

Labor, Nationalism and Subaltern Politics in Travancore: Reimagining the Coir Industry through the Political History of Muhamma's Coir Factory Workers

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Abstract

The coir industry in Kerala is confronting a period of profound uncertainty marked by structural decline, market volatility, and policy neglect. This paper examines the historical formation and contemporary persistence of coir workers' collective organization with special reference to Muhamma in Alappuzha district, a long-established center of coir factory labor. Situating present-day trade union activity within a longer trajectory of labor mobilization, the study traces the origins of coir workers' political consciousness to early organization's such as the Travancore Labor Association (1922) and their subsequent engagement with social reform, Gandhian nationalism, and anti-princely resistance. Drawing on archival records, union documents, newspapers, and oral testimonies, the paper demonstrates that coir workers in Muhamma were not merely class actors but politically active participants in the Indian National Movement, a role largely marginalized in dominant historiography. It further shows that contemporary unions affiliated to AITUC, INTUC, and CITU continue to embody this historically rooted class solidarity, even as their struggles are constrained by declining production, an ageing workforce, and shrinking factory operations. The study argues that current labor mobilizations in the coir sector represents the survival of subaltern political agency under conditions of industrial erosion, highlighting both the fragile future of Kerala's coir industry and the continuing relevance of organized labor in sustaining worker rights and historical memory.

Keywords: Coir industry; Labor unions; Travancore labor association; Coir workers; Class solidarity; Muhamma; Alappuzha; Trade unionism

Introduction

The coir industry has historically occupied a distinctive position in Kerala's socio-economic landscape, combining features of a traditional craft economy with the structural characteristics of industrial wage labor (30; 32; 15 1998). Rooted in the coastal ecology of Travancore, coir production linked agrarian hinterlands, factory spaces, and export-oriented maritime trade, thereby shaping labor relations and class formation in the region [1,2]. Despite its economic and cultural significance, the coir industry has often been marginalized within mainstream narratives of Indian industrial labor, which have privileged plantation, textile, and heavy industries [3,4]. This paper argues that such marginalization

obscures the crucial role played by coir workers in the early emergence of organized labor and class solidarity in Kerala. Labor organization in Travancore acquired early momentum through the formation of the Travancore Labor Association (TLA) in 1922, widely recognized as one of the earliest organized labor platforms in the princely state [5,6]. The TLA marked a significant transition from fragmented occupational protest to collective class-based mobilization, particularly among coir factory workers concentrated in coastal centers such as Alappuzha, Muhamma, and Mararikulam [7,8]. These regions witnessed the gradual shift from household-based coir processing to factory-oriented production, intensifying wage dependency and sharpening class antagonisms between labor and capital [9,10]. The coir factory system reconfigured everyday

labor experiences through regimented working hours, piece-rate wages, gendered divisions of labor, and heightened managerial control, especially over women workers who formed the backbone of the industry [11,12]. Such conditions fostered shared grievances and facilitated the emergence of sustained collective action, transforming factory spaces into sites of political socialization and labor consciousness [13,14]. The Coir Factory Workers' Movement, emerging from these material conditions, articulated demands not only for wage revision and welfare benefits but also for dignity and recognition within a rapidly changing political economy [15,16]. In the post-independence period, labor mobilization in the coir sector became increasingly institutionalized through trade unions affiliated with national federations such as the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), operating within the legal framework of the Trade Unions Act, 1926 and later state-specific legislation such as the Kerala Recognition of Trade Unions Act, 2010 [17,18]. In Muhamma, a historically significant center of coir factory labor, union activity has remained robust despite declining production, technological stagnation, and shrinking employment opportunities [19]. This persistence reflects what van der Linden (2008) identifies as "durable labor solidarities" embedded in local histories of struggle rather than solely in contemporary economic incentives. A significant body of empirical scholarship on the coir industry in Alappuzha has been contributed by Pratheesh P., whose studies collectively trace the industry's origins, labor dynamics, and the contradictions of modernization from a ground-level perspective. His early work interrogates the impact of mechanization on coir labor, arguing that modernization has intensified work alienation by disrupting traditional skill-based labor relations without ensuring stable employment [20]. Through detailed studies of household coir units, he demonstrates how informal production structures continue to sustain the industry while simultaneously masking precarity and declining incomes [21]. Focusing on loom workers, Pratheesh identifies persistent vulnerabilities in employment, wage security, and social protection, revealing structural neglect within a sector often romanticized as traditional and sustainable [22]. Extending this analysis, Pratheesh and Gopakumaran Nair (2021) conceptualize the "changing portfolio" of coir workers, showing how modernization reshapes occupational identities and accelerates labor displacement rather than skill upgradation. This argument is further substantiated through an assessment of industry performance in Alappuzha, which links productivity-oriented reforms to workforce contraction and exclusion [23]. More recently, Pratheesh, Reema, and Florence (2024) situate the coir industry within national employment strategies, critically evaluating state-led interventions and highlighting the limits of

policy-driven revival in addressing unemployment. Together, these studies provide a robust empirical foundation for understanding the coir industry's structural challenges and labor transformations, while also underscoring the need to integrate labor history and political agency into analyses of industrial change. At present, however, the future of the coir industry in Kerala hangs by a thread. Global market competition, reduced state support, ageing workforce demographics, and the casualization of labor have collectively undermined the economic viability of coir factories, intensifying precarity among workers [24,25]. Yet, as this paper demonstrates, trade unions in Muhamma continue to function as crucial mediating institutions, drawing upon a century-long legacy of labor mobilization that can be traced back to the Travancore Labor Association. By situating contemporary union struggles within this longer historical trajectory, the study seeks to contribute to broader debates on working-class formation, deindustrialization, and the resilience of labor movements in peripheral and declining industries [26,27].

Methodology

Historical and historiographical approach

This study adopts a multi-method historical approach, combining archival research, historiographical analysis, and qualitative interpretation to examine the growth of the coir industry and the emergence of labor organization in Travancore, with special reference to coir factories and workers of Muhamma and Mararikulam. The methodology is designed to situate local labor experiences within broader structural, institutional, and ideological transformations, while remaining attentive to the specificity of place, production, and class formation [28, 29].

Historical sources and archival research

Primary historical evidence for this study is drawn from a range of archival and documentary sources, including government reports of the Travancore state, factory inspection records, labor department files, coir industry surveys, proceedings of the Travancore Labor Association, and early trade union publications [30,5,31]. These sources are supplemented by contemporaneous newspaper reports, vernacular periodicals, and pamphlets that documented labor disputes, strikes, wage negotiations, and factory conditions in the Alappuzha region [7,32]. Particular attention is paid to references to Muhamma and Mararikulam, which emerge repeatedly in official correspondence and press reports as centers of coir factory labor and labor mobilization. Factory-level evidence, where available, is used to reconstruct everyday labor regimes, including wage systems, working hours, gendered divisions of labor, and disciplinary practices [9,15]. Given the fragmentary nature of industrial records in traditional sectors, the

study employs a critical reading of state documents, recognizing their regulatory and managerial bias, while triangulating them with worker-generated sources and union narratives [33,34].

Oral histories and memory as supplementary evidence

Oral testimonies of former coir workers, union activists, and community elders from Muhamma and Mararikulam are used selectively to supplement archival gaps, particularly regarding factory routines, informal organizing, and everyday experiences of labor and protest. Oral history is treated not as a substitute for documentary evidence but as a means to access lived experiences and subjective interpretations of labor relations that remain underrepresented in official archives [35;36]. These narratives are analyzed critically, with attention to memory, retrospective interpretation, and intergenerational transmission of labor histories [11].

Historiographical framework

Historiographically, the study is positioned at the intersection of labor history, social history, and political economy. It engages critically with existing scholarship on Kerala's labor movements, which has largely focused on plantation labor, agricultural struggles, and post-independence trade unionism, often overlooking traditional industries such as coir [17,3,4]. By foregrounding coir factory workers, the paper seeks to extend debates on working-class formation to include labor in small-scale, export-oriented, and gender-intensive industries [14,27]. The study also draws on Marxian and neo-Marxian perspectives on class formation, particularly the emphasis on production relations, wage dependency, and collective struggle as constitutive of class consciousness [37,26]. At the same time, it remains attentive to the critiques advanced by subaltern studies scholars regarding the heterogeneity of labor, the role of caste and gender, and the limits of class-centric narratives in South Asian contexts [13,38].

Spatial and micro historical orientation

Methodologically, the paper adopts a micro historical orientation by focusing on Muhamma and Mararikulam as localized sites of labor organization, while situating these local experiences within wider regional and national labor networks [39, 40]. This approach allows for a nuanced examination of how factory spaces, neighborhoods, and union offices functioned as arenas of everyday political practice and class solidarity. Spatial concentration of coir factories in these localities facilitated sustained interaction among workers, enabling the diffusion of organizational strategies and political ideas associated with the Travancore Labor Association and later trade unions.

Analytical Strategy and Limitations

Analytically, the study employs thematic coding of archival and oral materials around key categories such as production regimes, labor discipline, wage struggles, union formation, and class solidarity. Chronological reconstruction is combined with thematic analysis to trace both continuity and change in labor organization from the early twentieth century to the contemporary period [29]. The study acknowledges limitations arising from uneven archival preservation, particularly the scarcity of factory-level records and women's voices, and addresses these through methodological triangulation and critical historiographical reflection [34,33].

Growth and Development of the Coir Industry in Travancore

The growth of the coir industry in Travancore was closely intertwined with the region's coastal ecology, agrarian economy, and integration into export-oriented maritime trade networks [1,30]. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coir had emerged as one of Travancore's most significant industrial commodities, supplying rope, yarn, and matting to both domestic and international markets, particularly through the port of Alappuzha [32,15]. This expansion was driven by increasing global demand, improvements in inland water transport, and the availability of abundant labor drawn largely from coastal and backwater communities [7,10]. Initially organized as a dispersed, household-based activity, coir production gradually underwent structural transformation with the establishment of factory units that centralized spinning, weaving, and bundling processes [9]. This transition was particularly visible in areas such as Muhamma and Mararikulam, where proximity to coconut-growing regions, navigable waterways, and trading centers facilitated the concentration of coir factories [31,6]. Factory organization introduced new labor regimes characterized by fixed working hours, wage dependency, and supervisory control, marking a decisive shift from semi-autonomous craft labor to industrial discipline [37,3].

The expansion of coir factories also reconfigured social relations of production. Women workers constituted a substantial proportion of the workforce, especially in spinning and yarn preparation, while men were more frequently employed in retting, transport, and supervisory roles, reflecting a deeply gendered division of labor [12,11]. Wage differentials, employment insecurity, and harsh working conditions became defining features of factory labor, intensifying worker grievances and sharpening class distinctions between factory owners, intermediaries, and laborers [9,8]. State intervention played an ambivalent role in the industry's development. While the Travancore government recognized coir as a vital export commodity and introduced regulatory measures related to production and trade, labor protection remained limited

and unevenly enforced [31,5]. Factory inspections and wage regulations often prioritized productivity and export competitiveness over worker welfare, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations within the industry [34,33]. This regulatory environment further contributed to the consolidation of factory-based labor and the emergence of collective worker responses.

By the early twentieth century, the concentration of labor in coir factories had created conditions conducive to sustained labor interaction, communication, and organization. In Muhamma and Mararikulam, factory clusters functioned as spaces where shared experiences of exploitation, wage disputes, and managerial control fostered a growing sense of collective identity among workers [7,14]. These material conditions formed the structural foundation for the emergence of organized labor movements, most notably the Travancore Labor Association, which sought to articulate worker grievances in collective and institutionalized forms [5,6]. Thus, the growth and development of the coir industry in Travancore cannot be understood solely in terms of economic expansion or technological change. Rather, it constituted a critical phase in the region's labor history, during which factory-based production, wage dependency, and regulatory practices collectively shaped the emergence of class consciousness and organized labor politics among coir workers.

The Travancore Labor Association and the Institutionalization of Coir Labor

The formation of the Travancore Labor Association (TLA) in 1922 marked a critical moment in the institutionalization of labor organization in Travancore, representing an early transition from sporadic protest to structured collective bargaining [5,6]. Emerging in a context of expanding factory-based production and intensifying wage dependency, the TLA provided coir workers with an organizational platform through which grievances could be articulated collectively rather than individually [7,3]. Its significance lay not merely in its formal establishment, but in its ability to link dispersed factory workers across coastal centers such as Alappuzha, Muhamma, and Mararikulam into a shared institutional framework [32,15]. The TLA drew its support primarily from coir factory workers, whose labor conditions long working hours, piece-rate wages, and limited legal protection made them particularly receptive to organized mobilization [9,8]. Unlike earlier occupational or caste-based associations, the TLA articulated demands in explicitly labor-oriented terms, foregrounding wage regulation, working hours, and collective negotiation with employers and the state [37,4]. This marked a qualitative shift in labor politics in Travancore, signaling the emergence of class-based consciousness rooted in factory labor relations. Leadership within the TLA often emerged from locally

embedded worker-intellectuals and reform-minded activists who mediated between factory labor and broader political currents, including nationalist and socialist ideas circulating in early twentieth-century Kerala [1,17]. In Muhamma and Mararikulam, the Association functioned as a conduit for translating everyday shop-floor grievances into organized petitions, strikes, and negotiations, thereby transforming factory spaces into arenas of political education and class formation [13,14].

The Travancore state's response to the TLA was ambivalent. While authorities acknowledged the Association as a representative body for labor, regulatory engagement often sought to contain rather than empower worker demands, reflecting broader colonial and princely-state anxieties regarding organized labor [31,34]. Nevertheless, the TLA established enduring organizational precedents, including collective bargaining practices and inter-factory coordination, which later trade unions in the coir sector would inherit and expand upon [18,27]. From a methodological standpoint, analyzing the TLA allows the study to move from structural conditions to institutional agency, demonstrating how coir workers actively shaped labor politics rather than merely responding to economic change. The Association thus occupies a central place in understanding the historical trajectory of coir labor organization and class solidarity in Travancore.

The Coir Factory Workers' Movement in Alappuzha and Muhamma: Early Strikes, Labor Consciousness, and Class Mobilization

The emergence of the Coir Factory Workers' Movement in Alappuzha and Muhamma represented a decisive phase in the consolidation of labor consciousness and class mobilization among coir workers in Travancore. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the concentration of labor in factory spaces, combined with exploitative wage systems and precarious employment conditions, had generated conditions conducive to sustained collective action [9, 7]. Unlike earlier forms of occupational protest that were episodic and localized, coir workers' struggles increasingly assumed organized and class-oriented forms, reflecting the maturation of labor politics in the region [37,3]. Early strikes by coir factory workers in Alappuzha and surrounding localities, including Muhamma, were primarily driven by demands for wage revisions, regularization of working hours, and resistance to arbitrary managerial practices [5, 15]. These strikes often emerged in response to sudden wage cuts, delayed payments, and intensified labor discipline imposed by factory owners seeking to maximize output in a competitive export market [32,30]. Although initially spontaneous, such actions gradually became coordinated through emerging labor organizations, particularly the Travancore

Labor Association, which provided a platform for inter-factory communication and collective negotiation [6,10].

Muhamma occupied a particularly significant position within this movement due to the density of coir factories and the concentration of wage-dependent labor. Factory clusters in the locality functioned as spaces of everyday political interaction, enabling workers to share grievances, disseminate information about strikes, and coordinate collective responses [14,13]. These interactions facilitated the emergence of a shared labor identity that transcended caste affiliations and village boundaries, marking a shift from social segmentation to class based solidarity [38,11]. Labor consciousness among coir workers was further shaped by the gendered nature of factory labor. Women workers, who formed a substantial segment of the workforce, participated actively in strikes and work stoppages, despite facing wage discrimination and limited representation in formal leadership structures [12,11]. Their participation underscored the collective character of coir labor struggles and challenged prevailing notions of women's work as supplementary or apolitical [4,27]. Oral testimonies and contemporary reports indicate that women's participation in collective action often sustained strikes and reinforced solidarity at the household and community levels [35,36]. The Coir Factory Workers' Movement also reflected an expanding political consciousness shaped by broader currents of anti-colonial nationalism, social reform, and socialist thought circulating in Travancore during the interwar period [1,17]. Worker leaders in Alappuzha and Muhamma increasingly articulated demands in terms of rights, justice, and dignity, rather than solely economic concessions, signaling the deepening of class consciousness [37,13]. Strikes thus functioned not only as economic tools but as pedagogical moments that politicized workers and consolidated collective identities. State and employer responses to coir workers' mobilization were characterized by a combination of negotiation, surveillance, and repression. While authorities occasionally intervened to mediate wage disputes, they also sought to contain labor unrest through regulatory mechanisms and policing, reflecting anxieties about the spread of organized labor in a strategically important export industry [31,34]. These responses, however, often reinforced worker solidarity by confirming shared perceptions of structural injustice [33,14].

By the mid-twentieth century, the cumulative impact of early strikes and collective mobilization had established durable organizational traditions among coir workers in Alappuzha and Muhamma. The Coir Factory Workers' Movement thus constituted a foundational chapter in Kerala's labor history, demonstrating how workers in a traditional, labor-intensive industry forged class solidarity through sustained collective action. These early struggles laid the groundwork for post-independence trade unionism in the

coir sector and continue to inform contemporary labor politics in Muhamma, even as the industry confronts structural decline [17].

Coir Workers, Nationalism, and Subaltern Agency in Alappuzha (Travancore)

The participation of coir workers in the Indian National Movement in Travancore, particularly in Alappuzha and its surrounding industrial localities, remains inadequately represented in mainstream historiography. Existing historical narratives have tended to privilege elite political leadership, urban middle-class activism, or, alternatively, organized communist movements, thereby marginalizing the contributions of industrial workers in traditional sectors such as coir [3,38]. This historiographical imbalance has resulted in the effective erasure of coir workers as political actors in the nationalist struggle, necessitating a subaltern re-examination of their role, agency, and ideological commitments. Coir workers in Alappuzha were not passive recipients of nationalist ideas but active participants in the social and political currents that shaped Travancore in the early twentieth century. Their political consciousness was deeply influenced by the social reform movement spearheaded by Sree Narayana Guru, whose critique of caste hierarchy and advocacy of social equality resonated strongly among coir workers drawn largely from oppressed and marginalized communities [6,11]. Guru's emphasis on dignity of labor and moral regeneration provided an ethical foundation upon which workers articulated both social and political claims, linking everyday labor struggles to broader visions of social justice [1].

The penetration of Gandhian nationalism into the coastal labor belt of Alappuzha further expanded the political horizons of coir workers. Gandhian principles of non-violence, swadeshi, and mass participation found expression in the collective actions of coir workers, who observed hartals, participated in civil disobedience campaigns, and supported the Quit India Movement through strikes, work stoppages, and public demonstrations [32,5]. For coir workers, nationalism was not an abstract ideology but a lived political practice that intersected with demands for dignity, representation, and justice within the industrial order [13]. Coir workers also played a significant role in landmark movements such as the Vaikom Satyagraha, where industrial laborers from Alappuzha and neighboring regions participated alongside reformers and nationalists in challenging caste-based exclusion in public spaces [30, 11]. Their participation underscored the convergence of social reform and nationalist politics at the grassroots level, complicating rigid distinctions between "social" and "political" movements often maintained in historiography [38].

A crucial yet contested episode in this trajectory was the resistance to the Travancore state's proposal for a separate nationhood under an "American model" constitution. Coir workers, along with other sections of the working population in Alappuzha, opposed this move, aligning themselves with the Indian National Congress's vision of a united India [17,7]. This opposition culminated in mass mobilization that found its most dramatic expression in the Punnapra Vayalar uprising. While later historiography, particularly Marxist interpretations, has largely framed this episode as a class struggle or proto-revolutionary movement, such readings risk obscuring its nationalist dimensions and the Congress-oriented aspirations of many participants [3,6]. From a subaltern perspective, the Punnapra–Vayalar struggle must be understood as a complex political moment where nationalist, anti-authoritarian, and labor grievances intersected. The subsequent historiographical appropriation of the movement by communist narratives, which foreground class conflict while downplaying nationalist motivations, has contributed to the marginalization of coir workers' broader political commitments [38,34]. Such representations flatten the plurality of worker consciousness and reduce coir laborers to instruments of ideological struggle rather than recognizing them as autonomous political actors. Re-centering coir workers in the history of the national movement in Travancore thus challenges dominant historiographical frameworks and calls for a more nuanced understanding of popular nationalism. Their engagement with social reform, Gandhian politics, civil disobedience, and resistance to princely authoritarianism demonstrates that coir workers were integral to the making of nationalist politics in Alappuzha. Recovering their voices and experiences not only enriches labor history but also redefines the contours of the Indian National Movement from below, affirming the centrality of subaltern agency in the struggle for a united India [14,27].

Historiographical Debate

Nationalist vs. marxist readings of punnapra-vayalar

The Punnapra-Vayalar uprising occupies a central yet contested position in the historiography of modern Kerala. Nationalist historiography has generally interpreted the episode as a popular resistance against princely authoritarianism and Travancore's attempt to assert separate nationhood, situating it within the broader trajectory of the Indian National Movement [30,1]. From this perspective, the mobilization of workers particularly coir workers from Alappuzha and surrounding localities was closely aligned with the Congress vision of a united India and informed by Gandhian political idioms of mass resistance and sacrifice [5,32]. In contrast, Marxist historiography has largely framed Punnapra

Vayalar as a watershed moment of class struggle, emphasizing its revolutionary potential and interpreting it as an expression of proletarian resistance against feudal-capitalist domination [7,17]. While this interpretation foregrounds the agency of laboring classes, it often subsumes the plurality of worker motivations under a singular class narrative, marginalizing the nationalist and anti-princely dimensions of the struggle (3). As a result, coir workers appear primarily as bearers of class consciousness rather than as political actors negotiating multiple ideological commitments. This binary historiographical framing nationalist versus Marxist obscures the layered political consciousness of coir workers in Alappuzha. Drawing on subaltern studies critiques, this paper argues that such teleological readings impose retrospective ideological coherence on historically contingent actions [38, 34]. For many coir workers, participation in Punnapra Vayalar was shaped simultaneously by nationalist allegiance, opposition to princely despotism, social reformist ethics, and labor grievances. Recognizing this multiplicity challenges historiographical reductionism and calls for a more nuanced reconstruction of popular politics from below [13].

Subaltern labor and the limits of left historiography in Kerala

Kerala's left historiography has made significant contributions to understanding labor mobilization, class formation, and state-led social transformation. However, its analytical strength has also generated certain silences, particularly regarding subaltern labor in traditional industries such as coir [17,10]. Coir workers, despite their numerical strength and political participation, often appear only episodically in left narratives, primarily when their struggles intersect with organized communist movements. This selective visibility reflects a broader limitation within left historiography, where labor agency is frequently recognized only when articulated through party-led mobilization or revolutionary frameworks [27]. Consequently, coir workers' earlier engagements with Gandhian nationalism, social reform movements led by Sree Narayana Guru, and Congress-led civil disobedience campaigns are rendered peripheral or politically immature [11,6]. Such representations implicitly privilege ideological alignment over lived political practice. A subaltern approach problematizes this tendency by foregrounding everyday political reasoning and moral economies that shaped worker participation [38,37]. Coir workers' politics cannot be reduced to class struggle alone; rather, it was constituted through overlapping identities of caste, labor, community, and nation. By overlooking these dimensions, left historiography risks reproducing a new form of elite narrative one that speaks in the name of labor while silencing its heterogeneity [13,14].

Memory, Silence, and Erasure

Coir workers in textbooks and archives

The marginalization of coir workers in Kerala's political history is not merely a historiographical issue but also a problem of memory and archival representation. State archives, official reports, and factory records disproportionately reflect the perspectives of administrators, employers, and political elites, rendering workers visible primarily as objects of regulation or control [33,34]. As a result, coir workers' participation in nationalist movements often survives only in fragmented references, oral traditions, and local memories.

Textbook narratives further institutionalize this erasure by privileging iconic movements, elite leadership, and party-centric struggles, while overlooking the contributions of industrial workers in traditional sectors [30,32]. Even when labor movements are acknowledged, the specificity of coir workers' political engagement particularly their role in civil disobedience, Vaikom Satyagraha, and resistance to Travancore's separatist ambitions remains largely absent. Oral histories and community memory in Alappuzha and Muhamma, however, preserve alternative narratives that foreground coir workers as active participants in the national struggle. These memories challenge archival silences and underscore the importance of integrating non-textual sources into historical reconstruction [35,36]. From a methodological standpoint, recovering these suppressed voices is essential to reimagining the past in ways that do justice to subaltern political agency [11].

Major Findings and Arguments

Reinterpreting coir workers' political agency through a subaltern lens

This study advances four interrelated findings that collectively challenge dominant historiographical representations of labor and nationalism in Travancore, with specific reference to coir workers of Alappuzha and its industrial hinterland, including Muhamma. Drawing on archival records, contemporaneous newspapers, organizational histories, and oral testimonies, the paper demonstrates that coir workers were not marginal or derivative actors but constituted an active and politically conscious constituency within the Indian National Movement. First, empirical evidence indicates that coir workers' political participation preceded and exceeded their incorporation into formal class-based movements. Coir workers actively engaged with the social reform agenda of Sree Narayana Guru, whose critique of caste hierarchy and emphasis on social equality deeply resonated within coir-producing communities drawn largely from oppressed social groups [6,11]. Support for Guru's reforms translated into early political consciousness that linked dignity of

labor with moral and civic rights, forming a crucial precondition for later nationalist mobilization. This trajectory challenges Marxian assumptions that class consciousness among industrial workers emerged primarily through capitalist production relations alone [37]. Second, the findings establish that Gandhian nationalism exercised a substantial influence on coir workers' political practices in Alappuzha. Workers participated in civil disobedience campaigns, observed hartals, supported the Quit India Movement through strikes and work stoppages, and internalized Gandhian principles of non-violence and collective sacrifice [32,5]. These actions were not episodic or symbolic; rather, they were embedded in factory routines and neighborhood networks, suggesting that nationalism was lived and enacted through everyday labor practices. Empirically, this is visible in repeated factory shutdowns during major national agitations and the circulation of nationalist symbols and rhetoric within coir labor settlements [30]. Third, the participation of coir workers in movements such as the Vaikom Satyagraha reveals the convergence of social reform and nationalist politics at the subaltern level. Coir workers from Alappuzha and neighboring regions joined broader coalitions challenging caste exclusion, thereby blurring rigid historiographical distinctions between "social" and "political" movements [38,13]. This finding complicates elite nationalist narratives that situate mass participation as derivative of middle-class leadership, and instead foregrounds subaltern moral reasoning as a driver of political action.

The most significant empirical and historiographical intervention of this study concerns the interpretation of resistance to Travancore's proposal for a separate nationhood under an "American model" constitution. Coir workers overwhelmingly opposed this project, aligning themselves with the Indian National Congress's vision of a united India [17,1]. Archival records and oral accounts from Alappuzha indicate that workers perceived the proposal as an extension of princely authoritarianism that threatened both national unity and labor rights. This opposition culminated in mass mobilization that found its most dramatic expression in the Punnappa Vayalar uprising. Here, the paper directly intervenes in the long-standing Marxian-nationalist historiographical debate. Marxist historiography has largely represented Punnappa Vayalar as a revolutionary class struggle, retrospectively inscribing communist ideology as the primary explanatory framework [7,17]. While class grievances undeniably shaped the mobilization, this study demonstrates that such readings marginalize the nationalist motivations of coir workers and obscure their Congress-oriented political aspirations. The empirical record suggests that for many coir workers, Punnappa Vayalar was simultaneously an anti-princely, nationalist, and labor struggle and articulation of what E. P. Thompson (1963) would describe as a

historically formed political consciousness rather than a mechanically derived class position. Drawing on subaltern studies critiques, particularly Guha's insistence on recognizing autonomous popular politics and Chatterjee's emphasis on political society, this paper argues that the communist "hijacking" of Punnapra Vayalar in historiography represents a second-order erasure where subaltern agency is acknowledged only when it conforms to a revolutionary class script [38,13]. In this process, coir workers' nationalism is either reclassified as proto-revolutionary or dismissed as false consciousness, thereby denying the legitimacy of their political choices. The consolidated historiographical analysis thus reveals a paradox: while Marxian narratives foreground labor, they often silence labor's plural political imagination. By contrast, a subaltern re-reading restores coir workers as historical subjects who navigated social reform, Gandhian nationalism, labor organization, and resistance to princely power without reducing one dimension to another. Empirically and conceptually, the study demonstrates that coir workers in Alappuzha were neither merely class actors nor passive followers of elite nationalism, but active participants in shaping the political history of Travancore and the making of a united India [41,42].

Conclusion

This study repositions coir workers of Alappuzha and its industrial localities as active political agents in the history of Travancore and the Indian National Movement. By foregrounding their participation in social reform, Gandhian mobilization, and anti-princely resistance, it challenges historiographical traditions that have either marginalized these workers or absorbed their actions into rigid ideological narratives. The evidence demonstrates that coir workers were neither peripheral to nationalism nor reducible to class actors alone; rather, they articulated a political consciousness shaped by labor, social equality, and national unity. The findings highlight that coir workers engaged deeply with the reformist ideals of Sree Narayana Guru, participated in mass nationalist campaigns including civil disobedience and Quit India, and aligned themselves with the Congress vision of a united India. Their involvement in movements such as the Vaikom Satyagraha reveals the convergence of social reform and nationalism at the subaltern level, challenging elite-centered interpretations of political mobilization. These interventions underscore that nationalism in Travancore was not merely disseminated from above but actively produced within laboring communities. A key historiographical intervention of this study lies in its re-reading of the Punnapra Vayalar uprising. While Marxist historiography has framed this episode predominantly as a class struggle, this paper demonstrates that such readings obscure the nationalist motivations

of coir workers and retrospectively reconfigure their political choices. Recognizing the uprising as simultaneously anti-princely, nationalist, and labor-oriented restores historical complexity and challenges class-reductionist interpretations that deny subaltern political plurality. More broadly, the study reveals how both nationalist and Marxian historiographies have contributed to the erasure of coir workers either by excluding them from canonical narratives or by subsuming their agency within predetermined ideological frameworks. A subaltern perspective, drawing on Guha, 13 and Thompson, allows for a reimagining of labor not as a passive or ideologically fixed category but as a historically situated political actor with its own moral and strategic reasoning.

Future Directions

This intervention opens space for renewed historiographical inquiry. Future research should prioritize oral histories, vernacular sources, and factory-level archives to further recover coir workers' political experiences, particularly those of women workers. Re-examining events such as Punnapra–Vayalar through comparative and micro-historical approaches can disrupt monolithic narratives of labor politics. Finally, critical engagement with textbooks, public memory, and commemorative practices is essential to understanding how subaltern contributions were silenced and how alternative histories can be reclaimed. By restoring coir workers to Kerala's political history, this study calls for a reassessment of labor, nationalism, and subaltern agency in modern South India, urging historians to move beyond inherited binaries and toward more inclusive and plural historical interpretations.

Endnote

The Punnapra–Vayalar rebellion refers to a series of armed confrontations between workers and state forces in October 1946 in the princely state of Travancore, marking one of the most significant episodes of late-colonial popular resistance in South India. Occurring in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and on the eve of Indian independence, the uprising must be situated within the broader crisis of princely authority, constitutional uncertainty, and mass political mobilization in Travancore between 1945 and 1947. Contemporary records and later historical scholarship identify coir workers, agricultural laborers, and industrial workers from the Alappuzha region as the principal participants [30,1]. While Marxist historiography has predominantly interpreted the rebellion as a revolutionary class struggle led by the Communist Party, authoritative historical accounts emphasize its multi-layered character combining labor grievances, opposition to princely autocracy, and resistance to the proposed separate nationhood of Travancore [32,5]. As one of the last major mass uprisings in princely India before independence,

Punnappa Vayalar occupies a critical position in the historical transition from colonial rule to nationhood, warranting interpretation within both regional and all-India political contexts rather than through a singular ideological lens.

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