

## Teamsters or Turtles

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### ABSTRACT

*The failure or reluctance of mainstream organizations of workers in catering to the core issues of the traditional working people of the country seems to produce a large number of community-based trade unions across the country. Kerala Swathanthra Malsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF), a major community-based 'informal trade union' in the state of Kerala presents a different kind of working class politics with a strong inclination to the idea of sustainable development. Despite a mere association of wage earners set up for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives, it seems to consider the trade union as an instrument for larger political struggle to bring justice, particularly its most important variant inter-generational justice, to thousands of disadvantaged sections of workers who are engaged in the traditional sectors. They strongly oppose the idea of irrational extraction of natural resources and the development projects with a negative impact on natural environment. In this struggle for a better world, KSMTF attempt to build up and maintain alliances with other like-minded individuals and groups. The present study is an effort to analyze the unique nature of this informal trade union with a special focus on its inclination to environment protection.*

**Keywords:** Globalization, Inter-generational justice, Environmental Activism, Community based trade union, Informal Unionism

### Introduction

The terms such as 'economism' or 'business unionism' generally explain the common tendency of working class organizations to give undue focus on wage increase. Views of Vladimir Lenin support this. He described, "trade union activity as an infantile disease of the working class and the faster they are cured of it the sooner they will reach adolescence and revolutionary maturity" He believed that workers bargaining with capitalist through their trade unions would compel them to pay attention to improve their wages and will make them 'economists' (Macrids, 1980). George Bernard Shaw also shares same view but in a satirical manner. He said, "trade unionists have no objection to the continuance of the capitalist's method in industry, provided that labor gets the lion's share" (Subramannian, 1967). While analyzing the trade union movement in Mavoor Gwalior Rayon's Factory in Kerala, K.T Ram Mohan and K. Ravi Mohan speak about "collaborationist kind of trade union leadership", which represent the unholy alliances between the management and trade union leadership that had allegedly existed in the collective bargaining process in Mavoor (Mohan, 1988). Again, the series of blue-green conflicts in the state of Kerala during the last fifty years exposes the limitation of the working class movement in developing into a political force for a radical change. Further, unions in the organized sector seem to be a failure in understanding the hardships faced by the victims of the environmental disaster produced by the modernist perceptions on development. The strong waves of globalization and its neo-liberal policies have made the situation more badly. It is in this background that the informal trade unions emerged with an intention to organize the most underprivileged sections of workers in the traditional sector.

### Informal unionism

Here it is important to note that almost 90 % of the total workforce in India belongs to unorganized sector. In agriculture and allied occupations, the single largest provider of employment opportunities, the share of unorganized sector is 99 %. The trade and commerce also present same picture. In the manufacturing sector, this is around 75%. The enrollment details of Indian trade unions tell us that 70 % of their membership is predominantly from organized sector. Surprisingly, this constitutes only less than 10% of the total workforce in the country (Mohanthy, 2009). Globalization seems to intensify this crisis in working class movement. On the one side, the spread of neo-liberal policies unleashed a process of informalization posing serious challenges on formal trade union activity in these societies. On the other side, the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources badly affected the livelihood of traditional communities. It is in this background, the informal unionism became a trend in Indian trade union movement and ideas such as

disaffiliation, Workers cooperative societies and trusts, community bases trade unions, social movement unionism etc. have become common in union renewal literature.

Contrary to the fact that informalism appears as a response to neo liberal policies, there were some isolated attempts in Kerala towards informalization before the period of liberalization. For example, in Ernakulam area, the 1940's witnessed a movement similar to informalization. S.E.S Menon, a veteran trade union activist of those days formed independent unions in some of the industries in Ernakulam district.

His intention was to free trade unions from party affiliation. For this, he raised the slogan 'one industry one union'. Here it is to be mentioned that this new initiative was also not free from the evils of business unionism. Another development was in Calicut when Vasu, a former naxalite leader formed GROW, an independent union for the underprivileged reserve workers in Gwalior Factory in Mavoor. He was successful in building strong labor-community alliances in the struggle against big capitalists (Vasu, 2011).

### **Kerala Swathandramalsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF)**

The history of trade unionism in traditional fishing sector began way back in 1913 when Pandit Karuppan, a social reformer intervened to organize a section of fishermen in Kochi. In Malabar, the associations like *Agila Kerala Mukkuva Sangam* (1920) and *Mukkuva Mahasabha* (1933) and in Travancore, *Deevara Sabha* organized fish workers. Individuals like Simon Asan, A.V Thamarakshan and several others contributed to the growth of unions in the coastal area. The left initiative for class formation among the fishermen community did not produce expected results mainly due to the strong influence of identity politics among the fish workers. A.V Thamarakshan, a leader of Revolutionary Socialist Party made some remarkable achievements in creating class-consciousness among the anglers community. He formed several units affiliated to UTUC, a left oriented central trade union in India. Several Christian priests, some of them under the inspiration of liberation theology, organized the workers in terms of their religious identity. The efforts of mainstream political parties and religious organizations to form affiliated unions finally resulted in disunity among fish workers diffusing the collective bargaining power of the community in their fight against massive encroachment upon their livelihood. It was in this background, in 1980, the *Kerala Swanthaanthramalsya Thozhilali Federation* was formed as a disaffiliated independent community based trade union of traditional fishermen in Kerala (Peter, 2012). Since, the main purpose of this study is to analyze its attitude on the question of intergenerational justice; the ensuing discussion is confined to some selected issues connected to the environmental activism in India.

### **Trawling Regulation**

'Fishery regulation measures like ban on trawling in the in-shore water during the months of June, July and August (south western monsoon season)' was one of the major demands of the Federation ever since its formation in 1980. It strongly argued that 'indiscriminate and excessive trawling operations by a fleet of mechanised boats operating close to the coastal line was the main reason for the fall in catch landed by the traditional fishermen'. According to the federation, 'the greatest harm takes place during the monsoon season of June – August, when many of the commercially significant fish species are known to spawn'. The 'turbidity of the in-shore zone caused by monsoon seas is further accentuated by the trawlers creating an aquating milieu that adversely affects spawning potentialities and destroys spawners' (Mathew, 1984). As a result of continuous representations and agitations ban on trawling was firstly introduced in Kerala in 1981 by the LDF government led by E.K Nayanar. However, under the pressure from the association of mechanised boat owners, the government of Kerala decided to exempt Neendakara region from the purview of trawling ban and thus spoiled the spirit of trawling regulation. The insincerity in engaging an effective regulation measures dragged the fish workers to strikes and agitations against various governments. There were apprehensions that there is an alliance between the government and the association of mechanised boat owners. With active support of civil society and several other like-minded associations the anti-trawling agitations organized under the leadership of KSMTF slowly developed into a mass movement. Here it is to be mentioned that the conflict between the traditional workers and the trawling sector was very common during those days. Between 1970-85 period about 50 traditional workers were killed because of attacks from mechanised boats. (Mathews, 2011) Finally, in 1989, the LDF government agreed to implement the ban in an effective manner. The demand for extending the ban period to a minimum of 90 days is still pending.

### **Agitations against Foreign Vessels**

There was a notable increase in the volume of sea products in the first two decades of post independent era. It rose from 500 tonnes in 1950 to 84000 tonne in 1970. The KSMTF alleges that this increase in the production never benefitted the traditional workers, which constitute nearly 86 percentage of the total

workforce in the fishing sector. The share of traditional sector in the food production declined to 54.44 percentage in 1982 which was 90.44 percentage in 1969(Hameeda,2015). KSMTF was in the forefront of agitations against the central government's decision to issue licence to foreign fishing factory vessels for fishing activities in Indian sea. In connection with this, a state level mass convention was organised in YMCA hall in Thiruvanthapuram on 13 January 2004. This was followed by similar conventions in all most all coastal districts. A coastal bandh was organized on 3 February 2004. The agitators marched to Accountant Generals office to register their protest against the LPG reforms. The General body meeting of the National Fish Workers Forum, an association to which KSMTF is affiliated, held in 2012 passed a resolution challenging the decision for Free Trade Pacts allowing Foreign Direct Investments in retail and fisheries sectors. It reads "fish workers be consulted before any trade agreement involving the fisheries sector was signed"(Alakal 4(5), 2012)

### **Alliances with Natural Resource Based Traditional Communities**

In the words of Shantha Bhatteerjee of Van Sramjeev Munch of Uthar Pradesh, "the need of the hour for all people struggling to protect their natural resources is to come together as federation to co-ordinate and amplify the struggle in a better way"(Alakal 4(28),2012). The KSMTF is very active in this joint struggle. For example, the representatives of the federation found active in the National Conference of Traditional Livelihood and Natural Resources Based Communities held at Delhi's Mavlankar hall on 16 december 2011. The conference formed a national level common platform known as National Federation of Natural Resources Based Traditional Communities and Organisations. T Peter, the general secretary of NFF strongly supported the call for cross movement alliances for making the struggle against the neo-liberal policies more effective. To quote his words, "The fish workers of this country cannot sustain ourselves without identifying with and struggling together with forest people, handloom weavers, the women vendors, the bamboo workers etc of this country"(Ibid). The representatives of the Federations also attended World Social Forum held in Mumbai in January 2004.

The Chirala(Andhra Pradesh) Conference held in 2014 further proved the its commitment to alliances. This meeting was attended by 67 people's movements across the country representing advasis, dalits, fish workers, hadloom workers, clay workers, bamboo workers, journalists, film makers, artists and several others. The conference passed a resolution urging joint struggle for the protection of natural environment. The delegates from different parts of the country identified globalisation and the neo liberal policies as the prime reasons for the present crisis in the traditional sectors(Alkal 4(55), 2014).

### **Protest against Power Plants**

Power projects in India including nuclear power projects in Kudamkulam and Jaitapur have become objects of protest by fish workers across the nation. They are mainly located in the coastal areas, and pose serious challenges on fishing community. They will be the main victims of the environmental hazards caused by these plants. The agitations in Koodamakulam has become a major movement against nuclear power plants in India. KSMTF seems to be very active in extending support to these projects. For example, National Fish workers Forum organized a major campaign in 10 coastal States in India against Koodamakulam Nuclear Power Project in 2012. In Kerala, this was organised by KSMTF. As part of the campaign, the federation conducted a seminar on the topic 'Atomic Power or Power of the people' in association with Coalition for Nuclear Dismament and Peace(CNDP). The General Body meeting of National Fish Workers Forum held in Thiruvanthapuram in the same year expressed solidarity with the people Kudamkulam and Jaitapur. The meeting denounced the idea of thermal power plants with captive ports on the coast. Later in 2015, NFF and KSMTF jointly organised two conferences against Koodamakulam Project. The first one was held as a sign of condolence to Praful Bidwai noted columnist and the main inspiration behind the movements against nuclear plants in India. The presence of Dr.S.P Udayakumar, leader of Koodamakulam agitations made the second conference more active. Representatives of political parties and several social activists like, P. Prasad, Maryapuram Sreekumar, Hameed Vaniyambalam, Velukkuty Pilla, Jothi Krishnan and several others attended Neyyattinkara conference. The orchestra team of the Federation *Thirayude Thalam* appeared in concert, singing *Kadalppattukal*.(Alakal-4(5)2012,Alakal -4(28),2012)

### **Conclusion**

It is significant to note that the KSMTF seems to be instrumental in fighting the negative impact of Globalisation. From a traditional organisation of fish workers it rose to the level of an environmental movement posing challenges on neo-liberal policies with an unusual vigour. The programmes organised by the federation during the last three decades against the heavy damages caused by projects carried out by

the greedy capitalists and policies of anti people governments and finally the alliances it built up make it unique organization in the working class politics in Kerala. The question whether the changes in the nature of this working class organisation is a result of cross movement pollination of environmental and working class movements necessitates further study and reserch.

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