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## **FOR AND AGAINST THE GRAIN: POLITICS OF RICE IN KERALA, INDIA**

N.C. Narayan

June 2003

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POLITICS OF RICE IN KERALA, INDIA**

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## **ACRONYMS\***

TKTU	Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union
AOP	Actor-Oriented Perspective
ARC	Alternative Rice Commission
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CSP	Congress Socialist Party
GOK	Government of Kerala
KAU	Kerala Agricultural University
KC	Kerala Congress
KSKTU	Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union
LDF	Left Democratic Front
SRFA	Save Rice Field Agitation
UDF	United Democratic Front
UKKS	Upper Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham

\* Used more than once.

## INTRODUCTION

A passionate public debate was triggered in Kerala, South India in July 1997 following a Luddite-type agitation by the agricultural labourers destroying the crops and assets in converted rice fields. There was a fifty percent fall in the rice-cultivated area in Kerala in the last twenty-five years. Rice has been the most traditional land use and the main economic variable that has historically shaped social relations. It is grown in valley portions, mostly wetlands that are fluvial landforms. Cultivation of rice helps conserve the wetland character of these lands. However, in recent years, rice cultivation has become the economically least productive of the various agricultural options. The debate about whether or not to continue this activity is now being raised by farmers.

The state is against conversion of rice lands, but farmers do it illegally, using the argument of their individual right to opt for the crop of their choice. The amorphous group of small farmers who bear the cost of low-productive rice cultivation cannot come together as an interest group because of the multiple identities present and most of them are not full-time farmers. They basically argue on the need for profit maximisation through freedom of individual choice to shift away from rice. The agricultural labourers on the other hand with their strong labour institutions and a left-wing government that was sympathetic to their demands argued for continuance of this activity since rice cultivation is labour intensive. The trade unions argue for the highly labour absorbing activity of rice cultivation and proclaim the labourers' 'right to work' and also raise the environmental and food security arguments for the conservation of rice lands.

The agitation led by the agricultural labour union of the leftist party churned-up the political realm of Kerala, bringing perspectives *for and against* the cultivation of the staple food *grain* of rice. This is one of the resource conflicts in Kerala in which the environmental issues like wetland conservation were discussed prominently. This paper examines the political dimensions of this complex developmental issue where environmental, economic, social (redistributive) and political (power) arguments can be distinguished. For this reason I concentrate on a specific context: Kuttanad, the 'rice bowl of Kerala', where the agitation has been mostly concentrated. The thrust of this paper is the analysis of contemporary politics and its effect on land use within the larger debates

on political ecology.<sup>1</sup> The earlier studies on Kuttanad concentrated on the history of labour mobilisation and agrarian change. The 1990s, with their accelerated social changes and especially with the turbulence in Kuttanad following the save rice field agitation have not been covered by any recent study. Section 1 presents the analytical frame to examine the issues. The historical analysis of political institutions and roots of differential interests is done in section 2 based on the rich documented history of political conflicts. This forms the foundation for the analysis of political institutions to understand contemporary resource conflicts in section 3.

The analytical frame in section 1 paints the larger picture at the outset with the recent writings in political ecology. It provides the general structural arguments and suggests the importance of larger political economy issues in the discussion of environment-development issues. Developments in social science bring the need to incorporate other concerns like individual agency and differential meanings, which are important analytically. However, it is difficult to bring the two sensibilities into an analytical frame and hence we propose a historical analysis of political institutions. This is suggested as an intermediate framework to understand political struggles through the analysis of institutions like the political parties and trade unions, which represent class interests and also give emphasis to the agency of individuals in shaping institutional strategies. Section 2 places the regional political dynamics within the larger political constellation in Kerala and traces the historical evolution of the competing labour and propertied interests represented through certain political institutions. Section 3 analyses the contemporary political realm in the wake of the save rice field agitation (hereafter SRFA) by the trade union. Here, we argue that erstwhile opposing interests have lost much of their tooth due to the societal transformations and the struggles become mostly self-serving agendas for certain political institutions to play-out their historical role in the society. However, we end-up recognising the validity of such struggles, where issues like labour displacement can have a toll on the livelihoods of the landless agricultural labourers.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an improved version of a paper presented in the Rural Research Seminar in the Institute of Social Studies on July 2, 2002. I thank Des Gasper, Ashwani Saith, Hans Opschoor and Shanti George for their incisive reading of an earlier version. The valuable comments by Eric Ross and Jun Borras are also acknowledged. The usual disclaimers apply.

## 1 ANALYTICAL FRAME

Our analytical frame is a search to comprehend the ecological, economic, social and political issues through a single prism. First, we review the arguments that treat land issues as part of the larger political-economic discussions, which are mostly structural and then focus on those that argue to go beyond these. Politics that is decisive in land use is given central importance. At the end, we suggest an intermediate framework to historically study institutions like political parties to analytically bridge the twin concerns of structure and agency raised in the recent writings in political ecology.

### 1.1 Political Economy Of Land Issues

From mid nineteen eighties, a host of studies searched the larger connections between land use, land degradation and the local and global political economy. The political economy analysis informing early studies (Blaikie, 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987) built mostly on the peasant studies literature. It searched for causal explanations for ecological transformations not simply in nature, but tried to grapple with the social, historical and political factors in the contexts of local production relations and wider economic systems (Moore, 1996:381). Hence it adopted a socio-economic and political analysis of environmental change (Zimmerer, 1996:112). Similarly Neumann (1992) focused on the land users, their local relations, and linked these to the wider geographical and social setting through a historical analysis. Another study argued that the inequality in access to environmental resources leads to accumulation by a few and the impoverishment and struggle for survival of others as the major cause of degradation (Krokkfors, 1989). Byrant (1992) sees the environment as a politicised condition, where the distribution and use of these resources are seen as the outcomes of political and policy decisions. Here land use and environmental degradation become the function of political and institutional factors. The term political ecology emerged and the link established was that while political economy deals with *economic* distribution conflicts, political ecology grapples with *ecological* distribution conflicts (Guha and Alier, 1997:22).

Political ecologists emphasise the ways in which the state in the Third World may intervene to promote environmentally destructive activities (Byrant and Bailey, 1997:3). The state commonly tends to 'lend its power to dominant groups and marginalization of the losers through taxation, food policy, land tenure policy and the allocation of resources'



(Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987:17). The pressure to produce can be heightened by social relations of production involving onerous rates of surplus extraction.

Political ecology was criticized for structural determinism by certain authors in the early 1990s. The 'field's structuralist legacy' was pointed to as one impediment to the analysis of rich 'micro politics', the interests and actions of the actors involved in land use and struggles (Moore, 1993:381). These were portrayed as 'monolithic' in that little effort was made to appreciate the internal complexity or differentiated concerns of the state or other actors (ibid). A related criticism was that of economic determinism in the earlier studies (Byrant, 1992). However, Byrant and Bailey suggested that the critique appears outdated by the mid-1990s, when a host of studies documented the political and ecological interactions at the micro level (1997: 6). Starting from the structural patterns, a more differentiated study of society is suggested to understand the foundations of micro politics springing from the specifics of social relations and the differentiated social structure.

Later writings acknowledged that the facts of degradation are contested, and there will always be multiple frames of reference and hence perceptions, e.g. one person's degradation is another person's soil fertility (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987). Byrant and Bailey suggested the actor-oriented studies (1997) which tried to bring the actor centre-stage in resource studies as one important stream of political ecology. The proponents of actor perspectives (hereafter AOP) always project the limitations of structural explanations of social change.<sup>2</sup> The pre-eminence of human agency over structural analysis is propounded by those who wanted to bring the point of view and subjective perceptions of human actors more firmly into the study of society (Turner, 1996). The differential patterns arising in similar (homogenous) structural circumstances are attributed as a creation of the actors (Long, 1992:21). This approach strives to transcend the homogenising explanations of structural analysis by highlighting the importance of human agency. The behavior of actors is not driven automatically and unconsciously by structures; rather, they actively monitor, interpret and shape the world

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<sup>2</sup> AOP argue that "many of the abstractions used were far removed from day-to-day workings of everyday development practice and failed to explain the differential outcomes of change. Hence while 'class struggle' and 'surplus extraction' might characterise some important features of intervention, they were seldom enough to explain the particular situations that emerged" (Long and Villarael, 1994:41). I do not see the need for a conflict between the two ways of understanding, and in fact may be used complementarily. A structural background of understanding could only help to place the otherwise 'voluntary' expressions of agency and perceptions of actors within the pre-attentive structures, which they are part of (reviewed in detail in Narayanan, 2003-chapter 7).

around them (Long and Van der Ploeg, 1994; Long and Long, 1992; Leach et al., 1997). Although some routinised actions may reproduce structures, other action has agency and may even serve to change the system and perhaps in time make new rules (Giddens, 1984; Long and Van der Ploeg, 1994; Bebbington, 1994; Leach et al., 1997). According to Long (1992), human agency attributes to the actor (individual or social group) the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping. Therefore, 'to exercise agency, actors need organising capacities within given social relations'. This clarifies the importance of the existing structure and the role of agency in creating, maintaining and altering it. He further states that 'differential patterns arise in similar structural circumstances, even if the conditions appear relatively homogenous and this is the creation of the actors themselves' (Long, 1992:21). This is a valid starting point to pursue those elements of social change or innovations that are a product of the creative agency of actors. AOP is useful to analyse the impulses that trigger agency, which bring about differential patterns in seemingly homogeneous situations. However, we will be cautious not to slip into 'voluntarism' and hence try to place the actors and agency within the existing structures to ground them.

Political ecologists start from the premise that environmental change is not a neutral process amenable to technical management. Rather, it has political sources, conditions and ramifications that impinge on existing socio-economic inequalities and political processes (Bryant, 1992). Political ecology identifies the multiple power relations in the society. Subsequently 'liberation ecology' integrating the liberatory concerns of social movements was explicitly suggested. They emphasised that 'politics must be central to political ecology in order to give the bare bones of "poverty" some sort of flesh if it is to be employed analytically' and suggest efforts at integrating political action: Of everyday forms of resistance, civic movements or organised party politics (Peet and Watts, 1996).

Lately, the central importance of politics in resource use and conflicts is reiterated with a suggestion to give attention to politics as the interaction of actors over resources and recognition, in which even weak actors possess some power to act in the pursuit of their interests (Byrant and Bailey, 1997: 25). This relates to the suggestion of the movement of Third World political ecology from the structuralist premises of the 1980s towards a full appreciation of the role of agency in human affairs (Redclift, 1992).

The neglect of politics in earlier discussions (Blaikie, 1985) was also criticized (Watts, 1997: 77) and solution was to include insights from environmental sociology and also the political economy of ideological construction (Blaikie, 1997) indicating the conflicts over meanings and ideology. The importance of politics derives from the fact that the costs and benefits associated with environmental change are for the most part distributed unequally among actors (Byrant and Bailey, 1997:28). Hence, environmental change has political implications and when it creates impoverishment for some, resistance also develops (1997:29). However, the analytical problems of employing both these sensibilities are enormous and we try to attempt such a formulation taking cue from certain writings which they proposed as historical institutionalism (such as Thelen and Steinmo, 1992; Rothstein, 1992; Hall, 1992; Weir, 1992; Doornbos, 2000).

## **1.2 Analysing Political Struggles Historically**

Historical institutionalists deal with macro structural variables (like class structure) through the analysis of institutions and attempt to explain how political struggles are mediated by the institutional setting in which they take place. In general, historical institutionalists work with a definition of institutions that includes both formal organisations and informal rules and procedures that structure conduct (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992:2) The definition encompasses ‘intermediate-level institutions, such as party systems and the structure of economic interest groups like trade unions, that mediate between the behaviour of individual political actors and national political outcomes’ (1992:11). Historical institutionalists agree that macro structures like class can impose significant constraints on behaviour, but still they argue that it is less useful to subsume such macro (systems-level) structures into the definition of institutions since it is better to maintain a narrow focus and examine how these forces are mediated by intermediate-level institutions (ibid).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The example given is Karl Polanyi’s work which anchored on Speenhamland system to explain the Western European transformation to a market economy (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992:11) Thelen and Steinmo put historical institutionalism as a criticism to the behaviorist theories that focused that on the characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals and groups, to explain political outcomes. This was against the grand theorizing by behaviorists that dominated comparative politics, which obscured the intermediate institutions that structure politics in different countries, beneath the surface of homogenizing concepts such as modernity and tradition. Historical Institutionalism is considered as new institutionalism that provide us with a critique of behaviorists who miss the ‘crucial elements of the playing field’ in their analysis (see also Thelen and Steinmo, 1992:7-10 for a discussion of their critique of the rational choice school of new institutionalists).

The importance of human agency as a crucial independent variable to understanding political outcomes (with political behaviour not being influenced by the macro socio-economic structures alone) is also stressed by historical institutionalists (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). Historical institutionalists suggest that institutions, like party systems, not only respond to the structure of economic interests, which can shape and constrain political strategies, but they are themselves also the outcome (conscious or unintended) of deliberate political strategies, of political conflict, and of choice. Thelen and Steinmo argue that, ‘by focussing on these intermediate institutional features of political life, institutionalism provides the theoretical bridge between “men [who] make history” and the “circumstances” under which they are able to do so’. (1992:10). This answers the demands by political ecologists for a need to go beyond the structural foundations (Peet and Watts, 1996; Escobar, 1996; Zimmerer, 1996; Moore, 1996). Thus, historical institutionalism is conceived as a middle range theory that integrates an understanding of political history with an explanation of the contingent nature of political and economic development, and especially ‘the role of political agency, conflict, and choice, in shaping that development’ (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992:9) and helps ‘examine the relationship between political actors as objects and as agents of history’ (ibid).

The larger political economy of land-use shifts that triggered the SRFA is described in section 3 with the background of labour displacement and feminisation of agricultural labour. To analyse political power, I discuss intermediate institutions like political parties and trade unions, which had their historically ascribed roles. Such an analysis can then place primary emphasis on understanding the role and relevance of institutional structures within their particular social and political contexts (Doornbos, 2000:13). Contemporary struggles on land-use options are analysed in the light of the conflicting interests described in section 2, with institutions like the political parties and trade unions representing labour and farmer interests respectively. The social changes in Kerala and Kuttanad described in section 2 have considerably blurred the earlier binary interests like ‘propertied’ and ‘labour’. Later political ecology writings (Blaikie, 1997; Agarwal, 1998) had explicitly highlighted the need for analysing the political economy of ideological construction. Hence in section 3, the perspectives of the different institutions are examined to illustrate how the differential and conflicting interests in land use are represented, negotiated and contended.

## **2 KUTTANAD: POLITICAL HISTORY**

This section describes the salient aspects of the political history of Kerala and Kuttanad, which are well-documented in earlier studies. This is to place the political issues in their socio-economic and historical context as demanded by the analytical frame. The discussions provide a background to analyse how the historically defined differential interests trigger contemporary political struggles in section 3.

### **2.1 Kuttanad Within Kerala's Developmental Experience**

The characteristic features of Kerala's development experience with the implications of a fragmented political realm is explained at the outset in section 2.1.1. Section 2.1.2 outlines the important aspects of the regional development of Kuttanad as a background.

#### *2.1.1 Kerala: Development Of A Fragmented Polity*

Kerala state lies in the south-western corner of India and is bounded by the forested hills of the Western Ghats in the East and the Arabian Sea in the West. Kerala had an oppressive caste system with the upper castes establishing their economic and social life based on land. A caste division of labour developed whereby the manual labour was relegated to the lowest castes while the upper castes owned the means of production. In the economic sphere, commercialisation of agriculture from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially with plantations in the mountain ranges, triggered an array of non-traditional activities and employment opportunities. The upper caste landowners were the 'primordial power' in society and were challenged by the economic power of new classes who later became politically powerful also. The educational development, especially the early work of missionaries and a later welfare state, helped develop a literate population. The non-agricultural job opportunities and avenues of educational development triggered social movements with emancipatory goals by the lower castes and politicisation based on communal/caste grounds with competition for resources such as land and for service sector jobs. Such a development trajectory was accentuated by the later development of a welfare state that responded positively to popular demands.

Kerala has a pattern of development, characterised by high levels of social development, which includes a set of high material quality of life indicators coinciding with low per capita incomes with low growth and a stagnation of productive sectors of the economy. The achievements in the social sphere were made possible by conscious

state policies in response to the series of social movements and mobilisations by politicised interest groups.<sup>4</sup> The main force behind the development trajectory was the political awareness created by education, and various societal interest groups began to assert their rights to economic opportunities, social status and political power (Mathew, 1989).

At the political level, the well-entrenched propertied interests and the slow and steady fight of egalitarian interests brought dramatic changes in the access to and distribution of resources. The Communist administration that came to power in 1957 took egalitarian interests forward, especially with new public educational policies and land reforms. The conservative backlash brought down the government and the ensuing politics from the 1960s fragmented the political realm. From this caste and class fragmentation of the polity, small political parties representing narrow sectarian, communal and regional interests emerged. They bargained with the major political parties, made and broke coalition governments with fluid and opportunistic political stances. This fragmented polity led to a process of democratisation and mellowed the stark ideological contradictions between the former bi-polar interests.

Coming to the specifics, in the plural Kerala society, no religious or caste group is in a dominant position, and hence the majority party system has never worked in Kerala (Pillai, 1999:103). Different organised groups having deep sociological roots, either communal or occupational in character (Chander, 1981:71) influenced the major political parties. The constellation of communal groups came in various permutations to clutch political power in the state. Both the dominant secular/national parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Indian National Congress, hereafter referred to as Congress, split in the 1960s. The split in the former led to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), hereafter referred to as CPI (M), that later spearheaded the egalitarian interests much more than the CPI. Kerala Congress (KC) was born out of the split in Congress, which then pursued the propertied interests strongly.

The splits in political parties continued in the later period, and there was a proliferation of them emerging as interest groups of various communal, factional or

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<sup>4</sup> The high social development is commented on by the *Human Development Report for South Asia* (1997) and states that, 'analysis based on the HDI for fifteen Indian states shows that Kerala has the highest (0.597) human development index (HDI) in India while Madhya Pradesh has the lowest (0.341). While Kerala would rank as high as China in international comparisons, Madhya Pradesh will take its

regional interests, with a certain social base for every political party (Thomas, 1985).<sup>5</sup> The contemporary political realities are further elaborated in section 3.

### *2.1.2 Rice-Centric Development Of Kuttanad*

With this background, let us examine the regional dimension of the development of a rice-centric economy of Kuttanad. Kuttanad is a low-lying and water-logged region, which is transformed into a vast sheet of water of varying depths during the monsoon season (Pillai and Panikkar, 1964:26-7). It is highly fertile land, replenished by silt brought by the river systems; the area was found to be well suited to rice cultivation from early days. A sheet of water covers the agricultural land of Kuttanad when there is no cultivation. Outer bunds have to be built and the water bailed out in the beginning of every cultivation season. Reclamation of land for cultivation and flood control used to be undertaken by private farmers, with assistance from the State (Pillai and Panikar, 1965). The traditional agrarian structure until the mid-twentieth century was hierarchical and caste based; land being owned or possessed only by upper-caste Hindus or Syrian Christians. Cultivation used to be done by tenants the agricultural labourers who tilled land and harvested the crop being scheduled castes and the backward communities. The characteristic feature of this system was that it was inherently coercive in nature, and perpetuated itself by trapping the poor and the weak in a vicious circle of poverty, debt and bondage (Kannan, 1979).

Records of reclamation are available from 1834 when the Government of Travancore advanced loans for reclamation and by the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost 2300 ha of Vembanad lake was reclaimed (GOK, 1971:5). The initiative for institutional reforms came from the monarchy and as a consequence of this policy, even by 1850 a major share of the cultivated land and the whole of the waste land came under the State which led to the emergence of a class of independent farmers, who reclaimed the backwaters of Kuttanad for rice cultivation through operations which required large capital investments (Pillai and Panicker, 1965).

In the Kuttanad region also, the social changes mentioned earlier, followed the

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position besides Rwanda' (UNDP, 1997:37).

<sup>5</sup> The best example of splits in political parties is that there are four factions of Kerala Congress (KC) represented in the Kerala assembly now. Three of them – KC (Mani), KC (Jacob) and KC (Pillai) – are in the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF), with KC (Joseph) in the opposition Left Democratic Front (LDF). The letters in brackets denote the names of leaders who formed these, mainly to obtain a seat in the respective cabinets.

same pattern or in fact spearheaded those macro changes. The tenancy reforms in the early decades of 20th century (which weakened the rentier landlord Hindu aristocracy) and state support for backwater reclamation by the former tenants were the major reasons for the rise of capitalism in agriculture (Jose 1977; Kannan, 1979). The tenancy reforms in the 1930s did not envisage any land redistribution with the ownership being assigned to tenants who turned to owner-cultivators. The farmers, thus relieved from rent payment, could retain a surplus to be put back in agriculture to improve the technique of production. This initiated the transition to a capital-intensive technology (Jose, 1979). Meanwhile, attracted by the newly generated employment opportunities in the agricultural farm sector, agricultural labourers from the midlands and highlands east of the region migrated to the Kuttanad region (Jose, 1999). Such penetration of capital into Kuttanad agriculture and the attendant technological advancements led to a decline in labour use along with emergence of excess supply of labour (Kannan, 1979). A class of wage workers emerged with their subsequent mobilisation and organization into a rural proletariat (Kannan, 1986 and 1988; Jose, 1977 and 1979).

## **2.2. Class Interests In Kuttanad**

We outline the class interests and conflicts in the agrarian scene in Kuttanad in this section. The labour interests consolidated as a result of the development of objective conditions for worker mobilisation. The organisation of farmer/landed interests later emerged as a response, especially to confront what they refer as labour militancy in the wake of the Communist governments, which came to power in 1957 and 1967. The broad caste basis and political institutions representing the conflicting interests provide the background to the discussions on the contemporary political scene in section 3.

### *2.2.1. Labour Interests: Mobilisation of Agricultural Workers*

The shift from the mobilisations centred on community identities happened in the 1930s when the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), which later joined the Communist Party began organising workers. The trade unions organised by the leftists among coir factory workers had formed themselves into a union in Alleppey in Central Travancore



by the 1920s and started struggles by 1938.<sup>6</sup> The Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union (TKTU) was formed in 1940.<sup>7</sup> Kannan ascribed historical factors an important role in the process of 'political mobilisation under conditions of accelerate social change' and identified the factors as: The early proletarianisation of a large segment of the traditional work-force; the emergence of social-reform movements for attaining social dignity for the poor and those considered socially backward; and the coming of nationalist politics, quickly accompanied by a radical political movement which sought to incorporate all sections of the labouring poor, irrespective of their status as peasant, wage labourers, or self-employed in non-agricultural occupations (Kannan, 1999:146). The movement flourished in Kuttanad because of the existence of 'objective conditions', of which the tenancy reforms in 1930s, development of capitalism, technological improvements and proletarianisation of workers were the major ones (Jose, 1979; Kannan, 1986). Labour-dependent, large-scale capitalist farming, especially in the *kayal* areas, were conducive for cornering the large farmers with big stakes by agitation in peak periods like harvesting (Jose, 1979:7). The early history of the movement is closely linked to the development of the Communist Party, with peasant mobilisations, which were anti-British and nationalistic in orientation, the greatest of which was the Punnapra-Vayalar revolt in 1946.<sup>8</sup>

The Communist Party and TKTU were banned after the revolt; the leaders went underground and a period of labour oppression continued until 1950.<sup>9</sup> When the union activities geared up again, the first task was to release the workers from the perpetual bondage where they were dependent on the landlords for their subsistence wages and also for their dwelling places, so that they could effectively participate in union politics. In 1955, the Travancore-Cochin state assembly passed legislation banning the eviction of hutment dwellers (Jose, 1979:6). The 1950s were particularly a turbulent period with farmer-labour conflicts on the rise. The union chose to declare regular strikes during

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<sup>6</sup> See Isaac (1984, chapter 3) for details and Isaac (1983) for the emergence of the radical working class movement from 1922 to 1938.

<sup>7</sup> This became Kerala Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KKTU) in 1956 with the integration of Malabar into Travancore-Cochin to form Kerala. The split in CPI in 1964 gave birth to two unions namely the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU) under CPI (M) and Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Federation (KSKTF) under CPI. For a history of these, see Oommen, 1985:69-83; Jose, 1979:3-6. For the ideology, detailed organisational pattern and functioning of KSKTU, see Oommen, 1989:180-94.

<sup>8</sup> See the detailed account by Oommen, 1985:73-80, Nampoodiripad, 1984.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout the 1940s, influential landlords used to frame cases against the labour leaders and wielded economic weapons against rebellious labourers by denying them work. This severely constrained the activities of the union (Jose, 1979:8).

times when the labour demand peaked like during the harvest period (see the timeline in box 1 for this and the major highlights of the mobilisation of agricultural workers). The first Communist administration came to power in 1957. This made the position of farmers vulnerable and Jose (1979) indicates the numerous tri-partite conferences of labourers, farmers and government officials in Kuttanad during this period. The ‘militant’ trade union leaders, partly now in positions of responsibility (of being state-level leaders of the ruling party), had to listen to the voices of the ‘other’ (farmer/landed). Therefore, the government set up a tri-partite committee in September 1957, called the Industrial Relations Committee (IRC).<sup>10</sup> But the trade union strategy was to continue agitation during negotiations, to influence the decisions as well as to bargain further on the demands (Jose, 1979:15).

**BOX 1**  
**Timeline of agricultural workers’ mobilisation**

1930s:	Congress Socialist Party (CSP) began organising industrial workers in Alleppey town which then extended to the mobilisation of agricultural workers in Kuttanad.
1940:	Formation of Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union (TKTU), but declared illegal by the government.
1946:	Punnapra Vayalar Revolt.
1950:	Sickle-holding demonstration of TKTU through Kottayam town.
1951:	TKTU meeting in Kavalam where a charter of 44 demands was formulated.
1953:	Strike during harvest; the tri-partite committee (landlords, workers and government representatives) decides on wage hike, limiting of working day and lunch break.
1954:	18-day strike coinciding with the harvest to implement the tri-partite agreement
1955:	Strike during the harvest season for <i>theerpu</i> (rice given as advance to tide over the harvest season).
1956:	Minimum wage committee recommends wage hike, but no official notification made.
1957:	Election of first Communist administration, minimum wage notification, formation of industrial relations committee, prevention of eviction of tenants, hutment dwelling rights and non-interference of police in labour disputes.
1958:	Agrarian Relations Bill.
1959:	Liberation struggle and dismissal of the administration.
1964:	CPI splits, but newly formed CPI (M) holds most of the agricultural workers.
1968:	Formation of KSKTU.
1969:	Land Reforms (Amendment) Bill passed. Half a million people attended the rally in Alleppey that decided that hutment dwellers will de facto assert their rights on land as per the provisions of the bill. ‘Land grab’ agitation of forcible occupation of land mainly to bring into the notice of the Govt. the availability of surplus land for re-distribution (lasted for 80 days). State-wide strike call by KSKTU to which half a million workers responded.
1971:	200,000 hutment dwellers asserted their rights on homesteads and counter offensive by landlords with the help of police. 32 persons were killed and 50,000 arrested.
1975:	Kerala Agricultural Workers’ Act passed –provisions for security of employment, provident fund scheme, limited hours of work, prescribed wages, procedures for settlement of disputes, etc.
1976:	15-day strike in Kuttanad against the attempt of landlords to reduce the wages.
1980:	First SRFA (Save Rice Field Agitation)
1997:	Latest SRFA Agitation

Source: Jose (1979); Oommen (1985); Kannan (1986); interview with Mr V.S. Achuthanandan.

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<sup>10</sup> The birth and composition of IRC is briefed in GOK, 1971:23. Jose outlined the achievements of this institution (Jose, 1979:13-16). Oommen discussed in detail the cases handled by IRC which gives an idea of the nature, extent and character of the disputes (Oommen, 1985:220-8).

The 1960s marked a more fluid period in the Kuttanad agrarian scene. During this decade the increase in the number of agricultural labourers was more than three times the increase in population, with no significant increase in the acreage under rice or intensity of cropping (Jose, 1979:20-2).<sup>11</sup> This led to competition among the workers themselves on the one hand. and struggle between the labourers and cultivators for employing the labourers on the other. Many instances of violence erupted in different parts of the region (Thomas and Thomas, 1999:305). The resistance to mechanisation by the unions is already reported from the mid-1960s (Pillai and Panicker, 1965:55). In Kuttanad, some tractors were broken up, 'a Luddite strategy resorted to by the unions with a view to protect employment and retain their bargaining power' (Kannan, 1999:151). Panikkar in his dissenting note to the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission Report portrayed the situation:

The labour force participation in Kuttanad is lower than the rest of Kerala and unemployment and under-employment are more acute....As there is not enough work with agriculture to go around, the available work has to be shared by the increasing number of claimants. During a recent visit to Kuttanad, I observed that large hordes of workers were pressing forward from the small hours of the morning to get into the fields...a male worker in Kuttanad gets about 100 to 120 days' work in a year and a female worker gets 80 to 100 days' work. (GOK, 1971:37)

The trade union demand in this situation was to resist mechanisation and bargain for less working hours so that more labourers could be accommodated (Jose, 1979:15). There is no surprise that in this situation the largest of the trade unions, KSKTU, could increase its membership from 48,000 in 1971 to 130,000 in 1973 and the membership of Alleppey district alone rose from 17,400 to 35,000 (Jose, 1979:12). In such situations, labour mobilisation and organisation became a must. It was rightly pointed out that, 'the unionisation and organised bargaining initiated by the left parties in this region were the political consequences of the economic deprivation which the agricultural labourers were subjected to' (Jose, 1979:23). The same arguments are put forward by Mencher (1980), Tharamangalam (1981) and Kannan (1986; 1988).

The achievements of unionisation are many-fold, the most important being the significant gains in the form of better conditions for wage employment, reduced working time, legislative measures for the welfare of agricultural workers, education of the workers about their rights and most importantly, making them into a political force with class

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<sup>11</sup> During the decade 1960-61 to 1970-71 in the Alappuzha district when population increased by 17%, the agricultural labour force increased by 57% and the agricultural labour market was thus getting saturated and overcrowded (Jose, 1979:20).

consciousness (Jose, 1979:19; Oommen: 1985:193). Thus the union acts as a great political force for the CPI (M), for demonstrations, picketing, etc., which in turn raises the political consciousness of participants which helps them to fight for their economic rights. The CPI (M), Congress, CPI and RSP are the major contenders of mobilisation of the agrarian poor in Kuttanad, with CPI (M) having the largest following. However, such political mobilisation along party lines often works at cross-purposes, cutting into potential class gains (Oommen, 1985:190-1). A more recent study observed the effect of caste organisations among the working class and category organisations among artisans and commented that, more than promoting solidarity among the working class, these segmentise and fragment the rural communities (Philip, 1994). The post-1980 labour interest mobilizations will be detailed in section 3.

#### *2.2.2. Counter-Mobilisation By The Landed Interests*

By the mid-1950s, the trade union leaders managed to build an elaborate network of village-based organisations and the agricultural labourers emerged as a militant group capable of bargaining on equal terms with their employers (Jose, 1979). The earlier farmer tactic of unleashing organised repression on militant labourers via various social and economic sanctions was no more possible (ibid). It was common that governments, especially the leftist, interfered to diffuse agrarian tensions in Kuttanad and to make decisions favouring labourers (Oommen, 1985). This led to the emergence and consolidation of the contrary interest on the agrarian scene: The response by the landed/farmer interests. The emergence of a class of capitalist farmers in Kuttanad was explained earlier and they naturally considered the trade unions a threat from the early days of mobilisation. The use of police for repression of trade union activities and physical force were the initial forms of resistance by the landed class. In spite of a prolonged period of confrontations and coercive strategies by farmers and the use of police, they found that the trade unions were growing in strength. With a pro-labour ministry in place in 1957, the farmers' position became more precarious, especially with the policy of non-interference of police in labour disputes. The farmers also were forced to organise. The strategies of the farmers to counter the 'menace' of labour 'militancy' is presented in this sub section.

The greatest problem for farmers is to identify themselves as a class as did the agricultural labourers. But what made them come together and when? Oommen explains this phenomenon as, 'in an area where one category of population is organised to

assert rights, it is almost inevitable that the categories which are adversely affected will also organise themselves either as a defence mechanism or as a counter-offensive' (1985:194). The first farmer's association, the *Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham* started functioning in 1932. A federation of farmers' associations emerged in the 1960s called the *Akhila Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham* (AKKS) 'in the wake of the threat from organised labour unions sponsored by the communist parties' (ibid:195). The *Upper Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham* (UKKS) was the biggest and was formed in 1958. They were very active in 1958-59 and then dormancy came with the dismissal of the Communist administration in 1959. It picked up momentum again in the wake of the next Communist administration in 1967. Most of the primary members are middle and small cultivators with associate members drawn from the agricultural labour force providing muscle power (ibid:201). The labourers are mostly upper castes mobilised along communal lines. However, when the threat vanishes there is no common goal, interest or ideology that cements them together.

The political affinity of UKKS with the Kerala Congress was clear (it represented their interests in the state legislature) and a primary incentive for educated younger members was that this is a channel towards a Kerala Congress political career (ibid:202). Conflicts of interests within the amorphous class of farmers, result in differential political affiliations too. There are farmers' associations ('poor peasants') for the CPI and CPI (M) and there are agricultural workers' unions for the Kerala Congress and Congress. However, the majority of the middle and rich farmers are under Kerala Congress and most landless agricultural labourers, especially of lowest castes, belong to the CPI (M)-sponsored KSKTU (ibid:206-7).

Although most of the agrarian conflicts are class conflicts, they are more or less political confrontations too. The move by the Communist government in 1959 to implement land reforms also triggered reaction by the upper caste land-owning farmers. In the Niranam village in Kuttanad, the champion of the cause of farmers, Elanjickal John Jacob, who later became a leader of the Kerala Congress and minister, organised a militant brigade of high castes, indulging in a number of group clashes. A number of Pulaya labourers belonging to the Communist party were killed (Philip, 1994:186). According to the landed class perspective the 'Niranam Brigade' (also called the 'palm cap brigade') was formed 'to counter the constant atrocities against farmers and peace-loving people. In 1957 as soon as the Communist party came to power, the party cadre began taking the law into their own hands. As the major land-owning class, the Christian farmers

were targeted by the attack of party cadre'.<sup>12</sup> A recent publication by a veteran Kerala Congress leader (Edayadi, 1998) brings out the landed interest perspective of the conflicts and the political implications.

The farmer tactics to trade union strategies changed from mid-1960s to the late 1970s.

Farmers responded by retrenching workers, often those who had been in long-term employment with them. They resorted to casualisation of employment and a policy of hire and fire. Physical violence broke out in several rice fields especially during harvest time. Several instances of workers forcibly harvesting rice were reported. Farmers tried strong-arm tactics by hiring mercenaries but it did not last long since the government was not always behind them. When pro-labour governments were in power, the scales tilted in favour of unions since the police would not be used to interfere in what was called 'labour disputes'. (Kannan, 1999:151)

One of the major strategies of farmer resistance to trade union activity in the 1980s was the shifting away from labour-intensive crops like rice. The conflict following this and the post-1980s scenario is discussed in section 3.

There were some long-standing grievances around which Kuttanad farmers could organize/consolidate also. The historical emphasis on food production has forced the State to insist on rice cultivation and the Land Utilization Order (1967) prohibited by law any conversion of land to other uses. As a consumer-friendly policy, a specific quantity of rice at controlled price as a 'quota' used to be collected from 1942-1953 from rice farmers to be distributed through ration shops at reasonable prices to consumers. This practice was stopped, but restarted in 1964 and continued until 1978 as 'levy'.<sup>13</sup> The pumping subsidy was another consistent demand by the farmers. The important victories of Kerala Congress inside and outside the legislature were the rationalization of the paddy procurement system (levy) (Oommen, 1985:202) and the subsidy protection, especially the pumping subsidies (ibid:203). Discontent with the Land Utilization Order even now figures dominantly in the farmer perspective and will be detailed in the next section and forms the basis of the contemporary struggles on land use.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mr Mammen Mathai, a Kerala Congress MLA from Kuttanad region.

<sup>13</sup> According to the study, this was an 'unfair practice' and it was computed that in the 14 years from 1964, farmers' accumulated loss comes to Rs. 300 million (Abraham, 1980:41).

### 3. CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SCENE

The decline in the area under rice cultivation has been a hotly debated issue on Kerala's political scene for many years. The debate centres around the Land Utilisation Order of 1967, that insists on continuance of food crops in those lands traditionally so used.<sup>14</sup> This is the one of the most controversial pieces of legislation, widely criticised by propertied interests, because, these farmers say, it has lost its social relevance once the days of acute food shortage were over. However, in spite of the order, rice field conversions were rampant, as evidenced by the fall in area under rice.<sup>15</sup> The agricultural labourers, faced with loss of job, and organised under strong trade unions, demand continuance of rice cultivation. Save Rice Field Agitation (SRFA) was the high point of the rice debate, when the trade union KSKTU (Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union) launched an agitation in August 1997 by destroying the crops planted in converted rice fields. It became acutely political and controversial when SRFA appealed to the Land Utilisation Order as the major legitimising factor of the agitation.

Section 3.1 examines the consequences of land-use changes for labour and the reasons for SRFA. Section 3.2 introduces the salient aspects of SRFA. Section 3.3 introduces the competing political perspectives and section 3.4 analyses those.

#### 3.1. Changing Land Use And Its Consequences For Labour

The shift away from rice cultivation in Kerala to more profitable crops is widespread. The Alternate Rice Commission (ARC), sympathetic to the cause of labour, calculated the labour absorbing capacity of different crops as given in table 1.

The table shows that the number of labour days generated is substantively more in rice than other crops with the exception of rubber. However, rubber cultivation exclusively favours men and other crops use women's labour power only marginally.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Kerala Land Utilization Order of 1967 (issued under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955) 'empowers the government to direct every holder of land not to leave any land fallow, not to cultivate any other food crop than grown during three years immediately before commencement of this order or attempt to convert such land for any other purpose' (GOK, 1977:1-2).

<sup>15</sup> If the agricultural officer certifies that the 'land cannot be put to productive use to grow rice' it can be converted legally to other crops. The government is debating whether to allow conversions of certain types like a maximum of 10 cents to build residential houses or for public purposes like hospitals.

<sup>16</sup> Since our major concern is Kuttanad, this is irrelevant because substitution of rice by rubber is near to impossible in the region.

**TABLE 1**  
**Labour absorption potential of different crops**

Crop	Labour days per hectare			Percentage of women labour days
	Male	Female	Total	
Rice	50	116	166	70
Tapioca	64	16	80	20
Coconut	67	8	75	11
Arecanut	81	15	96	16
Pepper	41	3	45	7
Rubber	208	-	208	0

Source: ARC (1998, table 21:60)

The shift away from rice therefore implies serious job loss for the lowest castes and in particular for women.

The non-availability of labour is often a justification to introduce mechanisation. Nevertheless, the KSKTU has a membership of 1.3 million and they claim that the total number of agricultural labourers is 2.1 million (Kanaran, 1998:23). Even if it is argued that this figure includes labourers in activities other than rice and that the number is bloated, we see that a sizeable section of the population is affected.<sup>17</sup>

The Agricultural Workers Act of 1974 was a decisive step in the lives of agricultural labourers in Kerala when the Government prescribed minimum wages for their work (Jeffrey, 1992:184). A variety of pro-poor measures by various governments in power positively contributed to their well-being (Kannan, 1998, 1999), although some aspects like gender disparity and feminisation of work are under-emphasised. The wage gains and other benefits accrued by the agricultural labourers through the long-drawn struggles were explained in section 2. In 1952 the harvest wage in rice cultivation was 1/12 or 8.3 percent of the produce, and gradually increased to 1/6 or close to 17 percent by the mid-1980s. The rise in labour wages continues even today (GRC, 1999:65). However, studies reveal that the per capita employment of agricultural labourers declined sharply and the wage gains were leading to job loss. A recent estimate is that the decline in employment due to the fall in rice area was 'around 35 million man-days by mid-seventies and early eighties and around 50 million man-days by mid-nineties' (Kannan, 1998:14). Average annual days of employment for agricultural labour in Kerala in 1964-65 was 194 for men and 143 for women compared to 273 and 180 respectively for all India, and by 1974-75 the per capita employment declined to 160 days for

<sup>17</sup> This was the familiar answer from farmers when this issue was posed in the field interviews.



men in Kerala with no change for women (GRC, 1999:61).<sup>18</sup> This was the result of a strategy of substituting female labour for male labour during the initial period of wage bargaining. In 1983-84 per capita employment declined to 147 and 115 days for men and women respectively. The decline in men's employment (days per year per man hired) was 18 percent between mid-1960s and mid-1970s and 8 percent between mid-1970s and mid-1980s in Kerala (GRC, 1999:61).

Our analysis (based on fieldwork done in 1998) suggested the drastic reduction of labour days is going further. It was seen that an average of 133 woman-labour days and 21 man-labour days is generated by rice farming per hectare per crop.<sup>19</sup> The figures indicate the general job loss by crop shifts and the feminisation of agricultural labour work. This was cutting into the wage gains accrued by labour due to a pro-active trade union movement. Given the continued decline in area under rice, the per capita employment must have registered a further decline in the 1990s. In Kuttanad, the Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) came out with a very profitable option of integrated fish farming, which is far less labour absorbing. This led the strongest trade union of the agricultural workers, KSKTU (affiliated to the CPI (M)), to re-launch the SRFA by destroying other land use in converted rice fields.

### **3.2. SRFA IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS**

KSKTU claimed to mobilise workers against rice field conversions from 1982-1996 after the first SRFA in 1982 in Kuttanad.<sup>20</sup> There were demonstrations in front of government offices to bring the issue to the notice of the government. Since there was not much response from the government or from farmers, the fourteenth State Conference of the KSKTU decided to strengthen the SRFA. On June 9, 1997 a 'Save Rice

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<sup>18</sup> The difference is mainly due to the predominance of perennial crops in Kerala's agriculture.

<sup>19</sup> The difference with the figure in table 1 (which is all Kerala for ARC) was inquired into. The major difference was in the female labour use ratio that is higher in our study. I was informed that this is because of the higher number of labour days generated by weeding in our study region (which is a female labour activity) as well as the higher share of women engaged in harvesting. Men who used to be actively involved in harvesting have shifted to the more remunerative job of head loading during this season, which is also special to the region since the rice has to be transported by canoes for marketing. GRC has noted this as an unhealthy trend (GRC, 1999:66-7).

<sup>20</sup> Sudhakaran (1998:40). Many KSKTU leaders refer to this strike as the first SRFA. An unsympathetic study reports that thousands of agricultural laborers participated to destroy the crop in one farmer's (Akkarakalathil Anthonichan) field near Nedumudi bridge in Kuttanad and the field is still fallowed without any crop (Shaji, 1997:112).

Fields' convention was held in Moncombu, Kuttanad. The report prepared by a team of KSKTU leaders, who went around Kuttanad studying the extent of conversions, was passed in this convention (Sudhakaran, 1998:40). They reported to the government that the 'extra-profit-motivated agrarian capitalists have reclaimed rice fields, mined sand and started fish farming with the help of Revenue Officials responsible to conserve rice lands' and the new SRFA was planned to bring this issue to the notice of the government and the public (Lakshmanan, 1998:89). Such a statement brings in the dominant elements in the labour perspective detailed later, which is the political economic aspect of the issue: The actions of the powerful interests in collusion with the State leading to environmental degradation and labour displacement. Hence the agitation was supposed to sensitise the public on such an issue.

In Alleppey district, strikes by agricultural workers were held at 47 centres from 5 July to 29 July 1997. KSKTU reported that prior notice was given about the location of the strike which were all at illegal reclamation by 'big agrarian capitalists' in which 31,660 people participated and as a result 29 cases were registered against 828 comrades including CPI(M) and KSKTU leaders (Lakshmanan, 1998:89). There was counter-propaganda against the agitation by newspapers, opposition political parties in the UDF and all parties in the ruling coalition except CPI (M). KSKTU equated this politi

cal response with that in the land reforms agitation in 1970 (Lakshmanan, 1998:91).

Some scientists from KAU came to the scene supporting the SRFA and organised a study tour and awareness campaign to sensitise people to the scientific and social aspects of rice field conversions. The environmental problem, water conservation issue, unemployment and social issues due to a fall in food production because of rice land conversions were discussed in detail in their report (ARC, 1998).

Farmers and their organisations painted a very different picture of SRFA.<sup>21</sup> They commented that there are no big farmers or agrarian capitalists in Kuttanad as KSKTU claimed. Low profitability, scarcity of labour and high wages are the major problems of rice cultivation. Farmers complain that SRFA was a sheer political exercise targeted to political opponents and suggested the hollowness of this 'symbolic agitation' by listing the CPI (M) leaders and cadre who have converted rice fields to

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<sup>21</sup> The farmer interviews I conducted in Alleppey District, where SRFA was most widespread, matched with Shaji (1997) who detailed the SRFA, largely denouncing the agitation with copious farmer interviews.

other uses. Shaji (1997) found a CPI (M) leader admitting the party-political nature of destruction and the non-involvement of labourers in the agitation, which was largely carried out by the party cadre.

CPI (M) was in power during SRFA and hence could not afford to let the agitation continue, given the concerted negative response in the political realm. On August 25, 1997, the Chief Minister of Kerala called an all-party conference with KSKTU and other representative organizations. It was decided to constitute a commission to study the problems of rice cultivation. Proclaiming more benefits for rice cultivation in the 1998-99 budget and declaration of the 'golden grain' year was the highlights (Lakshmanan, 1998:91). KSKTU claims that rice field conversions completely stopped in 1997 as a result of the agitation, but from 1998 onwards conversion has been widespread again, because of the carelessness and rent-seeking behaviour of the government officials responsible for implementing the law (Sudhakaran, 1998:39). The same article also claimed that SRFA is not like the earlier agitation for the right of the agricultural labourers, but an altruistic fight to protect the remaining rice fields. On both sides of the political fence, there were exaggerated claims and counter-claims for and against the agitation. These perspectives moulded public opinion and one of the debates in land use which was most discussed in Kerala.

### **3.3. Competing Perspectives**

Almost every political party, including those in the ruling left front coalition except CPI (M), came out openly against the agitation. Most of the political parties preferred to call the SRFA a 'crop destruction strike'. The following sections attempt to distil the arguments of the two conflicting interests in the SRFA. Newspapers are a powerful medium, especially among a highly literate population as in Kerala and many earlier commentators noted this as an important factor in the high political awareness of Keralites (Jeffrey, 1994; Franke and Chasin, 1993). The role of the media in opinion forming is important and becomes a significant factor in deciding the balance of power in a democratic polity. Individuals who were not directly involved in rice cultivation as cultivators or labourers raised these issues in the media through newspapers and trade union publications. I present the two competing perspectives regarding the issue from the point of view of farmers and labourers. The major arguments that figured in the ensuing debate are outlined in this section.

### 3.3.1. Farmer Perspective

The amorphous class of farmers who bear the cost of low-productive rice cultivation cannot come together as an interest group because of the multiple identities and cleavages explained elsewhere (Narayanan, 2003:chapter 7) and more importantly because except for a few, nobody is a full-time farmer. This group generally argues for their freedom of choice to shift away from rice.<sup>22</sup> We present some issues of farmer interest consistently taken up and propagated in the media and major arguments in box 2.

#### **BOX 2** **Major arguments in the farmer perspective**

- There is no sense in the argument that the farmers facing losses in cultivation nevertheless have to take care of the food security and agricultural labour jobs.
- Rice can be bought from anywhere and insistence on food self-sufficiency is unnecessary.
- The Kerala Land Utilisation Order has to be withdrawn and farmers allowed to cultivate any crop they desire.
- Scarcity of timely labour and the need for mechanisation.
- Nucleation of families has triggered housing problems that demand the reclamation of rice lands.
- There are no special environmental attractions of rice lands since these are just agricultural lands.
- SRFA is violence and cannot be tolerated. The agricultural labourers have no right to insist on rice cultivation.
- SRFA is unacceptable; destruction was caused to the crops of small and marginal farmers. The government has failed its duty to protect the farms and in addition, trouble the farmers through their party workers.
- Farmers affected by SRFA have to be compensated.
- If CPI (M) is sincere about their opposition to rice field conversions, they should convert the lands used to build party offices back to rice lands.

Not only the CPI (M), but all the major political parties, like the Congress, CPI, RSP, etc, have trade unions for agricultural workers. In the SRFA all these parties took a pro-farmer stand. Although CPI and RSP belonged to the then ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) coalition and are pro-labour parties, their criticism of SRFA was directed mostly towards CPI (M), which is known for its assertive attitude in the LDF. The main issue that the political parties took up and commented on was the destruction of the crops as violence, and hence a law and order problem. This had a twin motive of having an eye on the larger chunk of propertied class votes as well as an opportunity to criti-

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<sup>22</sup> I am aware of the danger of using 'farmer' as a 'group', considering the heterogeneity of interests among them, but this is a general term used to denote cultivators or landowners instead of laborers, subsisting solely by their labour power, whose interests are discussed in the next subsection. See Oommen (1985) who explained the problems of using 'farmer' as an analytical category.

cise the powerful CPI (M). The opinions against crop destruction carried out in SRFA are not essentially anti-labour opinions, but expressed in response to a more ‘militant’ stand by the strongest trade union of the biggest party in the political realm (which was also in power) in Kerala. However, regarding the media, most newspapers have been consistently raising propertied-interest concerns, as seen from our analysis of news reports during 1992-1998. In fact, a strong anti-labour orientation is noticeable in the repeated arguments in support of mechanisation.

### *3.3.2. Labour Perspective*

The labour perspective is more focused, with a few strong institutions and social practices well in place, compared to the farmer perspective. The agricultural workers are an organised group and a class-for-itself with support from the political parties, especially the CPI (M). Their main concern is livelihood security. The political and trade union leadership form a powerful group in contemporary Kerala. The KSKTU affiliated to the CPI (M) is the strongest institution in the trade union movement with membership throughout the state. Their main base is in the Alleppey district, with the largest number of agricultural labourers being concentrated here and many party leaders have their political roots organising the agricultural workers in Kuttanad. This was the main reason for the historical mobilisation (Kannan, 1986) and exclusive concentration in this region of KSKTU activism during SRFA.

The major arguments in the labour perspective are projected in a publication, *Karhaka Thozhilali* (Agricultural Labourer), the official magazine of the union. In 1998, it celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and this silver jubilee edition discusses the SRFA in detail, consolidating the arguments justifying the agitation. The top leaders wrote articles including the then Chief Minister of Kerala and another stalwart leader of the agricultural labourers who was also a politburo member of the CPI (M) and whose political base is in Alleppey. The major argument of trade unions legitimising SRFA was that it was a reaction to the illegal conversions by ‘profit-motivated farmers in collusion with corrupt officials’. The major arguments in the labour perspective are presented in box 3.

**BOX 3**  
**Major arguments in the labour perspective**

Need to continue rice cultivation:

- Solution to the food crisis;
- To reduce unemployment, especially of rural women;
- For environmental protection;
- For the availability of straw and husk for the cattle;
- For the prosperity of the village economy through agricultural development;
- 'Right to work' is a fundamental right and to safe-guard it, rice cultivation has to continue.
- Decline in labour days from 180-200 to average of 60 days per annum has forced almost 100,000 agricultural labourers, mostly women, to leave this sector.
- Land Utilisation Order (1967) has to be strictly enforced.

SRFA is based on a Marxist class analysis and is against:

- The neo-colonial strategy of destruction of the food grain production to promote the export of their surplus production and as part of a conspiracy to destroy the food security of the country.
- The development of capitalism in agriculture with the Green Revolution and the ensuing misery of a growing proletariat
- Greedy new capitalists, right-wing politicians, ignorant and a-political farmers, anti-labour intellectuals, bourgeois media and corrupt officials' (Sudhkaran, 1998:39).

### **3.4. Analysis Of The Perspectives**

#### *3.4.1. Political Constellations And Motives*

The political motives and competing perspectives have to be analysed against the background of the larger political process. Many studies mentioned the early social mobilisations based on the horizontal divisions in the society, such as communal identities, and their influence on the development of a fragmented polity (Kurien, 1986, Mathew, 1989). The broad class interests in this political process provided the material basis of conflicts and the interests were divided into 'egalitarian' and 'propertied' (Narayanan, 2003). The former group was always advocating change in the existing socio-economic situation (counter-hegemonic and emancipatory) to improve their positions, and the other invariably resisting it (hegemonic). The organisation of workers and the phases of the struggles of the working class and the reaction to this mobilisation by the privileged class when their hegemony was challenged from the 1950s onwards was also discussed. After 1957, no single political party could form a government and many conflicting interests were accommodated inside each coalition that came to power in Kerala. A new coalition that surfaced in 1980 with a break-away faction of Congress,

CPI and even one faction (M) of Kerala Congress, with CPI (M) as the leading partner, broke through the ideological barriers. The stark differences between the propertied and egalitarian interests in politics began waning.

Along with this, there was the process of social mobility for the lower classes due to the social changes described so far. The land reforms in 1970 and later and fragmentation of holdings brought in many new landholders – most of them small and marginal. The economics of cultivation made their position vulnerable. Meanwhile, the income of labour households improved with the right to homesteads as part of land reforms, welfare measures and safety cushions.<sup>23</sup> The initiation of a number of labour welfare measures including old-age pension to rural workers and creation of welfare funds imparted a degree of economic security to many segments of the hitherto unprotected labourers (Kannan, 1998 and 1999; Nair, 1999a).

This brought a change in the traditional role of the institutions representing working-class interests. A critique suggested that CPI (M) now represents non-working-class interests and explained the recent factional fight inside the party as intra middle-class strife (Rammohan, 1998:2578). For more on the greying of the contemporary societal realities see Rammohan (1991 and 1998), Kannan (1998 and 1999), George (1998) and Tharamangalam (1998). In short, the structural explanations based on the stark inequalities of the 1960s and earlier have lost much of their teeth.

The political motives of the re-emergence of the opposing interests as socially-constructed perspectives have to be analysed against this background.

The labour perspective pictures SRFA as a fight against agrarian capitalists who make huge profits through rice field conversions by colluding with corrupt officials, by law responsible for the conservation of these lands. Therefore, the SRFA was projected as a patriotic strike against these powerful classes. According to the labour perspective, the bourgeois political parties unleashed propaganda against this agitation, by turning it into a law-and-order issue. But they claim that the major sections of the public and progressive scientists supported the agitation. The victory of the agitation is claimed, citing the move by the government to appoint a commission to study the problems of rice cul-

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<sup>23</sup> In a study conducted in the major rice growing regions, it was found that more than 75 per cent of farm labourers were educated up to primary level. The annual income of majority of the labourers was found to be Rs.5000 - 10000. Only a lesser percentage of the farm labourers owned rice land with an area ranging from 0.5 - 2.0 acres (Pillai, 2001:63).



tivation and proclaim 'golden grain year' with additional support for rice. Still KSKTU decided to continue the 'patriotic struggle', in which the small farmers are to be the allies of agricultural labourers to save the agricultural sector from the neo-colonial strategy of destroying the Third World food systems. By these political tenets, the majority of the population is expected to flock to the party (CPI (M)), so that the enemy is reduced to only a few big farmers who still retain land.

The Kerala Congress and most other political parties deny the existence of such a class and claim to represent small and marginal farmers. Their enemy is not labour, but the militant trade unions who claim to represent labour and use the party machinery to harass the marginalized class of farmers, already suffering from the increasing costs in cultivation. They also oppose the LDF government that was in power which supported/spearheaded the anti-farmer actions. The farmer perspective mentioned has two particularly interesting statements by a Kerala Congress leader. One is that the Kerala Congress cadre won't hesitate to wear the 'palm-caps' again and go into agitation for farmers and the second was the threat that the farmers will march to the secretariat and pull down the ministry.<sup>24</sup> In both the statements, we see the traces of propertied interests that peaked during the late-1950s, when farmers coalesced into an interest group and were an important force in support of the 'liberation struggle' that brought down the first Communist government. These statements revived to reinforce the class interests that this party is supposed to be representing. Kerala Congress was very active in the political resistance against SRFA (see Edayadi, 1998 for details) since they 'represent' very many of the farmers.<sup>25</sup> The exaggerated political rhetoric from both sides brings the competing claims from the opposing perspectives.

The statements made by most of political parties against SRFA is oriented towards the sheer numbers (which count as votes in elections) in a democratic polity. The agricultural labourers form a weaker segment in the various electoral constituencies, except in regions like the rice bowls of Kuttanad and Palakkad. Here, the trade union action is a regional issue to maintain the hold of CPI (M). However, as the major partner in the ruling front, they had to respect the general public opinion and hence were partly apologetic about the 'violence' in the agitation and then the government inter-

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<sup>24</sup> The 'palm cap agitation' in 1950s was the symbol of the farmer offensive against worker mobilization mentioned in section 2.

<sup>25</sup> The Kerala Congress mostly represent the Christian cultivators, which form the majority (more than 46% according to KWBS, 1989, Annex D: 20) of the propertied interest in Kuttanad.

vened making way for the official settlement of the agitation. Sporadic incidences continued which matched the need of the local KSKTU leadership.

### 3.4.2. *Media Bias*

Contemporary politics in Kerala has intensively debated the farmer and labour points of view. There was a clear propertied class-orientation to the reporting by the newspapers. A resistance was put up by the counter-propaganda of trade unions, the penetration and influence of which was slight compared to that of the newspapers. The labour perspective projected larger issues like food security and environmental conservation as well as labour concerns like job loss. These were sidelined and the debate in the media largely reduced to issues of crop destruction and farmer concerns like individual right to choice of crop, low returns, lack of labour discipline and CPI (M) violence. Whose power do the societal perspectives described reflect? The perspectives projected by newspapers represent clearly identifiable interests. The trend of middle classing (Morrison 1997, Narayanan 2003) and the related interests were dominant. Since the land reforms, small and marginal farmers are a dominant majority and compared to this group, the landless agricultural workers figure only marginally in this newspaper subscribing clientele. The pro-agitation and labour-friendly media reports were mostly carried in *Desabhimani*, the official newspaper of CPI (M), but the readership of this was restricted to the working class and party fellow travellers.

*Manorama* is singled out here as being in the forefront of the 'bourgeois press' (Kurien, 1986:44) constantly upholding the cultivator's (propertied) interests.<sup>26</sup> The same phenomenon is identified in the rice debate. The newspaper mainly cited (and the others marginally referred to except *Desabhimani*), have these propertied interests as their customers (readership).<sup>27</sup> Such interests of the newspapers match well with those of all political parties (except CPI (M)) for which the dominant group is the opinion making, and hence the decision-making one. The strategy of domination of one per-

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<sup>26</sup> The suggestion was that *Manorama* was "nursing a bourgeois culture and imparting a capitalist orientation' to Kerala society" (Kurien, 1986:44).

<sup>27</sup> Here I refer to the rest of the population who are not agricultural laborers. Please note the earlier observation of a general aversion to manual jobs and class-consciousness at an aspirational level, though it may not conform to material realities. For example, an agricultural labourer's child who is educated and unemployed, although dependent on the parents for material needs, has the aspirations of the above-mentioned middle class. They also read, reflect and may feel one with the 'better majority' in the society unless there is a conscious conscientisation along other lines like a trade union education (which they are not available for).

spective “might not be overt and explicit nor through competition or confrontation, but through the expression of consensus and ‘officialising strategies’ whereby the particular interests of key sections of the community become identified with the *general interest*” (Mosse, 1993). This is very clear in the case of the dominant interests getting priority in the media debate following SRFA.

It could also be argued that the larger debate on the Luddite strategy of the trade union undermined the relevant issues like job loss, food security and environmental protection. However, in most of the media discussions on rice or Kuttanad over the years the orientation is towards the farmers’ problems of high wages, low returns, need for mechanisation, etc. SRFA could bring the attention of the media to the issues raised in the labour perspective. In spite of such discussions and controversy, conversion of rice fields continues unabated, indicating the final victory to the dominant interests in the society.

#### 3.4.3. *Critique of CPI (M) and Trade Unions*

Some recent academic writings in Kerala criticise the role of trade unions as counter-productive. They complain about the ‘labour militancy’ which keeps capital away from Kerala, as the unintended consequence of the ‘Kerala Model of Development’ (Tharamangalam 1998; George 1998). Some others raise the ‘psychic costs’ to investors because of the labour problems (Kannan 1998 and 1999; George 1998). There has been widespread displacement of labour in the 1980s due to the stagnation in productive sectors, especially once traditional industries took to migrating to low-wage areas inside India.<sup>28</sup> In the rice sector, the phenomenon was portrayed as ‘wage gains and work losses’ (Kannan, 1998 and 1999) and explained by the above-mentioned studies as the unintended societal consequences of mobilisation and a pro-labour development ethos.

Kannan (1998:18) and Oommen (1985:237) deemed the trade union leadership partly responsible for the situation. One not-so-kind portrayal of the leadership is the suggestion of the emergence of a ‘trade union bourgeoisie’, especially within CPI (M)

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<sup>28</sup> A prominent example given is that of the cashew processing industry employing around a 100,000 workers, 95 percent of whom were women. Minimum wages were introduced, arising out of the demand of labour unions, and employers’ attempts to restore ‘putting’ out’ systems through control of raw materials were frustrated. This resulted in large-scale migration of the industry to the neighboring state of Tamilnad and a sharp decline in employment in the industry in Kerala (Kannan 1998:13).

which ‘accumulates by appropriating a share of the workers’ legitimate due (Rammo-han, 1998:2580). Similar observations were made in an earlier study on the institutionalisation of agrarian relations where there was the mention of a ‘group of professional trade unionists or institutional entrepreneurs’ (Oommen, 1985:237). Oommen distinguished some latent functions of institutionalisation of agrarian relations:

while their [trade unions’] manifest role is to serve the categories they represent, it is not unlikely that they develop a vested interest to maintain their positions and for this, either the prevalent structures would be kept alive even when they become obsolete or new ones will be inducted into the system, both of which may be dysfunctional for pursuing the interests of the categories they represent. (Oommen, 1985:237).

This was said in a study on Alleppey district and KSKTU was one of the main foci and the leadership of the trade union at the various levels suggested to be a berth or stepping-stone to party responsibility. In the last two decades, there were only two major actions by KSKTU in 1982 (Sudhakaran 1998) and in 1997. Curiously, both were conducted when the CPI (M) was in power and if opposition accusations are correct, with full patronage of the state via the police.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the issues raised by KSKTU in both these are very relevant.

According to the farmer perspective, SRFA is to be seen in the light of the institutionalisation of CPI (M) and KSKTU. CPI (M) was in power for nine years in the last fourteen years (1987-2001) and the composition of the cadre also must have undergone changes considering the overall changes in the society. One of the criticisms by propertied interests was that the party cadre and not the agricultural workers mainly carried out the agitation, and that there is doubt whether many of the KSKTU agricultural labourers are ‘militant’ enough to undertake such operations now. Even if this is invalid, the societal pressure and the negativity that the agitation encountered was enormous. The interests and stakes in the society have shifted quite a bit due to the social changes. The rice sector is altogether a declining prospect. The economic, social and attitudinal problems make it unattractive. As a political party functioning within a democratic polity with electoral pressures, CPI (M) had to respond to this hegemonic trend and the agitation had to be withdrawn. But sporadic incidents of crop destruction were reported

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<sup>29</sup> Oommen (1985:201) also mentioned this connection between KSKTU activism and CPI (M) being in power.

even later which were due to pressure on the local leadership, especially in Alleppey district with the largest base and hence the highest stakes for KSKTU.

Here we see the argument by the historical institutionalists that institutions tend to remain , where institutions have to remain ‘sticky’ even when the political or economic conditions in which they exist have changed dramatically (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992:18). Thus institutions may have to play out certain ‘perceived roles’ although the social realities have considerably changed over a period of time. Doornbos suggested situations when ‘institutions assume a life of their own and become political actors in their own right’ and then ‘discrepancies between declared purposes and pursued aims’ arise. He raised the related question of ‘whose interests are at stake?’ (Doornbos, 2000:8). Some reports reduced SRFA to be the creation of infighting within CPI (M),<sup>30</sup> where a prominent leader and politburo member sought to consolidate his power within the party, through the KSKTU, his major political base (Jayaprakash 1997;<sup>31</sup> Abraham 1997).<sup>32</sup>)

However, agency cannot be reduced purely to self-interest. There are larger forces that constrain and enable agency too. When the politburo of CPI (M) concluded that the intra-party strife (‘groupism’) was as a result of a ‘clash of egos’ it was observed that ‘the clashes are possibly manifestations of certain tendencies and expressions of specific interests and sections’ (Rammohan, 1998:2578). The study associated the workers in traditional industries like coir processing, middle and lower sections of the peasantry, agricultural workers, etc, of the party as this particular leader’s class base (Rammohan, 1998:2580). This clarifies that there are socio-economic and political ‘constituencies’ that actors tend to ‘represent’ in order to consolidate their power.

By raising such questions of political agency, the notion of monolithic interests

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<sup>30</sup> See Rammohan (1998) for a detailed account of the personal and ideological aspects of the rift within CPI (M).

<sup>31</sup> This report raised the question that the agitation is concentrated around Kuttanad while the pertinent issue of rice field conversions is rampant in other districts and then reasoned this as a single leader’s tactic to get hold of the state party machinery in the organizational elections that were due. The report also cautioned that ‘sitting behind the curtain of a seemingly holy cause and unleashing unrelenting fight against the attack on earth, the commanders are moving the forces for their personal ends. But while a handful of leaders benefit from it, it is the movement which suffers, which can still act as a corrective force in the society’ (Jayaprakash 1997).

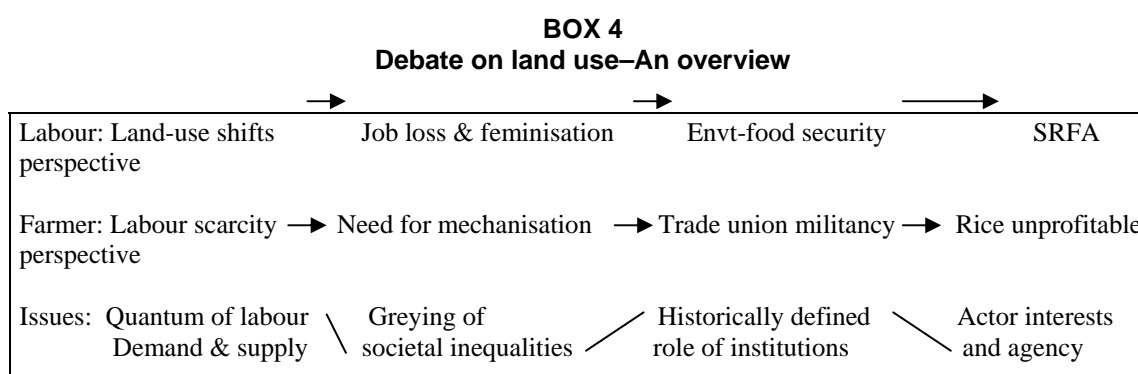
<sup>32</sup> This report also toed the same line as did the earlier report, explaining the agitation as the above-mentioned leader’s ‘brainchild’, and that he was trying to avenge the humiliation of his defeat (due to the feud in the party) in the assembly elections and commented that what the agitation achieved was bad publicity for the union (Abraham 1997:22-3).

of institutions (CPI (M) as a political party) is challenged, and political struggles get more vitality with assertions of specific individual actors/interests that guide institutional strategies. Here individual agency becomes a powerful factor in moulding political struggles, but has to be conceived within the structures of institutions and the larger society. When analysed through intermediate institutions like CPI (M), the interests could be dis-aggregated into occupational (agricultural labourers), organisational (KSKTU), caste or gender interests within political institutions, with the active role of agency taken seriously.

#### 3.4.4. Issues And Interests

The major issues from the farmers' point of view are that rice cultivation is unprofitable. Accordingly, in spite of the Land Utilization Order that restricts conversion, illegal conversions are rampant. The labour perspective is that SRFA is a reaction to this and is an effort to protect the law, promote food security and conserve the rice fields for their environmental role. The farmer perspective projects the acute shortage of labour and reduces SRFA to a mere political act by the trade union with no labour participation. The supply constraints of labour were evident from our field work and earlier studies (Kannan 1998, Shaji 1991). But there is still a large chunk of labour (above age forty, according to ARC 1998) dependent on this activity. Trade unions raise the issue that if the farmer's have a right to choose the land use, laborers have a 'right to work' as well, which can only be ensured if rice cultivation is sustained.<sup>33</sup>

This is an impasse in the debate, which demands more specific studies on the quantum of demand and supply of labour (including migration) during activities in a rice growing season. An overview of the debate on land use is given in:



<sup>33</sup> Interview with Mr. V. Kesavan, District Secretary, KSKTU, Allepey on 06-04-2000.

Most of those ‘vocally’ involved are not directly working in rice cultivation, but ‘represent’ certain interests. The representation is carried out by the political/media institutions, which play out their respective historical roles in the society. Because of this, we used the term ‘perspective analysis’ to understand the competing claims made in the political arena by various political institutions.<sup>34</sup> The statements can be considered as political discourses with their consequences for the material reality. Foucault argued that discourse ‘is material in the sense that it is located in institutions and social practices which define difference and shape the material world’ (Weedon 1999:103). In this case, the historically defined differences were reinforced through the competing perspectives. This is why the analysis of language is seen as important by political ecologists who consider language ‘not as reflective, but constitutive of social reality’.<sup>35</sup> We were interested in understanding how such political rhetoric is a product of the historically defined structures, how it helps articulate and reinforce certain contemporary claims, how it is the agent in their perpetuation.

The larger issue of rice in Kerala remains a stalemate just as in Kuttanad. Being a low-return activity, the farmers want to shift away from rice. The state still ‘officially’ holds on to the Land Utilisation Order (1967) which prohibits farmers from converting rice fields to other uses. But with loopholes in the law, many resort to conversions, evidenced by the 50% fall in the area under rice in the last 25 years.<sup>36</sup> The well-organised group of agricultural workers articulated issues of livelihoods, food security and environmental conservation. These *competing farmer and labour perspectives* pose the first impasse. However, in the micro context, some in both groups may have exits from the impasse as farmers shift away from rice and insofar as labourers go in search of alternate occupations for livelihood. The impasse at the macro level is more serious. The

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<sup>34</sup> Perspective analysis is informed by discourse analysis. Discourses are claims of truth rooted in institutions and social practices (Weedon 1987 and 1999; Sawicki 1991; Ramazanoglu 1993). The use of discourse was found to be useful in political ecology writings also. They define discourse as ‘an area of language use expressing a particular stand point and related to a certain set of institutions’ (Peet and Watts 1996:14). My use of the term ‘perspective’ is to clarify certain arguments projected by institutions representing certain societal interests.

<sup>35</sup> The post-structural analysis of discourse is applied in the context of political ecology by Escobar who suggested that ‘it is not only a linguistic theory; it is social theory, a theory of the production of social reality which includes the analysis of representation of social facts inseparable from what is commonly thought of as “material reality”. Post-structuralism focuses on the role of the language not as a reflection of “reality” but as constitutive of it’ (1996:46).

<sup>36</sup> If the Agricultural Officer certifies that the ‘land cannot be put to productive use to grow rice’ it can be converted legally to other crops. The government is debating whether to allow conversions of very small amounts of certain types like to build residential houses or for public infrastructure like hospitals.

political and trade union leadership are divided, taking sides with farmers and labourers. The political parties have their agendas and hence project the points of view of their major support bases. These interests cannot compromise and there is an impasse at the political level. There is little room for compromise between the *essential political stances* at the macro level. The environmental and social concerns invite resistance when imposed on individual farmers (particularly in a democratic polity). Individuals (particularly powerful ones) may not conform to social norms backed by legislation like the Land Utilisation Order of 1967. In a politicised society, such issues will prompt reaction from the affected groups, as in SRFA. The labour perspective was that the destruction of crops is not an illegal action, but a way of protecting the law. This also poses an impasse, considering the *legal norms of individual and collective rights*.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The discussions placed the political struggles over the issue of rice cultivation in Kerala and examined the contemporary conflicts in a rice-growing region with a historical perspective. The emerging writings in political ecology that incorporates theoretical ideas in development studies over a period was taken as an analytical pointer. We could incorporate many of the demands in this emerging framework like placing the issues in the historical and socio-economic context, taking agency seriously and giving central importance to politics. The missing analytical handle of integrating these concerns in political ecology was also rectified by the historical analysis of institutions that mediate political struggles taking agency of the actors also into account. The crux of the political ecology arguments is highlighted in the labour perspective of how the shifts to more profitable land use leads to a twin process of environmental degradation and social marginalisation.

The major observation is the politicisation of the larger issue of land use shifts away from rice with its consequences on the labour and the environment. In Kerala, the area under rice has drastically declined and there is a loss of 147 labour days per hectare per season (see Narayanan 2003:chapter 6) that cannot be compensated by any other crop. Nobody has precisely calculated the quantum of displacement or where these labourers get 'absorbed'. Therefore, there is the larger question of increasing unemployment and marginalisation of one of the most vulnerable sections of which the majority are the lowest caste women. The entry point of section 3 was the 'Save Rice



Field Agitation' (SRFA), the reaction of the agricultural workers union to the job loss due to rice field conversions. Such a political struggle was triggered from the issue of the general job loss by crop shifts away from rice and feminisation of agricultural labour work that was cutting into the wage gains accrued due to a pro-active trade union movement. The SRFA sprang out of these genuine problems, which are reflected in a rice bowl like Kuttanad, where a large chunk of labourers are solely dependent on rice cultivation. This is the reason why labour could be historically mobilised here, including in the present SRFA.

The historical evolution of conflicting interests in land was traced from the reigning academic wisdom on the topic. However, the greying of stark societal contradictions by land reforms and related social changes reflected in politics from the 1980s (of compromise between earlier binary interests) and ageing of institutions like trade unions and political parties prompted more nuanced analysis. This demanded the analysis of the political economy of ideological construction as demanded by political ecologists. Hence, I attempted the analysis of the projection of the competing perspectives (propertied and labour) by certain institutions. I used the term 'perspective analysis' to understand the competing claims made in the political arena by various political institutions. The historically defined differences between the institutions were reinforced by the competing perspectives. Reduction of the issues to 'CPI (M) violence' by all the political parties through the media reflected the trend of supporting the larger, dominant and decisive propertied classes in a democratic polity.

The social differentiation at the local level with its micro politics was noted elsewhere (see Narayanan 2003:chapter 7). The paper illustrated how the issues are aligned and fought over at the macro level. The historical analysis was insightful to grapple with the nuances of the contemporary political struggles like SRFA. CPI (M) supporting the labour cause from the early mobilisations through the land-reform struggles and equating those with the present SRFA was one side. Kerala Congress trying to reclaim the 'liberation struggle' days of the 1950s and arguing for farmers was the other.

Agency as demanded by historical institutionalists was given prominence. The political actors were placed within a larger context of structures and were found to be representing certain constituencies within the institutions and the larger society. Hence agency here is not completely voluntary. Our suggestion was that the differential meanings that actors assign to seemingly uniform situations/processes/issues is due to their

positioning in the social structure. The importance of agency was apparent, especially to dis-aggregate the character of institutions (like CPI (M)) which represent ‘class interests’. These institutions are not monoliths. Political struggles get more vitality with assertion of specific individual actors/interests that guide institutional strategies. Here individual agency becomes a powerful factor in moulding political struggles of certain groups who represent particular interests. The functional advantage of our analytical frame for the analysis of the actor--structure relation was also thus clarified.

Agricultural labourers, although a marginalized group with respect to all structures of societal power mentioned – caste, class and gender – were not passive victims of these structures. The mobilisation witnessed in SRFA, indicative of the political space for dissent in Kerala, is a crucial factor that prevented the spread of new initiatives like integrated fish farming in Kuttanad. Here we identify the crux of political ecology arguments. When resources get monopolised by dominant sections, conflicts and struggles over resources are initiated. The responses might be overt and open like SRFA or fought with ‘hidden transcripts’ depending on the power relations in the social structure. However, the land use decisions still rests with the powerful in the society. Thus we reiterated the centrality of politics in political ecology, which largely decides the change or continuity of land use.

The fragmented politics that currently works as a ‘check’ to productive activities should be transformed to one which creatively offer solutions from the local to broader contexts. The transformation cannot wish away the contemporary socio-political reality. Although Kerala lacks economic efficiency, it has proudly attained the social equity and political participation elements, which are crucial in development. There is little relevance now of acute and opposing essential stances, since the society has surpassed the stage of stark societal contradictions of social inequality. The *democratisation* and *politicisation* of the society has to be meaningfully taken forward by discussions, negotiations and consensus to facilitate benefits to maximum number of people. All developments have trade-offs and there should be societal means to redress the issues and negotiate solutions.

Politicisation is central to Kerala society and should be taken forward with the creative involvement of all by recognising and giving space to the differential interests. The present *essential stances* have to recognise the importance of societal dialectics to evolve *responsible politics*. Thus the last word also is of *power*. A land use strategy – with or without rice – is not only identifying what is technically feasible in a democ-

ratic fashion, but also recognising the *differential interests* and striving to build solutions that can command sufficient consensus through *responsible politics*.

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