



Kerala: From Barricade to School Bench

Olga Nieuwenhuys, University of Amsterdam

"Poverty is no excuse for ignorance"

There is very little evidence of working children fighting their exploitation themselves. If they did, what would be their demands? Historical sources remain by and large silent on the topic. A reading of the past history of Kerala (South India) in the period 1930-80 suggests that this silence is probably on account of working children normally not organising themselves separately from adults and certainly not forwarding demands for themselves. With one exception: the right to education for all, which rallied Kerala working children more than any other political issue of those decades. Why did working children in Kerala want this right and, once they obtained it, how did it change their lives as workers? To answer this question I will use, next to historical sources, information collected during an anthropological research between 1978-1980 in a coastal village of Kerala, Poomkara⁽¹⁾.

In 1930 a low-caste boy or girl living in a village of the then princely state of Travancore (now central Kerala, South India) would probably have been illiterate and have spent most of his or her time working by the side of his or her parents, tilling the land, fishing or making coir yarn which, exported to Europe, was used for weaving floor coverings popular among working class households. Thirty years later, this child's son or daughter would be likely to have attended school until his or her 12th year; and for the generation, living between 1970-80, it would have been normal to continue education until the completion of secondary school (15th-16th year). Little would have however

Sri Narayana Guru, founder of the SNDP

changed in children's work routines, so that these children would have been going to school while working out of school hours to help their parents and earn the money needed for books, notebooks, clothes and school fees. How to explain this exceptional commitment of working children to education?

At the end of the 19th century, Travancore had an extremely rigid caste system that prohibited low-caste people from even being seen by high caste people or coming in the vicinity of high caste temples. The State fell under the parts of India that were under indirect rule and had, by contrast to those ruled directly by the British administration (British India), a fair degree of internal autonomy. The rules of caste segregation were hence reflected in the laws and applied to all government offices and institutions such as employment in government, government schools, postal services, railways etc. Major markets happened all too often to be located near high caste temples, so that low-castes could also not engage in the trade of the products they were making. This was particularly problematic for the Ezhava caste, which had been massively involved in the production of the coir yarn that was in high demand abroad. They were dependent for their sale on the services of non-polluting castes and communities such as Christians and Muslims.

To challenge such practices, leaders of the Ezhava's launched in 1903 a reform movement headed by the SNDP (Sri Narayana Dharma Paripilana), that sought to change lower-caste customs to make them 'respectable' in the eyes of the higher castes. The movement sought to put an end to animal sacrifice, communication with the spirits through dance and the profuse use of alcohol during temple festivals, and to reform family customs by prohibiting child marriage and girls' initiation rites. And since the Raja himself had stated that he could not follow the British Viceroy's advice to treat all his subjects equally because Ezhavas' lack of culture made them "[...] hardly eligible for public office where a certain amount of respect is expected to be commanded"⁽²⁾, the SNDP endeavoured to encourage both modern and classical education. The response of children was enthusiastic, particularly in those areas that held out a promise of future enlightenment and progress: literacy.

All along the years of caste mobilisation rich Ezhava businessmen engaged teachers and opened private schools, which the children of the neighbourhood were welcome to attend in order to learn the rudiments of reading and writing. In the 1920s these schools had become a normal feature of village life all over Travancore. After pressure from the SNDP, the government had to recognise them as regular primary schools and make them eligible for the same grants-in-aid that were given to other private schools run by the richer communities such as Syrian Christians and Muslims. It would however take a few more decades before also secondary schools were opened and that the entire educational system would be made accessible to low-caste children. The literacy movement among the Ezhava's laid the foundations for children's active role in the later independence movement.

During the decisive period between the mid-1930s, which heralded the launching of the struggle for independence in the princely state of Travancore, and the late 1950s,

when the Kerala state was formed as part of the Indian Union, political movements sought actively to enlist children's support. These movements shared in common their concern for propagating schooling in the local language as an important unifying factor. Significantly, though they made sporadic attempts at establishing minimum wages for children, they did not challenge children's workload. Possibly because the movement was led by coir yarn entrepreneurs and Ezhava children formed a very sizeable if not the majority of the workforce, they just assumed that children would continue to work while attending their schools, and no one, lest the children, would question the workload that this implied. Quite to the contrary: children had customarily been working for no other remuneration than food and an occasional piece of cloth, and going to school demanded extra money to buy books, notebooks, pens, a school uniform, etc. Parents were generally little inclined to allow their children to go to school and were certainly not prepared to pay for its costs. Many children therefore resorted to working for others in order to earn the money needed for schooling. Believing that schools opened avenues towards their social emancipation, rather than fighting their economic exploitation, working children wilfully submitted to it.

Four distinct movements enthused working children for the political struggles of the pre-independence years: anti-casteism, nationalism, trade unionism and communism. These movements used various methods, in shifting combinations, to achieve their aims: they used symbols of the ideal child or youth, to influence, if not shape, children's perception of their place in society; they sought to enlist the loyalty of working children by appealing to a sense of solidarity and shared interests with adult workers; and, finally, they involved children directly in actions. It is important to note that only a minority of children would effectively participate in the political actions of the period. Many children lived in remote rural areas and had probably but faint ideas of what the turmoil was all about. But as political movements appealed to all children indiscriminately, they did set in motion a process that eventually altered the experience of childhood of even the most marginalised.

Anti-casteism

As said, many decades before the independence movement took form, the spread of the printed word among low-caste children had already started providing them with clues about desirable and innovative behaviour. From the 1920s onwards all low-castes would start emulating the caste reforms enacted through the SNDP, and this gave way to a movement for popular culture⁽³⁾. The fast growing number of literate low-caste children would come under the influence of a literature, fed by the works of modern poets and writers, which was highly subversive in the eyes of the caste and family seniors. One of the precursors of this literature was Kumaran Asan, between 1903 and 1919

president of the SNDP. In the 1930s his poems, which, rather than the classical deeds of gods and kings, celebrated feelings of love of ordinary young people, were memorised and chanted by thousands of low-caste children⁽⁴⁾. These highly individualistic emotions, perhaps banal in our western eyes, symbolised a strong challenge to the caste system and the authority of lineage elders, who wielded absolute power over the lives of children and arranged their marriage - often in childhood - without the least concern for their feelings.

Equally undermining for the existing social order were the novels of progressive writers, which related of the daily life of poor people such as agricultural labourers, fishermen, coir workers, scavengers and rickshaw pullers. In their work these writers consciously sought to imbue the growing number of literate children with the notion that as children they not only had a task in struggling for a better future but a right to revolt against authorities - both at the level of the family and that of the state - that kept them in a subordinate position in society as well. In their novels the writers rendered particularly homage, for the obvious reason that they formed their main readership, to low-caste children which they depicted as the most wretched of human beings. In the 1940s, with this literature taking on even more radical overtones, downtrodden low caste children revolting against the authorities would become the heroes of the most influential novels. This is for instance the case with the youthful heroes of Takazhi Sivashankara Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* and Kesava Dev's *From the Gutter*. Pappu, the Ezhava hero of *From the Gutter*, is an irrepressible fighter, who, as a child, already rebukes his primary school teacher for favouring the landlord's grandson, "*Touch me and I'll...*' *The roar of the little lion stunned the teacher. The brute strength of injustice had to bow before the spiritual power of justice. Pappu turned to his classmates and said, 'None of us should stay here any more. There is partiality here, partiality'. He walked out. From the veranda he looked back. The teacher was standing aghast*"⁽⁵⁾. Pappu's righteous anger must have been recognisable to low-caste working children. His determination was meant to set an example.

The Village Library Movement had been instrumental in bringing within the reach of large numbers of rural children the work of progressive writers. Translations of European realistic novelists such as Emile Zola and Maxim Gorky and descriptions of Marx's life and the October revolution were popular as well. In Poomkara a wealthy Ezhava merchant started a library in the 1940s, and many people still recollected, at the time of my stay, that its books were read assiduously. The library had a clerk, who regularly brought books to the homes of literate women and children, for whom the library was too far away. A few older men retold that in their youth the books of the library had arisen in them such curiosity, that they had taken to learn to read, in secrecy, all by themselves. These people still elicited admiration for their having acquired literacy by their own effort in spite of often virulent opposition by parents who saw books as sources of rebellious feelings if not immoral behaviour. To little avail, as reading had quickly become, very much as the cinema and television were to be in later years, a tremendously popular pastime.

The movement for popular culture created also new tensions in children's lives, which may help explain the rising discontent among the rural poor in later years. By the end of the 1930s schooling had come to embody, in Travancore as in other parts of South India, the panacea for ending poverty and the inequalities of the caste system. Near to 80% of children in the age-group 5-10 were going to school⁽⁶⁾. For many children the question was not whether they should go to school or not, but how they would cope during their school careers without food, clothes, money and even sufficient time. Achieving a minimum of elementary schooling was not as easy as one would expect when considering the amount of government support that was being provided. In 1933 the Education Reforms Committee acknowledged that there were many school children that were starving through the school day. To alleviate the situation, the government introduced in the 1940s a mid-day meal programme and made notebooks and textbooks available at cost price. The problem of clothing was dealt with by the mid-1940s with the provision of clothes through ration shops. But material want was but one aspect of the problem as children also had to work and assist their families. For a coir worker's son, and the more so for a daughter, carrying on studies beyond the lower primary level, i.e. beyond the age of nine or ten, remained virtually impossible till the late 1960s. In 1946-1947, of all children enrolled in the upper primary and high school level, only 5.4% were sons and daughters of labourers⁽⁷⁾.

Nationalism

While in Travancore the movement for popular culture availed itself mainly of symbols to influence children's perception of their place in society, the nationalist movement in northern Malabar, a part of today's Kerala that was under direct British rule (and part of the Madras Presidency) was enlisting them into direct actions. While during the 1920s and 1930s in Travancore the spirits were engrossed by caste-issues, in Malabar the British-modelled schools of the elite had been providing the breeding ground for a new generation of national leaders. These schools had greatly influenced young boys' perception of their role as distinct from that of the older generation. They had come to feel increasingly uneasy about the compulsions and attachments of familial life in the countryside, and to view their phase in life as a time for challenge and action. Speaking a common language learnt in schools, these boys shared a concern for what was going on in other parts of India and in particular in the urban areas. Their discontent was aggravated, during the 1930s, by the growing threat of educated unemployment⁽⁸⁾.

The nationalists encouraged systematically the political involvement of schoolboys in politics. The support of these boys to the national movement owed much to the influence of highly politicised elementary teachers. "*Every schoolmaster in our three thousand and odd schools*", wrote the Dewan (Prime Minister appointed by the British) of Travancore



Young girl preparing coir fibre, Kerala, 1978 (collectie Olga Nieuwenhuys)

core in 1925, "is the centre of a political group"⁽⁹⁾. The climate in the schools of Malabar can be gauged from the autobiography of the popular communist leader A.K. Gopalan, born in 1904 in north Malabar. His career started, in his own words, even before his teens when he had become 'the leader of the bad boys in school'. This spirit of rebellion brought him, by the time he had become a school teacher, to instil in his pupils, "Patriotism, a sense of freedom and the courage and stamina to fight against oppression and social vices [...]. The greatest service that I rendered as a teacher was to instil political consciousness in my students"⁽¹⁰⁾. E.K. Nayanar, a younger communist leader and a later prime minister in the Kerala government, testifies in his autobiography to his having had his very first political experiences as a schoolboy of seven. By ten he was already a committed activist of the party that assembled the nationalists, the Indian National Congress⁽¹¹⁾. In the course of the 1920s and 1930s, the Congress would consolidate its organisational base among the school children by establishing children's wings ('Bala Sanghams' children's wings (Bala Sanghams). The children actively helped in spreading the nationalist message in the countryside by, "[...] Campaigning in villages during vacation-time, circulating manuscript magazines, conducting competitions and summer schools"⁽¹²⁾.

Nationalist youngsters in Malabar would find an eager ally in the poor Muslim peasantry. Reinforced by British policies, the feudal 'jenmi'-system had made the life of small tenants and landless labourers extremely difficult. The second half of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th had been punctuated by regular eruptions of violence, known as 'Moplah outbreaks', in which small tenants and landless labourers revolted against their high caste landlords. The outbreaks were marked by the ritual self-immolation of adolescent boys⁽¹³⁾. To heighten the tension, new elements appeared on the political scene, including the beginning of the independence struggle and the Khilafat movement. The Khilafat movement aimed at forcing the British to amend the treaty of Sèvres (1919), which dismembered the Ottoman Empire. The treaty seriously undermined the power of the Caliph of Islam, the ancient symbol of Islamic unity⁽¹⁴⁾. In 1921-22 the tension building up in Malabar found a temporary outlet in the 'Moplah rebellion' which was ruthlessly suppressed. The British would thereafter continue to keep the Muslims in deep distrust and this reinforced, as became clear in the aftermath of the rebellion, Muslims' militancy and their eagerness to participate in the national liberation struggle.

Until 1938 the Indian National Congress had limited its activities to British India. But as it obtained government responsibilities, its leadership decided to extend the national liberation struggle to the princely states. The first action undertaken by the Malabar Congress to this effect was to organise a 'jatha' (march) to Travancore in which numbers of school boys joined enthusiastically. A.K. Gopalan, the popular communist leader headed the 'jatha' and recounts in his autobiography his delight in discovering how these boys were, "[...] up to anything provided they could participate in the freedom struggle"⁽¹⁵⁾. Police repression against the youthful marchers was brutal. The violence was such that the main trade union, the Alleppey-based Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union

(TCFWU) decided in protest to add 'responsible' government to the demands forwarded in the general strike it had launched in support of the march⁽¹⁶⁾ Gopalan 1973. For the nationalists the label 'young' proved gratifying insofar that it appealed to a large section of the population that shared, though temporarily, a subordinate position in society and was particularly responsive to appeals to challenge not only 'the' authorities but authority in general. The turn of the century had seen nationally oriented emancipation movements all over Asia adorning themselves, as the Young Turks, with the term 'young' as a badge of honour⁽¹⁷⁾. Youth associations would function as trail-blazers in the emancipation movements of the period. The Akhila Kerala Thiyya Yuva Sangham (All-Kerala Ezhava Youth Association), an association influential in the Alleppey area in the 1930s, followed a more radical line, and took Lenin's book *Free Society* as its bible⁽¹⁸⁾. The notion of youth was instrumental in addressing youngsters with very heterogeneous experiences and positions in society and helped sidestep the existing caste cleavages. There were of course also forces that sought to counter the nationalist appeal to the young in order to retain their political potential to further more particularistic aims. After the mid-1930s, the Muslim religious leaders discouraged for instance the participation of Muslim youths in the Congress. This was for two reasons: the importance gained by the rationalist and atheist approach to society in the Congress on the one hand, and on the other, the position of the Muslim League with respect to the partition issue between India and Pakistan⁽¹⁹⁾.

Trade-unionism

The late 1930s and early 1940s were marked by the political radicalisation of the trade union movement in Travancore's only industrial town, Alleppey. To enlist children's loyalty, the unions did not appeal so much to 'youth' as to a sense of solidarity and shared interests with adult workers. The nationalists' view of children's political duties had opened the way for the latter's involvement in union actions. The caste-composition of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union (TCFWU), with its vast majority of low-caste workers, meant that the actions involved primarily low-caste working children. The social position of these children at the bottom of the social hierarchy made it likely that, as the events during the march of 1938 already suggested, they would often expose themselves in a confrontation with the authorities. Many children supported the strike that had been called in support of the marchers, maintaining communication among the different factory committees and actively participating in the organisation⁽²⁰⁾. Also in later years working children were surprisingly active. We know of a woman leader of the TCFWU, K. Meenakshi, who was barely thirteen when she led her first strike in the early 1940s. She was then working as a spinning-wheel rotator at Kazhke Darragh Smail Company in Alleppey⁽²¹⁾.

The 1940s would extend the influence of trade unionism to the children living in the countryside. Though the TCFWU organised mainly male factory workers its purport was far wider. Most of the production took place in the homes of the rural poor, where the coir fibre was prepared and spun into yarn. There existed no sharp distinction between the urban industrial sector and the rural cottage-based one, nor between adult and child workers. Even within the factories, men depended on women and children for all the preparatory stages of weaving as well as to assist them on the manually operated looms. When, during the 1930s depression, the European demand for coir mats and mattings started fluctuating heavily, factories closed down and moved the looms to the rural areas. Because workers could move back and forth between work in the weaving sheds and agricultural work, rural labour was cheaper and more flexible. But as they commuted between jobs, these workers also carried their experiences of unionism into the countryside⁽²²⁾. Even if women and children retained most of the times an inconspicuous position in the unions, this was not due to their lack of activism but reflected their subordinate position in society. They were the most exploited workers and this made them particularly keen to participate in direct actions, preparing hereby the ground for the communist mobilisation of the countryside in subsequent years.

Communism

From the early 1930s had there been rifts in the Malabar Congress between the 'left' and the 'right', without however threatening as yet the unity of the movement. With the left wingers finding massive support among the coir workers in Travancore at the end of the 1930s, the situation changed. To popularise their radical views, the left wingers, who were to join in later years the Communist Party of India (CPI) could rely on the existing network of village libraries, local trade-union offices, youth organisations and study classes that had become part of normal village life. They quite naturally also appealed to children, *"Through study classes in the evenings and school holidays the party used teacher and college volunteers to teach the rudiments of Marxism in a manner relevant to the environment, backed up by village reading rooms and colloquial-style leaflets. The CPI treated the neglected youngsters of the economically and socially backward communities as if they mattered"*⁽²³⁾.

The anti-caste movement had united a broad range of ideological strands that were influential among workers. Some of these, as the one embodied by 'sahodaran' (brother) Aiyappan, had of long been preparing the ground for like-minded support to the left wingers' stand. During the 1920s, Aiyappan had fulminated in his journal against the injustice of caste. His fiery speeches advocated atheism as a cure for the belief in the caste system, which he perceived as mere prejudice and superstition, often referring to the Soviet Union as a model for reforming Travancorean society. In 1940 the left win-

gers decided to leave the Congress and join the newly formed CPI. The new party encountered little opposition in taking control over the TCFWU. During the mid-1940s, the CPI extended its influence over local unions of agricultural and casual labourers⁽²⁴⁾. The communists were soon to discover that they could build upon a far greater support in the countryside than in town, and this was even true for the leverage of the factory union, the TCFWU. The mounting discontent among the rural population that followed upon the depression and the war, coupled to the organisational set-up provided by the unions, soon led to an outburst, later to be known as the 'Punnapra-Vayalar' uprising (1946), which precipitated the fall of the 'Dewan' (the Prime Minister appointed by the British) and the accession of Travancore to the Indian Union in 1952.

There are different interpretations of how the uprising started. The uprising would have been planned, following upon a general strike called by the TCFWU, by the all-India leadership of the CPI. Its aim was to frustrate the plan of the 'Dewan', C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, to establish an independent Travancore state after the British would have left India. The direct spur seems to have been provided by the display of police violence unleashed against potential opponents to the 'Dewan's' plans. He was particularly weary of the reaction of the CPI activists in the Shertallai and Punnapra area (north and south of Alleppey), with their impressive rural backing⁽²⁵⁾. He therefore sent a sizeable police and army force to these areas on the pretext that leading landlords and employers had insistently asked for protection against the violent actions of the unions.

From the reports of survivors one gets the impression of children's involvement in the uprising as a matter-of-fact. N.S.P. Panicker, in custody at the Shertallai police station, was an eye-witness to what happened to the hundreds of people arrested. *"By the evening sixteen comrades, including a ten-year-old from a medical store of Kesavan Vaidyar, victims of police atrocities at Ponnammeli market, were brought to the police station with broken heads and blood all over. No first aid was given to them and they were thrown into cells unconscious. Those who were regaining consciousness wanted water but were not given [...] from the cells one could only hear the moaning of the wounded" [...]* *"The police raided the Arur Coir Factory Workers' Union and brought about ten comrades from there including a boy of eight" [...]* *"The next day I saw a most inhuman incident. The police brought a child of five years with gunshot wounds, with his elder brothers aged ten and eight and a wounded old woman of ninety years of an agricultural workers' family. The police was abusing the woman in filthy language. For a week they were kept without food or medicine"*⁽²⁶⁾.

The landlords, obviously, considered the children of the labourers as much their enemies as their parents. During the uprising, which lasted but four days and ended in a disaster, many children were wounded, arrested and killed. On October the 23rd, the TCFWU launched, as planned, a general strike. It first came to a direct confrontation in Punnapra, a fishing village some ten kilometres south of Alleppey, where the other part of the 'Dewan's' police force was camping. To intimidate the strikers, the police forces decided to set out on a march through the densely populated beach of the village.

Upon reaching the Fish Workers' Union sub-office, they came face-to-face with a human barricade of men, women and children. Children were in the front. A series of encounters followed in which many of these children, most of whom acted as scouts and messengers, were killed.

On October 27th with the attack by five hundred soldiers armed with guns on an island in the middle of a lake near Vayalar to which about two hundred insurgents had fled, the insurrection was put to an end. From the crushing encounter only fifty escaped alive. Other camps in the Alleppey area were immediately disbanded. In Vayalar, as one of the insurgents related, some were very young indeed, "A young comrade of eight years sitting behind me received a shot in his knee. He had come to the camp with a bag of stones. He wanted to face the military with them. I tried to scare him telling that he would be shot dead by the military. But I could not. He was following me everywhere to hand over the stones to persons who could effectively use them against the military shooting at the comrades. When firing started I forced him to sit behind me quietly. At four in the afternoon he stretched out his leg and a bullet pierced his knee. When the firing subsided a little I tore my cloth and bandaged his wound and hid him in a cowshed covered with a coconut palm leaf"⁽²⁷⁾. Twelve-year-old Sankunni had also been shooting stones with his catapult at Vayalar, and was brought to court during the trial of the insurgents, "The judge asked me about the incident. He asked me whether I threw stones and I said, 'I did'. When he asked me why, I said, 'I threw stones when they opened fire at us'"⁽²⁸⁾.

Opposite interpretations have been given of the insurrection. On the one hand it would have been a pathetic and ill-prepared action that led to the death of hundreds of unarmed people⁽²⁹⁾. But it has also passed, in spite of the massacre, in the annals of communist history as an act of youthful heroism⁽³⁰⁾. Till this day poems and songs popular among the supporters of the communist movement in Kerala, glorify the death of the insurgents underscoring that many children, enthused by their faith in the potential of the CPI to change the world, threw themselves passionately in the struggle, some going as far as sacrificing their lives.

Many communist leaders of those days seem to have been surprised that their propaganda made such a crushing impact on low-caste children. N.S.P. Panicker expressed how deeply the sight of a Pulaya (a former slave caste) boy, brought wounded to the Shertallai police station, exalted but also disturbed him. This is what the boy, in N.S.P. Panikar's words, told him before dying: "Comrade, we longed to live honourably. The leaders of the party and the union taught us to hold our heads high and taught us that we have a right to live. Our enemies wanted to humiliate our self-respect. They started killing us in large numbers. We don't grieve over it. What sufferings had our comrades experienced in 1938. It is not that which made Travancore recognising us as a self-respecting class? We have fought and shed our blood. Today we are suffering but henceforth nobody will suffer such misery. We will grow stronger"⁽³¹⁾.

No doubt that the version of the uprising given by George has been coloured by his having been an insurrection leader and his affiliation with the CPI. Nonetheless, children's role in the uprising should not too easily be dismissed as propaganda. The leaders of the CPI are not the only ones to have pointed at the role of children in the uprising.



Child workers marching with Union, Kerala, 1979 (collectie Olga Nieuwenhuys)

A police report described the 'hard-core' activists as, "[...] *Mostly young bloods who were full of the wartime stories of guerrilla bands, patriot armies and the success of the Soviets*"⁽³²⁾. The early independence years would see the communists expanding their influence in the trade unions of agricultural labourers. The Punnapra-Vayalar events had alienated the population of large parts of Travancore from the leadership of the Congress. For many low-caste rural children and youngsters the CPI became the party that represented their interests⁽³³⁾. This set the door open for forms of political militancy among children which would last for the following decade.

After Independence: The agrarian movement

The popularity of the CPI in the countryside became manifest in the very large electoral support obtained after independence. Its role in leading the struggles of women agricultural labourers in the rice-growing Kuttanad of central Kerala expanded its popularity in subsequent years. With many leaders underground and the party banned until 1952, it had taken some years before unions were in a position to reorganise and mount their actions. With the general coir workers' strike of 1952, that lasted fifty-three days, the CPI was back on the political scene. Through the strike the workers regained many of the rights lost during the post-insurrection years in addition to a substantial raise in wages⁽³⁴⁾. From then on strikes under the leadership of women and for women's issues intensified in the rural areas surrounding Alleppey. The 1954 strike against Murickan, one of the largest landowners of Kuttanad, was for instance about female wages⁽³⁵⁾. Women's militancy was prompted by the extreme conditions of work and the harsh repression to which the landed proprietors resorted to when confronted by females. Women's actions brought more girls and young boys on the union scene than those involving overwhelmingly men. Children often worked under the supervision of women or were taken along to work. Being their main care-takers, women made their children more directly aware of the issues taken up by the unions than men could do. The agrarian movement often involved not only agricultural labourers but also other rural workers such as coir yarn manufacturers. In the coastal area's, making yarn and agricultural work were often carried out by members of the same household. However, coir yarn was made at home. It was hence difficult to forward demands about wages and working hours. Nonetheless coir worker's unions agitated in the 1950s for minimum wages. In what remained probably an unique occurrence, the unions also demanded that minimum wages for the girls who made yarn, arguing that there were perhaps between 200 and 250 000 of such girls forming the mainstay of rural labour in the industry. A minimum wage would help them not only support their families but also finance their schooling.

There still remained a mass of children whose exposure to such actions was however

very much mitigated by the isolation of the locality in which they lived, by the nature of their work, and by the orientation of the leaders of the community to which they belonged. The contacts of these children with emancipation movements were less common, though if they took place, they often had a lasting impact. In Poomkara, one such locality, there is the example of a doctor who sought to bring the Gandhian ideal of brotherhood with the 'Harijans' (untouchables) into practice. He endeavoured to convince the parents of 'untouchable' Paraya children to let them go to the local school he had started. In compensation, he provided the children with free meals. An elderly Paraya woman still relished as one of her dearest childhood memories that on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's tour in Kerala the doctor had taken her, with the other pupils, to Alleppey to see him, "*The only great moment in a life of drudgery*", as she said. *In short, the movements of the two decades 1930-1950 were decisive in broadening the perspective of Kerala children and in unifying attitudes and expectations with respect to childhood in society. Some children were directly involved in the turmoil of the independence struggle, and many more were influenced by the ascendancy of movements that called upon children to challenge established relations of authority. But the type of childhood which eventually became generally accepted after independence, would fall a long way short of the ideal which had been pursued by the movements of emancipation.*

Reform not revolution

In 1957, at the height of the Cold War, the first general election of the newly formed state of Kerala⁽³⁶⁾ voted the CPI into government. It was the first time in history that a communist government had been elected through the polls. Its electorate consisted overwhelmingly of the rural poor, and in particular of low castes. The event was highly publicised and Kerala became overnight that object of studies on the strategies of the communist movement. The CPI did nevertheless not take up office to pursue its revolutionary aims, but to improve through legal means the standard of living of the working population. But even a modest tilting of the balance of power in favour of the rural poor would soon prove a Sisyphean task.

The opposition of a powerful elite with vested interests in commerce and the political-administrative system against economic reform was no doubt one of the important reasons for the economic stagnation that marked the post-independence period. This elite was a legacy of colonialism. British policies in Travancore had opposed any attempt at industrialisation so that even the factories at Alleppey hardly used any mechanical power at all. As during the 19th century commercial activities stepped up, the newly rich had to invest their earnings in non-industrial undertakings. Many sought investment outlets that would allow them to seize and retain positions of power within

the political-administrative system. Diplomas were the key to the salaried jobs in the administrative system and to seats of state power. As we have seen, literacy and schooling had been the mainstay of anti-caste agitation. The wealthy were quick to discover that the removal of caste barriers would bring them not only jobs but also opportunities for investment in educational institutions. Affluent families were ready to invest large sums in the schooling of their children procuring hereby those who started and managed private schools excellent opportunities for making profits. Managing a private school became the more profitable that anti-caste agitation resulted in government recognition and the allocation of grants-in-aid. In 1932 the Educational Reforms Committee noted in its report that it had been a common practice for managers of private schools to sell appointments to the highest bidder. The salaries paid to teachers appointed in private schools were refunded by the government, but school managers habitually retained for themselves as much as 25 to 50% of what they received. In 1946 a Congress-led government passed a law intended to bring privately managed schools under full state control within a time-span of ten years. The bishop of Changanassery, the spokesman of the Catholic Church which was the largest interest group with a stake in aided schools, warned the reformers in a pastoral letter in the following threatening words, "*If the primary rights of the individual are affected to the slightest extent, as a result of the socialistic policy of the government, nature will grow angry with the government, rouse up all the forces under the sun and wipe out from the face of the earth the unjust authors of nationalisation*"⁽³⁷⁾. Attempts by the successive governments to bring private aided schools under direct state control failed as miserably, nor could the expansion of grants-in-aid be prevented. In the early 1950s, the system was extended to cover all the expenses of privately managed schools. In 1957-'58 the expenditure on education rose to one third of the total state expenditure. An important reason for the growth of the aided schools, was that initiatives to start new ones received, under the impact of the emancipation movements discussed previously, also strong impulses from below. On the eve of independence therefore, privately managed schools were organisations with considerable political and economical power, which stretched well-beyond the mental and physical well-being of their pupils. Breaking the power of private school managers proved nonetheless far more arduous than foreseen even after independence.

The battle for admission in secondary schools

A major grievance of the CPI electorate was that aided schools were run by high caste managements and gave children of these communities preferential treatment to the disadvantage of low-caste children. As former untouchable and low-castes had been reserved as much as 40% of all appointments in government, this was an important issue⁽³⁸⁾. Low caste children could not qualify for the jobs that had been reserved to

them, so that the reservation policy remained in fact dead letter⁽³⁹⁾. Soon after coming to power the Communist government prepared an educational reform (the 'Kerala Educational Bill', KEB); to enlarge the control of the state over privately managed schools. The aim was to reduce the drain on state expenditure, on the one hand, and on the other, to increase low-caste children's access to secondary education. The KEB stipulated that only teachers who were registered and qualified would be eligible for appointment, and that they were to receive their salary directly from the state. The bill envisaged free and compulsory schooling for all children up to the age of fourteen, with provision of a free meal, textbooks and writing material. The state was also to increase its control over the curriculum, with special committees to be instituted to prepare new textbooks. Parents who withdrew their children from school were to be liable of punishment. The other side of the coin was that the government disallowed itself from its former political stand on children's political activism. The Bill prohibited children from taking part in political agitations and legalised corporal punishments in schools⁽⁴⁰⁾.

In reaction to the provisions of the KEB, the conference of bishops and archbishops of the Catholic church announced a state-wide agitation against what they perceived was an attempt at injecting 'atheism and other aspects of communism' into children⁽⁴¹⁾. Proof that this was indeed the intention of the KEB, was sought in the content of the new compulsory textbooks and in the plan of the government to control the appointment of teachers. Catholics opposing the KEB were soon to find in the leaders of the communal organisation of the high caste Nayers (Nayar Service Society, NSS), whose landed interests were being threatened by an impending agrarian reform, a powerful ally⁽⁴²⁾. The NSS accused the government of giving Ezhava children a preferential treatment and launched a campaign to have them removed from the list of backward communities eligible for reservation in professional colleges and in government service. After the NSS had joined the action committee organized to stop the implementation of the KEB, its leader, Mannath Padmanabhan, warned the communist ministers in these sinister terms, "[...] quit voluntarily without giving room for unrest and bloodshed. I give you the warning that, if you try to stick on to the ministerial chairs, the consequences will be terrible. If the people wrest power from these Ministers and subject them to trial, their ears and noses will be chopped off or they will be whipped in public"⁽⁴³⁾.

The action committee decided not to reopen schools after the summer vacations, unless the KEB was amended. Also political leaders of the Congress, in spite of the KEB having been approved by the Supreme Court and the Indian president and their party's neutral stand, joined in the school closure movement. Children were brought as 'scouts' into action to defend the interests of the Catholic Church. With their support, the opposition was able to mount violent agitations against the ministry, and this led eventually to its dismissal by the central government and the imposition of direct rule⁽⁴⁴⁾.

It is likely that opposition against the government's attempt at centralising control over

private schools was supported also by the lower castes. The communist government had allotted former untouchable and low-castes reservation of as much as 40% of all appointments in government. This policy would herald the emergence, through the competition for government jobs, of a new phase in the struggle for emancipation. The children of the rural poor came to look at secondary schools as the places where they hoped their dream of emancipation would be fulfilled, and equity in the access to these schools came to embody their struggle in attaining this goal. But government schools had but reluctantly accepted to admit low-caste pupils and the growth of literacy and schooling among these children had been mostly on the account of private initiatives. Government teachers were often very much concerned, in their dealings with low-caste pupils, not to annoy the wealthy high caste families that often controlled local affairs⁽⁴⁵⁾. Their salaries were very modest and giving tuition to high caste children was a common way to make ends meet. Privately managed schools, by contrast, were run by caste organisations which primary aim was to channel government funds towards their supporters. These organisations, though avowedly non-political, had extensive links in political and business circles. Caste leaders acted as brokers to get access to government resources such as credit, housing schemes, appointments in government service etc., even for the most modest among their followers, in return for votes. The communists, by contrast, introduced measures that had to be implemented by the state bureaucracy. The bureaucrats who controlled the machine of state had not been chosen by the polls but were the heirs of elites which held sway for centuries. Their loyalty was in the first place with the ruling strata. The communists were therefore powerless in keeping the promises they had made to the electorate. As the caste leaders were able to enlist the children of the poor in their aided secondary schools, they attracted large numbers of the poor away from the communists. They provided an alternative distributive system that more effectively served the interests of their supporters than the communist government. The demands for new private secondary schools could be met without upsetting the whole system of distribution of government funds as the KEB threatened to do, and this also worked to the advantage of caste organisations. An additional advantage was that the organisations represented but limited portions of the poor and not the totality of them, as the communists claimed. The success of private schools owed much to the fact that the powerful and influential who patronised and controlled them had been promoting the view that all members of the backward castes and communities suffered equally from stigmatisation and discrimination, and that the schools would provide them all with equal changes to obtain jobs in government service.

Supported by the SNDP, enterprising Ezhavas gathered large sums from both successful business people and the rank-and-file. They bought land and applied for government grants to open new high schools and colleges. In 1952, with the institution of the Sri Narayana Trust, the SNDP commanded a sizeable capital and managed a large number of high schools and colleges⁽⁴⁶⁾. As an embodiment of group-feelings, the CPI



Village High School, Kerala, 1980 (collection Olga Nieuwenhuys)

compared poorly with the SNDP, with its well organised system of local branches that catered for all aspects of community life such as marriage, funeral, inter-caste relations and, above all, the education of children. Ezhavas' expectation that, through the preferential treatment they were to get in their 'own' schools and colleges, they would gain access to the same avenues of upward mobility as high caste children, had a tremendous political impact. In the 1957 election Ezhavas had voted overwhelmingly for the CPI. But after the fall of the communist ministry, the educational policy of the SNDP helped the Congress, which came to power in 1962 under the leadership of SNDP-leader R. Sankar, in gradually dividing the loyalty of the Ezhava electorate⁽⁴⁷⁾. By the mid-1960s, the government claimed that enrolment in the lower primary was universal and illiteracy virtually eliminated. Literacy rate in the Alleppey district rose in 1971 to 70%. The turnover of high schools, as measured by the number of passes to the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) showed a dramatic increase, rising from 58,575 in 1961-1966 to 84,906 in 1971 and 187,824 in 1981. Working children were very much part of this process of mass schooling. In 1975-1976 as many as 83% of those aged 15 to 60 in coir yarn making families had gone to the upper primary, and 10% had completed high school.

From barricade to school bench

In the political consolidation that took place in the post-independence period, the climate became less favourable for youngsters' attacks on authority bearers. Generalised schooling brought with it increasingly severe discipline in a child's routine and an insistence on uniformity. The pressure on rural children to conform to what schools demanded was added to the work compulsions of everyday life. Impulses to question this form of hidden exploitation was suppressed by the myth created around the children of the poor by the fund raisers of caste organisations. It 'sold' better to depict the children of the poor as objects of compassion thirsting for whatever charitable help the organisations which claimed to represent them were able to wrest, than to dwell on their exploitation at work.

One would however search in vain for historical evidence that governmental efforts may have contributed, either directly or indirectly, to render the work of children in the countryside, and more in particular in the context of the family, redundant. The type of economic development pursued after independence failed to open up new employment opportunities and on the whole adversely affected the position of the rural poor. Attempts of the left-oriented governments that came to power between 1967 and 1977 to alter power relations in the countryside through land legislation were unable to sidetrack the negatives effects on employment these initiatives called forth. Though they successfully fought for minimum wage legislation, unions of agricultural

labourers remained powerless in the face of landowners cutting down on employment when prices fell or wages rose. Kerala's economy remained basically oriented towards the production and export of raw or semi-manufactured materials. The long-term decline in prices of these products that set in after the second World War in combination with population growth had a negative impact on the employment situation and the level of living. The underlying assumptions of the rising rates of schooling therefore remained unchangingly that, while in school, children would continue to work to support themselves and help their families.

Schooling as emancipation?

In the span of half a century schools came to take a decisive important role in the lives of working children in Kerala. The policy of reservation opened such bright prospects for upward mobility that it seemed obvious that children would take advantage of the opportunities that schools seemed to offer. The perceived need of gathering knowledge and experiences in the world beyond the locality also increased. Newspapers, the radio, political rallies, study classes and books from the village library, opened up the world beyond the immediate vicinity of one's living place. Participation in such diverse organisations as cultural associations, women and youth clubs, trade unions, cooperatives and political parties became part of the shared culture of the countryside. In the 1950s the kind of knowledge imparted in schools had become so fully part of daily life that unfamiliarity with it came to be viewed as a serious handicap. It meant that one could not understand or avail oneself of provisions for the rural poor or that one had to depend on a third party to deal with clerks of cooperative societies, banks, school managements and government officials. In the competitive and individualistic world of post-independence Kerala, in which self-help became increasingly crucial, a lack of schooling would even become a highly risky affair. It also made one object of contempt, as literacy came to be viewed as enabling people to manage their lives more efficiently and achieve upward mobility. The example of those who had borne tremendous sacrifices and had struggled for 'enlightenment' was proof that poverty could be no excuse for ignorance. A lack of schooling was the more isolating and stigmatising that one could not join in the heated discussions on national and international political developments that are even today a favourite pastime in the countryside.

With the opening of a high school managed by the Sree Narayana Trust at a few kilometres distance from Poomkara in the beginning of the 1970s, access to the reserved government jobs would become a distinct possibility also for working children, provided of course they were exceptionally endowed and perseverant. Going to school affected relations of seniority, and particularly those within the family. Children became more assertive than they used to be, and schoolroom culture had a unifying effect in

their choice of dress, their tastes and their general world outlook. For children who, at the beginning of the 1980s, went to school and worked part-time to defray its costs, schooling brought a few undeniable gains: the payment that could be claimed for work, the increased expenditure for clothing and books, and a feeling of gaining competence in confronting the problems of modern life. Above all, going to school gave children the opportunity to get away from the preoccupations of everyday life. But there were shadow sides as well, as education fostered a spirit of competition which, as the older generation often feared, disrupted forms of solidarity that were crucial to cope. The high rate of failures was another negative effect likely to breed a sense of inferiority and a lack of self-confidence. But the most insidious effect was the high level of drudgery that schooling implied, leaving working children with insufficient time for play and leisure. Challenging this situation had become the more difficult that schools symbolised a better life which a child was supposed to achieve by his or her own endeavour. Exploitation was turned into a temporary though necessary evil of poor childhood, divorced from the struggles of adult labourers. In the face of the impossibility to fight exploitation many youngsters believed that schooling was indeed the road to emancipation, even if they also knew that it all too often turned out to be little else than a dream to help them cope with the harshness of everyday life.

Conclusion

Summing up, the growing work demands solicited by colonial domination from the children of the rural poor were not felt as morally reprehensible. The very position of these children at the bottom of society, nevertheless, made them particularly responsive to movements that challenged authority. When the national movement canalised the opposition colonialism had called forth, the ideals of childhood it propagated would have a longstanding impact on working children's attitudes and expectations. However, in the wake of the post-independence consolidation, the ideals of children's emancipation were narrowed down and equated with achieving equality in the school bench. As the process of de-colonisation brought schooling within the reach of working children it accommodated at the same time their need to work to satisfy their material wants and pay for schooling. To a large extent this was due to the growth of aided schools serving the vested interests of powerful educational entrepreneurs. The latter actively propagated the idea that high levels of schooling was desirable for all children, irrespective of their economic condition. As schooling rose, there was no economic restructuring that would have made children's work redundant or even dispensable. On the contrary, the rise owed much to a situation in which children bore with their work much of the costs that would otherwise have to be devolved to society at large. Schooling in Kerala was not, as in 19th century Europe, an antidote against children's

work, and its introduction was not accompanied by a realistic legislation to reduce the work of children. Rather than clashing, schooling and work remained symbolically part of different arena's that, though in many respects complementary, were not seen as interrelated.

There are several reasons why working children were enthusiastic about schooling and they spin-off from the importance gained by the written word and the culture of schools in Kerala society. In the post-independence period the knowledge acquired in schools became the key, as in most parts of the modern world, to the normal village definition of a self-respecting citizen. Schools also opened up the opportunity, though to only a few, to gain access to seats of state power and prestige for castes and communities that had been legally barred from them in the nearby past. As schools carried the banner of social justice and progress, the ability of working children to partake in their culture and identify with the schooling youth became a significant step in their emancipation. In Poomkara, by demanding time and means to spend on schooling children were able to challenge their total subordination to the authority of seniors. Though they logically still depended entirely on them for their daily livelihood they had a separate world in school, where, ideally at least, they could compete on equal footing with the children of the well-to-do.

- (1) To protect the privacy of the informants I have given the village a fictitious name. I am grateful to the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (wotro), the Directorate for International Co-operation of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the University of Amsterdam for funds and support in helping me carry out the research. For a detailed analysis of children's work and schooling in Poomkara and in Kerala in general, cf. O. NIEUWENHUYIS, *Children's Lifeworlds, Labour, Gender and Welfare in the Developing World*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994 and O. NIEUWENHUYIS, *To Read and not to Eat, South Indian Children Between Secondary School and Work*. In: *Childhood*, 1(2), pp. 100-109, 1993.
- (2) M.S.A. RAO, *Social Movements and Social Transformation*, Madras: McMillan, 1979, p. 29.
- (3) K.P. KANNAN, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles. Mobilisation and Organisation of Rural Workers in Kerala, India*, New Delhi-Oxford, 1988, p. 98ff.
- (4) E.M.S. NAMBOODIRIPAD, *Kerala Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1968, p. 117.
- (5) KESAVA DEV, *From the Gutter*, Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1944.
- (6) P.R. GOPINATHAN NAIR, *Education and Economic Change*, Trivandrum: Centre for Development Studies, 1978, pp. 46-48.
- (7) P.R. GOPINATHAN NAIR, *Education [...]*, p. 53.
- (8) T.V. SATHYAMURTHY, *India Since Independence, Studies in the Development of the State, Volume 1: Centre-State Relations, The case of Kerala*, New Delhi: Ajanta, 1985, p. 389.
- (9) Cited in R. JEFFREY, *Politics, Women and Well Being, How Kerala Became 'A Model'*, London: McMillan, 1992, p. 68.
- (10) A.K. GOPALAN, *In the Cause of the People*, Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1973, p. 7.
- (11) E.K. NAYANAR, *My Struggles, An Autobiography*, Delhi: Vikas, 1982, pp. 1ff.
- (12) A.K. GOPALAN, *In the Cause [...]*, p. 91.
- (13) C. WOOD, *The Moplah Rebellion and its Genesis*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1987, p.7ff.
- (14) R.E. MILLER, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala, A Study in Islamic Trends*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976, p. 128ff.

- (15) A.K. GOPALAN, *In the Cause [...]*, p. 99.
- (16) A.K. GOPALAN, *In the Cause [...]*, pp. 99-108.
- (17) W.F. WERTHEIM, *Evolution and Revolution, The Rising Waves of Emancipation*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1971, p. 46.
- (18) T. ISAAC, From Caste Consciousness to Class Consciousness, Alleppey Coir Workers During the Inter-war Period. In: *Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Political Economy*, 1985, p. 11.
- (19) R.E. MILLER, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala, [...]*, p. 161ff.
- (20) T.V. KRISHNAN, quoted in: V. MEERA, *Women workers and class struggles in Alleppey, 1938-50*. In: *Social Scientist*, (1983)127, p. 51.
- (21) V. MEERA, *Women workers [...]*, p. 51.
- (22) R. JEFFREY, Destroy Capitalism, Growing Solidarity of Alleppey's Coir Workers 1930-1940. In: *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19(29), (1983)29, p. 1160.
- (23) T.J. NOSSITER, *Communism in Kerala*, p. 95.
- (24) J. THARAMANGALAM, *Agrarian Class Conflict*, Vancouver: UBC, 1981, p. 70.
- (25) T.J. NOSSITER, *Communism [...]*, pp. 90-91.
- (26) A.K. GOPALAN, *In the Cause [...]*, pp. 44-47.
- (27) A.K. GOPALAN, *In the Cause [...]*, p. 112.
- (28) A.K. GOPALAN, *In the Cause [...]*, p. 116.
- (29) G. WOODCOCK, *Kerala: a Portrait of the Malabar Coast*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967, p. 248.
- (30) K.C. GEORGE, *Immortal Punnappa-Vayalar*, New Delhi: Communist Party Publication, 1975; R. JEFFREY, India's Working Class Revolt: Punnappa-Vayalar and the Communist "Conspiracy" of 1946. In: *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 18(1981)2, pp. 97-122.
- (31) K.C. GEORGE, *Immortal [...]*, pp. 46-47.
- (32) R. JEFFREY, *India's Working [...]*, p. 117.
- (33) T.V. SATHYAMURTHY, *India Since [...]*, p. 167
- (34) T. ISAAC, Class Struggle and Cultural Change: Coir Mats and Matting Industry in Kerala, 1950-'80. In: *Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Political Economy*, 1982, p. 115.
- (35) J. THARAMANGALAM, *Agrarian [...]*, pp. 70ff.
- (36) The state of Kerala was formed in 1956 on the basis of the Malayalam language which was spoken by the vast majority of the people of the former native states of Travancore and Cochin and the Madras Presidency.
- (37) A. MATHEW, *A History of Educational Development in Kerala*, New Delhi: National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, 1987, p. 169.
- (38) GOVERNMENT OF KERALA, *Report of the Backward Classes Reservation Commission, Kerala*, (in two volumes), Trivandrum: Gov. Press, 1971, p. 6.
- (39) T.V. SATHYAMURTHY, *India Since [...]*, p. 391.
- (40) G.K. LIETEN, *The First Communist Ministry in Kerala, 1957-1959*, Calcutta: Bagchi, 1982, p. 42.
- (41) G.K. LIETEN, *The First [...]*, p. 44.
- (42) T.V. SATHYAMURTHY, *India Since [...]*, pp. 396ff.
- (43) Quoted in G.K. LIETEN, *The First [...]*, p. 140.
- (44) G.K. LIETEN, *The First [...]*, pp. 140ff.
- (45) J.E. WALSH, *Growing up in British India, Indian Autobiographers on Childhood and Education under the Raj*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982, p. 41.
- (46) M.S.A. RAO, *Social Movements [...]*, p. 95.
- (47) M.S.A. RAO, *Social Movements [...]*, p. 88.