Südasien-Chronik - South Asia Chronicle 12/2022, pp. 329-346 © Südasien-Seminar der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin ISBN: 978-3-86004-349-3

Badge of Labour: Marginal Lives of the Labouring Poor in the Port of Cochin[1]

JUSTIN MATHEW

JUSTINMATHEW@HRC.DU.AC.IN

KEYWORDS: COCHIN, CHAPPA SYSTEM, SHIPPING, INFRASTRUCTURE, MOOPANS, PRINCELY STATES, LABOUR MILITANCY, STRIKE

The article is a microanalysis of a militant labour riot that took place in the Mattancherry bazaars of the port city of Cochin in 1953. The incident is popularly known as *Chappa Samaram* (Chappa strike) which involved the port and water transport workers against the repressive labour recruitment practice that existed at the port of Cochin in the early and mid-twentieth-century. Majority of the workers who participated in the militant labour strike were people engaged in the port related works and lived in the peripheral villages of the newly built deep-water harbour. The remarkable urban expansion of Cochin during and after a major infrastructure project of converting the backwaters into a deep-water harbour (1920-39) was largely based on the supply of natural resources and labour power as cheap commodities. The militant labour riot that happened in Cochin in 1953 has a long history connected to the large-scale urban appropriation of the backwaters and coastal region for the development of shipping and export market infrastructures.

People traditionally depending on fishing, backwater dependent agriculture, and water transport works experienced the building of a deep-water harbour as a forceful appropriation of their land, fresh water, and sources of livelihoods. The port-based mercantile capital's search for a cheap source

of labour found a huge amount of unemployed coastal population. They were the people dispossessed of their livelihood resources based on fishing, backwater rice cultivation, and water transportation works. The port authority benefitted from the caste-based labour recruitment and workspace discipling of labourers practiced by the agro-processing units and the port-based export firms. The caste and community based labour recruitment practice existing in the early and mid-twentieth century Cochin was called the Chappa system.

The Chappa system was a labour recruitment and discipline practice that existed in the port of Cochin and was based on caste-based hierarchical relationship. The process of recruiting labour for daily work was controlled by a nexus of the port authority, shipping agents and the worksite supervisor, who was locally called the "Mooppan". The nexus controlled the labour-power of thousands of "footloose labourers" as harbour construction workers, porters, water and land transport workers, artisans, and manual labourers. The precarious working and living conditions of the urban factory and transport workers were reflected in the emergence of labour militancy in the pre-Second World War coastal factory towns. The majority of them were casual workers who were affected by the prolonged crisis in the Great Depression (1930s) and the Second World War Years (1939-45) (see also Breman 2003). The precarious condition created by the prolonged and deeper crises amplified the existing colonial conditions of poverty, inegalitarian and oppressive labour recruitment and disciplining culture. The major labour strike that led to police firing in Mattancherry, an export-market town adjacent to the port of Cochin in 1953 was a part of the prolonged struggle of the port workers to reclaim the urban spaces as their source of livelihood and a space of justice.

Colonial labour regimes and trade union militancy (1920s-40s)

A remarkably lax implementation of the labour laws by the princely state Government of Cochin led to the problem of underpayment and workspace punishment. The noticeable exemption in Cochin state was the measures adopted to improve labour conditions in the Western Ghat tea and coffee plantations by enacting plantation legislation in 1937. K. P. Vallon (1940), a member of the Cochin Legislative Council demanded that the daily wage of coolie labourers was 2 annas when '6 annas was the proper wage for a day' (Government of Cochin 1941: 665-6). These interventions were the reflections of the growing labour organisations in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin in the 1930s.

The first two decades of the twentieth century was a time when militant labour movements emerged in the coastal factory towns in southwest India. Established in 1922 by the coir factory works of Alappuzha, the Travancore Labour Union, was the first trade union established in Kerala (Mohammed 1980: 722). The union was formed to demand for minimum wage, work-time regulation, legislations against the imposition of heavy and arbitrary wage cuts and fines, and the police and factory supervisors' oppression of workers resistance. Average weekly work time in Travancore and Cochin in the 1920s was 72 hours. In the subsequent decades, the trade unions organised processions, strikes, and submitted memorandums demanding fair wage and labour welfare legislations. Influenced by the early movement, the tiles factory workers of Kollam formed the Kollam Labour Union in 1928. Subsequently, the Press Workers Union was formed in Thiruvananthapuram in 1931. The boat workers of the port of Cochin organised a massive strike in 1928 for fair wage. The Cochin Labour Union was formed in 1931 to mobilise factory and transport workers.

However, unionisation of port workers of Cochin was extremely challenging due to the violent repression of strikes and protest meetings by the stevedores of the port and the police forces of the Cochin princely state (Prakasam 1979: 43-4). The factory owners of Cochin state were not ready to accept the rights of the workers to unionise. The port workers had to travel more than five kilometres from nearby coastal villages including Poochakkal, Vaduthala, Idakkochi, and Palluruthi. Their day starts before sunrise to reach the worksite to collect a chappa to claim that day's work. The average daily worktime of the port workers of Cochin was fourteen hours or more (ibid.: 47). The port and factory workers started joining the strikes and protests organised by the Cochin Labour Union in the early 1930s.

The following Great Depression (1929-37) and the Second World War (1939-45) worsened the living conditions of the labouring poor. The trade crisis affected the import of paddy from Burma and the rice producing regions in Eastern India. The rice produced locally was less than fifty percent of what was required (Superintendent of Government Press 1945). The urban poor who engaged in the port and market related works were hard-hit by the shortage of food and underemployment. T. M. Abu, a trade union leader who organised the port workers of Cochin in the 1940s, depicted the work and living condition of the urban working class in the following words:

> Chappa was a metal coin of sorts with the emblem of the stevedore contractor engraved on it. The mooppan will appear at one point with these chappa coins stacked in his hands like a stack of silver coins. All those who are somewhat able-bodied start to scramble and run. They would circle the moopan. "Mooppan, dear mooppan, please grant me a chappa! In the name of God! In the name of Allah! It has been three days since we ate." All these pleas will not move the mooppan. He would give a chappa each to the one who bribed him the earlier night in the form of alcohol and fish curry and to a blood relative. He would then take the rest of them, circle them once over his head and then throw it around. The struggle people go through to get hold of one chappa is something one can never succeed to describe properly. (Abu 1997: 92-3)

The chappa system had become a symbol of poverty, urban precarity, and labour exploitation during the decades of crisis before the mid-twentieth century. The workers of the port constituted their political memory of labour militancy around the repressive labour recruitment practice. The chappa system was specific to Cochin-Mattancherry urban frontiers, a central market for the export of spices and agro-processing industries in southwest India. The period between 1937 and 1942 was also a time when trade unions became militant in Cochin. In 1938, the port workers of Cochin came together to demand labour regulations for minimum wage, worksite accident compensation, and to reduce worktime. Participated by thousands of port workers, the May Day rally of 1938 attracted port and boat workers of Cochin to the trade union activities. However, the ban of public meetings and processions during the Quit India movement, an anti-colonial agitation led by the Indian National Congress in 1942, affected trade union activities.

After the Second World War, the dock workers of Cochin formed the Cochin Port Cargo Labour Union in 1945. Around 16,000 dock workers lost their jobs immediately after the end of the war (Prakasam 1979: 146). The war related export and the end of the port building activities resulted in massive issues of unemployment in Cochin. Alongside the repressive labour regime existed in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, the massive urban appropriation of the backwaters and sea coasts as spaces for modern harbour shaped the urban experiences of the labouring poor. The everyday struggle of the workers was not limited to the issues related to wage, worksite oppression, and extended worktime. In the inter-World War Cochin, they had to negotiate with the urbanisation of the backwaters and the related loss of habitats, livelihood, and access to natural resources, especially fresh water.

The harbour building project as environmental justice question

The port of Cochin had been redeveloped as a major port with deep-water harbour for ocean going ships in the inter-World War decades (1920-39). The Cochin harbour project was a response to the emerging imperial defense necessity of the British Empire in the western Indian Ocean and the commercial infrastructural requirements of the coastal princely states of Travancore and Cochin. The building of a deep-water harbour in Cochin in the 1920s was a massive enterprise of dredging a ship channel cutting across the solid 400 feet long sandbar at the Cochin estuary that separated the backwaters from the sea. The project was managed by the Marine Department of the Government of Madras and jointly funded by the Governments of India, the provincial Government of Madras and the princely state Governments of Travancore and Cochin. The mega-infrastructure project of converting the backwaters and the coasts as harbour construction site dispossessed fishermen, water workers, and peasants from their sources of livelihood. The majority of them were from lower-caste background and joined the harbour project as daily workers.

In Cochin, the major harbour construction project carried out under the direct control of the Harbour Authority constituted by the Government of Madras claimed a vast area of backwaters and the coast as site for the development of a modern deep-water harbour. The harbour authority justified the urban appropriation of the common resources like the backwaters and the sea coast in the name of promised prosperity a modern harbour could offer. Robert Bristow, the chief engineer of the project perceived the functioning of the port as a technical enterprise that required to be planned by trained engineers and urban planners. After an initial survey of the coast and the backwaters, Bristow depicted the Cochin harbour project as an engineering task that would bring 'not only greater prosperity but perhaps also the salvation of its congested and increasing population' (Bristow 1937: 2-3). He presented the project of converting the lived spaces around the backwaters as a major step in the onward march of the underdeveloped hinterland of the port of Cochin towards progress and civilisation (Bristow 1959: 60-178).

During the construction of a deep-water harbour in the 1920s, the port authority appropriated the spaces of everyday economic activities of the backwaters, coasts, and the lagoons as commercial infrastructures of the port by building ship channels, harbour island, wharves, bridges, and industrial waste yards. The sites identified by the port authority for shipping

infrastructures were locations populated with fishing infrastructures, coconut cultivation and small huts of the local population Government of Cochin 1938: 5-13). This was the narrow strip of land that separated the backwaters and the sea. Moreover, the marine engineering surveys conducted by the Government of Madras before World War I doubted the strength of the narrow strip of land to sustain a deep harbour. The engineering reports identified sea erosion at Cochin as a major problem that the harbour project could intensify.

But the need to accommodate the large ocean-going ships and the mercantile demand to expand maritime trade networks dominated the narratives related to the mega-infrastructure project. The colonial officials depicted the massive infrastructure project that involved a significant modification of the existing coastal spaces as a gift to the public. The colonial port authority argued that the new harbour project would signifycantly enhance 'trade and industry and the demand for labour' (Government of Cochin 1931: 24-5). The expansion of the maritime projects to the coastal villages around the port majorly redefined the relationship of the villages towards the port.

Figure 1 (next page) depicts the harbour project as landscape around the port of Cochin as unclaimed natural spaces. The map conceived by the colonial port authority provided a detailed depiction of British Cochin (right end corner) as a planned urban space with adequately protected shores. The Island Venduruthi (in the middle of the backwaters) and the mainland Ernakulam urban region in the Cochin princely state (left top corner) were represented through the vegetation and the water bodies. The absence of built-spaces in these indigenous local spaces expressed a lack of knowledge and reflected the colonial perception and understanding of the princely state’s spaces.

Cochin harbour proposal, c. 1928

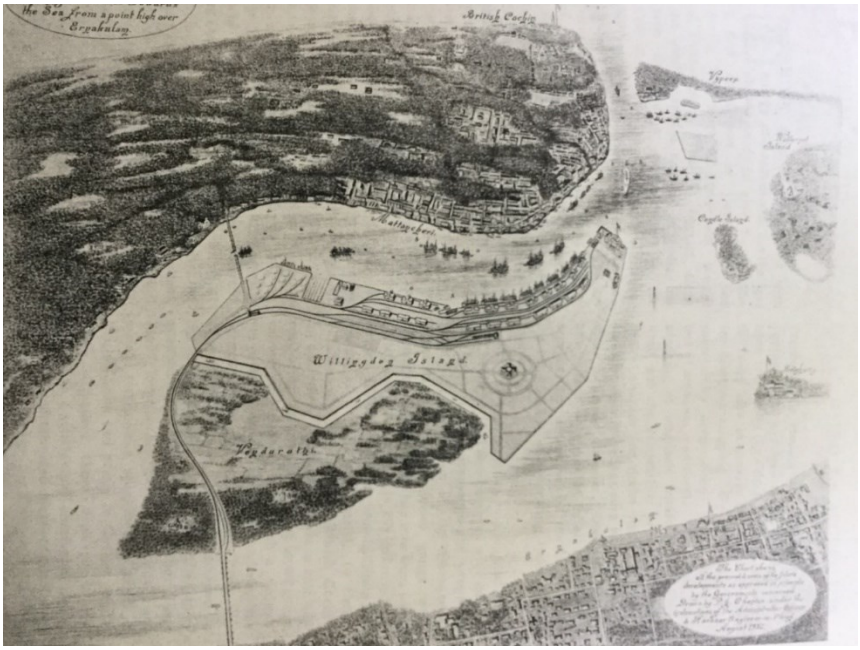

Figure 1, source: Robert Bristow (1937: iii).

The backwaters in the 1920s were filled with fishing infrastructures and built-spaces for local transport networks that interconnected the numerous island villages to the markets and religious spaces. The production of a new harbour space eliminated or systematically appropriated ecologically specific works, skills and the existing built-spaces. Specifically, the removal of the fishing stakes for harbour building left them with no option, but to find work at the harbour construction sites. The fishing communities lived on the shores of the sea, or the banks of the backwaters including Valas, Arayan, Mukkuvan, and Marakkans. Together, they formed 1.4 per cent of the total population of the Cochin princely state (Government of Cochin 1920b: 3).[2]

The loss of common land and livelihood made them wage workers of the port of Cochin. The Muslim, Latin Christian urban workers and the migrant workers from the dry plains of the Madras presidency as well as coastal southwest India engaged in the twenty-years long harbour construction project were pushed to the urban frontiers. When the fisherfolk lost their fishing stakes to a wharf of the ship channel, the engineer made use of their ability to build groynes to transport building material. 'We set the villagers to work whenever there was a chance day or night', observed Bristow while describing the reclamation works carried out in the port (Bristow 1959: 102). They were engaged in foreshore protection works, the

making of the 3000 feet long wooden groynes, moving heavy construction materials to the worksites, and the levelling of the reclamation island.

The appropriation of the skills of the artisanal communities and the maritime labourers was a process of absorbing existing caste and community-based labour relations. For instance, the *Khalasi* Muslims, a community engaged in building indigenous crafts and transporting heavy material through the water, were involved in the waterworks. They played a crucial role in building the larger reclamation embankments using stones and mango wood planks. *Valas*, the local community who lived by the backwaters, provided their in-depth knowledge about the backwater-bed on the worksite of the harbour. The harbour authority used locally specific skills, materials and labour for the anti-erosion works at the Vypeen foreshore in the north of the Cochin estuary (Bristow 1937: 72-3).

Labourers from the neighbouring regions of Cochin, especially Andikadavu, Vypeen, Kuzupilli, and Crangaur were engaged in the foreshore protection works by making groynes. Groynes were made to prevent erosion and to facilitate accretion; a practice that existed among the fishermen and the coconut cultivators. The people who were displaced from the harbour construction sites as well as the migrant workers started to inhabit the outskirts of Mattancherry and the corners of the newly reclaimed islands (Abu 2007; Jainy 2007). The proliferation of these segregated colonies for the depressed classes from the early decades of the twentieth century also indicated the growth of urban inequality.[3]

By converting the backwaters and shores into a modern harbour, the British imperial authority made Cochin a landscape to facilitate the use of fossil fuel as the major source of energy for maritime transportation. However, the development of the inner harbour affected the thousands of boat workers who were engaged in carrying goods from ships anchored in the outer sea and the port. The boat workers of Cochin organised a strike in 1928 when the boat owners reduced the daily wage of boat workers when the ships started entering the inner harbour (Prakasam 1979: 40).

Earlier a boat worker was paid three rupees and fifty paise for carrying 100 bags of rice from outer sea to the port. But when the ships started entering the harbour, the boat owners and contractors reduced the daily wage by half. The 1928 strike of the boat workers against the wage cut continued for six days. The successful strike of the boat workers led to the formation of the Cochin Port Labour Association in 1928. Majority of the boat workers lived around the port and had to depend on backwater fishing and subsistence agriculture since their daily wage was insufficient to

support the survival of an average five to six members of a family. The appropriation of the coasts and the backwaters as a space for ships limited their access to backwaters as a source for fresh water and food.

The ecological damages in the context of Cochin were a by-product of colonial capitalism's choice to use fossil-fuel as the main energy source for transportation. Modern capitalist economy based on fossil fuel became a powerful agent of appropriating non-metropolitan, non-urban landscapes spaces as infrastructures. At the same time, the effects of fossil consumption unevenly fell on people who lost their source of livelihood to the massive fossil fuel infrastructure projects. In the case of cochin, the list of dispossessed includes fishermen, transport workers and backwater rice cultivators.

The production of urban periphery as sites of everyday political struggles

The construction of a deep-water harbour for the port of Cochin during the inter-world war years made Cochin a major export market in Southern India. The development of a deep-water harbour facilitated the flourishing of agro-processing and export industries during and after World War II (1939-45). The spaces around the port of Cochin emerged as industrial urbn spaces with factories, agro-processing units and factories during and after World War II. This also initiated an unprecedented concentration of workers in and around the backwaters of Cochin. The workers who migrated from the hinterland villages found their life in the city precarious due to limited access to fresh water, fuel for light and warmth, and affordable food crops. The port trust of Cochin employed 17,600 workers in 1944 (Rege 1946: 22). The urban workers lacked necessary social security support from the employer to compensate for the limited and expensive access to basic amnesties. Security of next day's employment was the immediate concern due to laxity in the enforcement of labour laws as well as social security rights including regular employment, compensation for employment injury, or fare wage.

The first two decades after World War II was a time of large-scale participation of workers in trade union movements around the port of Cochin for labour rights. Industrial conflicts and worksite struggle led by the trade union movements received limited but significant attention from the historians of trade union movements. While the port-based industries experienced remarkable structural changes, caste and community-based hierarchies continued to define the living and working conditions of men,

women, and children who found their livelihood in industries, transport services, fishing, navigation, port related works. By exploring the everyday urban experiences of the port workers of Cochin in the 1940s and early 1950s, this study argues that the militant struggle of the port workers in an era of expanded commodification of the city was a crucial moment of redefining the struggles of the labouring poor to reclaim their right to access the city as a source of livelihood.

The era of large-scale industrialisation of production was also a time when the workers organised against the exploitative labour regimes that existed in the factories, the railway yards and at the docks. The expansion of the port of Cochin as a major industrial centre during and after World War II led to a greater concentration of the port workers in Cochin, especially in and around Mattancherry. While Fort Cochin (the old town) and Willingdon Island (the newly reclaimed harbour island) were made into the centres of industrial and mercantile elites and the navy, Mattancherry bazaar and surrounding regions became working class neighbourhoods. The *cherries* (urban poor neighbourhood) of Mattancherry spatially represented the marginalisation of the working class.

The middle-classes as well as the mercantile elites attempted to portray the urban frontiers in Mattancherry as the 'lumpen' spaces. However, these urban margins of everyday workers lives were crucial in the production of the political geography of labour militancy in the mid-twentieth century. At the same time, the indigenous-upper caste groups from the Ernakulam mainland and the mercantile firms based in British Cochin and Mattancherry exercised their political networks to protect their spaces from the massive appropriation of landscapes as urban infrastructures. In the subsequent decades, the survival of the urban poor became a political struggle of claiming their right to the city. Regular procession to the port, public meeting and a theatre and cultural programme were part of their everyday life of resistance.

The life of the workers outside the worksite, especially, struggles to deal with the issue of soaring rent, access to freshwater and health care became crucial factors that shaped their consciousness as the urban working class. They became part of the protests, meetings, and strikes that demanded the end of the job contract systems and a wage increase. However, the Travancore and Cochin princely governments and the postcolonial Thiru-Kochi state governments assumed the role of the supreme arbitrator to regulate industrial relations in the emerging urban industrial city of Cochin.

Except for some legislations regarding the plantation and mining work condition regulations, labour legislations in the princely states did not adopt the British Indian labour legislations. Later, the governments of the linguistically unified state of Kerala followed the colonial path of delivering the natural resource bases and the urban infrastructure for subsidised rates to various Indian and metropolitan capitalists to promote the development of big industries. The hegemonic idea of achieving economic development through technology-based heavy industries found the labour movements and the urban spaces occupied and the labouring poor as a barrier that prevented the smooth appropriation of urban labour-power.

Referring to the increasing strikes by workers in agro-processing and coir factories, V. M. Kutty, a member of the Cochin State Legislative Council, demanded for the creation of a separate labour department for effective implementation of labour laws in Cochin (Government of Cochin 1941: 571-3). He was referring to the precarious condition of the underpaid and casual labourers. The 1940s and the first two postcolonial decades was a time when the Indian industrial cities became a focal point of labour uprising against the company managers, work supervisors and jobbers. This was also the time when the urban centres with major industrial production units began to emerge in Travancore and Cochin. Women workers with limited labour rights constituted the major labour force in the factory-based industries in these cities (Government of Cochin 1940: 668). The emergence of factory industrial production intensified the urban appropriation of natural resources, especially fresh water, sea coasts, timber and granite from the inland regions, and the hills for the production of hydro-electric energy. The emergence of factory based industrial production led to major urban expansion of the port towns of Kollam, Alappuzha and Cochin. However, the port related works were dominated by men coming from the nearby backwater regions.

The late-colonial and the postcolonial governments adopted a policy of promoting the big-business friendly labour regime by regulating the labour policies. The governments suppressed labour movements that demanded better wages, housing, healthcare and educational facilities. Unemployment and poverty led to a prolonged phase of labour militancy. The situation was further worsened when the port authority of Cochin retrenched 16,000 workers during the Second World War (Government of Cochin 1946: 244). The Chappa Samaram contextualises one of such moments of conflict, a historical juncture in the urban labour history of Cochin. It is important to notice that an in-depth historical study on the crucial decades

of the post-1930s labour militancy is yet to be done in the context of Cochin (see also Ahuja 2013: ix-xvi).

The Chappa Samaram and the Mattancherry firing

On 15 September 1953, the urban periphery in the port city of Cochin witnessed a tyrannical suppression of the workers' strike along the streets of Mattancherry market. The workers refused to unload a ship anchored at Cochin that came for the P. G. Khona Company (Deepika 1953: 1). This was the seventy-fifth day of the Chappa Samaram. A conflict between the Kochi Thuramugha Thozhili Union (CTTU) workers led by M. K. Raghavan and the Porto Cargo Labour Union led by the Communist Party of India entered into conflict. The Porto Cargo Labour Union leaders alleged that the CTTU leadership settled the strike in favour of the shipping agents. The Port Cargo Union workers prevented the attempt made by the coal contractors and the shipping agents to unload cargo with the help of the CTTU leaders. However, the two sections of workers could not reach any consensus. The police arrested four leaders: M. K. Raghavan master (President, CTTU), K. K. Kochuni Masters (Gen. Secretary, CTTU), T. M. Abu and M. A. Muhammad (Port Cargo Labour Union).

The arrest provoked the workers, and they tried to get their leaders out of the police van. Some of the workers started lying flat on the road and started pelting stones and glass bottles. It stormed through the whole afternoon with the state police force and the paramilitary on the one side and a mix of port and transport workers of Cochin on the other. The incident is locally known as the *Mattancherry vediveyppu* (Mattancherry firing) or Chappa Samaram, showing the intensity of the workers' militancy in an industrial-urban space and the state approach towards the workers' protest movements. The day started in the busy bazaars of Mattancherry with the march of the police and the paramilitary force to crush a possible violent protest by the agitated workers of the port of Cochin. Hundreds of workers of the port of Cochin started shouting slogans: 'end the repressive Chappa system, end the job contract, give us the permanent job.' The slogan represented a specific moment of the history of the urban political movement in mid-twentieth century southwest India.

The police forcibly evicted the protesting workers by repeatedly mounting baton charges. However, the demonstrators reacted by throwing stones and blocking roads, streets and jetties. The historical spice bazaar of the port city of Cochin turned into a battleground where the state forces and the port workers engaged in a fierce conflict. The police opened firing to

quell the movement. Three workers—Syed, Saidalvi and Anthony—were shot dead. Saidalvi was a twenty-three-year-old boat worker. Syed was a middle-aged man engaged in transporting cargo from the outer sea to the port. Anthony, another dock worker, was the secretary of the Cochin office of the All India Trade Union Congress. Several others were severely wounded, and the state arrested several protesters. The agitated workers marched towards the Mattancherry town police station. The police mounted another round of baton charge kept on firing for twenty rounds until the crowd dispersed. The workers set the kerosene depot of the Gowardhana Hathibhai Company. A. Thanu Pillai, the Chief Minister of Thiru-Kochi government, argued that the firing was the police action because of the port workers 'use of criminal force' (Superintendent of Government Press 1954: 123). However, the militant movement of the urban workers escalated in the following years. The workers of Cochin assumed the streets of Mattancherry as symbolic political geography of rebellion against the state suppression. The strikes in the following decades repeated the emotionally charged slogan: '*Pattalathe pullay Karuthiya Mattancherry Marakkamo!*' (how can we forget Mattancherry which fearlessly stormed the army).

What united the workers from the urban periphery of Cochin to organise a powerful protest movement was their precarious work and living conditions in a port city that was gaining acclaim as the "Queen of the Arabian Sea". In an interview with T. M. Abu, a trade union leader who led the Mattancherry strike that led to the firing in 1953, recollected the context of the riot. Abu recalled the struggle as a movement to achieve their rights through political actions when the state was hostile to the survival demands of the workers (Abu 2007). He stressed that the demand of the workers' unions to abolish the 'servile-like' labour recruitment practice of *Chappa* system enflamed the urban workers' militancy. He remembered, when the state took over the streets in the name of maintaining a peaceful atmosphere for trade and industries, the workers had to struggle to reclaim it as the space of their everyday life.

The studies on the industrial development in the context of Kerala portrayed the labour militancy as a crucial factor that led to low scale of industrial growth (Prakash 1989: 64; Thampy 1990). Moreover, the newspaper and popular narratives often referred to the labour militancy as the reason for the decline of the export trade and the arrested industrial development of Cochin after the 1980s.[4] Consequently, the Mattancherry firing, and other instances of strikes remain somewhat ignored in the labour

history of contemporary southwest India. At the same time, the environmental movements that have been emerging in the urban peripheries of Cochin for the last three decades overlooked the potential to study the labour movement as urban ecological movements. Instead, the history of the urban labour remains mainly as linear histories of the unionisation of the dock workers. Consequently, the urban socio-ecological histories are deprived of insights on the workers movements and the everyday struggle of the labouring poor. The histories of workers, their households, community relationship and workspace solidarities in the southwest Indian urban contexts requires meticulous reconfiguration of the linear narrative of the labour movement. What is required is the change from the dominant urban labour history perception of the city as a space of production and consumption to the perspective of considering the city itself as space produced by the conflicting social forces.

Conclusion

This study followed the perspective of the emerging field of labour history as the deep political history of labour relations based on the oral testimonies, biographies, literary works, workers union newspapers and photographs of the port workers.[5] At the outset, the Mattancherry riot and the commercial appropriation of the urban space appear as two separate events. When writing the history of labour as part of the urban cultural and political history it is necessary to perceive the city as a space consistently produced within the conflicting social interests (see also Brenner et al. 2012; Lefebvre 1996; Smith 1984). The riots of the workers influenced the production of the urban space by resisting the capitalist tendency to privatise the city by pushing the labouring poor towards the margins. The instance of the militant labour protests in the urban context like the Chappa Samaram did not merely refer to the workers' demand for their immediate benefits but struggles against the profit-oriented forms of urban development.

The constant struggle between the conversion of nature as exchange-value of the urban spaces by capital and ruling oligarchs and the use-value demands of the labouring poor to prioritises the city use-value of nature manifested in the militant labour struggles. In the present context, the right to social movements within the urban space is what David Harvey called 'a co-revolutionary' movement of the labour movement, anti-globalisation, anti-racist and the ecological movements (Harvey 2010: 255). The Chappa Samaram was one such moment which provides critical insights from a past

context to understand the contemporary struggles claiming the urban inhabitants' and especially the continuously marginalised population' right to the participation in the urban space and life.

The urban labour movement in the context of Cochin demands the opening of the borders of the urban labour history as an urban political history that explores the archive beyond the trade unions and the activities of the leaders. Moreover, as the site of the most militant labour movements in Kerala, the port of Cochin requires a careful historical analysis to connect urban history and labour politics to make the entangled work and everyday-urban struggles of the labouring poor visible and comprehensible (see also Chandavarkar 2009: 121-190). Therefore, the critical histories of the labour militancy as part of the political movement for an inclusive urban space keep the future of urban labour history much more open.

Endnotes

[1] An initial version of this article was uploaded in the online repository of the Kerala Council for Historical Research.

[2] Arayans engaged mainly in the marine fishing while Vaalan engaged only in the backwater and lagoon fishing; The Arayan, Mukkuvan, Kanakkan, Pondan, Valan, and Vallavan were the boatmen and Fishermen caste groups.

[3] For a note by Diwan of Cochin on the development of lower caste colonies in coastal regions near Cochin including Njarakkal, Crangannur, Azhikkal, see Government of Cochin (1920a: 56-7).

[4] For a recent newspaper article that interconnected labour militancy and low industrial growth in Kerala, see Abraham (2022).

[5] Along with conventional sources the microanalysis of the Chappa Samaram developed an archive of the local sources: Diaries of N. M. Jainy (Shrank, Cochin Port), News Paper Report (Deepika), Harbour News (2004-2006), Chief Guest (2004-2006). Interviews conducted in August 2007: K. A. Ibrahim (Khalsi Mooppan), T. M. Abu (Leader, Cargo Labour Union), M. Lawrence (Mechanic, Cochin Port), M. M. Lawrence (C. I. T. U.), Sherif Ansari (boat worker).

Bibliography

Archival sources and reports:

Government of Cochin. 1946. *Proceedings of the Cochin Legislative Council (CLC-6), 1945*. Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press.

_____. 1941. *Proceedings of the Cochin Legislative Council (CLC 5 (1938-45), 1940*. Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press.

_____. 1940. *Proceedings of the Cochin Legislative Assembly (CLC 5), 1939*. Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press.

_____. 1938. *Material Papers Relating to the Development of Cochin Harbour,* Vol. I (1918-34), Vol. II (1934-37), Vol. III (1937-39). Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press.

_____. 1931. *Cochin Harbour Papers Vol 1*. Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press.

_____. 1920a. *Report on the Administration of the Cochin, 1919-20.* Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press.

_____. 1920b. *Report on the Fishing Stakes of Cochin*. Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press.

Rege, D. V. et al. 1946. Labour Investigation Committee, Government of India, Main Report. Delhi: Manager of Publications, Government of India.

Superintendent of Government Press. 1954. *Proceedings of the Travancore-Cochin Legislative Assembly,* 24 Mar. 1954, Vol. X, No. 3. Government Central Press. Thiruvananthapuram.

_____. 1945. *"Grow More Food" in Cochin.* Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press, 1.

Newspapers:

Chief Guest (2004-2006)

Deepika, 16 Sep. 1953

Harbour News (2004-2006)

The New Indian Express (2022)

Interviews:

K. A. Ibrahim (Khalsi Mooppan), Sept. 2007.

M. Lawrence (Mechanic, Cochin Port), Sept. 2007.

M. M. Lawrence (C. I. T. U.), Sept. 2007.

N. M Jainy (Boatman, Cochin Port), Aug. 2007.

Sherif Ansari (boat worker), Sept. 2007.

T. M. Abu (Leader, Cargo Labour Union), Sept. 2007.

Literature

Abraham, Rajesh. Rs 300-crore export company in Kerala may shift to Tamil Nadu after stir by BMS. *The New Indian Express*, 30 April 2022, p. 9.

Abu, T. M. 1997. *Smritipadhangalil* (Malayalam). Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhat Book House.

Ahuja, Ravi. 2013. *Working lives and worker militancy: The politics of labour in colonial India.* New Delhi: Tulika.

Breman, Jan. 2003. *Footloose labour: working in India's informal economy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brenner, Neil, Peter Marcuse & Margit Mayer. 2012. *Cities for people, not for profit: critical urban theory and the right to the city.* London: Routledge.

Bristow, Robert. 1959. *Cochin Saga: a history of foreign government and business adventurers in Kerala, South India, by Arabs, Romans, Venetians, Dutch and British, together with the personal narratives of the last adventurer and an epilogue.* London: Cassell.

_____. 1937. *Cochin Port 1500-1937: some proposals complied from the records of the Madras Government*. Madras: Government Press.

Chandarvarkar, Rajnarayan. 2009. *History, culture and the Indian City.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harvey, David. 2010. Organizing for the anti-capitalist transition. *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*, 2 (1), pp. 243-61.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1996. *Writings on cities.* Translated by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mohammed, T. Jamal. 1980. The Travancore Labour Association the earliest trade union in Kerala. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress,* 41, pp. 722-5.

Prakash, B. A. 1989. *'Unemployment in Kerala: An Analysis of Economic Causes.' Working Paper No. 231 of Centre for Development Studies.* Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies.

Prakasam, R. 1979. *Keralathile Trade Union Prasthanathinte Charitra* (Malayalam). Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhatam.

Smith, Neil. 1984. *Uneven development: nature, capital, and the production of space.* London: Verso.

Thampy, M. M. 1990. Wage-cost and Kerala's industrial stagnation: study of organised small-scale sector. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 (37), pp. 2077-82.