the British Resident.[57] By a proclamation of 1829, the Travancore administration officially allowed would-be converts to become Christians provided they continued to practise pre-conversion caste norms socially. Although this limited the possibilities for social transformation, it created pressures for the uplift of members of the lower castes, the most active converts.[58] By the 1930s, converts and their descendants approached a third of the state's Christian population.

A major missionary activity was the establishment of English-language schools open to those of all castes. Originally, the Travancore government supported them by providing grants for tuition. This was seen as preferable to having low-caste pupils attend the same schools as those of the upper castes.[59] The broader pressures created by the missionaries also helped prompt progressive reforms by the Government of Travancore in the 1860s. They included the mass introduction of vernacular schools and a requirement of educational attainment for attractive government employment.[60] From the final decade of the nineteenth century, the state itself assumed

Pillai (Trivandrum: University of Kerala, 1989); Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, *Kayar*, (trans.) Sreekantan Nair (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997), p. 226.

[55]K. N. Ganesh, 'Representations of Agricultural Labour in Randidangazhi', *Review of Agrarian Studies* 10:2 (2020), available at http://ras.org.in/bafeb4a5e55b0402ccc220395122249d, [last accessed 1 December 2020].

[56]Pillai, *Kayar*, pp. 331, 416.

[57]Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India: The London Missionary Society in South Travancore in the Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989). By 1900, the Church Missionary Society counted about 35,000 adherents and the London Missionary Society (LMS) approximately 60,000. Most of the converts came from the Untouchable castes of Pulaya and Paraya communities who worked as toddy tappers or agricultural labourers. K. Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858–1936* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[58]Gordon MacKenzie, *Christianity in Travancore* (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1901), pp. 48, 53. Many of the plantation labourers had been slaves prior to slavery's abolition in 1855. Some went on to work for LMS-managed, Christian-owned plantations. Others continued to work under brutal conditions, with plantation owners preferring the converts for their discipline and abstention from alcohol. D. Kooiman, 'Conversion from Slavery to Plantation Labour: Christian Mission in South India (Nineteenth Century)', *Social Scientist* 19:8/9 (1991), pp. 57–71. See also Jayanth, 'Abolishing Agrarian Slavery'.

[59]Kooiman, 'Conversion', p. 89.

[60]Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance*, pp. 70–103.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

greater formal control over educational institutions.[61] Thakazhi's novel depicts the increasingly wide spread of education across caste lines by writing of two attempts decades apart to open schools for those from the Untouchable castes. In the first attempt, people from upper castes burned down the school, fearing that education would encourage their Untouchable labourers to seek alternative employment. In the second attempt, once the state had mandated their introduction, the school operated without interruption. Still, the more elite Nair families sent their children to schools in the city which offered greater opportunities.[62] Travancore educational policy was transformational. Between 1875 and 1941, literacy rose from 6 to 68 per cent. The comparable 1941 figure for British India was just 12 per cent.[63]

European contact ushered in a new epoch in the history of Travancore. Becoming a cash crop exporter in the process of British-led globalization led to great, albeit precarious, prosperity. It strengthened communities that embraced commercial cultivation and backwater reclamation while immiserating the more traditional landowners. Prosperity brought the beginnings of industrialization, and missionary contact created educational and institutional legacies that made Travancore a model state in some respects.[64] Where the state proved more resistant to change was in responding to the demands of progressive politics that proceeded from the reordering of social and economic relations.

Political organization and reforms in twentieth-century Travancore

Politics in Travancore developed along distinct yet connected lines to those in the provinces of British India. In large part, its distinct political trajectory owed to its theocratic, monarchical form of governance. Most administrative affairs were managed by the diwan (prime minister), an Indian male appointed by the monarch. Travancoreans stood at one level removed from the rule of colonial difference premised on the alienness of the ruling group that proved so important in catalysing anticolonial nationalist resistance in British India.[65] Even though Travancore had a legislative council (from 1888) and consultative assembly (from 1904), these bodies enjoyed little substantive power.[66] Flagship parties like the umbrella Indian National Congress (INC) and the Communist Party of India arrived in Travancore long after they had established themseves elsewhere in the country. Political reforms were targeted mitigations of popular pressure that could be easily reversed. In this context, the form that popular

[61]Kawashima, *Missionaries*, p. 112.

[62]Pillai, *Kayar*, pp. 280–330.

[63]Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance*, p. 75; *Census of India, 1941*.

[64]M. S. S. Pandian has argued that in Kuttanad, state appropriation of social product prevented the possibilities for accumulation and stalled changes to the mode of production. In Travancore as a whole, however, state policy seems to have aided the development—albeit on an unequal basis—of agricultural output. M. S. S. Pandian, *The Political Economy of Agrarian Change: Nanchilnadu, 1880–1939* (New Delhi: Sage, 1990).

[65]On the rule of colonial difference, see the classic work by Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 10. Elizabeth Kolsky, 'Codification and the Rule of Colonial Difference: Criminal Procedure in British India', *Law and History Review* 23:3 (2005), pp. 631–83, explores its translation into the legal system.

[66]Jeffrey, 'A Sanctified Label', p. 441.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sovereignty might take in the future, and Travancore's relationship to the rest of India, was deeply uncertain.

Localized concerns around social reform and representation, not all-India developments, primarily drove Travancore's early twentieth-century politics.[67] Disparate groups came together to contest the particularly rigid, caste-based order of social rules and practices in the Hindu state, as well as the customary privileges of its dominant communities. A major social reform movement sprung up around the Ezhava reformer Sri Narayana Guru (1854–1924), who sought to purify Hinduism of caste and uplift the poor.[68] The Nairs, an internally stratified group dealing with the social and economic decline of members within their ranks previously discussed, formed a Service Society to consolidate their caste in 1914.[69] One major assemblage of groups for progressive reform consisted of Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas, Christians, and Muslims lobbying the state for greater employment opportunities in prestigious roles in public administration. They were outraged that Brahmans and Nairs held three times their share of government jobs relative to their population.[70]

By the 1930s, influenced in part by mass nationalism in British India, political activity began to concern itself with the form and substance of a future responsible self-government. The federation model brought into being by the Government of India Act of 1935 granted democratically elected legislatures for the provinces of British India while staying silent on the states.[71] In the face of this contradiction, agitation for responsible government by Travancoreans took a more organized form and became widespread. In 1933, the state introduced a bicameral legislative system with a limited franchise, with special quotas for Muslim, Ezhava, and non-Syrian Christians.[72]

Nevertheless, substantive power continued to vest largely with the monarch and the diwan (prime minister).[73] The already major influence on state affairs wielded by this figure assumed new proportions when C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, until then an adviser to the royal family and law member of the Viceroy's Executive Council (1931–6), ascended to the position in 1936.[74] A Tamil Brahman loyal to the royals and inimical to the people, Ramaswamy Aiyar's appointment met with disappointment by

[67]Ibid., p. 435.

[68]P. Chandramohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala: Narayana Guru, SNDP Yogam, and Social Reform* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016).

[69]Jeffrey, 'A Sanctified Label', p. 440.

[70]D. Kooiman, *Communalism and Indian Princely States: Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad in the 1930s* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), pp. 140–5; Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, pp. 79–89; R. Jeffrey, 'Temple Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860–1940', *Social Scientist* 4:8 (1976), pp. 3–27, 12.

[71]In an illuminating article, Sarath Pillai uses the concept of divisible sovereignty to understand Travancore's claim for federal independence under this model, whereby its local sovereignty vested in the ruler. S. Pillai, 'Fragmenting the Nation: Divisible Sovereignty and Travancore's Quest for Federal Independence', *Law and History Review* 34:3 (2016), pp. 743–82.

[72]Kooiman, *Communalism*, p. 157.

[73]Ibid., pp. 133–4.

[74]The son of a judge, Ramaswamy Aiyar had a successful legal career before joining Annie Besant's Home Rule League and becoming a nationalist. However, when the Gandhian brand of Congress politics became mainstream, Aiyar moved away from Congress politics. He served variously as advocate general of Madras and on the Governing Council of Madras before occupying a number of posts as a representative of the Government of India. Aiyar was highly regarded for his wit and cultivated the good graces of the British. Saroja Sundararajan, *Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar: A Biography* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2002).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Travancoreans. The British Resident described him as 'a "superior person" domineering and contemptuous of the common herd…His methods are Machiavellian; he rules by dividing, he bribes with office and other favours, he sets traps for his critics and plays on the weakness of his enemies.'[75]

A signature event of Ramaswamy Aiyar's first year as diwan was his issuance of the Temple Entry Proclamation. The measure allowed Ezhavas and other Untouchable communities to enter temples, which had been hitherto denied to them. Some see this as an indication of his progressive, modernizing ethos, as the rest of India followed Travancore's example. In reality, Aiyar, long wary of offending caste Hindus, had only recently changed his views on the matter.[76] The threat of conversion to Christianity and pressure from Gandhians forced his hand. More plausibly, the measure may be interpreted as an effort to consolidate Hindu society against Christians.[77]

Ramaswamy Aiyar's stubborn unwillingness to consider demands for responsible government laid bare his less savoury, autocratic tendencies. He worried especially that devolving political power to elected assemblies in the states would pave the way for the entrance of the INC into these legislatures and overwhelm princely power in the federation model. These fears were not without legitimate grounds. In 1938, the INC made a demand for 'civil liberty' in the princely states, culminating in the creation of a princely state branch of the INC (State Congress) in Travancore shortly thereafter. Among the issues the State Congress picked up on was the prosecution for sedition and attack on journalists who had written an anti-government article. In one example, the author of a newspaper article about a quota system of communal representation was jailed for 18 months on the grounds of creating communal disturbances. An increase of the fee for press licences created a further impediment to free speech. In May, the State Congress presented a memorial to the maharaja that featured several demands: a Cabinet of Ministers responsible to the legislature, adult franchise, civil rights, freedom of speech and religion, protection from arbitrary arrest, guarantees of a living wage, the dismissal of Ramaswamy Aiyar, and an investigation into his conduct. It culminated in a full-blown Civil Disobedience movement.[78]

Although conducted under the auspices of the umbrella State Congress, a more radical left political movement brewing in the region spearheaded Civil Disobedience. The partial industrialization of the princely state had created a factory population of approximately 330,000 workers by 1920, over a third of whom worked in the coir industry.[79] Shortly afterwards, following the Russian Revolution, an adherent of Narayana Guru's philosophy named K. Ayyappan introduced the ideas of Marx and Lenin through a triweekly workers' newspaper. Coir workers came together under the auspices of a Travancore Labour Association (1922) in Alleppey.[80] By the 1930s, once the effects of the Great Depression began to be felt on Travancore's export economy, a true working class politics began to develop. It concentrated especially in the coastal Shertallai

[75]Quoted in Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, p. 122.

[76]Ibid., p. 95.

[77]Jeffrey, 'Temple Entry Movement', p. 20.

[78]Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, pp. 130–43; Jeffrey, 'A Sanctified Label', pp. 451–6.

[79]Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', p. 38.

[80]Ibid., p. 52; Joseph Tharamangalam, *Agrarian Class Conflict: The Political Mobilisation of Agricultural Labourers in Kuttanad, South India* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1981), p. 68.

and Ambalappuzha *taluks* (an administrative unit, usually a cluster of villages), home to the coir industry.[81] Over the course of the decade, these coir workers participated in strikes for better wages.

Joining their ranks in left politics were young, educated leaders from groups like the Nair Service Society and student-populated groups like the Youth League who embraced communism. [82] Labour unions registered as trade unions and won formal recognition of their rights in the Travancore Trade Unions Act of 1937. Together, these groups provided the basis for a workers' movement. From the following year, strikes were formally organized by committees and volunteer corps in the state.[83]

Although the Communist Party of India, created in 1925, was banned in 1934, its members operated in adjacent Malabar district as they worked within the INC's newly created Congress Socialist Party.[84] This was part of a United Front strategy to join with other parties in a common struggle to advance the working class cause. The Malabar leaders, many of them Nairs, worked to create a secular sense of community between workers and peasants and transform rural politics. Depression conditions served them well as they mobilized peasants in unions and organized agitations for tenancy rights and rent remissions.[85] Over the course of the decade, the Malabar police's violence against peasants and workers strengthened the resolve of these leaders. At the ideological level, Congress socialists also managed to exert a hold on reading rooms across the district and disseminate progressive literature. This material attacked traditional society and vernacularized communism into an idea of caste equality.[86] In an environment of increasing literacy across communities, there was uptake of these ideas and a reshaping of the public sphere.

The Civil Disobedience of 1938 was led by the communists across Travancore, Malabar, and Cochin. Malabar communists in the Congress Socialist Party organized a *jatha* (march) of 40 volunteers to walk the 759 miles from Calicut to Travancore. Along the way, 3,000 volunteers and members of another 500 village and district committees joined them.[87] Writing many years later in his memoirs, the communist leader A. K. Gopalan recalled it with pride: 'I have participated in struggles in British India and have led strikes and agitations of mammoth proportions. But the enthusiasm, courage, and general disposition towards agitation that I saw on that day was something that I had never seen before.'[88] Gopalan and the other communists were arrested and put in

[81]Jeffrey, '"Destroy Capitalism!"'.

[82]The Youth League was the renamed version of the earlier Communist League (founded in 1931). The name change came after the Government of Travancore proscribed a radical pamphlet circulated by the organization envisioning a future India free of authoritarian rule and worker exploitation. M. Lenin Lal, 'The Emergence of Left Movement in Colonial Travancore', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 77 (2016), pp. 435–44; Miroslav Victor Fic, 'Peaceful Transformation to Communism in India, 1954–1957: A Comparative Case Study of Kerala', PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1962, p. 550.

[83]Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', p. 145.

[84]Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1940* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 335.

[85]This paragraph follows Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 145–60.

[86]Ibid., p. 2.

[87]Fic, 'Peaceful Transformation', pp. 555–6.

[88]Originally a Congressman and a teacher by profession, Gopalan (1904–77) joined the Communist Party in the late 1930s and became a key member. He was associated with a range of activities, including trade

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

jail. Later that year, the labour leaders coordinated the Alleppey General Strike, which was over 20,000 workers strong and lasted 80 days.[89] This was the first general strike in Kerala's history.[90]

Arrests and a brutal strangulation of the movement followed. Ramaswamy Aiyar banned the leading newspaper, *Malayala Manorama*, and warned editors of the serious consequences of publishing anti-government material. Newspapers had their licences cancelled. Finally, after the intervention of Gandhi, agitators withdrew the memorandum in exchange for promises of responsible government. Even still, the damage was done; there would be no true return to normal.[91]

Between the turn of the century and the eve of the Second World War, Travancore politics had evolved from a vehicle for articulating demands for local caste-based change to one connected with national politics and an international ideology that sought nothing less than to remake the world. Class formation, social reform, and the circulation of ideas of progress left Travancoreans willing to court violent suppression to make their demands heard and threw the centuries-old monarchy's future into doubt.

Travancore in an all-India food crisis

'Are we not Indians? Why are we treated like this? Is this fair?' These were some of the questions asked of K. Santhanam, the journalist whose remarks began this article, when he arrived in Travancore in late 1943. If not starving, people were suffering from hunger and malnourishment. They ate anything they could find, including tapioca leaves and coir dust to fill their bellies.[92] In the order of priority for receiving food supplies from British India, princely Travancore and Cochin came a distant second after Bengal.[93] The Government of India's Food Department, which was created only at the height of the crisis, was far from an efficient apparatus and failed to deliver the region adequate stocks. Incoming supply was just one of multiple reasons behind this sorry state of affairs. Santhanam also noted 'suspicion and distrust' between the authorities and non-officials that precluded the cooperation required to deal with the food crisis, one that had grown since the Civil Disobedience and under the conditions created by the draconian policies of the Government of Travancore. Although it ultimately took over the wholescale procurement and distribution of food and averted

unionism and farmers' movements. His name is inextricably linked to the constitutional history of India thanks to his unsuccessful challenge to being imprisoned under the Preventive Detention Act of 1950 on the grounds of violating his personal liberty. The Supreme Court ruled that his imprisonment was conducted by a 'procedure according to law' even if it did infringe on his fundamental rights. This interpretation of Article 21 was not overruled until 2017. Gopalan served five consecutive terms in the Lok Sabha, from 1952 until his death. A. K. Gopalan, *In the Cause of the People: Reminiscences* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1973), pp. 102–3.

[89]E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *The National Question in Kerala* (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1952), p. 143.

[90]Fic, 'Peaceful Transformation', p. 555.

[91]Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, pp. 155–80; Jeffrey, 'A Sanctified Label', pp. 445–56.

[92]Santhanam, *Cry of Distress*, p. 57.

[93]Telegram from Food Department to Secretary of State for India, 26 October 1943, India Office Records, Asian and African Studies Collection, British Library, London (hereafter IOR) L/PS/13/1298.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more widespread disaster, a comparison to Cochin reveals that such measures were rolled out with comparatively great hesitation and opacity. Further, it showcases the variations in modes of governance between princely states and their widely divergent consequences.

Across the subcontinent, the princely states pledged their allegiance to the war effort. They took the opportunity to show their support for the Crown and to forestall the possible usurpation of power by the federal authority under the terms of the Government of India Act of 1935. The states sent over 300,000 soldiers to the Indian Army and offered almost £20 million in cash and materials.[94] The three Madras states of Cochin, Travancore, and Pudukottai were particularly generous. They contributed 150,000 labour units to the war effort. Additionally, these states invested in national savings certificates and defence loans, supplied a field ambulance unit, five mobile canteens, and gave over large quantities of other supplies.'[95] Among them, Travancore displayed a particular eagerness to put its resources at the Raj's disposal. The maharaja pledged support a full week before Britain formally entered the war. Some 65,000 Travancoreans left the state to serve in the army.[96] A further 55,000 joined the Assam Labour Corps.[97]

Beyond its formal contribution, Travancore bore a heavy wartime economic burden. War interrupted shipping routes and brought trade with several European countries to a temporary end.[98] Across the northern coastal towns of Alleppey, Shertallai, and Quilon, some 25,000 coir factory workers lost their jobs.[99] According to one estimate cited in the popular assembly, war adversely affected the work of 300,000 people in the coconut and related industries, including those in the informal sector.[100] Although some were absorbed into the War Supplies Department, they contended with real wage declines and poor conditions as they worked around the clock.[101]

War offered a convenient ruse for Travancore's unpopular diwan to operate in a particularly draconian fashion. Ramaswamy Aiyar put in place Defence of India Rules, under which anyone could be detained without trial.[102] Unlike in British India, where the Federal Court struck down the equivalent provisions of the Defence of India Act,

[94]Raghavan, *India's War*, p. 14.

[95]'News from India', 29 January 1945, IOR L/PS/13/1298.

[96]'Note Prepared by his Excellency the Viceroy on the problems under discussion with the Resident for the Madras States', Political Department, 5 February 1944, IOR R/1/1/413: 1944: File 187-P(S)/1944 1.

[97]These statistics were provided by Ramaswamy Aiyar in his remarks to the *Third All-India Food Conference*, 5–8 July 1943 (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1943), p. 8. I am grateful to Benjamin Siegel for this reference. In total, 157,000 men had left the state by March 1943 for employment in the army and civilian labour force. K. V. Joseph, *Keralites on the Move* (New Delhi: Shipra, 2006), p. 73.

[98]*Travancore Administration Report*, 1940–1 (Trivandrum: Government of Travancore, 1941), p. 19.

[99]*Travancore Administration Report*, 1939–40 (Trivandrum: Government of Travancore, 1940), p. 117.

[100]Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', p. 239.

[101]Aswathy, 'Studying Famine', p. 105. On wartime working conditions, see R. Ahuja, 'Produce or Perish: The Crisis of the Late 1940s and the Place of Labour in Postcolonial India', *Modern Asian Studies* 54:4 (2020), pp. 1041–112, 1050; and Raghavan, *India's War*, pp. 331–2.

[102]Reuters Dispatch, 10 October 1939, reproduced in 'Madras States: Travancore Affairs', IOR L/PS/13/1285; Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, p. 200.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Travancore High Court had no such judicial autonomy.[103] The diwan also expressed his opinion that too many newspapers operated in the state. He told the Travancore's Journalists' Association to cut the number from 70 to 10 around clearly defined lines of policy.[104] Press communiques issued by the Government of Travancore containing warnings not to publish certain material.[105] There was no question of *Malayala Manorama* resuming publication. Sycophancy rather than free speech was encouraged. A particularly egregious example of this were the committees convened around the state to honour the diwan for his *Shastiabdapoorthi*, or sixtieth birthday. This is a significant event in Tamil society, accompanied by rituals like renewing one's marriage vows. To rehabilitate its image with their Hindu rulers, the Syrian Christian community even proposed erecting a statue in the diwan's honour to mark the event.[106]

Travancore's leadership understood that the state's food deficit left it vulnerable to possible supply dislocations. Anticipating wartime price inflation, the Government of Travancore purchased extra rice from Burma in 1940 and sold it at a loss.[107] It banned food exports for commercial purposes and fixed prices of imported rice.[108] Still, as in other parts of India, the prevailing policy wisdom with respect to commodity markets was one of laissez faire.[109] It was only as the situation worsened over the next few years that the state reluctantly embraced a successively greater role in the procurement and distribution of food supplies. Between the fall of Burma to the Japanese in February 1942 and the declaration of monopoly procurement and rationing by the state in March 1944, a combination of factors internal to Travancore and related to a national food shortage intensified the challenges experienced by the princely state.

A serious food scarcity problem emerged after the fall of Burma to the Japanese in March 1942. This left Travancore, with 250,000 tons of annual rice output, some 367,000 tons short of requirements. Originally, the Madras presidency pledged 176,000 tons to meet the shortfall.[110] Unfortunately, over the next year, the Madras and Bombay presidencies, as well as the nearby princely states of Cochin and Mysore, began to suffer shortages of their own.[111] Supplies from Madras dried up by September, leaving Travancore with less than half of what was promised.[112] Sourcing rice from neighbouring regions could no longer be a viable strategy.

[103]Rohit De, 'Emasculating the Executive: The Federal Court and Civil Liberties in Late Colonial India', in *Fates of Political Liberalism in the British Postcolony: The Politics of the Legal Complex*, (eds) Terence Halliday, Lucien Karpik and Malcolm Feeley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 59–90.

[104]Madras States Agency, Fortnightly Report (hereafter FR) Two, May 1940, IOR L/PS/13/1298.

[105]FR One, July 1941.

[106]Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, p. 202.

[107]*Proceedings of the TSMA*, 2nd Assembly, Seventh Session, 23 July 1940, p. 141.

[108]*Proceedings of the TSMA*, 2nd Assembly, Ninth Session, 31 July 1941, pp. 627–9.

[109]Knight, *Food Administration in India*, p. 37.

[110]*Famine Enquiry Commission Report*, p. 9.

[111]Bombay typically imported approximately 15 per cent of its requirements, and Madras between 5 and 10 per cent. They had larger populations than Travancore and Cochin and imported greater absolute quantities of rice but were better placed to spread the shortage out over a larger population. *Famine Enquiry Commission Report*, pp. 3–8.

[112]'Press Communique', 23 August 1943, Confidential Section, Travancore Secretariat, File 499/1944, Kerala State Archives, Trivandrum. I am indebted to Robin Jeffrey for this reference. *Famine Enquiry Commission Report*, p. 9. According to the latter estimate, for the whole period from July 1942 to January 1943, Travancore received just 76,000 tons of rice.

Table 4: Travancore food deficit, Basic Plan allocations, and quantity received.

Period	Total deficit (tons)	Allocation	Quantity received	Percentage allocation received	Percentage of deficit met
December 1942 to July 1943	240,000	133,600	75,800	57	32
August to November 1943	120,000	32,280	20,720	64	17
November 1943 to October 1944	360,000	213,108	129,692	61	36
November 1944 to October 1945	360,000	160,000	28,915	18	8

Source: Sivaswamy, *The Exodus*, p. 125. These numbers, reported by the Travancore government, broadly accord with the data presented in N. N. Wanchoo, 'Memorandum from Food Department to Secretary of State', 19 November 1943, IOR L/PS/13/1298.

One source of rice for Travancore became the British Government of India's newly created apparatus to move rice from surplus to deficit regions under a Basic Plan. This new Food Department, fashioned haphazardly, kicked into action as conditions in Bengal deteriorated.[113] Its priorities did not lie in South India.[114] Rice travelled by great distances on the already overburdened railways to get to Travancore, creating opportunities for pilferage along the way.[115] Deliveries of food to Travancore, calculated on the basis of absolute shortages rather than supplies available, fell far short of the pledged amounts (see Table 4).

Shortfalls in supplies received from other parts of India forced the Travancore government to pursue multiple local strategies as part of managing the food crisis. First, like other parts of India, the princely state embraced the Government of India's Grow More Food Campaign. This campaign sought to switch cultivation over from cash to food crops, expand the area of land under cultivation, increase irrigation, and use better seeds to improve agricultural yields. It further provided farmers with various incentives for doing so.[116] Grow More Food did not amount to very much, because Travancore was already pushing towards the limits of cultivation on its land (see the section of this article titled 'European contact and socioeconomic change'). The state further encouraged the consumption of substitute foods like tapioca and bananas.[117] Finally, the Travancore government began to regulate and then oversee the procurement and distribution of food across the state.

This was a reactive process of trial and error that culminated in the complete state takeover of every aspect of procurement and distribution of food. It responded to dishonest behaviour by government employees, landowners unwilling to part with their excess stocks, and unscrupulous merchants who sought to sell grains to the highest bidder. Travancore initially required that merchants secure permits for trading and

[113]Knight, *Food Administration in India*, pp. 178–88.

[114]Ibid.; Telegram from Government of India Food Department to Secretary of State, 26 October 1943, IOR L/PS/13/1298.

[115]This pilferage is explored in the next section. On the exhaustion of the railways during the Second World War, see Raghavan, *India's War*, pp. 332–4.

[116]FR Two, June 1942. P. N. Chopra, *Evolution of Food Policy in India* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 57–63.

[117]FR Two, November 1943. The next section will explore the consequences of this dietary substitution.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

furnish the government with information about their purchases and sales.[118] This did little to arrest the increase in prices. So, the government created a new office of grain purchasing officers and gave them legal sanction to purchase all stocks of food from landholders at specified prices.[119] These officers could differ substantially in how much of a landholder's supply they considered to be in excess. The new basis for government acquisition was thus changed to acreage of holdings.[120] But this too was discarded because of varying yields across farms. Thus, Travancore embraced a policy of measuring excess stocks on the basis of land rent, which corresponded to yield.[121] Finally, embracing the idea that 'maximum benefit can be achieved by direct purchase by Government through their officers from the producing centre itself, and that above all to facilitate the purchase there should be complete control of transport by Government', the state assumed complete control of the food supply.[122]

In the sphere of distribution, Travancore moved from selective rationing in March 1943 to universal rationing a year later. Originally, officials would 'dole out small quantities to the most deserving' and government workers. Rationing was first limited to urban areas, later expanding to rural areas during the course of the year. The needs-based approach to rationing created problems of bureaucratic discretion over who got how much. Further, the double ration given to government servants led to bitter resentment in the populace. So, from August 1943, a blanket ration of 8 ounces (3 ounces of rice and 5 ounces of other grains) was announced for everyone.[123] This was a tiny amount; the comparable figure for Bombay was 24 ounces and Madras 21.3 ounces of rice.[124] While it may have sustained life, it did not sustain healthy living.

Travancore's decision to institute rationing a full year or more before the rest of India may initially seem visionary.[125] In fact, the director general of the Indian Medical Services cited this as the primary reason that 'saved this part of India from a Bengal catastrophe'.[126] The rest of India, of course, did not have a food deficit of over 50 per cent. A more germane comparison is with the neighbouring princely state of Cochin.[127] Although Cochin benefited from its smaller landmass, population, a smaller proportion of land under cultivation, and access to the deep water port of Cochin Harbour, it also seemed to have understood the seriousness of the problem much earlier and acted accordingly.

From the beginning of the crisis, Cochin instituted a single price for food, rather than different prices for domestic and imported rice. So, there was no problem of cheaper rice going to those who could afford to pay more. Next, from the beginning

[118]Government of Travancore, 'Note on Rationing and Procurement of Food Supplies in Travancore', n.d. (March 1944), IOR L/PS/13/1285.

[119]*Report of the Foodgrains Enquiry Committee* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1943), p. 51.

[120]FR One, February 1943.

[121]*Travancore Administration Report*, 1942–3, p. 164.

[122]'Note on Rationing'.

[123]'Rice Rationing', *The Hindu*, 23 August 1943.

[124]FR Two, August 1943.

[125]Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, pp. 189–90.

[126]FR Two, November 1943.

[127]The comparison in this paragraph follows the excellent work in Anthony Gatti, 'The Food Crisis in Travancore and Cochin, 1940–5', Honours thesis, University of Flinders, South Australia, 1982. I am indebted to Robin Jeffrey for this reference.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cochin's principle for procurement was based on settlement yields rather than acreage. It was able to get control of 40 per cent of the paddy supply, compared to Travancore's 25 per cent.[128] Third, Cochin instituted rationing a full year before Travancore.[129] Finally, given that its population was heavily rice-dependent, Cochin made special efforts to encourage the consumption of other grains by setting up Cochin restaurants to prepare more palatable meals.[130]

Distinct political dynamics drove Cochin and Travancore's divergent approaches, the significance of which cannot be underestimated. If the Madras states under British rule wore a 'hollow crown', they could still wield substantial power in certain areas.[131] As we have seen, political power in Travancore was centralized in the unpopular diwan. The observations of the British Resident, who recorded his impressions at some length in 1944, are worth mentioning in this regard. While he credited Ramaswamy Aiyar, a man with a 'quick brain and arresting personality', for modernizing Travancore's administration and rapidly industrializing the state, this came at a price. His autocratic mode of governance had 'driven all initiative and sense of responsibility from the subordinate staff'. Nobody dared stand up to him. It was no surprise, then, that the legislature was a sham, and the newspapers were 'suspiciously wary of crossing him'. By contrast, Cochin was a state that was trying to improve its political culture through the introduction of village panchayats. Its similarly weak administration was not dominated by one personality, its functionaries were more willing to serve, and the government was keen to seek cooperation in tackling its food crisis. These conditions, the Resident felt, were 'more productive of solid results'.[132] Travancore's comparatively repressed environment for free speech and political activity prevented information about the depths of the crisis from being communicated to the British and indeed the rest of the world.

The Resident would note that 'equally harrowing photographs [to Bengal]' could be produced from the scarcity areas of Travancore, 'but feelings of prestige forbid public exposure of the gangrenous sores' and 'the criticism is of course feared that the administration is incapable of effecting an equitable distribution of resources'.[133] The Defence of Travancore Rules allowed Ramaswamy Aiyar to arrest politicians who sought to expose these conditions for sedition. Press communiques warned 'subversive organisations and movements' against 'reprehensible activities and trying to undermine the morale of the people'.[134] The Travancore police were particularly violent, and the state was known to hire gangs to disrupt meetings held by undesirable elements.[135]

[128]K. G. Sivaswamy, *Famine, Rationing, and Food Policy in Cochin* (Madras: Servindia Kerala Relief Centre, 1946), p. 17.

[129]Ibid., p. 32.

[130]Gatti, 'The Food Crisis'; Sivaswamy, *Famine, Rationing, and Food Policy*, p. 41.

[131]Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For an important corrective that recovers the multiple forms of political autonomy wielded by the princes, see Barbara Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[132]Letter from H. J. Todd, Resident, to Griffin, 24 April 1944, 'Travancore Information', IOR L/PS/13/1285.

[133]FR One, September 1943.

[134]FR One, July 1942.

[135]Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, p. 210.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In this environment, there was limited take-up of local knowledge and resources to mobilize more advantaged members of a community towards food relief. When a delegation of communists gathered before Ramaswamy Aiyar to address the food situation in late 1942, they proposed village level food committees to help determine requirements of stock from landholders. The diwan did not engage with them and merely paid lip service to their demands. He further refused to release their existing prisoners and put one member of the delegation in jail. The following year, the government arrested two State Congress members who had vocally advocated village committees as a way to ascertain the excess produce of landholders.[136] Although the state later released its political prisoners in droves and removed the ban on certain newspapers when it was desperate for help, it issued warnings shortly thereafter 'against abusing the freedom of speech they have been allowed'.[137] The lack of a feedback mechanism for the government prevented it from being more proactive. On the other hand, in Cochin, the communists reported being able to convene committees of concerned citizens to prevent profiteering and ensure equitable food distribution.[138]

Cash agriculture had enriched Travancore and enabled the state to make impressive achievements. At the same time, dependence on exports and the lack of self-sufficiency in food left it suffering during the Depression and then in the Second World War. In retrospect, Ramaswamy Aiyar would recognize that he 'did not have the foresight to advise His Highness that it was all very well to industrialise and to gain money; that money alone is not equivalent to food'.[139] The unavailability of food, a disempowered bureaucracy devoid of talented personnel, and the absence of a political voice in a highly centralized and autocratic polity combined to unleash a tragedy.

Unequal suffering: Dislocation, disease, and death

In a now-classic essay, Indivar Kamtekar observed that whereas the Second World War created new solidarities in Great Britain, it produced new forms of inequality in India.[140] Similarly, the effects of Travancore's management of the shortage varied across class, caste, and space. Some profited. Others starved. Still others moved. Supplementing the archival record with surveys of death and disease rates and novels about food management and migration helps paint a picture of the distinct lived experiences of this tumultuous period in Travancore's history.

Part VII of *Kayar* focused on how those poor families with able-bodied sons sent them to enlist in the army and remit money back home. As the war goes on, the local postman brings more news of death in battle rather than money orders. A subsidiary concern of this section of the novel is how those with command of food supplies and

[136]'C. P. on Food in Travancore', *Peoples' War*, 27 June 1943, p. 5.

[137]K. C. George to C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, 30 September 1943, 'Communists and Food Committees', Confidential Section, Travancore Secretariat Files, File 689/1943, Kerala State Archives, Trivandrum. I am indebted to Robin Jeffrey for this reference; FR One, November 1943.

[138]*Peoples' War*, 3 January 1943, cited in Gatti, 'The Food Crisis, p. 46.

[139]'Prize Distribution at Shri Chitra Exhibition, 17 November 1942', Folder 42, Microfilm Accession 1410, Papers of Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

[140]I. Kamtekar, 'A Different War Dance: State and Class in India, 1939–1945', *Past and Present* 176 (2002), pp. 187–221.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

other war resources profited handsomely off their supplies while others suffered.[141] That theme is explored in greater detail in the Indian English-language writer Raja Rao's (1908–2006) novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare: A Tale of Modern India*. Drawing upon the author's experiences living in Travancore's capital of Trivandrum during the war, the book tells the story of an upright ration clerk battling a corrupt system through the eyes of a witty and cynical colleague.[142] The narrator Ramakrishna Pai talks about how war allows one to meet the challenge of raising a family on a fixed government salary: 'Fortunately, there are wars. And rationing is one of the grandest inventions of man. You stamp paper with figures and you feed stomachs on numbers. You know these *sadhus* (wandering holy ascetics)…For three months, they need no food…I give magical cards, and my wife eats pearl rice. My children go to school.'[143]

In *The Cat and Shakespeare*, government officers sell false ration cards or sign them for those who are no longer living. Documentation selectively disappears, explained away as having been eaten by rats. Conspicuous consumption and real estate purchases are justified as assets from the wife's family line. Although fictional, the accounts in the book were inspired by certain real-life events. There was a black market for ration cards to which the poor contributed in order to purchase cheaper substitute foods like tapioca (see below) that would allow subsistence for longer.[144] And although ultimately the magistrate dismissed the charges, the Travancore government temporarily suspended and investigated the conduct of 116 officers for holding disproportionate assets like large plots of land.[145] While state-wide procurement and rationing of food curbed black market activity, it was far from a panacea. In some cases, it merely enriched the government servant rather than the trading agent.

For the less fortunate, food scarcity forced uncomfortable decisions that led to displacement, disease, and death, especially in the Shertallai and Ambalappuzha taluks of north coastal Travancore. Thanks to the efforts of the Servindia Relief Centre, a branch of the Servants of India Society (SIS), and its local secretary, K. G. Sivaswamy (??–1957), there is a detailed and rigorous analysis of the effects of the food crisis.[146] Sivaswamy was a politician who had become a social worker dedicated to improving agrarian India through rural reconstruction and agrarian cooperatives.[147] He came to Travancore in the second half of 1943 during the brief window of time in which Ramaswamy Aiyar sought cooperation from relief organizations. The four Servindia relief centres across

[141] Pillai, *Kayar*, p. 596.

[142] Shyamala Narayan, *Raja Rao: Man and his Works* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1988), p. 74.

[143] R. Rao, *The Cat and Shakespeare: A Tale of Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient, 1965), p. 11.

[144] FR One, January 1944.

[145] *Third All-India Food Conference*, p. 8; FR Two, October 1943.

[146] Founded by the moderate nationalist leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866–1915), in the year he became president of the Congress (1905), the SIS pursued service activities to contribute to the uplift of Indian society, including the abolition of Untouchability, improvement of sanitation and hygiene, and education. Its members were animated by a sense of self-sacrifice and moral purity. Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 136; C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 273.

[147] 'Obituary: K. G. Sivaswamy', *The Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics* 12:1 (1957), pp. 1–2. In the early 1940s, he was also involved in studying land tenure in South India and organizing agricultural workers and labourers in unions. Weekly Letters of the Servants of India Society, Papers of the Servants of India Society, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi (hereafter NMML).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Travancore fed several thousands of children daily and made rigorous studies of the effects of the food shortage in Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore.[148] The photographic images accompanying these studies capture the extent of the suffering of the people. They have been excluded here to avoid making spectacles of their bodies.[149]

Whereas in the Bengal Famine, the hungry migrated from rural to urban areas in search of food, there was a powerful reverse current of migration out of Travancore. Approximately 12,000 people, mainly smallholding farmers, left for the jungles of Malabar, between 1942–4.[150] This accelerated a migratory trend from Travancore to Malabar that began in the late 1920s as a consequence of the declining availability of cultivable land.[151] Migrants were primarily Syrian Christians who often had access to that combination of material resources, skills, and social networks that Joya Chatterji has called 'mobility capital'.[152] Having sold their land in Travancore, they attempted to bring mainly tapioca or rice under cultivation, depending on where they migrated to. A key attraction during the war was also a 50 per cent lower controlled price of rice in Malabar than Travancore. If migration to the jungles promised greater food security, it also carried dangers. One of the novels spawned by these wartime migrations, Kuravilangad Joseph's *Dukha Bhoomi* (1967), wrote of forests where 'wild elephants, wild buffaloes, tigers, boars and pythons had freely rambled'. While it promised a life without starvation, this new world required 'awful hard work, loss of manpower, and many other terrible losses'.[153] Some migrants failed in their endeavours and were forced to return to Travancore; countless others died of malaria.[154] Adjusting their diet to the produce of the land led to an overconsumption of carbohydrates and a deficit of fish and coconuts. These settlers suffered from anaemia and scabies. Sivaswamy calculated an excess mortality of 2,000 for this group, or about one in six.[155]

Those who stayed behind experienced more acute under-nutrition and had to eat a greater proportion of substitute foods. Payment in rice for agricultural labour was substituted for paper money that lost its value quickly; the resulting hunger is described movingly in Thakazhi's 1948 book *Rantidangazhi* (Two Measures of Rice).[156] We have already pointed out the small size of the ration; the only thing most people could do with it was prepare rice gruel. Tapioca, which saw an increase in cultivation of about a third during 1943–4 in Travancore, served as the most common emergency

[148]K. G. Sivaswamy to Thakurdas, 4 January 1944, 'ServIndia Travancore Relief Centre, Alleppey', Subject File 315, pp. 61–2, Sir Purushotamdas Thakurdas Papers, NMML.

[149]Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), cited in a talk by Bianca Primo. I am grateful to Isabel Huacuja Alonso for pointing me towards this ethical concern.

[150]K. G. Sivaswamy et al., *The Exodus from Travancore to the Malabar Jungles* (Coimbatore: ServIndia Relief Centre, 1945), p. 1.

[151]K. V. Joseph, *Migration and Economic Development in Kerala* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), p. 95.

[152]Joya Chatterji, 'Dispositions and Destinations: Refugee Agency and "Mobility Capital" in the Bengal Diaspora, 1947–2007', *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 55:2 (2013), pp. 273–304.

[153]Cited in V. J. Verghese, 'De-scribing Self: Reading Migrant Novels on Malabar Migration', *Tapasam* 1:2 (2005), pp. 327–54, 334, 338.

[154]V. J. Verghese, 'Migrant Narratives: Reading Literary Representations of Christian Migration in Kerala, 1920–70', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43:2 (2006), pp. 227–55.

[155]Sivaswamy et al., *The Exodus*, p. 10.

[156]Bipan Chandra, 'P. C. Joshi and the National Politics', *Studies in History* 24:2 (2008), p. 82; Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, *Two Measures of Rice*, (trans.) M. A. Shakoor (Bombay: Jaico, 1967).

substitute food.[157] Other major dietary substitutes were not always readily accepted. 'Everywhere, I am met by the appeal for more rice and less bajra, maize, etc,' the Resident wrote.[158] It was harder to persuade children to eat substitutes. Too much tapioca retarded their bone growth.[159] The swelling of their bellies resulted from a condition known as kwashiorkor, caused by inadequate protein in their diets. By far the most common consequences of malnutrition were severe anaemia and oedema. This was a harrowing experience. Swelling begins in the abdomen and spreads through the body, stretching the skin. Blood pressure drops, corneas turn red and sore, and aches and pains develop across the body. A craving for carbohydrates and salt develops, accompanied by uncontrollable diarrhoea. Then, the victims move from depression, to irritation, to unconsciousness.[160]

The young communist E. M. S. Namboodiripad (1909–1998) spoke of how under these circumstances, notions of morality were replaced by survival instincts: 'Self-respect and fellow-feeling all disappear in the face of hunger. Beg, bribe, borrow, steal, do anything you like so that you may live!—This becomes the desperate mood.'[161] He reported that thefts had increased. The Resident offered a particularly chilling observation in one of his dispatches, of 'a huddle of little skinny animals—that were born human'. Protruding ribs, swollen stomachs, and sticklike arms became a common sight. Most tragically, some would never have a real chance to even become fully humans; the average new-born weight declined by eight ounces between March 1943 and September 1944.[162] Conditions declined as one moved away from urban areas. They were worst in Alleppey and Shertallai.

'I feel considerable anxiety in view of grave danger of serious loss of life from epidemics following semi-starvation in 1943 and having regard to apparent slow arrival of new supplies,' wrote the secretary of state for India in early 1944.[163] These fears were warranted. Rather than outright starvation, it was disease brought on by the reduction in immunity resulting from malnutrition that accounted for most of the increase in deaths from 1942 onwards. Direct casualties from epidemics of smallpox and cholera were roughly 1,000 and 6,605 respectively.[164] Other conditions that led to death were

[157] *Famine Enquiry Commission Report*, p. 204.

[158] FR One, September 1944.

[159] FR Two, August 1944.

[160] This description follows Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: The Second World War and the Battle for Food* (New York: Penguin, 2012), Chapter 1, paragraph 11 (epub version).

[161] Namboodiripad (1909–1998) was a major figure in the Indian communist movement as both a political leader and intellectual. He was a founding member and leader of the CPI and then helped form the breakaway leftist Communist Party of India (Marxist) that sought to resist collaboration with the ruling party. After independence, he became chief minister of Kerala from 1957–9, India's first non-Congress chief minister, presiding over the world's first democratically elected communist government, and again from 1967–9. From 1978–1992, he served as the CPI (M)'s general secretary. A prolific writer, Namboodiripad published over 20 books. S. R. Bakshi, *E. M. S. Namboodiripad: The Marxist Leader* (New Delhi: Anmol, 1994). Namboodiripad, 'Food in Kerala', *Peoples' War*, 30 July 1943.

[162] FR Two, August 1943.

[163] Amery to Government of India, 6 February 1944, 'Travancore Information', IOR L/PS/13/1298.

[164] *Travancore Administration Reports*, 1942–5. The smallpox numbers are a little below the actual figures because the epidemic was still going on after March 1945, when these *Reports* stopped appearing. However, according to the Fortnightly Reports, there were 86 attacks and 60 deaths in the second half of May 1945 and 76 attacks with 25 deaths in the first half of June. FR Two, May 1945 and FR One, June 1945.

oedema and dysentery. Sivaswamy estimated the number of casualties from the food crisis between 1942 and 1944 at 89,204 by taking the difference in the average death rate between 1931–41 and the death rate for the individual years, multiplying them by a factor of 1.5 (consistent with the Public Health Department's estimate of the extent of under-reporting), then multiplying by the population, and summing the totals for the years in question, arriving at a figure of 90,000. Admittedly, this was a crude estimate that did not adjust for changes in the composition of the population and relied on parish records of the CMS, which was active in relief efforts. Nevertheless, Sivaswamy remains the only person to have sought to measure the death toll of this episode.[165] Excess mortality due to disease continued after the food shortage, meaning that the toll was possibly higher.

Whereas malnutrition was equally distributed in Cochin, Travancore contained greater variation. The worst-affected districts in the north suffered in a manner analogous to their counterparts in Bengal. Things were better nearer to the capital, further south. The food shortage hit the poor especially badly in Travancore. Those who could command excess rations or leave the state did so, by any means possible. Those who could not succumbed to their fate. Even this story, however, is not completely one of disempowerment and death that would later be forgotten. Political developments were underway.

Food, communism, and united Kerala

The food situation created conditions that paved the way for successful wartime communist activity in Travancore, and the end of princely rule. It also helped shape the growing conceptualization of a state of Kerala out of the Malayalam-speaking areas of South India (Cochin, Travancore, and Malabar).[166] The communists' internationalist perspective, based on Moscow's attitude to the war and their localized interest in improving the food situation, assisted them in building a following that could be mobilized to accelerate the end of princely rule and later establish a persistent electoral presence in the region.

The international politics of war led to the separation of communists from the Congress socialists and the end of the United Front. Originally, the communists refused to participate in what they considered an imperialist war. The line changed after Britain and the Soviet Union joined forces against the Axis Powers in 1942. The India's communists adopted a 'People's War' line and pledged their full support to the British war effort.[167] The ban on the party was lifted, and the communists refused to participate in the INC's nationwide Quit India Movement of 1942. As a result, they managed to avoid the arrests and repression that followed and could instead be counted on as contributors to the war effort.[168]

War proved to be a boon for the communists in Travancore. During this time, agrarian labourers formed their first unions, later amalgamating with existing unions as

[165]Sivaswamy, 'Vital Statistics and Public Health', pp. 81–122.

[166]E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *Kerala: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1968), p. 175.

[167]Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 385.

[168]Menon, p. 169.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an all-Travancore Trade Union Federation.[169] Travancore's own branch of the Kerala Communist Party was founded in 1940.[170] Unlike the INC, which was dogged by splits between the Congress and the Congress socialists, the communists of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar stuck together.[171] Their attitude to the war was, as Namboodiripad remembered, 'linked with the solution to the day-to-day life problems of workers, peasants and other sections of the common people'. They organized workers and peasants to increase food production, formed feeding centres for the poor, and helped the government get acreage and yield statistics of farms.[172] Work conducted during 1942–5, especially in Travancore where the INC was prohibited from interfering, helped the idea and slogan of *Aikiya Kerala* (United Kerala), free of princely or imperial rule and governed by democracy, to take shape.[173]

Coupled with food relief, the communists conducted night classes to educate children and possible party workers in their ideology and train them in guerrilla warfare.[174] In his memoirs, the communist leader E. K. Nayanar (1919–2004) recalled going under cover in Travancore during the war as a newspaper reporter and conducting secret night classes once he got off work.[175] Focusing their efforts on factory workers and agricultural labourers, the communists built a support base among the coir workers of Alleppey, where they had led their march from Calicut in 1938. Across the state, by the end of 1945, the communists counted about 45,000 Travancore workers among their ranks. Most were lower caste workers from the Ezhava, Pulaya, and Paraya communities.[176] A focus on material issues helped them overcome division based on caste.

Writing regular dispatches for the communist newspaper *Peoples' War* familiarized Namboodiripad with the food situation enough for him to bring out a short pamphlet in June 1944 called *Food in Kerala*.[177] Consistent with the idea of *Aikiya Kerala*, the pamphlet conceived of Kerala as a unit and explained how the advent of plantation agriculture had created problems of food security. Namboodiripad stressed how the experience of shortage after the fall of Burma was a point of commonality among the less fortunate, an issue around which to cultivate solidarity: 'Nobody would suffer

[169]Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', pp. 214–35. This was later renamed the All-Travancore Trade Union Congress in 1942.

[170]T. M. Thomas Isaac, 'The National Movement and the Communist Party in Kerala', *Social Scientist* 14:8/9 (1986), pp. 59–80, 65–70.

[171]Robin Jeffrey, 'Matriliny, Marxism, and the Birth of the Communist Party in Kerala, 1930–1940', *Journal of Asian Studies* 38:1 (1978), pp. 77–98, 93.

[172]K. M. N. Menon, *A History of the Indian Freedom Struggle*, (ed.) Namboodiripad (Trivandrum: Social Scientist Press, 1986), pp. 786–7; Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', pp. 260–1.

[173]Namboodiripad, *National Question*, p. 156.

[174]FR One, December 1943; Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', pp. 260–1.

[175]Nayanar was a Malabar communist who also distinguished himself as an author and occasional poet. He would become a senior leader in the Kerala Communist Party, serving as the head of the state unit from 1972–80 and 1992–6. He became chief minister of Kerala on three separate occasions: 1980–1, 1987–1991, and 1992–6, which made him the state's longest serving chief minister. From 1992–2004, he served on the Politburo of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). E. K. Nayanar, *My Struggles: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Vikas 1982), pp. 70–5.

[176]Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', p. 262.

[177]E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *Food in Kerala* (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1944). I am grateful to Benjamin Siegel for furnishing me with this source.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more from this than the thousands of working-class, agricultural labour, poor-peasant and poor-middle class families who depend on imported rice throughout the year.' He blamed landlords and traders for hoarding food supplies. More pointedly, he argued that the governments of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar had failed to understand the importance of social cooperation in bringing together the masses to expose illicit activities and 'rouse patriotic consciousness'. Restrictions on meetings and activities born out of 'anxiety to prevent any awakening of political consciousness among the masses' had precluded bringing in wider support. He targeted the Travancore government's unwillingness to make use of local food committees which had granular knowledge of specific food requirements and enough social legitimacy to negotiate with traders. Invoking the case of Bengal as a cautionary tale, Namboodiripad suggested that Kerala could avoid the loss of millions of lives through state procurement and rationing, and by abandoning political differences to come together and banish hunger.

In Bengal, and across the country, famine relief and propaganda efforts provided one way for the communists to toe the People's War line and demonstrate their commitment to the Indian people.[178] It was one of the factors that helped the party increase its nationwide membership by a factor of four in these years.[179] The Calcutta communists formed over 100 People's Protection (*Jana Raksha*) committees and the all-India Party undertook fundraising activities and marches for famine victims across the country.[180] Party general secretary, P. C. Joshi, took special pains to raise nationwide awareness of the situation in Bengal among literate and non-literate audiences. Apart from touring the region and writing regularly in *People's War*, he found a talented young photographer and new party recruit in Sunil Janah who produced images that soon gained worldwide attention. Joshi recruited playwrights, poets, and visual artists to the party during this time to contribute their talents to publicity work. The Indian People's Theatre Association toured the country performing plays that raised awareness of the famine; some 60 years later, the historian Bipan Chandra would remember attending a wartime performance of *Bhookha Bengal* (Hungry Bengal) in Lahore.[181]

The cessation of hostilities would not have been much noticed by the average Travancorean. Food scarcity endured and prices continued to rise.[182] In Alleppey, the cost of a standard meal rose tenfold between 1939 and 1946.[183] Syrian Christians persisted in migrating to Malabar, a process that would endure until the 1970s and influence their self-identity as a community of the forward-looking and enterprising.

[178]Sanjoy Bhattacharya, 'The Colonial State and the Communist Party of India, 1942–45: A Reappraisal', *South Asia Research* 15:1 (1995), pp. 48–77, 69. I am grateful to Ishan Mukherjee for pointing me towards the literature cited in this paragraph.

[179]Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 413.

[180]Sanjoy Bhattacharya, *Propaganda and Information in Eastern India, 1939–45: A Necessary Weapon of War* (London: Curzon, 2001), p. 32; Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine: Bengal, 1939–45* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), p. 132.

[181]Chandra, 'P. C. Joshi and the National Politics', pp. 245–64, 249.

[182]Namboodiripad, 'Food Problem', *Deshabhimani*, 7 July 1946. I am grateful to Robin Jeffrey for the translation from the Malayalam.

[183]Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', p. 287.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Supplies from the Government of India fell short of promises made.[184] In the coir industry, reduced demand from the United States after hostilities ended threw a number of workers in that industry out of jobs. The president of the Shertallai Coir Factory Union Workers labelled the ongoing events a 'man-made famine'.[185]

The communists persisted in tying food-related agitation to ideological concerns. In late July 1946, the Travancore communists raised a *jatha* (organized march) of 2,000 people, mainly coir workers, shouting food slogans and *Inquilab* ('Revolution') in Alleppey to protest against rising rice prices.[186] Unlike in Malabar, where the INC had a mass following, in Travancore, communists took the lead in organizing labour strikes, food rallies, and student actions, and in raising demands for a 'United People's Democratic Kerala'.[187]

Meanwhile, Ramaswamy Aiyar began to take up the thorny question of Travancore's political future. Recognizing that the idea of an independent nation-state of Travancore was untenable, he proposed what he called an 'American model', of Travancore becoming part of a federation by which it nominally joined an independent Indian Union. Under its terms, there would be universal suffrage along with a permanently ensconced executive. The executive would be appointed by the maharaja. Although the State Congress, which had captured 11 of the 49 seats in the elected assembly, was willing to debate the issue, the communists bitterly opposed Ramaswamy Aiyar's idea. They raised the famous slogan 'Throw the American Model in the Arabian Sea!'.[188]

One scholar has referred to the communists' struggle for popular government in Travancore as 'the most important chapter in the history of the Communist Party of Kerala' in the last few years before Indian independence.[189] These were certainly exciting times. In August, the Communist Party of India authored a resolution calling on party cadres to assert leadership of mass struggles and defeat the INC-style leadership that made compromises.[190] The government cut food rations and factory owners in Alleppey and Shertallai announced a lockout of workers, putting them out of jobs. Days later, Namboodiripad wrote an article called 'Travancore Workers on the Brink of War and Starvation and Rule by the Diwan' in the Malayalam communist newspaper *Deshabhimani*. By September, labour leaders had been arrested and public meetings banned. A subsequent strike led the Travancore government to promulgate an Emergency Powers Act in October banning strikes, hartals, processions, and labour meetings. It also gave the government the right to confiscate property and imprison those involved in 'subversive activity'.

[184]'Rice Ration', *Deshabhimani*, 2 August 1946; 'Food—Travancore', *The Hindu*, 28 September 1946; 'Food Position in Travancore', *The Hindu*, 16 April 1948.

[185]Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', pp. 285–6.

[186]'Jatha in Alleppey', *Deshabhimani*, 27 July 1946.

[187]Namboodiripad, *National Question*, p. 158.

[188]This paragraph follows Jeffrey, 'A Sanctified Label'.

[189]Fic, 'Peaceful Transformation', p. 571.

[190]This paragraph follows R. Jeffrey, 'India's Working-Class Revolt: Punnapra-Vayalar and the Communist Conspiracy of 1946', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 18:2 (1981), pp. 97–122, 97–116.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In response, the communists planned a general strike for 22 October and organized worker training camps across the state.[191] The government classified these as insurrectionary. The strike lasted multiple days. On 24 October, a clash between the police and workers broke out, killing two constables, a head constable, and a sub-inspector. The next day, martial law was declared in Shertallai and Alleppey. Ramaswamy Aiyar took over the military which proceeded to raid worker camps. In motor boats, a military detachment approached the peninsular village of Vayalar and opened fire on the more than thousand workers gathered there, killing hundreds. This was the first organized working-class revolt against the government in Indian history.

The Punnapra-Vayalar revolt, as it came to be known, became the stuff of communist lore and attracted public sympathy.[192] In *Kayar*, Thakazhi described how it made heroes of its participants and established their political legitimacy:

> The leftist candidate was one Sadanandan who had led the Punnapra-Vayalar rising. All his colleagues had fallen dead around him, but he bore a charmed life. The bodies were collected and dumped into a pit which could not contain all of them. So beach sand was piled above the heap of dead bodies and it took the shape of a hillock. It was the torch lighted from that hillock in Vayalar that was taken to every constituency contested by communists.[193]

Food scarcity became a rallying point and material condition that the communists were able to use both to legitimize their cause and win mainly Ezhava and Pulaya converts, thanks to the People's War line. It enabled them to launch a major uprising and help lay the foundations for their enduring presence in Kerala. Months later, the diwan left his position and Travancore acceded to the Indian Union.

Communism and food policy continued to be closely related in post-colonial India. E. M. S. Namboodiripad, E. K. Nayanar, and A. K. Gopalan, whom we have mentioned at various points in this article, established themselves as stalwarts of the Party. In 1957, the year after Kerala was constituted as a state, its assembly elections brought the world's first democratic communist government to power. Namboodiripad became chief minister.[194] Within a year of taking office, the party lifted taxes on foodstuffs and created a two-point policy to bring down the price of rice and meet the food deficit.[195] As part of this policy, the state took over cultivation in the rice bowl of Kuttanad. Expanding on the idea of wartime food committees the communists had organized, the government directed villages to form People's Vigilance Committees to advise the authorities on rice distribution. By 1960, its food prices were kept lower than any other state in India, apart from the state of Orissa.

[191]This paragraph follows Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', pp. 286–310.

[192]K. C. George, *Immortal Punnapra Vayalar* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1975); Chandran, 'Working Class Movement in Travancore', p. 336.

[193]Pillai, *Kayar*, p. 641.

[194]Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (London: Picador, 2007), pp. 286–8.

[195]The rest of this paragraph follows A. K. Gopalan, *Kerala: Past and Present* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1959), pp. 98–101.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kerala's subsequent history has been marked by communist-led governments alternating with INC-led coalitions.[196] This has helped to produce a distinct model of governance that pays particular attention to health and nutrition. Despite continuing to be a food deficit state, it has the country's best public distribution system. It operates via a two-level system with a widespread network of ration and fair price shops. Unlike in other areas of Madras presidencies, where these were dismantled after the Second World War, in the areas that became Kerala, they were consolidated and expanded.[197] The communists have continued to perform well in Alleppey district (which incorporates Alleppey, Ambalappuzha, and Shertallai), where they had been active during the war and helped bring about the Punnapra Vayalar uprising.

Moving beyond Kerala, immediately postwar communist activity gained a greater foothold in Bengal as well. The communist-dominated Kisan Sabha in that region began to organize sharecroppers in a movement to receive two-thirds (or *tebhaga*) of the land's produce from the landowners. Recommended by an imperial commission 1940, the measure had been swept under the rug by subsequent events. Restating the demand in a postwar environment on the back of a devastating famine gave it far greater potency. Student communist activists from the cities helped organize villagers across the province in protest, especially in its northern regions.[198] After the outbreak of state-sanctioned violence against the protestors in early 1947, support for the movement waned. Its spirit lived on, though. As Janam Mukherjee notes, 'The movement was crushed, but simmered below the surface for decades to come, energizing the Communist Party's rise to power in West Bengal three decades later. In some sense, the resistance movement generated in the petri dish of famine, had remained coiled at the heart of politics in Bengal all that time.'[199]

Bengal and Kerala would be the two states where communist parties would lead governments in the post-colonial period, and both would be dogged by the tension between class and caste politics. Although that history is beyond the scope of this article, the foundations of their mass following can be traced back to the war years. Unfortunately, Kerala's turn to parliamentary communism, linguistic statehood, and communist ministry also shifted communist practice towards a more conservative approach focused on the state rather than the people.[200] The Kerala communists have continued a pattern of upper caste leadership and primarily lower-caste cadres of support, much the same as during the period examined in this article. While many benefits have followed from the state-based approach, it has marginalized the Dalit (formerly known as Untouchable) and *adivasi* (formerly known as tribal) communities of the state. Kerala's 'egalitarian developmentalism' is therefore predicated on certain

[196]The history of the formative decade between 1947 and 1957 that paved the way for this presence has yet to be written and goes beyond the scope of this article. Since then, the communists formed governments in 1957–9, 1967–9, and 1980–81 and as leaders of coalition governments in 1987–91, 1996–2001, 2006–11, and 2016 onwards.

[197]Ramachandran, 'On Kerala's Development Achievements', pp. 244–50; R. Jeffrey, *Politics, Women, and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992).

[198]Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 439–40.

[199]Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, p. 256.

[200]Dilip Menon, 'Lost Visions? Imagining a National Culture in the 1950s', in *Land, Labour and Rights: The Daniel Thorner Memorial Lectures*, (ed.) Alice Thorner (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2002), pp. 250–68, 262.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

kinds of treatment by the state that does not acknowledge differences of disadvantage across communities.[201] In social life, caste endogamy and caste-based residential segregation endure, even if the more venal practices of earlier times have disappeared.[202] To use Marx's terms, 'political emancipation' has not led to 'human emancipation'.[203]

Conclusion

In 2018, the Malayalam film *Bhayanagam* (Fear) was released to much critical acclaim.[204] Adapted from Part VII of *Kayar*, the film explores the fate of Kuttanad soldiers who join the war effort to support their families through the figure of a nameless postman delivering letters and money orders to family members. The postman becomes a bad omen; as the war progresses, the letters he brings tell increasingly of the death of these soldiers and brings grief to their families. The death of Travancore soldiers outside their home soil—forced to embrace an alien cause thanks to their poverty—and the profound agony this evokes, are the primary concerns of this film. With the exception of one scene in which a smug, heartless landowner tells the labourers gathered outside his home to get food from the ration shop instead of ogling his granary, the 'cry of distress' emanating from within Travancore is left out. The film's antiwar, anti-imperial objective leads to its omission of the less sensational, slower, but equally substantial loss of lives at home.

Cash agriculture compromised Travancore's food independence and left its inhabitants at the mercy of a belatedly conceived and leaky procurement and rationing apparatus during the war. However, these trends, combined with a strong culture of literacy and education, also fomented the rise of class politics and brought food to the centre of the Communist Party's platform, with enduring consequences. Understanding the unique history of the princely state is crucial to understanding the consequences of food scarcity and suffering. It is necessary for deciphering the post-colonial political trajectory of Kerala.

Travancore's wartime experiences have been obscured and forgotten because of the larger scale of the Bengal Famine, media suppression, and the persistent conveyance of an idea that things were being well managed by the Travancore government. Furthermore, subsequent sensational political developments of Punnapra Vayalar, which had a connection to the food problem, and the defeat of the American model as part of the integration of princely states into the Indian Union have seized Marxist and nationalist interpretations of Kerala's past. By shining a light on the unfortunate fates

[201]J. Devika, 'Egalitarian Developmentalism, Communist Mobilisation, and the Question of Caste in Kerala State, India', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69:3 (2010), pp. 799–820.

[202]Sharika Thiranagama, 'Respect Your Neighbor as Yourself: Neighborliness, Caste, and Community in South India', *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 61:2 (2019), pp. 269–300.

[203]While the state may have 'freed' itself from caste (political emancipation), the people themselves are not free of it (human emancipation). Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question' (1843), available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/, [accessed 19 April 2023].

[204]Jayaraj, *Bhayanagam* (Cochin: Prakriti Pictures, 2018). Anubha George, '"The Ultimate Fear is the Fear of War": National Film Award Winner Jayaraj on Bhayanakam', *Scroll.in*, 14 April 2018, available at https://scroll.in/reel/875621/the-ultimate-fear-is-the-fear-of-war-national-film-award-winner-jayaraj-on-bhayanakam, [accessed 21 April 2023]. I am indebted to Sarath Pillai for alerting me to the existence of this film.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of those who suffered in Travancore during the war, this article has sought to place those broader developments within a material context and suggest the importance of wartime hunger in Kerala's subsequent history. Across India's deficit districts, 'war meant something that caused scarcity and high prices', as it did for the protagonists of *Kayar*. 'There was nothing to do; nothing to eat,' the narrator observes.[205] Recovering these regional experiences and their political consequences or inconsequentialities in regions like Punjab's Hissar district in 1939–40, or in Mysore after the fall of Burma, should be a key agenda of the social history of war in South Asia as it moves beyond nationalist frames.[206]

Acknowledgments. This article is dedicated to Professors Amartya Sen and Robin Jeffrey, who have greatly supported me in various ways over the years. Even if I am constitutionally unable to emulate their cheerfulness, the influence of their scholarship on this article will be apparent.

Several people have helped in the preparation of this article. I first learned of the little-known Travancore event in Srinath Raghavan's excellent book, *India's War*. Exchanges and suggestions from Professor Dilip Menon, Rasheed Kalladi, Cherian Kunjeria, K. T. Rammohan, and Ravi Raman helped me find my bearings. The superlative Kerala Scholars Google group fielded my query about sources. My friends Mark Ragheb, Aditya Ramesh, and Benjamin Siegel sourced or shared materials and help me access e-resources. Sarath Pillai generously shared information about Travancore's history and pointed me towards the film *Bhayanagam*. Isabel Huacuja Alonso and Andrew Amstutz have been model editors of this special issue. Their comprehensive comments on a draft of this article have greatly strengthened it. During the revision stage, Ishan Mukherjee shared many useful references about his beloved Bengal. I am indebted to them all. None, however, bears responsibility for the shortcomings of what has come before.

Competing interests. None.

[205]Pillai, *Kayar*, p. 596.

[206]Sheila Zurbrigg, 'Hunger and Epidemic Malaria in Punjab, 1868–1940', *Economic and Political Weekly* 27:4 (1992), pp. PE-2-PE9, PE11-PE26.

Cite this article: Balasubramanian, Aditya. 2023. 'A forgotten famine of '43? Travancore's muffled "cry of distress"'. *Modern Asian Studies* 57(5), pp. 1495–1529. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000706