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State, Society and Politics in Kerala

COURSE CODE: M23PS12DC

Postgraduate Programme in Political Science

Discipline Core Course

Self Learning Material



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The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

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State, Society and Politics in Kerala

Course Code: M23PS12DC

Semester - IV

Discipline Core Course
Postgraduate Programme in Political Science
Self Learning Material
(With Model Question Paper Sets)



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The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala



STATE, SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN KERALA

Course Code: M23PS12DC

Semester- IV

Discipline Core Course

Postgraduate Programme in Political Science

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Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

The courses offered by the Sreenarayanaguru Open University aim to strike a quality balance, ensuring students are equipped for both personal growth and professional excellence. The University embraces the widely acclaimed "blended format," a practical framework that harmoniously integrates Self-Learning Materials, Classroom Counseling, and Virtual modes, fostering a dynamic and enriching experience for both learners and instructors.

The University aims to offer you an engaging and thought-provoking educational journey. The MA programme in Political Science offers an advanced study of governmental structures and processes. It combines theoretical frameworks with practical applications, emphasising policy analysis and implementation. The curriculum covers organizational theory, public policy, administrative law, governance ethics, etc. Through the courses, learners gain expertise in public sector management. This programme prepares graduates for leadership roles in government agencies, non-profits, and international organizations, as well as for further academic pursuits. The Self-Learning Material has been meticulously crafted, incorporating relevant examples to facilitate better comprehension.

Rest assured, the university's student support services will be at your disposal throughout your academic journey, readily available to address any concerns or grievances you may encounter. We encourage you to reach out to us freely regarding any matter about your academic programme. It is our sincere wish that you achieve the utmost success.



Regards,
Dr. Jagathy Raj V.P.

01-03-2026

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BLOCK 1

Historical Background

UNIT 1

Traditional Society, Economy and Power Structure

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- describe the historical evolution of Kerala's early society and political structures
- explain how caste, class, and land relations shaped Kerala's feudal order
- discuss the role of temples and local assemblies in the administration of early Kerala
- evaluate how early political and social traditions influenced Kerala's later democratic culture

Background

The formation of Kerala's society and polity was influenced by its distinct geography, maritime trade, and social institutions. The region, located between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea, developed a decentralised form of governance where political power was dispersed among local rulers, Brahmin households, and temples. Recognising the roles of temples and local governance can inspire respect for Kerala's unique social foundations and emphasise their importance in shaping regional identity.

Keywords

Temple Economy, Janmi–Kudiyan Structure, Caste Hierarchy, Feudal Power Relations

Discussion

☐ Autonomous political unit

Kerala's early history reflects an intricate interplay of geography, social organisation, and political power. The natural barriers of the Western Ghats and the extensive coastline encouraged localised political formations rather than centralised kingdoms. Each region, or Nadu, functioned as an

autonomous political unit, governed by a chieftain or naduvazhi. These leaders maintained order, collected taxes, and presided over assemblies that handled local administration and disputes.

❑ Land as a divine

Myths such as that of Parasurama and the accounts in Keralolpathi played a major role in legitimising political authority and social hierarchy. They portrayed land as a divine gift to the Brahmins, making them moral custodians and landholders. The introduction of Brahmadeya grants institutionalised Brahmin ownership of land and consolidated temple-based economies. Temples thus became the nuclei of both religious and administrative life, managing the production and redistribution of resources.

❑ Jenmi–Kudiyan framework

The caste system became closely aligned with the economic structure. The Jenmi–Kudiyan framework divided society into landowners, tenants, and labourers, mirroring caste divisions. The Brahmins dominated as landowners and priests, the Nairs served as warriors and administrators, and the lower castes, such as Ezhavas and Pulayas, remained tied to agricultural labour. This fusion of caste and class sustained a feudal structure in which authority flowed from land and ritual purity rather than from military conquest.

Despite its hierarchical nature, Kerala's pre-modern polity also displayed participatory features. Local assemblies associated with temples, landholders, and guilds encouraged deliberation and cooperation in governance. This culture of consultation later evolved into Kerala's distinctive democratic and reformist tradition.

1.1.1 Formation of Regional Identity and Political Consciousness

❑ Distinct regional character

The shaping of Kerala's regional identity was a long historical process that combined ecological conditions, political organisation, and cultural interaction. In the early centuries, the region was part of Tamilakam and shared a language, customs, and literary traditions with the Tamil country. Over time, however, differences began to emerge as communities adapted to the unique geography of the west coast, characterised by the Western Ghats on one side and the Arabian Sea on the other. The enclosed terrain encouraged small political units, localised economies, and tightly knit settlements, all of which contributed to a distinct regional character.

❑ Rise of the Nadu

A central feature of this development was the rise of the Nadu, a territorial unit that acted as the basic framework of political life. Each Nadu was governed through its own assembly, known as the Nadu Sabha, where elders, landholding families, and



ritual specialists played important roles. Leadership was not concentrated in a single authority but distributed among kinship networks. Control over land and ritual status often determined influence, and political power depended on an individual's ability to maintain peace, organise cultivation, settle disputes, and uphold customary norms. This system created a political environment in which authority was negotiated rather than imposed, and in which regional identities grew out of collective participation in local governance.

As these networks of governance stabilised, they encouraged a shared understanding of territory and belonging. Communities that had once been linked mainly through trade or kinship began to perceive themselves as part of a larger cultural landscape. The process was gradual, but it gave Kerala a sense of identity rooted not in conquest or imperial rule but in accumulated social practices and cooperative forms of political organisation. This tradition later contributed to Kerala's strong inclination towards participatory politics and reform-oriented public life.

❑ Shared understanding of territory and belonging

Myths, Legends and the Politics of Legitimacy

Myths and legends played a significant role in shaping ideas of authority and social order in early Kerala. The Parasurama legend, which narrates the creation of Kerala through the retrieval of land from the sea, became a powerful tool for explaining the region's political structure. By portraying the Brahmins as the first beneficiaries of this divine act, the story offered a sacred justification for their ownership of land and their central position in society. This narrative helped naturalise a system where ritual authority and political influence were closely connected.

❑ Parasurama myth

The text known as Keralolpathi provided a more structured version of Kerala's past, organising it into the Parasurama, Perumal, and Tampuran periods. Although written much later, it articulated a political philosophy in which kingship was meaningful only when validated by Brahmin sanction, and in which temples were at the heart of governance. Such accounts reinforced the idea that political hierarchy was inseparable from religious duty. They also created an ideological framework that supported the authority of temple institutions, which played a central role in social and political life.

❑ Political hierarchy was inseparable from religious duty

Other legends added different layers to Kerala's historical consciousness. Stories of the apostle Thomas and the last Cheraman Perumal pointed to early encounters with Christianity and Islam, suggesting that the region was never isolated from wider religious movements and maritime exchanges. These narratives highlighted Kerala's ability to absorb new influences

❑ Early encounters with Christianity and Islam

while retaining its own cultural foundations, a feature that would later shape its pluralistic political ethos.

From Kinship Communities to Social Hierarchy

☐ Kinship-based communities

Early Kerala society was organised around kinship-based communities that collectively managed land and shared responsibilities for cultivation and social regulation. Sangam literature provides glimpses of these arrangements, in which clan leaders exercised authority based on age, experience, and communal trust. The social environment was more flexible at this stage, and divisions based on rank were less sharply defined.

☐ Spread of plough cultivation and iron implements

However, significant changes occurred with the growth of settled agriculture and improvements in tools and technology. The spread of plough cultivation and iron implements increased productivity, which in turn encouraged more permanent claims over land. Gradually, land shifted from a shared resource to private or hereditary property. This transformation laid the foundation for social differentiation, as families with greater access to fertile land acquired more influence within the community.

☐ Establishment of Brahmadeya settlements

A major turning point came with the establishment of Brahmadeya settlements, which were tax-free land grants given to Brahmins. These grants strengthened the economic power of Brahmin households and elevated them as custodians of religious knowledge and ritual authority. Temples linked to these settlements became centres of agricultural management, surplus redistribution, and social regulation. The janmi system grew out of this arrangement, creating a three-tier hierarchy of landlords, tenants, and labourers.

☐ Economic dependency and ritual legitimacy

Political control in this emerging order relied less on military force and more on economic dependency and ritual legitimacy. Those who controlled land and temples controlled society. This produced a layered social structure where caste and class overlapped, shaping Kerala's political patterns for centuries. The system was stable but also deeply unequal, and it would later be challenged by reform movements and modern political ideas.

☐ Devaswam and Brahmaswam

1.1.2 Temples, Economy and the Institution-alisation of Power

In early Kerala, the temple was more than a space for worship; it functioned as a centre of economic organisation, political coordination, and social regulation. The vast networks of land attached to temples, known as Devaswam and Brahmaswam, made them major landholders in the region. These lands produced an agricultural surplus that sustained Brahmin

households, supported a range of service castes, and financed elaborate rituals and festivals. The control of temple property placed Brahmins at the apex of local authority and brought Nairs, merchant groups, and artisans into a system of patronage that strengthened the temple's influence over everyday life.

- ❑ Temples also acted as local administrative units

Temples also acted as local administrative units. They managed irrigation channels, settled disputes related to cultivation, and coordinated labour for communal works. Many temples maintained their own militias, which protected property and enforced customary obligations. This shows that political control was not concentrated within a single ruler but distributed through institutions that commanded economic power and ritual legitimacy.

- ❑ Early forms of collective decision-making

Around these temples developed assemblies such as the Oor and the Sabha, which were early forms of collective decision-making. These bodies discussed taxation, labour duties, boundaries of fields, and the sharing of water resources. While they were hierarchical and largely restricted to the upper castes, they cultivated practices of consultation and deliberation that later influenced Kerala's political culture. The temple thus embodied a fusion of religious and civic authority, creating a social order in which power was justified by both ritual prestige and practical responsibility.

This close relationship among the economy, religion, and administration gave Kerala a form of polity in which the sacred and the political were deeply intertwined. The temple was not simply a religious institution but a pillar that organised social relations, legitimised authority, and anchored local governance.

1.1.3 Politics, Social Structure and Regional Identity

- ❑ Unique political culture

The region's geography, early political organisation, and cultural traditions combined to create a unique political culture in Kerala. The terrain favoured small, cooperative units of governance; myths legitimised ritual hierarchy; and temples served as powerful economic and administrative institutions. At the same time, Kerala's openness to trade allowed diverse communities to participate in its social and political life.

- ❑ Strong connection between moral legitimacy and political power.

These features produced a political tradition marked by negotiation rather than conquest, by shared authority rather than absolute control, and by a strong connection between moral legitimacy and political power. The practices that emerged in the Nadus, the deliberative assemblies around temples, and the pluralism of coastal society shaped the region's later movements for reform and democratic participation.

Kerala's early history, therefore, continues to influence its contemporary political identity. The region's deep respect for collective decision-making, its commitment to social justice, and its readiness for political mobilisation all have their roots in these early structures of power and community.

1.1.4 Caste as an Economic and Social Institution

In pre-modern Kerala, caste functioned simultaneously as a social classification and an economic arrangement. Endogamous occupational groups formed a self-regulating hierarchy that ensured a constant supply of labour and preserved the privileges of the upper castes. At the top were the Brahmins, whose ritual roles were reinforced by their position as major landowners. The Nairs, positioned below them, served as warriors, administrators, and land managers. The Ezhavas and Thiyyas formed productive groups involved in agriculture, coconut-based industries, and toddy tapping. Artisan communities, including Kammalars, Kushavars, and traditional goldsmiths, occupied intermediate positions. The Pulayas, Parayas, and other Scheduled Caste communities performed the most strenuous agricultural labour and lived under conditions of severe social restriction.

❑ Caste hierarchy

Occupations were hereditary, and movement across caste-based professions was not permitted. This rigidity stabilised the economic advantages of the upper castes while limiting the mobility of the lower groups. The ideology of ritual purity provided the justification for maintaining such divisions, presenting them as natural or divinely sanctioned. Historians such as M. G. S. Narayanan and Rajan Gurukkal describe this arrangement as a form of ritualised class domination, where economic control was secured through religious authority.

❑ The ideology of ritual purity

As a result, economic inequality was rendered legitimate through the language of ritual status. Nambuthiri Brahmins, with their extensive landholdings and control of temples, held the highest authority, supported by the military and administrative functions carried out by the Nairs. Meanwhile, the productive sections of society remained excluded from decision-making, land rights, education, and political participation. The caste system thus functioned as a structure of exploitation and dependency, presenting a hierarchical economic order as a sacred social duty.

❑ structure of exploitation

1.1.5 Land, Economy, and Feudal Power Relations in Kerala History

The history of Kerala's economy and power structure is deeply intertwined with land ownership and the emergence of feudal relations. From the early medieval period, control over land became the most crucial source of both wealth and authority. The agrarian system, temple economy, and local political order evolved together, giving rise to a distinct form of feudalism unique to Kerala. Unlike the centralised kingdoms of North India, Kerala's power structure was decentralised, rooted in local landholding elites and temple-based institutions. These developments shaped not only the region's economy but also its caste hierarchy and political organisation.

❑ Caste hierarchy and political organisation

1.1.5.1 Land Ownership and Agrarian Structure

The land system in pre-modern Kerala developed around the Janmam-Kanam-Maryada framework, commonly known as the Jenmi-Kudiyan system. This system structured relations between landowners and tenants, with ownership rights determined by heredity rather than purchase or conquest. The concept of Janmam, meaning birthright, conferred hereditary ownership to the upper castes, particularly Brahmins and regional chieftains.

❑ Janmam-Kanam-Maryada

Between the ninth and twelfth centuries, this system took a definite shape under the influence of the temple economy and the decline of the Chera state. Brahmadeya grants, or tax-free land endowments, were made to Brahmins and temples by rulers and Naduvazhis (local chiefs). This practice transferred control of fertile land from early cultivators like the Pulayas, Idayas, and Villavas to Brahmin families and temple trustees. By the sixteenth century, land ownership was concentrated in three major forms: Brahmaswam (Brahmin-owned land), Devaswam (temple land), and Cherikkal (royal land).

❑ Land ownership

The agrarian hierarchy consisted of five principal categories: Naduvazhi, Uralar, Karalar, Kudiyan, and Adiyar. The Naduvazhis were the regional rulers who distributed land to temples and Brahmins. The Uralars were temple trustees, mostly Brahmins, who managed religious and economic affairs. The Karalars, usually Nairs, acted as intermediaries or leaseholders; Kudiyan were tenant cultivators drawn from intermediate castes like Ezhavas and Nairs, while the Adiyans, mostly Pulayas, worked as bonded labourers. This system formalised both economic dependency and social stratification, binding labour to caste and land.

❑ Agrarian hierarchy

1.1.6 Feudal Power and Political Relations

❑ Feudal power structure

The feudal power structure of Kerala was defined by the interdependence between landholders, rulers, and religious authorities. The Naduvazhis, who governed local territories, relied on the Nairs for military and administrative support, while the Brahmins provided ideological legitimacy through ritual sanction. This alliance between the three groups—Brahmins, Naduvazhis, and Nairs—constituted the political foundation of Kerala's feudal order.

❑ Political authority

The Naduvazhis maintained local armies, collected revenues, and exercised judicial authority within their Nadus. In return, they granted tax exemptions and temple endowments, reinforcing the religious authority of the Brahmins. Political authority thus became inseparable from ritual legitimacy. The right to rule was expressed through temple patronage and the performance of public sacrifices (yagas).

❑ Emergence of wealthy intermediaries

The Kanam and Otti tenures, introduced during the later medieval period, further complicated land relations. Tenants could mortgage or sublease land for fixed periods, but ultimate ownership remained with the Jenmi. This system created multiple layers of rights and obligations, leading to the emergence of wealthy intermediaries like Kanakkars, who controlled both land and labour. These intermediaries became crucial figures in the regional economy, often exercising power independent of the central authority.

1.1.6.1 Naduvazhis and the Decentralised Political Order

❑ Autonomous political unit

The Naduvazhis, or local chieftains, formed the backbone of Kerala's regional political structure. Each Nadu (territory) functioned as an autonomous political unit, with its own administrative headquarters (Nadapura), local councils, and officers. The Naduvazhis commanded military forces, collected revenue, and resolved disputes within their domains. Their authority was both hereditary and ritual, legitimised by temple rituals and Brahminical sanction.

❑ Nadu Sabha

Every Nadu had an assembly known as the Nadu Sabha or Nadu Kovilakam, composed of prominent landowners, nobles, and Brahmin representatives. These assemblies functioned as deliberative bodies, deciding on matters of taxation, irrigation, and local law. The Naduvazhi presided over the Sabha, but decisions were often reached through consultation, reflecting a participatory mode of governance within the limits of feudal hierarchy.

❑ Political power was localised

In this system, political power was localised yet interdependent. The Naduvazhis owed symbolic allegiance to the Chera king but exercised real control over their regions. This structure was well-suited to Kerala's ecology—its fragmented terrain and limited communication networks favoured small-scale governance. As K. N. Ganesh observed, Kerala's polity evolved as a "network of micro-centres," where authority was diffused through multiple levels of local leadership rather than concentrated in a single centre.

1.1.7 Temples as Political Institutions

❑ Quasi-political authority

Temples in medieval Kerala were not merely religious centres but pivotal institutions in the exercise of political power. The temple economy, sustained by vast land endowments and controlled by Brahmin trustees (Uralars), functioned as a quasi-political authority. The management of temple lands involved a hierarchy of officials, including the Potuval (secretary), Kuttams (local assemblies), Deshavazhis (village heads), and the Naduvazhi.

❑ Nalutali system

The temple's influence extended beyond ritual to administration and justice. Land disputes, tenancy regulations, and even military contributions were mediated through temple committees. Temples also maintained their own militias to protect property and enforce order. The Nalutali system a federation of four major temples exerted institutional control over the Perumal kings, symbolising the fusion of religion and politics in Kerala's governance.

❑ Brahmin–Temple oligarchy

Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai regarded this as the "Brahmin Temple oligarchy," where ritual authority overshadowed royal power. The temple thus served as both a spiritual and administrative hub, mediating between the monarchy and the people. The integration of the temple into the political system ensured the continuity of Brahminical dominance and reinforced the legitimacy of the ruling elite.

Summarised Overview

The traditional society of Kerala developed through an intricate balance between ecology, land relations, and social hierarchy. The early polity was shaped by small regional units (Nadus) that functioned under local chieftains and Brahmin councils. Myths and rituals were used to legitimise authority, while temples became powerful centres of administration and redistribution. The agrarian economy was structured by the Jenmi–Kudiyan system, in which land ownership and caste overlapped to form a feudal social order.

Political authority was shared among the King, Naduvazhis, and Brahmin institutions, with each level depending on ritual sanction for legitimacy. This decentralised arrangement ensured stability while allowing regional variation. Over time, Kerala evolved a political culture that valued negotiation, moral leadership, and community consensus. Though marked by caste inequality and feudal control, these early structures laid the groundwork for Kerala's later movements for equality, social reform, and participatory governance.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. How did Kerala's geography influence its political decentralisation?
2. Explain the role of the Nadu system in shaping regional identity.
3. What were the political implications of the Parasurama and Keralolpathi legends?
4. Discuss the interlinkages between land ownership and caste hierarchy in pre-modern Kerala.
5. How did temple institutions function as centres of political and economic power?
6. What were the features of the Jenmi–Kudiyan system?
7. In what ways did Kerala's early political culture influence its later democratic traditions?

Assignments

1. Analyse how geography and ecology influenced Kerala's early political and social evolution.
2. Critically evaluate the caste and class structure of pre-modern Kerala with reference to its economic foundations.
3. Discuss the functioning of the temple economy as a redistributive system in Kerala's feudal order.
4. Examine the relationship between ritual hierarchy and economic dependency in Kerala's feudalism.
5. Assess the role of the nadu sabhas and temple assemblies in developing traditions of local self-governance.
6. Explain how myths and legends served as tools of political legitimisation in Kerala's early history.
7. Evaluate how early forms of governance and moral legitimacy contributed to Kerala's modern political identity.

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Suggested Reading

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

UNIT 2

Impact of Colonialism

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- describe the nature of early European contact with Kerala and the motives behind expansion
- explain how colonial rule altered political authority and regional power structures
- analyse changes in land relations, agrarian systems, and revenue policies
- assess the long-term influence of colonialism on Kerala's modern identity

Background

Colonial rule reached Kerala via the Indian Ocean seaways. The region became a meeting point for commercial interests, military ambitions, and cultural negotiations. From the Portuguese to the Dutch and eventually the British, each power sought to control trade, taxation, and political authority. These encounters reshaped Kerala's governance, disrupted older institutions, and exposed society to new ideas. The spread of Western education, the missionary presence, and new administrative practices laid the groundwork for later reform movements and the rise of modern political consciousness.

Keywords

Colonial Expansion, Land Revenue Reforms, Land Relations, Colonial Interests

Discussion

The colonial presence in Kerala brought far-reaching changes that affected political authority, social relations, and the economic structure. Older systems based on Nadus, temple control, and hereditary privileges gradually lost power as the British introduced uniform administration, courts, and

revenue policies. Education and missionary activity opened new opportunities while also challenging caste boundaries. At the same time, resistance from peasants, workers, and regional rulers signalled the emergence of political awareness that later shaped Kerala's democratic culture. The impact of colonial rule was thus both disruptive and transformative, creating new tensions while also enabling new forms of collective action.

1.2.1 Nature and Scope of Colonial Impact

The story of colonialism in Kerala is not only about the entry of foreign powers but also about how their presence transformed the region's political, social, and economic foundations. Before Europeans reached the Malabar coast, Kerala existed within a world shaped by its own rhythms of power and exchange. Local chieftains, temple authorities, and regional kings shared authority in a decentralised political environment. The spice trade connected Kerala to the wider Indian Ocean world, but this interaction did not disturb the autonomy of local institutions or the internal balance of power. Society operated within a framework in which economic activity, social hierarchy, and political authority were closely tied to land, caste, and ritual legitimacy.

❑ Transformed the region's political, social, and economic foundations

The arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 brought a different kind of engagement. Their ambitions went far beyond peaceful trade; they aimed to control the maritime routes through which pepper and other spices flowed to West Asian and Mediterranean markets. Their use of military force and their policy of forging alliances with rival local rulers introduced an entirely new form of power politics into Kerala. The conflict between the Portuguese and the Zamorin of Calicut, along with their support for the Cochin Raja, reshaped regional rivalries and unsettled older structures of authority. For the first time, a foreign power used political intervention to advance its economic goals.

❑ Conflict between the Portuguese and the Zamorin of Calicut

The Dutch entry in the seventeenth century continued this pattern, although their methods were more commercial than missionary or military. They tried to stabilise trade in pepper and cinnamon through agreements with local rulers, but they also intervened politically when it suited their interests. Their presence weakened the already strained political balance, further reducing local authorities' freedom to control their own affairs.

❑ Dutch entry

The most profound changes came with the British, whose rise in Kerala was part of their expanding empire on the Indian subcontinent. Following their victory in the Anglo-Mysore wars, Malabar became a direct British territory, while Travancore and Cochin became princely states under British protection. Although the rulers of these states retained their titles, real

❑ British entry



authority was exercised by British Residents and advisors. Kings and ministers were expected to follow colonial directives on revenue, diplomacy, and administration. This shift marked the transition from a system based on dispersed local authority to one guided by a centralised colonial state.

❑ Change in the nature of political legitimacy

The colonial presence also changed the nature of political legitimacy. The pre-colonial order rested on shared understandings between rulers and the ruled, where ritual status, caste hierarchy, and temple institutions held political meaning. Colonial administration replaced these foundations with law, bureaucracy, and documentation. Modern courts, revenue offices, and police systems introduced new norms of authority that were unfamiliar to the older political culture. These institutions created a more uniform system of governance, but they also removed power from community-based structures and placed it in the hands of officials appointed to serve imperial interests.

❑ Changes in Economic life

Economic life, too, underwent significant change. The British altered the land system by recognising landlords as the absolute owners of land, disrupting generations of customary rights enjoyed by cultivators. The introduction of cash crops and new taxes drew Kerala into global markets and intensified economic inequalities. These developments weakened older ties between land, labour, and authority, contributing to social tensions that later fuelled political mobilisation.

❑ Cultural life

Cultural life experienced parallel shifts. Missionaries brought new forms of education, literacy, and print culture. Western education created an emerging middle class and introduced ideas of equality, rights, and public debate. These ideas encouraged people to question social discrimination and sparked early reform efforts among various communities. Even though these changes were uneven, they helped prepare the ground for the social and political transformations that Kerala would witness in the twentieth century.

❑ Colonial period reshaped Kerala

Taken together, the colonial period reshaped Kerala in lasting ways. It altered the political structure, redefined land relations, and introduced new forms of education and public life. While colonialism imposed subordination and aimed to control local resources, it also unintentionally encouraged questioning, reform, and new forms of political consciousness. The region's journey through colonial rule thus became an important chapter in the formation of Kerala's modern identity, influencing its later commitment to social justice, participation, and democratic values.

1.2.2 European Expansion and Control

The arrival of European powers on the Kerala coast from the closing years of the fifteenth century introduced a new phase in the region's political life. Kerala had earlier been part of an active Indian Ocean trading system in which merchants, rulers, and local communities interacted through customary agreements. Power was spread across many centres, and conflicts were usually managed through negotiation rather than large-scale military force. European intervention disturbed this balance. Their attempts to control maritime trade drew Kerala into a wider imperial rivalry that gradually reshaped local authority, disrupted older alliances, and introduced new pressures into the political system.

❑ Reshaped local authority

1.2.2.1 Portuguese Intervention and the Militarisation of Trade

When the Portuguese reached Calicut in 1498, they entered a world with a long-established trading culture. Arab merchants, Gujarati traders, and local rulers shared responsibilities in maintaining the flow of commerce. The Portuguese approached trade differently. They believed that control of the sea lanes was essential for securing profits. This meant that trading rights were no longer based on mutual agreement but on the ability to enforce naval power.

❑ Trading rights no longer based on mutual agreement

To strengthen their position, the Portuguese created a pass system known as the cartaz. Ships without this document were often stopped or attacked. Forts and trading posts in places such as Cochin and Kannur served as military bases from which the Portuguese attempted to dominate the spice trade. These strategies altered the political dynamics of the coast. By supporting the Cochin Raja in his conflict with the Zamorin of Calicut, the Portuguese inserted themselves into internal rivalries and deepened divisions among local rulers.

❑ Altered the political dynamics

Their presence also brought new religious influences. Missionaries worked among several coastal communities, shaping cultural and social practices. However, these activities unfolded alongside aggressive economic policies and periodic violence, which created resentment among groups whose livelihoods depended on older systems of open trade. The Portuguese thus left behind a mixed legacy: new connections with Europe but also widespread disruption of established political and commercial life.

❑ New religious influences

1.2.2.2 Dutch Commercial Hegemony and Strategic Alliances

- ❑ Dutch East India Company

- ❑ Relied more on diplomacy and commercial negotiation

The retreat of Portuguese power in the seventeenth century opened space for the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch did not come with the same missionary zeal, but they were equally determined to secure a profitable share of the spice trade. To achieve this, they entered into detailed agreements with several Kerala rulers, including the Cochin king and the Kolathiri of north Kerala. These treaties often specified the quantity of pepper to be supplied and the prices to be maintained.

The Dutch relied more on diplomacy and commercial negotiation than on military campaigns; yet their presence was no less political. Whenever local authorities failed to meet the terms of agreements, the Dutch intervened directly. Their attempts to regulate the harvest and stabilise pepper prices affected cultivators' incomes and altered existing trade networks. The Dutch period experienced fewer dramatic conflicts than the Portuguese era, but it continued the trend of drawing Kerala into a system in which foreign companies dictated the terms of commerce.

By the time Dutch influence began to decline in the eighteenth century, Kerala was already firmly tied to European trading structures. Local rulers found it difficult to act independently, and the region's traditional political institutions had weakened under the weight of continuous commercial pressures.

1.2.2.3 British Consolidation and the Reorganisation of Political Authority

- ❑ Changes that went far beyond commercial control

- ❑ Replaced traditional centres of authority

The British introduced changes that went far beyond commercial control. Their rise in Kerala was linked to their broader expansion in South India, particularly the wars with Mysore, led by Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. When the British emerged victorious, Malabar came under their direct administration. Travancore and Cochin remained princely states, but their external affairs, defence, and major policy decisions came under British supervision through subsidiary alliances.

British Residents in these states played an influential role. Although kings continued to rule, their decisions were monitored and often guided by British officials. In Malabar, British rule replaced traditional centres of authority with new institutions. Courts, police establishments, and revenue offices gradually became the pillars of administration. These changes introduced unfamiliar ideas of written law, fixed rights, and uniform procedures.

- ❑ Authority was linked to ritual status, caste hierarchy, and customary rights

- ❑ Restructured Kerala's political map

- ❑ British reinterpreted land

- ❑ Layered system of Land ownership

- ❑ Absolute owners of land

This reorganisation affected the nature of political legitimacy. Earlier, authority was linked to ritual status, caste hierarchy, and customary rights. Under British rule, political power depended on administrative performance, revenue collection, and adherence to colonial regulations. Malabar's integration into the Madras Presidency connected it to a wider bureaucratic system, while Travancore and Cochin were encouraged to adopt reforms in education, public works, and revenue management.

The British presence restructured Kerala's political map in lasting ways. It weakened local institutions that had shaped governance for centuries and replaced them with new forms of authority. Although these changes served colonial interests, they also opened space for new political ideas and public debates. The groundwork for later social reform movements, nationalist activity, and democratic participation began to take shape in this transformed setting.

Transformation of Land and Agrarian Relations

The arrival of colonial rule brought deep and lasting changes to Kerala's rural world. Land was not simply an economic resource in the pre-colonial order; it carried cultural meaning, shaped social hierarchy, and anchored political authority. The British reinterpreted land through their own administrative ideas and economic needs, and this shift created new forms of inequality while weakening older structures that once held rural society together.

Changing Ideas of Land and Ownership

Before the British introduced surveys and revenue rules, land in Kerala did not belong to a single owner in the modern sense. A single plot could have several sets of rights attached to it. Local chiefs exercised authority over the land, temples managed large estates as custodians of community wealth, and Brahmin households controlled land that had been granted to them for ritual duties. Cultivators too had customary claims, often recognised across generations. This layered system was complex, but it reflected the way power, economy, and social obligations worked together.

When the British took charge, they viewed this system as confusing and inefficient. Their first priority was creating a reliable source of revenue. To achieve this, they identified certain groups as absolute owners of land. In Malabar, the landlords were recognised as proprietors, while the cultivators were treated as tenants who could be asked to leave. This decision overturned old conventions where tenants had long enjoyed stability through unwritten customs. The introduction

of deeds, surveys, and written registers separated land from the communities that had shaped it for centuries.

- ❑ State became the primary authority over land

Travancore and Cochin saw a slower transition, but the direction was similar. Continuous assessments, land classification, and new tax demands placed additional burdens on cultivators. When the state became the primary authority over land, the balance between ritual authority, community responsibility, and agrarian life was steadily undone.

Strain on Tenants and Rural Labour

- ❑ Tenant farmers found their position weakening

The shift in land ownership affected different groups in different ways, but those who worked the soil bore the greatest hardship. Tenant farmers found their position weakening. The new system allowed landlords to increase rent, remove tenants, or alter the terms of cultivation. Many families that had farmed the same fields for generations suddenly lacked security. Debt became common as tenants tried to meet rising obligations.

- ❑ Customary protections faded

Agricultural labourers, who belonged mostly to the lowest sections of the caste order, experienced even greater vulnerability. Their dependence on landlords increased once customary protections faded. Although colonial rule introduced courts and legal procedures, these rarely worked in favour of labourers or even small tenants, who had neither the resources nor the influence to seek justice.

The loss of customary rights and the pressures of new revenue demands created conditions in which the poorest groups became more marginalised. These struggles later became an important foundation for organised peasant movements and social reform efforts.

Growth of Commercial Agriculture

- ❑ Increasing focus on commercial crops

Another noticeable change was the increasing focus on commercial crops. The British valued Kerala's agricultural potential, particularly its pepper, coconut, and arecanut, and encouraged their expansion. Coffee and later rubber plantations grew in the highlands. These crops were not grown for local markets but for distant European and other markets.

- ❑ Commercial agriculture

Commercial agriculture brought wealth to traders, officials, and large landlords, but it also pushed ordinary cultivators into a more uncertain position. Their livelihoods became tied to global prices. When prices fell, their income declined, but when prices rose, the benefits rarely accrued to them. The plantation economy, which required a steady and disciplined labour force, altered the social landscape of the highlands. Workers from other regions were brought in, while local communities had limited access to these new opportunities.

Decline of Traditional Institutions and Authority

- ❑ Authority replaced by government officers, courts

The transformation of the land system also reshaped Kerala's political culture. Temples, which had long been key institutions of local administration, lost much of their influence. Their landholdings were reduced or made subject to state regulation. Local chiefs, who once played important roles in settling disputes and organising agricultural activities, found their authority replaced by government officers, courts, and revenue officials.

- ❑ Centralised administration

This shift from community-based authority to centralised administration changed how people related to power. Earlier, disputes were mediated through ritual status, customary rights, and personal negotiation. Under colonial rule, authority flowed through officials whose decisions were based on written laws and revenue priorities. This new structure may have introduced uniformity, but it also weakened local institutions that had been integral to Kerala's political fabric.

1.2.3 Social and Cultural Changes Caused by Colonialism

- ❑ Shifts in Kerala's social and cultural landscape

Colonial rule brought about significant shifts in Kerala's social and cultural landscape. These changes unfolded over several centuries, beginning with Portuguese influence and becoming more visible under British administration. Earlier, Kerala's society was shaped largely by caste hierarchy, ritual authority, and local customs that guided social behaviour. The colonial period did not erase these structures, but it introduced new institutions, ideas, and social spaces that gradually encouraged people to question long-established norms. As a result, Kerala's social world moved gradually from a rigid order of inherited identities towards a more open and reflective society.

Missionary Activities and the Expansion of Literacy

- ❑ The establishment of schools

Missionaries played an important role in the early spread of education, especially from the nineteenth century onwards. While the first wave of European missionaries under the Portuguese focused mainly on religious conversion, later missions under the British encouraged schools, printing, and the creation of reading material in local languages. The establishment of schools in different regions had a profound impact, particularly because these institutions enrolled children from communities that had been excluded from traditional centres of learning.

❑ Missionaries

Missionaries also introduced printing presses, which helped produce textbooks, religious tracts, and general literature. This made reading a more widespread activity and encouraged new habits of thought. People from different castes and regions began to access written knowledge that had previously been confined to the upper castes. Although missionary initiatives had a religious purpose, their influence extended beyond this by opening new channels of communication and expanding the space for secular education. For many marginalised groups, schooling offered the first real opportunity to learn, express themselves, and participate in new occupations.

Western Education and the Emergence of New Social Groups

❑ The growth of Western education

The growth of Western education created shifts in Kerala's social structure. English education, though initially limited to those associated with missionary schools or government establishments, soon became a marker of social mobility. Families from various communities recognised the value of modern learning and encouraged their children to pursue studies that could lead to government service, teaching, or clerical work. This gradually produced a new middle class whose worldview differed from that of the older elite.

❑ Notions of equality, liberty, and rational thinking

Exposure to European ideas, including notions of equality, liberty, and rational thinking, encouraged students to question social restrictions that had long been accepted as natural. These ideas did not immediately replace existing beliefs, but they created an intellectual environment in which people felt more confident discussing issues of justice, dignity, and rights. The new professions emerging under colonial rule also expanded opportunities for interaction across caste boundaries. Teachers, clerks, lawyers, and journalists formed a group that increasingly influenced public opinion and helped shape early reform efforts in Kerala.

Changes in Caste Practices and Decline of Ritual Authority

❑ Formal courts and revenue offices

Caste remained a strong feature of Kerala's social life during the colonial period, but its functioning changed as traditional institutions lost some of their earlier prominence. Temples and their governing bodies had long exercised considerable influence over local interactions, regulating everything from access to land to social conduct. As the British administration introduced formal courts and revenue offices, many disputes that had previously been decided by caste councils or temple authorities began to be adjudicated in legal forums.

Certain legal interventions also weakened the severe forms of discrimination practised in earlier centuries. The abolition

❑ New legal language

of slavery, followed by efforts to restrict brutal forms of untouchability, slowly altered the social climate. Although these reforms did not end caste discrimination, they introduced a new legal language that questioned the absolute authority of upper-caste groups. Education and the growth of public debate enabled people from lower castes to challenge restrictions on mobility, occupation, and access to public spaces.

❑ New economic opportunities opened

The social authority of upper castes was further challenged as new economic opportunities opened. Groups that relied on hereditary status to maintain influence found themselves sharing space with individuals whose standing came from education and modern employment. This slow but steady decline of ritual authority set the stage for more decisive reforms in the twentieth century.

1.2.4 Administrative and Political Reorganisation

❑ New structure shaped by bureaucracy, written law

The entry of British power into Kerala reshaped the region's political and administrative framework in profound ways. Previously, authority in Kerala rested on a decentralised system in which local chiefs, temple bodies, and lineage groups exercised overlapping forms of control. Decisions were guided by custom, ritual obligation, and long-standing agreements between communities. When colonial rule expanded after the fall of Mysore, these arrangements slowly gave way to a new structure shaped by bureaucracy, written law, and centralised authority. This transition was neither sudden nor uniform, but it altered the foundations of governance across Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin.

New Administrative Structures in Malabar

❑ Direct form of colonial intervention

Malabar experienced the most direct form of colonial intervention, as it came under British rule following the Anglo-Mysore conflicts. The British introduced their own administrative institutions, replacing the older landscape of Naduvazhis, temple councils, and local assemblies. District collectors, magistrates, and revenue officials became the central figures overseeing taxation, law and order, and judicial matters. These officers relied on codes and manuals rather than customary practices.

This shift brought about a different understanding of authority. Instead of negotiation and community participation, governance now operated through procedures laid down in regulations. Courts replaced traditional dispute mechanisms, and decisions were recorded in written documents rather than remembered through custom. Although this system introduced

❑ Colonial institutions gained more control

a degree of uniformity, it also created a distance between the state and the people, as many villagers were unfamiliar with formal law and legal English. The older structures did not disappear overnight, but their influence declined steadily as colonial institutions gained more control.

Reorganisation in Travancore and Cochin

❑ Subsidiary alliances and the presence of British Residents

Travancore and Cochin retained their royal houses, but their autonomy was limited by subsidiary alliances and the presence of British Residents. These princely states undertook several reforms, but the direction of change often reflected British expectations. Diwans played a key role in shaping the administration, and many of them introduced measures in land revenue, education, and public works to make governance more systematic.

❑ Development of a more centralised bureaucracy

Travancore, in particular, saw the development of a more centralised bureaucracy. Departments were created for education, irrigation, roads, and public health. Similar changes occurred in Cochin. These reforms gradually reduced the power of local chiefs and temple authorities, bringing more activities under the control of the state. The rulers remained important symbols of legitimacy, but real governance increasingly followed administrative procedures shaped by state-appointed officials.

Creation of New Legal and Judicial Systems

❑ Written law and judicial uniformity

The British placed a strong emphasis on written law and judicial uniformity. Courts of different levels were established to replace earlier systems that relied on caste councils, temple authorities, or local elders. Civil laws and criminal procedures were introduced to provide what the colonial state considered a rational and predictable legal system.

❑ New legal order

This new legal order redefined rights and obligations. Disputes over land, inheritance, or taxation had to be settled through formal petitions and hearings. Individuals who had previously relied on community networks now had to navigate legal processes that required documents, fees, and the ability to argue cases. While this system created opportunities for those educated in modern law, it also created barriers for those unfamiliar with its complexity.

❑ Judicial changes

The judicial changes influenced political culture. The idea that power flowed from written rules rather than from birth or ritual standing began to take root, although this transition remained incomplete during the colonial period.

Impact on Local Authority and Traditional Institutions

☐ Traditional centres of authority

Traditional centres of authority, which had once played an important role in Kerala's political life, found themselves marginalised. Temple bodies that managed land and social affairs lost their administrative influence as revenue and judicial functions were transferred to state hands. Local chiefs, who once commanded authority over villages, became dependent on colonial officials and lost their earlier autonomy.

☐ Centralised model of governance

The shift in authority also affected community life. Decisions that were once handled informally within the local sphere were now processed by state institutions. This created a more centralised model of governance, but it also reduced the flexibility that had previously allowed communities to address matters according to local custom.

☐ New forms of political consciousness

Administrative Changes and the Growth of Political Awareness

While colonial administrative reforms were introduced to strengthen imperial control, they unintentionally created space for new forms of political consciousness. The expansion of bureaucracy, courts, and modern schooling produced a class of educated individuals who understood the workings of the state and began to question its decisions. Associations, public debates, and petitions emerged as ways for people to express their concerns.

☐ organised political activity

These developments laid the foundations for organised political activity in the early twentieth century. The new administrative environment also encouraged discussions on representation, justice, and public responsibility. Many later leaders who contributed to Kerala's social and political reform movements began their careers within these emerging administrative and educational spaces.

☐ Distribution of power

A New Framework of Governance

The administrative and political reorganisation of Kerala under colonial rule fundamentally transformed the distribution of power. From a decentralised world shaped by custom, the region moved toward a more centralised system guided by written rules, formal officers, and state departments. Although these changes were introduced to support colonial control, they had lasting effects on Kerala's political culture. They introduced new expectations about transparency, accountability, and participation, which later became important elements in the region's democratic development.

1.2.5. Legacy of Colonialism

The colonial period introduced deep and long-lasting changes in Kerala's political structure, social relations, and economic organisation. These changes did not disappear with the end of foreign rule; instead, they shaped the foundations of modern Kerala. The legacy of colonialism is therefore not a single outcome but a wide field of institutional shifts, new social ideas, and enduring contradictions that influenced the region's transition into the twentieth century.

- ❑ Political structure, social relations, and economic organisation.

Reshaping of Political and Administrative Institutions

One of the most visible legacies of colonialism was the transformation of political authority. British rule introduced modern administrative structures that replaced many older institutions such as Nadu assemblies, temple councils, and hereditary offices. Courts, revenue departments, and police stations created a centralised model of governance, bringing written laws and bureaucratic procedures into daily life.

- ❑ Transformation of political authority

Although these institutions were designed to serve colonial interests, they created an administrative framework that continued after independence. The princely states of Travancore and Cochin adopted several reforms under the guidance of British Residents, including modern departments, codified laws, and public works programmes. Malabar, which was directly under the Madras Presidency, became familiar with district administration, elected municipal bodies, and early forms of representative institutions. These administrative changes laid the groundwork for Kerala's later reputation for strong governance and public participation.

- ❑ Groundwork for strong governance and public participation.

Long-term Effects on Land Relations and Agrarian Society

Colonial land policies produced enduring tensions in Kerala's agrarian structure. The formation of the janmi-centred system in Malabar, in which landlords were recognised as absolute owners, altered the traditional protections that tenants had enjoyed under earlier local arrangements. The Mappila uprisings and rural conflicts throughout the nineteenth century demonstrated the disruptive effects of these policies.

- ❑ Tensions in Kerala's agrarian structure

Even after independence, the question of land rights remained one of the most pressing political issues in Kerala. The land reforms of the 1950s and 1960s, which sought to abolish landlordism and secure tenants' rights, addressed inequalities deepened under colonial rule. In this way, the legacy of colonial land policies directly influenced the direction of postcolonial reform and social justice.

- ❑ The question of land rights

Growth of Education, New Professions and Public Debate

❑ Intellectual and educational growth

Colonial rule unintentionally encouraged intellectual and educational growth. Missionaries, government schools, and printing presses created opportunities for learning far beyond traditional caste boundaries. Western education introduced new ideas about equality, citizenship, and public responsibility. As more people gained literacy and access to public careers, a new middle class emerged and actively participated in public life.

❑ Growth of public discussion

This development influenced the rise of newspapers, literary societies, and political associations. Debates on political rights, social reform, caste discrimination, and economic justice became increasingly common. The growth of public discussion marked a major shift from earlier forms of authority based largely on ritual status. This new climate of political thinking carried forward into the national movement and later into the formation of modern Kerala.

❑ Colonial intervention

Transformation of Caste Structures and Social Hierarchies

Colonial intervention did not end caste hierarchies, but it changed the conditions under which they operated. The weakening of temple-based authority, the introduction of secular courts, and the spread of education helped reduce the ritual power once held exclusively by upper castes.

❑ Modernisation of social relations

Social reformers used the openings created by these changes to demand rights and dignity for marginalised communities. Movements led by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and others gained strength partly because colonial institutions, such as schools, newspapers, and courts, provided new channels for challenging inequality. Thus, the modernisation of social relations in Kerala owed much to the political and legal environment created during the colonial period.

Summarised Overview

Colonialism introduced profound shifts in Kerala's political, economic, and social order. The arrival of the Portuguese marked a new phase of military-backed maritime trade, followed by Dutch commercial control and finally British political consolidation. These powers disrupted existing networks of authority and inserted Kerala into global systems of commerce and administration. Under British influence, land relations changed through new revenue policies, which weakened traditional elites and altered agrarian structures. Administrative reforms introduced courts, police, and bureaucratic governance, replacing older temple- and Nadu-based institutions. Missionary activity and Western education opened new social spaces and challenged entrenched caste hier-



archies. These changes also sparked various forms of resistance, from local uprisings to early political mobilisations. Together, colonial interventions reshaped Kerala's society and laid the foundations for modern political consciousness, democratic institutions, and organised social reform.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What were the major differences between Portuguese and Dutch commercial interests in Kerala?
2. How did the British reorganisation of administration change the nature of political authority?
3. Why was the transformation of land relations central to colonial power?
4. How did missionary education influence Kerala's social structure?
5. What role did local rulers play in shaping the nature of colonial control?
6. How did colonialism contribute to the rise of modern political consciousness?

Assignments

1. Examine how European commercial rivalry reshaped the political structure of pre-modern Kerala.
2. Critically analyse the impact of British land revenue reforms on agrarian relations in Malabar.
3. Assess the role of Christian missionaries in transforming Kerala's social and cultural landscape.
4. Discuss the political consequences of British administrative reorganisation in Travancore and Cochin.
5. Evaluate the early anti-colonial movements in Kerala and their contribution to regional nationalism.
6. Explain how colonial interventions altered caste relations and opened new spaces for social mobility.
7. Describe the dual impact of colonialism in Kerala as both destructive and modernising.
8. Analyse the long-term legacy of colonial rule in shaping Kerala's political institutions.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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UNIT 3

Contributions of Social Reformers

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the historical context that led to the Kerala Renaissance
- analyse the major contributions of Sree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, Ayyankali, and V. T. Bhattathiripad
- explain how caste reform, education, and social activism reshaped Kerala's society
- evaluate the political implications of social reform for modern Kerala

Background

The Kerala Renaissance emerged from deep social inequalities, rigid caste practices, and the disruptions created by colonial rule. Missionary education, new political ideas, and the economic pressures of the nineteenth century encouraged communities to question old hierarchies. Intellectuals, saints, and activists challenged the caste system, promoted education, and demanded dignity and rights. This climate produced a group of reformers who played decisive roles in reshaping Kerala's society and laying the foundations of modern political life.

Keywords

Social Reform, Sreenarayana Guru, Kerala Renaissance, Caste..

Discussion

The reform movements in Kerala were diverse in their methods but united in their moral purpose. They challenged the caste system, expanded access to education, and questioned the cultural authority of dominant groups. Reformers such as

❑ Confronted social oppression

❑ Inequalities, rigid caste hierarchies, and limited access to education

❑ Emerged from particular social backgrounds

❑ Political imagination

❑ Emphasis on education, social dignity and equality

Sree Narayana Guru and Chattampi Swamikal introduced new philosophical interpretations of religion that promoted equality. Leaders such as Ayyankali confronted social oppression directly through organised struggles and political engagement. Reformers from within the Nambudiri community, including V. T. Bhattathiripad, attacked internal conservatism and promoted modern education. The cumulative impact of these efforts transformed Kerala into one of India's most socially progressive regions.

The social reform movements in Kerala emerged during a period marked by deep inequalities, rigid caste hierarchies, and limited access to education and public life. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Kerala's society was shaped by a long history of ritual dominance, unequal land relations, and entrenched practices of exclusion. The spread of modern education, the growth of print culture, and the pressures generated by colonial administration created new spaces in which these inequalities could be questioned. It was in this context that a group of reformers began to articulate ideas that challenged inherited social norms and paved the way for a more inclusive public sphere.

The reformers did not form a uniform movement. Each emerged from particular social backgrounds and spoke to the conditions of their own communities. Yet, they shared a broader commitment to dignity, equality, and social justice. Figures such as Sree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, Ayyankali, and V. T. Bhattathiripad redefined the meaning of community and citizenship in Kerala. Through their teachings, organisational work, and interventions in social practices, they confronted caste discrimination, questioned religious orthodoxy, demanded access to education and public spaces, and encouraged ordinary people to recognise their rights.

The significance of their work lies not only in the reforms they initiated but also in the political imagination they helped cultivate. Their ideas expanded the social base of public participation and made it possible for marginalised groups to enter the arena of collective action. By challenging hereditary authority and ritual inequality, these reformers contributed to the development of a more democratic culture in Kerala, one that valued critical reflection, social responsibility, and collective uplift.

The contributions of these reformers continue to shape Kerala's identity. Their emphasis on education, social dignity and equality laid the foundations for many of the state's later achievements in literacy, social welfare and political mobilisation. Understanding

their work is therefore essential to comprehending how Kerala moved from a deeply hierarchical society to one known for its reformist and participatory traditions.

1.3.1 Understanding the Social, Political and Cultural Milieu That Shaped Reform

The Kerala Renaissance did not arise suddenly or through a single event. It developed gradually from a long history of social rigidity, cultural stagnation and uneven encounters with modernity. By the nineteenth century, Kerala had reached a stage where traditional institutions could no longer respond to emerging economic pressures, expanding communication networks or new forms of knowledge. The result was a growing awareness that social practices based on caste hierarchy and inherited privilege had become obstacles to collective progress. The Renaissance emerged from this tension between entrenched structures and the desire for a more inclusive society.

❑ Evolution

Social Inequalities and the Need for Transformation

Pre-Renaissance Kerala was one of the most rigidly stratified societies in the Indian subcontinent. Caste norms regulated almost every aspect of daily life, including dress, movement, occupation and access to public spaces. People from lower castes faced restrictions that denied them basic dignity, and their labour supported a larger structure that privileged only a small fraction of society. Such practices were internalised over centuries, creating a social order that resisted change even when economic and cultural conditions shifted.

❑ Pre-Renaissance Kerala

These inequalities were not abstract but shaped everyday experiences. Communities were segregated geographically, interaction across caste lines was limited, and people from marginalised groups were denied access to education or temple entry. Over time, these pressures produced frustration and a desire to question practices that justified inequality. This demand for change formed the social foundation of the Kerala Renaissance.

❑ Justified inequality

Caste Relations and Rising Awareness Among Marginalised Groups

By the nineteenth century, caste-based restrictions had become the central issue demanding reform. Upper-caste privilege, especially among Nambuthiri Brahmins, structured access to land, knowledge and social recognition. Practices of untouchability and unapproachability deprived entire communities of the right to walk on roads, enter markets or

❑ Untouchability and unapproachability



draw water from public wells. These exclusions were enforced through custom and, at times, violence.

❑ Spread of modern education

The spread of modern education and new employment opportunities began to challenge these structures. People from Ezhava, Dalit and other marginalised communities gradually became aware of their collective rights. They began organising meetings, forming caste associations and publishing pamphlets demanding access to education, representation and dignity. This marked the beginning of a new political consciousness that questioned the legitimacy of inherited hierarchy.

1.3.2 Social Reform Movement: Reformers and Their Contributions

❑ Emergence of powerful reform movements

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of powerful reform movements in Kerala. The traditional feudal society began to dissolve, giving way to a new socio-economic order. All-India organisations such as the Arya Samaj, the Theosophical Society, and the Ramakrishna Mission were active in Kerala, but their influence was marginal. The social reform movements that made a significant impact in Kerala were indigenous in origin and led by individual reformers. To gain a clearer understanding, it is important to examine the contributions of major social reformers.

1.3.2.1 Sree Narayana Guru and the Kerala Renaissance

❑ Sree Narayana Guru

Sree Narayana Guru stands at the centre of the Kerala Renaissance because he transformed the moral and social foundations of the region at a time when caste hierarchy shaped every aspect of public life. His reform work did not rely solely on confrontation or political agitation. Instead, he redefined religion, community relations, and social dignity through a combination of ethical reasoning, spiritual reinterpretation, and institution-building. His contributions helped Kerala transition from a rigidly stratified society to one that increasingly valued equality, education, and organised social effort.

Reinterpretation of Religion as a Force for Social Equality

❑ Most significant contributions

One of the Guru's most significant contributions was his effort to reinterpret religion in a way that removed social barriers rather than reinforcing them. He challenged the belief that spiritual worth depended on caste or ritual status. His statement that all religions share a common ethical core encouraged people to look beyond the rigid boundaries of ritual purity. By urging followers not to speak, think, or act in terms of caste, he introduced a moral framework that weakened the ideological basis of caste

discrimination. This approach prepared communities to imagine a society where dignity was not determined by birth but by ethical living and shared humanity.

Transformation of Temple Practices and Religious Authority

❑ Intervention in temple worship

The Guru's intervention in temple worship played a crucial role in reshaping public life in Kerala. By establishing places of worship open to all communities, he demonstrated that religious spaces need not be governed by hereditary privilege. His temple consecrations signalled a shift from ritual exclusivity to inclusive devotion. These acts also challenged the priestly monopoly on authority and created space for new forms of spiritual agency among communities previously denied entry to temples. The emphasis on the simplicity of ritual and moral intention encouraged people to view religion as a means of self-improvement rather than as a mechanism of social control.

Ethical Philosophy of Oneness and Human Dignity

❑ One caste, one religion, and one God

The Guru's philosophy of one caste, one religion, and one God offered an intellectual framework for social reform. It provided a language through which people could question everyday inequalities while remaining rooted in familiar traditions. This message did not call for the abolition of cultural diversity but rather for the recognition of a shared moral identity that connected all human beings. It challenged ideas of superiority and inferiority, reduced social distance between communities, and helped new forms of collective identity emerge. His ethical teaching treated fraternity, compassion, and truthfulness as the basis of modern social life.

Institutional Reform Through the SNDP Yogam

❑ Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam

A major dimension of the Guru's reform work was organisational. The founding of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam created a platform that enabled marginalised communities to gain access to education, economic mobility, and social confidence. The Yogam established schools, libraries, hostels, and industrial training centres, thereby opening new opportunities for communities long excluded from formal learning. It encouraged people to cultivate discipline, cooperative action, and self-respect. The organisational culture the Guru promoted replaced fatalism with a belief in collective effort and practical improvement. Through these institutions, previously oppressed groups entered public life with a new sense of dignity and possibility.

Reform of Social Customs and Everyday Practices

- ❑ Criticised superstitions

The Guru addressed social reform at the level of everyday behaviour. He criticised superstitions that drained resources and reinforced dependence on ritual specialists. He encouraged moderation, productive labour, and moral self-discipline. His reframing of marriage, worship, and local customs reduced unnecessary expenses that burdened poor households. By advocating simplicity and rationality in rituals, he helped people break away from customs that had confined them to debt, dependence, and social stagnation. His emphasis on education, hygiene, cooperation, and ethical conduct made reform a part of daily life rather than a purely ideological project.

Intellectual Influence on Civil Rights and Anti-Caste Movements

- ❑ Moral foundation for civil rights campaigns

The Guru's thought shaped many of Kerala's later struggles for social justice, including movements seeking rights to public roads, temple entry, and caste equality. His message provided a moral foundation for civil rights campaigns, including the Vaikom Satyagraha. Leaders of different movements drew inspiration from his emphasis on dignity, non-violence, and ethical persuasion. His ideas encouraged people to question discriminatory laws, demand access to public institutions, and challenge practices that excluded them from civic life. The influence of his teachings extended beyond his followers to the broader political culture of Kerala.

Legacy in Kerala's Modern Social and Political Life

- ❑ emphasis on dignity, equality, and cooperation

The Guru's reform work had far-reaching consequences for Kerala's political culture. His teachings encouraged people to view society as a shared moral space rather than a collection of separate communities. His emphasis on dignity, equality, and cooperation created a climate in which democratic values could take root. The shift in social attitudes he helped initiate made later political movements more inclusive and socially grounded. His legacy lives on in Kerala's commitment to public education, social justice, and civic participation. The transformation he inspired helped shape Kerala into a society known for its reformist spirit, high social development, and strong sense of moral community.

1.3.2.2 Chattampi Swamikal and Kerala Renaissance

- ❑ Foundational intellectual force

Chattampi Swamikal emerged as a foundational intellectual force during Kerala's social and cultural awakening. His contribution to the Kerala Renaissance was not tied to

organisational leadership but to a broader transformation in how people understood authority, knowledge, and moral life. Through sustained scholarship, reinterpretation of religious traditions, and deep engagement with Kerala's cultural history, he laid the intellectual groundwork for many later reform movements. His interventions opened new possibilities for debate, particularly on caste, religious authority, and social rights, at a time when Kerala's society was seeking alternatives to a rigid and unequal order.

Reclaiming Religious Knowledge and Challenging Caste Authority

A defining feature of Swamikal's work was his challenge to the belief that a single caste should monopolise religious knowledge. In his celebrated text *Vedadhikara Niroopanam*, he systematically questioned the idea that only Brahmins had the right to study the Vedas. His arguments were grounded in textual references, historical examples, and internal criticism of ritual authority.

☐ Vedadhikara Niroopanam

He highlighted episodes from early Indian traditions in which women, rishis from diverse communities, and householders engaged in philosophical debate. This helped undermine the belief that Vedic learning was always restricted to a narrow elite. His approach created space for broader participation in religious interpretation and encouraged marginalised groups to assert their right to knowledge.

☐ Highlighted episodes from early Indian traditions

His insistence that knowledge is independent of birth destabilised the ideological foundations of caste hierarchy. This shift was crucial in preparing Kerala for future struggles to secure access to public roads, temples, and education.

Historical Critique of Social Hierarchy and Kerala's Past

Swamikal made significant contributions to reconstructing Kerala's early history in a way that challenged the narratives used to justify Nambudiri dominance. In *Prachina Malayalam*, he questioned long-accepted assumptions about the origins of Kerala's social structure. He argued that Kerala's cultural formation was plural and that no single caste could claim exclusive authorship of its civilisation.

☐ Kerala's cultural formation was plural

By examining linguistic evidence, regional practices, and early cultural patterns, he suggested that many customs attributed to Brahmin leadership were relatively recent. This reinterpretation weakened claims of ritual supremacy and enabled intermediate castes to reassess their social position.

☐ weakened claims of ritual supremacy

His historical analysis had deep political implications. It provided intellectual legitimacy to emerging social movements and encouraged communities to examine the past critically, not as a fixed, sacred narrative but as a lived history open to reinterpretation.

Philosophical Writings and Ethical Humanism

Swamikal's contributions extended far beyond social criticism. He was a profound philosopher whose writings presented a reimagined spiritual vision that supported social equality. Works such as *Advaita Chinta Paddhati*, *Jeevakarunya Niroopanam* and *Christumatha Saram* expressed a form of Advaita that emphasised ethical conduct, compassion and moral responsibility.

❑ Profound philosopher

His Advaita was not abstract metaphysics but a practical philosophy that insisted on the unity of humanity. He argued that the divine resides equally in all beings, making it impossible to justify caste superiority on spiritual grounds. This ethical interpretation transformed religion into a tool for enhancing human dignity rather than reinforcing hierarchy.

❑ Unity of humanity

In *Jeevakarunya Niroopanam*, he articulated a philosophy of compassion rooted in respect for all life, promoting non-violence, self-discipline and moral clarity. His writings encouraged individuals to reflect critically on their behaviour and to cultivate responsibility towards others. This ethical foundation became a crucial component of the Kerala Renaissance.

❑ Jeevakarunya Niroopanam

Contributions to Language, Literature and Kerala's Intellectual Culture

Chattampi Swamikal played a key role in shaping modern Malayalam intellectual life. A polyglot proficient in Tamil, Sanskrit and Malayalam, he used linguistic scholarship to reinterpret Kerala's cultural history. His analysis of the evolution of Malayalam challenged theories that reduced the language to derivative forms of Sanskrit or Tamil, instead emphasising its independent development.

❑ Proficient in Tamil, Sanskrit and Malayalam

Through his engagement with local traditions, classical texts and contemporary debates, he helped create a new literary and scholarly environment. This development was essential for the Kerala Renaissance because it encouraged public discussion, critical inquiry and the circulation of new ideas through books, pamphlets and public discourse.

❑ Engagement with local traditions

Reform of Social Customs and Rational Analysis of Ritualism

Swamikal's critique of social customs was systematic and far-reaching. He questioned practices that imposed economic burdens on poor households, such as costly ceremonies and excessive ritual obligations. His writings encouraged people to adopt simple, rational customs that emphasised moral content rather than ritual spectacle.

☐ Critique of social customs

He criticised superstitions that restricted personal freedom or reinforced the authority of ritual specialists. By promoting reason, moderation and practical ethics, he encouraged communities to reform their daily practices in ways that supported dignity and economic stability.

☐ Criticised superstitions

His critique of ritualism was not directed at religion itself, but at practices that distorted spiritual life for the sake of social control. This distinction allowed ordinary people to re-evaluate customs without feeling that they were rejecting their cultural identity.

☐ Critique of ritualism

Influence on Kerala's Social Movements and Public Culture

The intellectual atmosphere created by Swamikal influenced nearly every major reform initiative in twentieth-century Kerala. His ideas provided philosophical support to movements demanding access to education, civil rights and temple entry. Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and leaders of Nair and Ezhava reform associations all drew upon his work, consciously or otherwise.

☐ Intellectual atmosphere created

Although he did not form mass organisations, his writings helped shape the arguments used by leaders in struggles such as the Vaikom Satyagraha. His emphasis on rational critique, ethical responsibility, and human equality became central themes in Kerala's reformist discourse. His influence extended into journalism, public meetings, and early social organisations, helping to shape a public sphere in which debate and dissent became acceptable.

☐ Rational critique, ethical responsibility, and human equality

Chattampi Swamikal's contribution to the Kerala Renaissance was foundational and far-reaching. Through his scholarship, he challenged caste authority, reinterpreted Kerala's history, and introduced new ways of thinking about religion and society. His philosophical writings emphasised ethical humanism, equality, and compassion. His linguistic work shaped Malayalam literary culture, while his critique of customs encouraged rational social reform.

☐ Challenged caste authority, reinterpreted Kerala's history



In shaping Kerala's intellectual landscape, Swamikal provided the tools and ideas that enabled later reform movements. He stands as one of the key figures who transformed Kerala's transition from a rigid traditional society to one capable of critical reflection, social justice, and democratic values.

1.3.2.3 Ayyankali and the Upliftment of Dalits in Kerala

- ❑ Recognised the structural nature of caste oppression

Ayyankali stands out in Kerala's modern history as a leader who recognised the structural nature of caste oppression and confronted it through organised action. At a time when Dalits in Travancore were denied access to land, education, public roads, and even basic dignity, he articulated a politics centred on equality, collective strength, and self-respect. His interventions reshaped the political imagination of the oppressed and opened new pathways for social mobility, making him one of the most decisive forces behind Kerala's renaissance.

Social Conditions and the Need for Resistance

- ❑ Faced rigid restrictions

When Ayyankali began his public life in the late nineteenth century, the Pulayar community and other Dalit groups lived under extreme forms of servitude. They faced rigid restrictions on movement, clothing, speech, and access to institutions. Dalits were barred from public roads, prohibited from entering markets and temples, and excluded from schools. Their labour sustained the agrarian economy, yet they had no rights over the land they cultivated.

- ❑ Recognised the strength of Dalit communities

Ayyankali understood that this oppression was not a series of isolated practices but a coherent system that controlled Dalit labour, denied dignity, and maintained upper-caste dominance. His leadership emerged from a deep awareness that political mobilisation was necessary for any meaningful change. He also recognised the strength of Dalit communities—solidarity, knowledge of the landscape, and resilience—which could be transformed into instruments of resistance.

Assertion of Civil Rights and Early Mobilisation

- ❑ Cart ride in 1893

Ayyankali's first major act of defiance was his famous cart ride in 1893, often described as the Villuvandi Yatra. Riding a decorated bullock cart along a road closed to Dalits, he openly challenged caste restrictions on public space. The attack that followed and the wider unrest it triggered revealed both the entrenched hostility of the upper castes and the growing resolve among Dalits to resist. These clashes, referred to as the Chaliyar incidents, became an early expression of the Dalit struggle for civic rights in Travancore.

☐ Symbolic acts that asserted dignity

This phase of mobilisation demonstrated a new form of political action in Kerala symbolic acts that asserted dignity while simultaneously exposing the brutality of caste hierarchy. Ayyankali's defiance encouraged Dalits across the region to demand their right to walk freely, use public facilities, and appear in clothing of their choice. His actions transformed everyday activities into political statements.

Campaigns for Dalit Women's Dignity and Bodily Autonomy

☐ Focus on Dalit women

One of the most significant aspects of Ayyankali's movement was his focus on Dalit women, who experienced oppression at the intersections of caste, gender, and labour. Dalit women were denied the right to cover their upper bodies and faced constant vulnerability to violence.

☐ Engagement with women's issues

Ayyankali challenged these practices by supporting women who asserted their right to dress with dignity. The protests that followed spread across southern Travancore, leading to violent confrontations but also strengthening collective determination. These struggles were instrumental in securing, by 1916, the Travancore proclamation that allowed all women irrespective of caste to wear upper cloth. Ayyankali's engagement with women's issues demonstrated his understanding that social reform had to address the deepest layers of caste-based control.

Struggle for Education and the School Entry Movement

Ayyankali recognised education as the most powerful tool for dismantling caste inequality. Dalits were systematically denied access to schools, and even government orders allowing admission were often ignored by local officials and dominant castes.

☐ Opened a school for Dalit children

In 1904, he opened a school for Dalit children in his own locality, defying threats and attacks. This school symbolised a new beginning—a declaration that Dalits would no longer accept exclusion from knowledge. When resistance persisted, Ayyankali organised what became one of the earliest labour strikes in Kerala's history. Agricultural workers refused to till the fields of upper-caste landlords until Dalit children were allowed into government schools.

This collective action compelled the Travancore government to intervene and reaffirm the right of school entry. The campaign was more than a struggle for education; it was a demonstration of political consciousness and organised bargaining power among the oppressed.

Labour Rights and the First Organised Agricultural Strike

- ❑ Agricultural labour strike in 1907

Beyond education, Ayyankali understood that structural change required transforming labour relations. Dalits were tied to landowners through hereditary service and received minimal wages or payments in kind. His leadership in organising an agricultural labour strike in 1907 marked a turning point. For the first time, Dalit workers collectively asserted their rights, withdrew their labour, and negotiated conditions.

- ❑ Significant economic power despite their social marginalisation

This strike revealed that Dalits held significant economic power despite their social marginalisation. It laid the foundation for later workers' movements in Kerala and demonstrated that the struggle for dignity was inseparable from the struggle for economic autonomy.

- ❑ Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham

Political Intervention and Legislative Advocacy

Ayyankali's political activism found institutional form through the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham, founded in 1905 to organise Dalit communities. The organisation focused on education, welfare, self-help, and representation. It became a platform through which people could articulate demands and seek government redress.

- ❑ First Dalit representative in a legislative body in Travancore

His election to the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly in 1910 marked a historic moment—he became the first Dalit representative in a legislative body in Travancore. Inside the Assembly, he raised issues of public roads, school access, land for the landless, and protection from upper-caste violence. While constrained by the limits of the institution, his presence politicised Dalit grievances and forced the state to confront long-ignored injustices.

- ❑ Campaigns for temple entry

Temple Entry and the Expanding Horizon of Equality

Although Ayyankali's movement focused primarily on civil rights, education, and labour, he also supported campaigns for temple entry. His efforts in the 1890s and later calls for removing religious barriers helped build momentum for broader reform. The landmark Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 came after decades of agitation by leaders across communities, and Ayyankali's sustained activism formed an essential background to this historic shift. By challenging ritual segregation, he broadened the meaning of equal citizenship.

Theoretical Significance and Lasting Legacy

Ayyankali's contributions were not limited to immediate reforms; they reshaped Kerala's political culture. He introduced a new mode of Dalit politics grounded in assertion rather

❑ Reshaped Kerala's political culture

❑ Knowledge systems, labour skills, and community networks

❑ Altered the social and political landscape

❑ Strengthened Kerala's wider movement for social equality

❑ Rigid conditions within Nambudiri society

than petition. His strategies—public defiance, controlled use of symbolic power, economic withdrawal, and collective mobilisation—anticipated later anti-caste movements in India.

Scholars have described him as a revolutionary who understood both the structure of caste power and the latent strengths of the oppressed. He recognised that Dalits had knowledge systems, labour skills, and community networks that could be converted into political resources. His methods demonstrated that dignity is not granted but claimed through action.

His work directly influenced later struggles for land reform, education, and political representation. The values he upheld—self-respect, equality, and social courage—remain central to Kerala's modern political identity.

Ayyankali's movement fundamentally altered the social and political landscape of Kerala. By challenging restrictions on movement and dress, demanding educational access, organising workers, and entering legislative politics, he dismantled key pillars of caste domination. His legacy lies not only in the reforms achieved but in the political awakening he inspired among Dalits. He transformed everyday resistance into a collective struggle for justice and laid the foundations for Kerala's later achievements in social equality and democratic participation.

1.3.2.4 V. T. Bhattathiripad and the Kerala Renaissance

V. T. Bhattathiripad stands out in the Kerala Renaissance because he questioned inequality from within one of Kerala's most conservative communities. At a time when the Nambudiri Brahmins controlled ritual life, land, and intellectual authority, V. T. argued that true reform must begin inside privileged groups. He used literature, theatre, public campaigns, and personal defiance to challenge customs around gender, caste, and family. His work did not merely modernise the Nambudiri community; it strengthened Kerala's wider movement for social equality by widening the base of reform.

Social Conditions and the Need for Reform

The transformation led by V. T. cannot be understood without considering the rigid conditions within Nambudiri society. Women lived in strict seclusion and were denied schooling, mobility, free choice in marriage, and the right to remarry. Younger Nambudiri men also faced restrictions; only the eldest son was permitted to marry within the caste. This

situation led to sambandham marriages with women from other castes, deepening social hierarchies and creating resentment.

- ❑ Gap between a changing Kerala and a stagnant Nambudiri order

These customs isolated the community from the rest of Kerala, where reformers like Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali had already begun challenging inequality. The gap between a changing Kerala and a stagnant Nambudiri order created the conditions for V. T.'s intervention. He recognised that reform would not come from within the traditional leadership; it needed an organised and intellectual response.

Writing and Theatre as Instruments of Social Transformation

- ❑ Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku

V. T.'s most powerful contribution came through literature. His play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* broke new ground by depicting the emotional and physical confinement of Nambudiri women. The play demonstrated how theatre could serve as a political tool by bringing private suffering into public debate. Audience members were compelled to confront the tension between ritual prestige and everyday oppression in their homes.

- ❑ Kanneerum Kinavum

His autobiography, *Kanneerum Kinavum*, used personal narrative to reveal the contradictions of Nambudiri life. Through stories, he humanised the struggles of women and younger Nambudiri men. His essays in reformist journals spread ideas among educated youth and challenged religious authorities who upheld outdated customs.

Through this literary work, V. T. helped reshape Malayalam theatre and literature into spaces of social critique. Reform became part of Kerala's cultural imagination, not just its political debates.

Yachana Yathra and the Politics of Public Action

- ❑ Yachana Yathra

V. T. understood that ideas alone cannot bring about social change without public pressure. In 1931, he organised the *Yachana Yathra*, a march across central Kerala to raise funds for women's education and widow remarriage. The march used symbolism effectively—asking for donations raised awareness of the "poverty" produced by Brahmanical customs, not just financial poverty.

- ❑ New style of reform politics

The Yathra marked a new style of reform politics. It brought reform into public spaces, involved ordinary people, fostered solidarity among reformers, and demonstrated that the Nambudiri community could also mobilise, like other social movements in Kerala. The visibility of the march unsettled conservative groups, revealing that the monopoly of orthodoxy

was beginning to weaken.

Widow Remarriage as a Direct Challenge to Orthodoxy

❑ Active support for widow remarriage

One of V. T.'s most radical steps was his active support for widow remarriage. Widows in Nambudiri households lived in complete isolation and had no rights over property or personal choice. Their suffering symbolised the cruelty of the traditional system.

❑ Real-life model to follow

The 1934 remarriage he arranged at his own home was a turning point. This act triggered debates across Kerala, produced social tensions, and led to the excommunication of several reformers. However, it also created a powerful precedent. Reformists now had a real-life model to follow, and younger generations began to rethink the unquestioned traditions of purity and pollution.

Widow remarriage thus became more than a family issue; it became a public statement about human dignity and the reconstruction of social order.

Concrete Results of V. T. Bhattathiripad's Reform Movement

- Nambudiri women gained access to formal schooling, public life, and professional opportunities.
- Education slowly broke the seclusion that had confined Antharjanams for generations.
- Women began to appear in schools, literary spaces, and, later, in employment.
- This marked the first major shift in gender roles within the Nambudiri community.
- Younger Nambudiri men entered higher education and modern jobs.
- The reform movement encouraged them to leave ritual occupations and seek new careers.
- Many joined colleges, the civil service, teaching, law, and emerging professional fields.
- This facilitated the community's integration into Kerala's modern public sphere.
- The rigid marriage system lost legitimacy and slowly collapsed.
- The practice of allowing only the eldest son to marry within the caste came under public criticism. Widow remarriage and inter-caste alliances demonstrated al-

ternative choices.

- Over time, the younger generation stopped accepting marriage rules based on purity and hierarchy.
- The Yogakshema Sabha became an institutional centre of sustained reform. It guided debates on education, women's rights, and modern social customs. The Sabha connected the Nambudiri reform with Kerala's larger social awakening. It ensured that changes did not remain temporary but became part of community life.

❑ Bringing reform into the heart of a conservative Brahmin community

V. T. Bhattathiripad played a decisive role in shaping Kerala's Renaissance by bringing reform into the heart of a conservative Brahmin community. Through theatre, public action, organisational work, and moral courage, he transformed oppressive customs and created space for new values centred on dignity and equality. His contributions demonstrate that the Kerala Renaissance was not a single movement but a set of interconnected struggles, each reshaping the region's social and political life from different directions. V. T.'s legacy shows how cultural work, when linked with ethical conviction, can drive deep and lasting social transformation.

Summarised Overview

At a time when caste discrimination, gender inequality, and social exclusion were deeply entrenched, figures such as Sree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, Ayyankali, and V.T. Bhattathiripad initiated transformative interventions. Their contributions went beyond individual reform—they questioned the foundations of social hierarchy, challenged religious orthodoxy, and opened new spaces for dignity and rights.

Sree Narayana Guru promoted a vision of social equality grounded in ethical and spiritual humanism, while Chattampi Swamikal dismantled Brahmanical claims to superiority through scholarship and reasoned critique. Ayyankali mobilised oppressed labouring communities, asserting their right to education, public space, and political participation. V.T. Bhattathiripad used literature and activism to reform the rigid structures within the Nambudiri community, advocating for women's rights and social modernisation.

Together, these reformers laid the ideological and organisational foundations for Kerala's renaissance. Their ideas supported the emergence of a democratic public sphere, weakened caste barriers, and prepared society for later political movements, making them central to understanding Kerala's path toward a modern and egalitarian social order.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What was the core message behind Sree Narayana Guru's social philosophy?
2. How did Chattampi Swamikal challenge Brahminical dominance in Kerala?
3. What forms of social exclusion did Ayyankali directly confront through mass mobilisation?
4. Why was V.T. Bhattathiripad's literary intervention important for Nambudiri reform?
5. How did the SNDP Yogam contribute to the Kerala Renaissance?
6. In what ways did Chattampi Swamikal promote vernacular scholarship?
7. How did Ayyankali's struggles redefine the political rights of agricultural labourers?
8. Why is the Nambudiri reform movement considered crucial to Kerala's social transformation?

Assignments

1. Evaluate the role of Sree Narayana Guru in shaping modern Kerala's ideas of equality and social justice.
2. Discuss Chattampi Swamikal's intellectual contributions and their impact on Kerala's cultural renaissance.
3. Analyse how Ayyankali's political and social movements advanced Dalit rights in Travancore.
4. Examine the contributions of V.T. Bhattathiripad to the reform of Nambudiri society and Kerala's public sphere.
5. Trace the link between early social reform and the development of modern Kerala's welfare policies.
6. Discuss the role of literature and public debate in advancing the Kerala Renaissance.

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Suggested Reading

1. K. N. Panikkar. *Culture and Consciousness in Modern Kerala*.
2. P. Sanal Mohan. *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*.
3. T. K. Ravindran. *Kerala and the Indian Freedom Struggle*.
4. M. S. A. Rao. *Social Movements and Social Transformation*.
5. G. Arunima. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala*.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

BLOCK 2

Political and Social Movements

UNIT 1

Movement of Aikya Kerala and Civil Rights Movement

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain the origin of the Aikya Kerala demand and the factors behind linguistic unity
- describe the Malayali and Ezhava Memorials and their role in expanding civil rights
- analyse the movements for responsible government in Travancore and Cochin
- evaluate how these struggles influenced the formation of Travancore–Cochin and Kerala

Background

Kerala was historically divided into Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar, each with its own administrative system. The spread of modern education, print media, and voluntary associations created a shared Malayalam identity and raised expectations for fair representation. Social inequalities and administrative exclusions pushed communities to organise petitions, public meetings, and democratic agitations. These developments slowly transformed public consciousness and encouraged a shift from traditional authority to modern political rights.

Keywords

Malayali Memorial, Ezhava Memorial, Responsible Government, Travancore State Congress, Linguistic Reorganisation, Aikya Kerala, Travancore–Cochin Merger.

The political developments that shaped modern Kerala began with early petitions and public campaigns that highlighted new expectations of fairness and representation. The Malayali Memorial and the Ezhava Memorial brought to the surface long-standing inequalities in Travancore's administration, where social groups with higher educational qualifications still faced exclusion from public employment and civic rights. These petitions marked a transition from isolated grievances to collective political action, involving teachers, students, professionals, peasants, and reformers. As political awareness deepened, the movements for responsible government in Travancore and Cochin expanded the scope of public participation. Mass meetings, hartals, civil disobedience, and organised leadership through bodies like the Travancore State Congress helped people recognise that governance should be accountable to elected representatives rather than hereditary or autocratic authority.

At the same time, linguistic identity and shared cultural traditions encouraged the idea of merging Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar into a single political unit. Regional conferences, the Malayalam press, and emerging political organisations helped shape a wider public imagination that connected struggles for civil rights with the demand for a united Kerala. These impulses gathered strength through the major Aikya Kerala conferences of the 1920s and 1940s, which brought leaders and delegates from across the region together to debate the future of Kerala. The merging of Travancore and Cochin in 1949 marked a significant step in restructuring the political landscape, shifting from fragmented princely states to a unified administrative system. By the mid-1950s, the long history of petitions, democratic struggles, and regional activism created the conditions for the linguistic reorganisation of states. The formation of Kerala in 1956 thus emerged from a combination of civil rights movements, responsible government agitations, and a sustained demand for linguistic unity.

2.1.1 Malayali Memorial and Ezhava Memorial

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Travancore witnessed growing dissatisfaction among its educated sections. The main reason was the state's preference for appointing non-Malayali Brahmins, especially Tamil Brahmins, to high offices in the civil service. This pattern began during the time of Ramayyan Dalawa and continued for the rest of the century. Even when qualified Malayalis were available, they remained excluded from influential positions. Research shows that by 1891,

❑ Malayalis remained excluded from influential positions

non-Malayali Brahmins accounted for only a small fraction of the population but held a disproportionately high share of well-paid government jobs, including Dewans, judgeships, department heads, and key administrative posts.

❑ Sharpened public opinion

Educated Nairs, Syrian Christians, and even leaders of the Ezhava community gradually realised that the existing system worked against their interests. The expulsion of three Maharaja's College students in 1882—G.P. Pillai, R. Ranga Rao, and N. Raman Pillai—for criticising this appointment policy further sharpened public opinion. All these developments created the background for organised memorials demanding fairness in public employment and social rights.

2.1.1.1 Malayali Memorial (1891)

❑ Policy of appointing non-Malayali Brahmins

In the late nineteenth century, Travancore society experienced growing dissatisfaction among its educated communities. The main concern was the state's continued policy of appointing non-Malayali Brahmins, especially Tamil Brahmins, to important government posts, even when qualified Malayalis were available. This pattern had existed since the days of Ramayyan Dalawa and became more visible with the expansion of modern administration and English education. Research shows that by 1891, the foreign Brahmin population in Travancore was small, yet they occupied a significant share of higher government positions and enjoyed considerable influence in administration and public life.

❑ Three students of the Maharaja's College were expelled

Educated Nairs, Syrian Christians, and leaders from the Ezhava community felt that this situation denied opportunities to Travancore's own people. Public opinion strengthened when three students of the Maharaja's College were expelled in 1882 for criticising the appointment of outsiders. These developments created a wider awareness of injustice and prepared the ground for organised petitions that demanded fairness, access, and dignity in public life.

❑ January 11, 1891

The petition was circulated widely in 1890, and by January 11, 1891, 10,028 people representing various castes and occupations had signed it. The memorial was submitted to Maharaja Sri Moolam Thirunal.

Demands of the Memorial

❑ Highlighted the unfair exclusion

The memorial highlighted the unfair exclusion of educated Malayalis from higher public service posts. It urged the Maharaja to ensure a fair share of appointments for Travancore's own subjects. It questioned the monopoly enjoyed by foreign Brahmins and argued that qualified natives deserved equal opportunity. The petition also pointed out the lack of representation



of communities such as the Ezhavas and Syrian Christians in government service.

Importance of the Malayali Memorial

The Malayali Memorial holds a special place in Kerala's modern history because it marked the beginning of organised political agitation in Travancore. It introduced a new form of public action through petitions, meetings, and newspaper campaigns, which helped shape the state's political climate. The memorial also expressed a growing awareness that opportunities in public service should reflect the aspirations of the people of Travancore. Although the immediate benefits were enjoyed mainly by the Nair community, the movement helped other communities realise the value of collective action. Its importance lies in its role in stimulating public debate, encouraging unity among different social groups, and laying the foundation for later struggles demanding equality and civil rights.

❑ Beginning of organised political agitation in Travancore

Impact on Kerala's Political and Social History

Although the government's initial reaction was defensive, the agitation reshaped Travancore's political atmosphere. In the years that followed, several Nair leaders who participated in the movement were appointed to influential posts under the new Dewan, Sankara Subbairar. However, other communities did not benefit in the same way, which later encouraged them to organise separate movements.

❑ Encouraged to organise separate movements.

The memorial had long-term effects on Kerala's political development. It laid the foundation for later struggles demanding representation, equality, and civil rights. It also exposed the growing caste and community consciousness of the period, which later influenced organisations like the Nair Service Society and SNDP Yogam. Most importantly, it helped cultivate a modern sense of political rights among the people of Travancore, which later contributed to movements such as the Civil Rights Agitation of 1919.

❑ Long-term effects

2.1.2 Ezhava Memorial (1896 and 1900)

The success of the Malayali Memorial inspired other marginalised groups to raise their concerns. Among them, the Ezhava community faced severe discrimination in education, employment, and social life. They were denied admission to government schools and excluded from public service. Dr. Palpu, one of the earliest doctors from the community, was denied employment in the Travancore Medical Department and had to work in Mysore instead. These experiences led to a collective realisation within the community that a separate organised appeal was necessary.

❑ Inspired other marginalised groups

☐ 13,176 signatures

The First Ezhava Memorial (1896)

On September 3, 1896, the first Ezhava Memorial was submitted to the Maharaja. It carried 13,176 signatures and pleaded for basic civil rights. It demanded that Ezhavas be granted the same access to education and government employment as those from their community who had converted to Christianity. The government's response was negative, leaving the petitioners disappointed.

☐ Presented to Lord Curzon

The Second Ezhava Memorial (1900)

A second memorial was presented to Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, during his visit to Trivandrum in 1900. It described the community's hardships and sought external intervention. However, the Viceroy declined to interfere, stating that such matters were internal to the princely state.

☐ Earliest united protests by a marginalised community

Importance of the Ezhava Memorial

The Ezhava Memorial is important because it marked one of the earliest united protests by a marginalised community in Kerala. It gave the Ezhavas a collective voice at a time when they were denied access to education, public employment, and social dignity. Even without immediate administrative change, the memorial created a new sense of confidence and solidarity within the community. It encouraged the growth of reform movements and later contributed to the rise of SNDP Yogam and the wider social renaissance led by Narayana Guru. Its importance lies in the fact that it transformed a disadvantaged community into an active participant in Kerala's social and political processes and laid a strong foundation for future movements for equality and civil rights.

The Ezhava Memorials thus represented an early struggle for social justice and civil rights, shaping Kerala's wider reformist tradition.

☐ Strengthened Kerala's journey towards modern political consciousness

The Malayali Memorial and Ezhava Memorial occupy an important place in Kerala's modern history. They emerged during a period when Travancore society was slowly becoming aware of questions of fairness, rights, and representation. While the Malayali Memorial was primarily a movement of the educated middle class seeking administrative justice, the Ezhava Memorial expressed the deeper struggle of a marginalised community demanding dignity and equal opportunity. Together, these movements strengthened Kerala's journey towards modern political consciousness and laid the groundwork for the broader civil rights and social reform movements that followed.

2.1.3 Aikya Kerala Movement

The movement for Aikya Kerala emerged from a long tradition of cultural unity, linguistic identity, and political aspiration among Malayalam-speaking people. Although Kerala historically existed as three different administrative regions—Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar—the idea of merging them into a single state gained momentum in the early twentieth century. Several political conferences, public demands, and democratic struggles gradually transformed this idea into a powerful movement that shaped the formation of the modern state of Kerala.

- ❑ Emerged from a long tradition of cultural unity, linguistic identity,

Early Expressions of the Idea (1920s)

The earliest organised efforts for a united Kerala appeared in the 1920s. The State People's Conference held at Ernakulam in April 1928 passed one of the first formal resolutions supporting the creation of Aikya Kerala. Delegates from across the Malayalam-speaking regions attended, indicating that the idea already had wide appeal.

- ❑ State People's Conference

In May of the same year, the Payyannur Political Conference, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, endorsed this demand. The resolution requested the Indian National Congress to consider Kerala as a separate province when framing a constitution for an independent India. The All-Kerala Political Conferences conducted by the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee from the early 1920s strengthened these ideas. Leaders from Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar began to think collectively about political unity and administrative reorganisation.

- ❑ Payyannur Political Conference

Growing Momentum in the 1940s

The 1940s witnessed faster progress towards unification. The prospect of Indian independence gave renewed strength to regional aspirations. The Maharaja of Cochin, Sri Kerala Varma, announced in July 1946 his support for the early creation of a Kerala state that included Travancore, Cochin, and British Malabar. This statement encouraged political workers to push for a concrete plan.

- ❑ Prospect of Indian independence

Later, in 1946, a subcommittee of the Kerala Provincial Congress, under K. P. Kesava Menon, met at Cheruthuruthy and decided to convene a major Aikya Kerala Conference. This set the stage for the next phase of the movement.

The Thrissur Aikya Kerala Conference of 1947

The Aikya Kerala Conference, held in Thrissur in April 1947, was a landmark event. Led by K. Kelappan, it was one of the largest and most representative gatherings in Kerala's political history. Hundreds of delegates from across Kerala participated.

- ❑ Led by K. Kelappan

❑ Demanded the immediate formation of Aikya Kerala

❑ End the Dewan Rule

❑ Responsible government and Aikya Kerala

The Maharaja of Cochin attended and expressed open support for the formation of a united Kerala.

A resolution moved by E. Moidu Maulavi demanded the immediate formation of Aikya Kerala. A standing council of 100 members was established to coordinate future activities. This conference affirmed that the idea of linguistic reorganisation had become a collective political goal rather than a theoretical aspiration.

Political Context and the Role of Democratic Movements

The climate of the 1940s was heavily influenced by democratic struggles in Travancore and Cochin. In Travancore, protests with slogans such as "End the Dewan Rule" and movements like Punnappa-Vayalar created a strong current against autocratic governance. At the same time, the Travancore administration sought to weaken the movement by exploiting linguistic divisions in South Travancore and by appealing to Tamil sentiments to oppose the demand for unification.

Cochin also experienced intense democratic activity. In 1946, united demonstrations and hartals shook the administration. The Maharaja responded with a declaration supporting responsible government and Aikya Kerala, which won him temporary goodwill. Yet the deeper aim of these manoeuvres was to preserve the privileges of ruling families, even in a unified system, thereby creating tensions among democratic groups.

These developments showed that the idea of a united Kerala was closely connected to the struggle for democratic rights and political autonomy.

Conventions at Alwaye and Palghat

Two more major conventions were organised to maintain momentum:

- Aikya Kerala Convention at Alwaye in February 1949
- Aikya Kerala Convention at Palghat in November 1949

Both meetings reiterated the need for linguistic unity and administrative reorganisation. They reflected the broad-based nature of the movement, with participation from political parties, social workers, peasants' organisations, and professionals.

The Merger of Travancore and Cochin (1949)

A major turning point came with the integration of princely states across India under the leadership of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Encouraged by this policy, the states of Travancore and Cochin merged on 1 July 1949, forming the Travancore–Cochin State.

Key developments after the merger included:

- The Maharaja of Travancore became the Rajapramukh.
- The Maharaja of Cochin voluntarily stepped aside, stating that he wished his people to "enjoy a larger life."
- The legislatures and ministries of both states were unified.
- Trivandrum became the capital, and the High Court was located in Ernakulam.

This was the first concrete step towards the formation of a larger Kerala state. Although it did not include Malabar and did not fully fulfil the linguistic principle, it marked a structural shift from fragmented princely administration to unified governance.

Debates and Conflicts within the Movement

Despite wide popular support, divisions emerged within the movement. Two major tensions can be identified:

1. **Conflicting Visions of Geography** : Some leaders wanted a "historical Kerala" extending from Kanyakumari to Gokarna, arguing that ancient Kerala was culturally unified. This proposal included Tamil, Tulu, and Kannada-speaking regions. However, this vision was opposed by neighbouring nationalities, who rejected being grouped into a Malayalam-majority state. It created unnecessary conflicts and weakened the larger democratic goal.
2. **Class Interests and Concerns** : Professional groups and sections of the bourgeoisie feared losing employment opportunities or facing stronger competition if a smaller linguistic state were formed. Feudal groups in Travancore resisted the prospect of losing political control if South Travancore were to join the Madras state. Despite these concerns, the broader democratic aspiration for Aikya Kerala continued to grow.

❑ Historical Kerala

❑ Feared losing employment opportunities

Strengthening of the Movement after 1950

The years after independence saw major political changes across India. Mass struggles in North Malabar, the Paliyam Satyagraha, and movements led by democratic and left organisations kept the demand alive. By the early 1950s, the reorganisation of states along linguistic lines had become a national issue. States such as Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra demanded similar reorganisations, thereby strengthening Kerala's case.

The States Reorganisation Commission examined all proposals in detail. While it rejected maximalist claims to expand Kerala into multilingual regions, it recommended the formation of a linguistic state for Malayalees, with minor border adjustments, including a portion of Kasargod taluk.

2.1.4 Formation of the State of Kerala (1956)

The recommendations of the States Reorganisation Commission were implemented on 1 November 1956. The new state of Kerala was formed by merging Travancore–Cochin with the Malabar district of Madras State and the Kasargod region. This finally established the linguistic status of the Malayalam-speaking people and fulfilled a long-standing aspiration articulated since the 1920s.

❑ 1 November 1956

The Aikya Kerala Movement was not a single event but a long political journey involving cultural consciousness, democratic struggles, and strategic negotiations. From early resolutions in 1928 to mass movements in the 1940s and the structural reorganisation in 1956, the movement reflected a deep desire for unity, linguistic identity, and responsible governance. It brought together diverse groups across Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar and helped lay the foundation for modern Kerala. The creation of the state on linguistic lines symbolised both the culmination of decades of political efforts and the beginning of a new democratic era rooted in cultural unity and social progress.

❑ Reflected a deep desire for unity, linguistic identity

2.1.5 Struggle for Responsible Government in Travancore and Cochin

The struggle for responsible government in Travancore was a significant political movement in the 1930s and 1940s. It was led by the Travancore State Congress, formed in 1938. The aim of the struggle was to demand self-rule against the autocratic rule of the Maharaja and the Diwan, C.P. Ramaswami Iyer.

❑ Significant political movement in the 1930s and 1940s

The most important aspect of the political movement in Travancore was the struggle for responsible government. The South Indian Princely States' People's Conference, held in Trivandrum in 1929, was the first step towards the struggle for responsible government in Travancore. The conference passed a resolution demanding the British government enforce responsible government in the princely states of India. The progressive-minded youth within the Congress formed an organisation called the Youth League in 1931.

❑ States' People's Conference

Nivarthana Movement (1932)

☐ Achieving responsible government

The Nivarthana Movement, or the Abstention Movement, of 1932 was initiated in Travancore alongside the national civil disobedience movement. This movement gained popularity in Travancore for its aim of achieving responsible government. It is termed the Abstention Movement because the agitators decided to abstain from participating in legislative elections. The origins of the movement can be traced to the discriminatory policies implemented by the Travancore government regarding representation for various castes and communities in the legislature and public services. Kesari Balakrishna Pilla characterised this movement as the 'struggle for civil society'.

☐ Legislative reforms of 1932

Since the establishment of the legislature in 1888, it had been dominated by 'savarnas'. The majority of the population, consisting of lower castes, had inadequate representation in that body. As the primary qualification for voting was tax payment, the avarnas received virtually no representation in the legislature. The legislative reforms of 1932 introduced a property qualification for exercising the franchise. The Ezhavas, Muslims, and Christians feared that these new reforms would secure them fewer seats in the legislature than they were entitled to. They were concerned that the Nairs would receive more seats than they deserved. Consequently, these communities demanded representation in the legislature in proportion to their numerical strength. As the government's attitude was unfavourable, the Abstentionists formed their own organisation to pursue their demands, which they called the 'Joint Political Congress' or 'Samyuktha Rashtriya Samithi'. In a meeting held on 25 January 1933, the Samithi made the significant decision to abstain from voting in the election to the legislature.

☐ Vigorous protests throughout the state

As these communities—Ezhavas, Christians, and Muslims—comprised more than two-thirds of the population, their agitation took on the character of a mass struggle. The Abstentionists conducted vigorous protests throughout the state against the new constitutional reforms. During this period, C. Kesavan delivered his famous speech at Kozhencherry on 11 May 1935, for which he was arrested and punished. Although the government adopted a repressive policy, it ultimately conceded to the demands of the agitators. It established a Public Service Commission to ensure fair representation of backward communities in public services and reduced the property qualification by widening the franchise. The government also agreed to allocate a specific number of seats in the legislature to these three communities. The outcome of this agitation was the dismantling of the political power monopoly held by upper-caste Hindus. It also marked the end of constitutional agitation and the beginning of direct

political action. Furthermore, it paved the way for the formation of the Travancore State Congress and the Cochin State Praja Mandal. Thus, the agitation fulfilled its objectives.

The Struggle for Responsible Government in Travancore

- ❑ Joint Political Congress was transformed into a new organisation

The struggle for responsible government in Travancore took an organised form in 1938 when the Joint Political Congress was transformed into a new organisation, the Travancore State Congress, with Pattom A. Thanupillai as its president. C. Kesavan, T.M. Varghese, and other prominent leaders of the Joint Political Congress emerged as its principal figures. The aim of the new organisation was to achieve full responsible government for the people of Travancore. The organisation decided to launch direct action to achieve its goals. As an initial step, it presented a memorial to the Maharaja, urging the need for an early grant of responsible government to the people of the State. The memorial also contained a series of charges against the Diwan, Sir C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, and demanded his dismissal from office.

- ❑ Banned the State Congress and Youth League

The government of Travancore decided to suppress the agitation with an iron hand. It banned the State Congress and Youth League for their activities against the state. Under these circumstances, the State Congress decided to launch a civil disobedience movement on 26 August 1938. As a consequence, all the top leaders of the Congress were arrested and imprisoned. There were large-scale rallies and protests, including violent clashes between the people and the police in different parts of the state. In Neyyattin Kare, the police opened fire, resulting in the death of one person, namely Raghavan. In Alleppy, workers resorted to a general strike, paralysing public life in the region.

- ❑ Insisted on the withdrawal of the memorial

The Action Council of the Congress planned a huge demonstration in Trivandrum in November during the birth celebration of the Maharaja. As a result, the government withdrew the ban on the State Congress, and the Youth League leaders were released from prison. However, the State Congress could not continue its normal political activities because the government's attitude towards the organisation remained hostile. The Diwan, Ramaswamy Iyer, insisted on the withdrawal of the memorial presented to the Maharaja as a condition for negotiation between the government and the State Congress regarding constitutional reforms. The State Congress decided to withdraw the memorial at Gandhiji's advice. This resulted in a split in the Congress into Rightists and Leftists. The Leftists formed the Congress Socialist Party. Originally, they were Congress members, but they preferred to call themselves socialists. They functioned as a separate group within the Congress. They dominated the Congress but disliked Gandhian techniques. The Left wing, dominated by socialists, led the agitation of workers and peasants, strengthen-

ing their mass base. They organised and passed resolutions, held hunger marches, and came into the political limelight.

Struggle for Responsible Government in Cochin.

Cochin had also experienced popular political struggle even before the emergence of the National Movement there. The first of such organised movements occurred in 1834 when a group of representatives protested against the misrule of the then Diwan of Kochi, Sankara Menon. The people submitted a memorandum to the Madras Governor, requesting that he take the necessary action. The Governor responded favourably and dismissed Sankara Menon from the post of Diwan. A similar process occurred in 1859, this time against the then Diwan, Venkata Rao. He was also dismissed from his post at the request of the people by the then Governor of Madras.

❑ Dismissed
Sankara Menon

Early Congress Activities

The National Movement in India, under the leadership of the Indian National Congress, had its echoes in Cochin. A committee of the Congress was functioning in Trichur as early as 1919. Several members of Congress from the state participated in various non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements under Gandhi's leadership. In 1933, the peasants and workers agitated for relief from the burden of indebtedness, demanding necessary reforms to redress their grievances.

❑ Agitated for relief
from the burden of
indebtedness

The Electricity Agitation

The struggle for responsible government in Kochi began with the Electricity struggle of 1936. The Diwan, Shanmugham Chetty, decided to entrust the distribution of electricity in Kochi to a private company against the interests and requests of the people. Although the decision affected only the local area of Cochin/Kochi, the struggle against it was widespread throughout the state. The government suppressed the popular struggle. Though the Electricity struggle failed, it paved the way for a growing sentiment among the people, and the necessity to start a fresh struggle for responsible government in Kochi gained momentum.

❑ Electricity
struggle of 1936

The Kochi government recognised that the struggle for responsible government in Travancore was gaining momentum, and to prevent a similar popular struggle in Kochi, it introduced administrative reforms in 1938. This was based on the Administrative Reforms introduced by the British in India in 1919. Under the newly introduced Administrative Reforms, one person was to be appointed as a minister who would receive the support of a majority of the elected members in the Legislative Council. Accordingly, elections were conducted for the Legislative Council

❑ Introduced
administrative
reforms in 1938

of Kochi, and Sivarama Menon was appointed as the minister after the elections. He became the first minister representing the people in Kochi, although he was given responsibility for only some unimportant departments. However, his appointment and the earlier elections turned out to be an important stage in the establishment of responsible government in Kochi.

☐ Kochi Praja Mandalam

The system of dyarchy introduced with the appointment of Sivarama Menon as a minister did not satisfy the progressive wing of society. They formed the 'Kochi Praja Mandalam' (Cochin State Congress) on 26 January 1941, under the leadership of V.R. Krishna Ezhuttacchan. The objective of the organisation was to establish a responsible government in Kochi. However, the government adopted a negative attitude towards the Praja Mandalam and banned its first annual conference. Those who attempted to conduct the conference defied the ban order, and about 3,000 delegates attended the session. Several individuals, including the president, were arrested and imprisoned. After a short period, the ban was lifted, and the political prisoners were released. The King declared elections to the Legislative Council, in which the majority of seats were won by the Praja Mandalam candidates. Subsequently, another minister was appointed by the King, with two ministers representing the people of Kochi. However, the Praja Mandalam remained dissatisfied and decided to continue the struggle for responsible government.

2.1.6 Responsible Government in Kochi

☐ Fresh direct struggle throughout Kochi

The annual conference of the Praja Mandalam, held in July 1946 at Ernakulam, decided to launch a fresh direct struggle throughout Kochi with the aim of achieving responsible government. Following the call given by the annual conference, 29 July was observed as "Responsible Government Day" throughout Kochi. Several public meetings were organised on that day, and these meetings passed resolutions demanding an end to the rule of the Diwan and the immediate transfer of full political power to the people's representatives.

☐ Submitted a memorial to the King demanding responsible government

As part of the struggle, representatives of the Praja Mandalam submitted a memorial to the King demanding responsible government. To end the system of dyarchy, the Praja Mandalam leaders, including Panampilly Govinda Menon, moved a no-confidence motion against the two ministers. The no-confidence motion was passed, and the ministers resigned on 8 August. Their departments were returned to the Diwan.

As a result of the ongoing agitation, the King declared that he was prepared to allocate all the departments to ministers responsible to the council, except for the departments of Fi-

❑ First people's ministry of Kochi

❑ Fresh struggle to achieve their new demand

❑ Samara Kahalam

❑ Led by the Communist Party of India

❑ The famine-like situation

nance, the Judiciary, Law, and Devasam. He guaranteed that the number of ministers would be raised from two to four. The King's declaration was generally accepted, and the Praja Mandalam decided to form a ministry. Subsequently, a ministry was formed with Panampilly, C.R. Iyyunni, K. Ayyappan, and T.K. Nair as ministers. Thus, the first people's ministry of Kochi came into power on 9 September 1946.

Important departments such as Finance, Law, and the Judiciary remained under the Diwan's control. The ministers' decisions regarding finance could not be implemented promptly, leading to conflicts between the interests of the Diwan and the ministers. The Praja Mandalam demanded that all departments should be handed over to the ministers and decided to initiate a fresh struggle to achieve their new demands.

The Prajamandalam organised several meetings and demonstrations. The movement's leaders were arrested, and the youth wing of the Prajamandalam set fire to the military campus in Ernakulam. They published a secret bulletin named 'Samara Kahalam'. As the Prajamandalam was associated with the Quit India movement, its image was enhanced. In Kochi, the Legislative Assembly was constituted in May 1948. In the elections held, the Prajamandalam won a decisive victory and assumed office, with an Ikkanda warrior as prime minister, on 20 September 1948. When the Prajamandalam merged with the Congress in November 1948, the new ministry became the first Congress ministry in the state of Kochi. Thus, the struggle for responsible government in Kochi culminated in success.

2.1.7 Punnapra-Vayalar - 1946

The Punnapra-Vayalar revolt was a communist uprising that took place in October 1946. It was led by the Communist Party of India against C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the Dewan of Travancore. The revolt is named after the two places where it occurred, beginning in Punnapra and ending in Vayalar.

During the Second World War (1939-43), many parts of the country were plunged into a famine-like situation. This was due to grain, resources, and raw materials being exported to the war front rather than distributed to the people in India. In Travancore, a radical communist faction emerged during this time. The famine-like situation pushed the peasantry closer to the Communist group. At the time, the Dewan, C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, had been promoting the idea of an independent state along the lines of the American model. This angered the communists, as America was heavily anti-communist. The Dewan had also subjected workers in the Alappuzha area to stringent and brutal land laws. As a British vassal, the Dewan allowed landlords to

stake claims to private and public property, deny wages, and torment their workers. As a result, protests organised by the Communist Party were held regularly in the region, and the relationship between the leadership and its citizens grew tense and volatile.

❑ All India Trade Union Congress called for a nationwide strike

In response, fishermen, farmers, and coir workers alike unionised for an armed struggle. The trigger that marked the beginning of the revolt is said to have occurred on 24 October 1946, when the All India Trade Union Congress called for a nationwide strike. The strike took place in the form of a march from Alappuzha to Punnapra on King Chithira Thirunal Balarama Verma's birthday. The march turned violent when police became involved. The workers held demonstrations and went on strike; water transport in the area came to a standstill. The oil, coir, handicraft, and handloom industries were closed. Several 'jathas' from different directions converged on Punnapra. In the encounter that followed, about 200 demonstrators fell victim to police bullets. The demonstrators confronted the police with bamboos, spikes, and areca spears.

Swords and Stones

❑ Legislative assembly was constituted

The police and military opened fire with machine guns. The main scene of activity shifted from Punnapra to Vayalar, where several volunteer camps imparting paramilitary training to workers were located. Attempts to wind up the volunteer camps failed. In the meantime, armed forces moved to Vayalar, a place surrounded by water on three sides. The workers resisted the police's advance onto the land in Vayalar. In the encounter that followed, about 150 people were killed on the spot. It is estimated that about a thousand people lost their lives in the incident. The tragic event came as a rude shock to public opinion throughout the state. Although the communist movement was suppressed, the episode hastened the beginning of the end of the Diwan's autocratic rule and aided in the early establishment of responsible government in Travancore. Shri C.P. resigned from the office of Diwan on 19 August 1947, and the proclamation of responsible government was made on 4 September 1947. A legislative assembly was constituted, and the first popular ministry of Travancore, under Shri Pattom Thanu Pillai, assumed office on 24 March 1948.

Summarised Overview

The unit traces how early petitions, such as the Malayali and Ezhava Memorials, challenged discriminatory administrative practices and created space for broader civil rights demands. As political awareness expanded, movements in Travancore and Cochin mobilised diverse social groups to press for responsible government and greater public participation. These democratic struggles, combined with the growing linguistic unity fostered by Malayalam print culture and region-wide conferences, gradually shaped an organised Aikya Kerala movement. Through successive conventions, negotiations, and the Travancore–Cochin merger, these currents culminated in the linguistic reorganisation of 1956, forming the modern state of Kerala.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What prompted the submission of the Malayali Memorial in 1891?
2. How did the Ezhava Memorials contribute to civil rights consciousness?
3. Why was responsible government demanded in Travancore?
4. What role did the Travancore State Congress play in democratic mobilisation?
5. How did linguistic unity strengthen the Aikya Kerala movement?
6. Which social groups actively participated in the early democratic struggles?
7. What administrative changes followed the Travancore–Cochin merger?
8. How did petitions turn into large-scale mass movements in Kerala?

Assignments

1. Examine the Malayali Memorial as a turning point in Kerala's political modernisation.
2. Analyse the relationship between caste-based petitions and wider civil rights mobilisations.
3. Discuss the methods and impact of the responsible government movement in Travancore.
4. Evaluate how the Aikya Kerala campaign blended cultural, administrative, and political demands.
5. Assess the role of educated elites and middle classes in shaping early political movements.
6. Explain how democratic agitation in princely states prepared the ground for linguistic reorganisation.
7. Critically assess whether memorials alone could have led to state formation without mass movements.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

UNIT 2

Nationalist, Peasant and Trade Union Movement

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- trace nationalist mobilisation across Malabar, Travancore and Cochin
- explain the causes and consequences of major peasant uprisings
- describe the rise of trade unions and their influence on labour rights
- analyse how these movements shaped later political alignments

Background

Agrarian relations in Kerala were dominated by landlordism and insecure tenancy, particularly in Malabar. This structure produced recurring conflicts that shaped peasant uprisings. Industrial workers in the coir and cashew sectors faced poor wages and long working hours, prompting the formation of early trade unions. Nationalist ideas emerged in this context, linking anti-colonial sentiment with social and economic grievances.

Keywords

Malabar Rebellion, Khilafat, Karshaka Sangham, Tenancy, Trade Unions, Coir and Cashew Industries, Wage Struggles.

Discussion

The nationalist, peasant, and trade union movements of Kerala evolved through a dynamic interaction among political awakening, economic tensions, and social reform. Nationalism took distinct forms across Malabar, Travancore and Cochin due to regional administrative differences; however, English education, voluntary associations, and the activities of the Indian

National Congress gradually fostered a shared political awareness. Mass campaigns—from the Home Rule Movement and Non-Cooperation to Salt Satyagraha—brought new groups into public life and connected everyday grievances with anti-colonial sentiment. In Malabar, the combination of Khilafat solidarity, tenant-landlord tensions, and colonial repression produced the Malabar Rebellion, a turning point that revealed the depth of agrarian discontent and compelled nationalist leaders to reconsider their organisational strategies.

Peasant movements emerged from longstanding inequalities in land relations. Tenants in Malabar faced insecurity, high rents, and the risk of eviction, while workers and small cultivators in Travancore and Cochin lived under restrictive agrarian systems. Organisations such as the Karshaka Sangham helped peasants transition from individual resistance to organised collective action. As peasant struggles intensified, they increasingly connected with emerging ideological currents, particularly socialist and left-wing politics. Simultaneously, trade union movements in industrial centres such as Alappuzha and Kollam gained momentum. Coir and cashew workers, plantation labourers, and factory employees began to form unions to address low wages, harsh working conditions, and workplace insecurity. These unions soon became central actors in political life, linking economic struggles with broader demands for rights and representation.

Together, nationalist, peasant, and labour movements broadened the social base of Kerala's political mobilisation. They brought workers, peasants, women, students, and professionals into organised public action and helped shift political debates towards land reform, labour welfare, and social equality. By the time of independence, Kerala had developed a political culture characterised by high levels of participation and strong demands for social justice. These movements laid the foundation for the region's later land reforms, welfare policies, and left-oriented political alignments.

2.2.1 Nationalist Movement in Kerala

The beginnings of the nationalist movement in Kerala emerged in a political environment shaped by three different administrative regions. Malabar was under direct British rule, while Travancore and Cochin were princely states with their own internal administrations. These differences influenced the timing and nature of political awakening in each region. Nevertheless, the spread of English education, the rise of the press, and the influence of the Indian National Congress gradually created a common political consciousness.

❑ Common political consciousness

☐ Broader mobilisation

In Malabar, the early activities of the Congress were led by educated professionals who recognised the need to connect local grievances to national political developments. C. Sankaran Nair's participation in the 1897 Congress session and the formation of the Malabar District Congress Committee in 1908 helped provide structure to early political activity. Political meetings, public lectures, and voluntary associations laid the foundation for broader mobilisation that later became essential to the nationalist movement.

☐ The First World War

Home Rule Movement

The First World War gave an impetus to the national movement in Malabar. In 1916, a public meeting was held in the Calicut Town Hall to mobilise public support for the government's war effort. K.P. Kesava Menon, who was denied permission by the collector Innes to address a meeting in Malayalam, staged a walkout from the hall, accompanied by the vast majority of the audience. The incident was symbolic as it demonstrated the rising tempo of the national movement.

☐ Boycott of foreign goods, courts of law, and educational institutions

The end of the war saw the announcement of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms (1919 Act), leading to a major controversy over whether the reforms should be accepted. The fifth Malabar District Political Conference, held in Manjeri on 28 April 1920 in the presence of Dr Annie Besant, passed a resolution declaring the reforms unsatisfactory and disappointing. There was a widespread boycott of foreign goods, courts of law, and educational institutions. Representatives of the Congress from Kerala joined the deputation of the Home Rule League, which visited Montague to submit their proposal for constitutional reforms. By 1919, there was considerable political activity in Malabar. Meanwhile, the Khilafat movement was initiated as a protest against British government actions. For a time, the Congress and the Khilafat movements merged into a single movement, with Hindus and Muslims participating with great enthusiasm.

☐ Non-cooperation movement synchronised with the Khilafat movement

Non-Cooperation Movement

The winds of change began to blow in Malabar when Gandhi assumed leadership of the Congress in the 1920s. The non-cooperation movement, which started after the Nagpur Congress, made significant headway in Malabar. There was a widespread boycott of foreign goods, courts of law, and educational institutions in the district. The non-cooperation movement synchronised with the Khilafat movement, thereby acquiring a new dimension under the combined efforts, with Hindus and Muslims participating enthusiastically. The Khilafat movement itself was initiated as a protest against British actions that disrupt-

ed the Turkish Empire and deprived the Sultan of Turkey of his spiritual leadership as the Khilafat. Organised throughout the country under the auspices of the Congress, the Khilafat movement gained momentum. To accelerate the movement, Gandhiji and Shoukat Ali visited Malabar to organise the Khilafat Committee. In April 1921, the first All-Kerala Political Conference, attended by delegates from Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin, was held at Otapalam. The Otapalam Conference gave full support to the non-cooperation movement. It was during this movement that Malabar witnessed the Moplah outburst.

Malabar Rebellion (1921)

- ❑ Disturbed the relationship between Hindus and Muslims

The Malabar Rebellion, was a major anti-colonial uprising by Mappila Muslims against British rule and oppressive Hindu landlords. It may be considered a turning point in Kerala's history. The rebellion seriously disturbed the relationship between Hindus and Muslims and cast a shadow of gloom over the entire freedom movement. It has been viewed as the most tragic episode in our freedom struggle. It is also referred to as the Malabar Rebellion because the chief area of disturbance was in Malabar. Additionally, it is known as the Moplah Rebellion because most participants were from the Mappila community.

- ❑ Nature and character of the Malabar Rebellion

The nature and character of the Malabar Rebellion are points of controversy among historians. According to the nationalist school of historians, the rebellion was an anti-imperialist struggle, a political uprising of the Mappilas against police repression. The Marxist school of thought, however, views it as an agrarian uprising of purely economic origin. As Mappila tenants were oppressed by Hindu Janmis and British officials, they rose in revolt. Nonetheless, it was the result of the combined operation of political, economic, and communal factors. Thus, the rebellion was simultaneously anti-British, agrarian, and communal.

The Causes

- ❑ Political, social, economic, and ideological

The causes were political, social, economic, and ideological. The policy of repression adopted by the British government against the non-cooperation and Khilafat movements was a significant factor. The Moplahs reacted violently to this policy of oppression. Additionally, the Hindu-Muslim misunderstanding regarding the ideological factors and political aspirations of the rebels also contributed to the outbreak.

The event that paved the way for the rebellion was primarily political: the Turkish Sultan was deprived of his authority as caliph. The leaders initiated the Khilafat movement in India to rally Indian Muslims to the nationalist cause. In Malabar,

❑ Turkish Sultan was deprived of his authority as caliph

the Khilafatists found their strongest support in the Eranad and Valluvanad Taluks. As the movement progressed to a point that alarmed official circles, the government placed these taluks under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Meetings were banned, and the police began arresting Congress and Khilafat workers. The arrest of Vatakkeveetil Moidu Muhamed on the charge of stealing a pistol from the Nilampur police was the immediate provocation for the uprising. Muhamed was the local Khilafat secretary, and the police's attempt to arrest him was thwarted by a crowd of 2,000 Moplahs, who emerged armed with spears and swords, killing many policemen and driving the survivors away. The police, searching for the Khilafat rebels, entered the Mumbram Mosque at Tirurangadi, where the rebels had taken refuge. Meanwhile, news spread that the mosque had been desecrated, prompting the Moplahs to converge on Tirurangadi, attack the police station, loot government treasuries, and burn government records. For a few weeks, the writ of the British government did not run in the area. The original leaders of the Khilafat movement, whether Hindu or Muslim, faded from the scene.

❑ A series of encounters ensued, resulting in the loss of many lives

In the meantime, the nature of the rebellion shifted from political to communal, with communal terrorist leaders assuming control. Varian Kunneth Kunjahemmad Haji became the de facto authority in the Eranad and Valluvanadu Taluks, styling himself as the Amir of the Muslims, Raja of the Hindus, and Colonel of the Khilafat army. He effectively became the king, levying taxes and issuing passports. Seethikoye Thangal, another leader, maintained law and order and issued circulars as the Governor. However, Ali Musaliyar, the priest of the mosque, although he adopted the title of king, instructed his followers not to molest Hindus or loot their property. Khilafat Raj had become a reality; British rule was eliminated, and a rebel autocracy dominated the region. The rebels achieved a measure of success in extinguishing British rule. In the later stages, however, land lords were persecuted on the grounds that they had allied with the British. Ultimately, the rebellion was crushed by the British with an iron fist. The government deployed British troops and burkha regiments, declaring martial law. A series of encounters ensued, resulting in the loss of many lives. By November 1921, the rebellion had nearly been extinguished, with rebels being captured and shot, while many others were imprisoned and deported.

❑ Wagon Tragedy

A corollary of the Malabar Rebellion was the Wagon Tragedy. The arrested rebels were confined in a closed railway wagon and transported from Trichur to Bellary. Once the rebels were pushed inside the wagon, the army personnel closed the doors and locked them from the outside. The closed door was the only outlet of the wagon, and the rebels inside began to suffocate.



The army personnel travelled in another compartment and never inquired about the conditions of the prisoners inside the wagon throughout the night. Without access to water or air to breathe, 61 out of 90 died from suffocation. This incident became known as the Wagon Tragedy and highlighted the inhuman methods adopted by the British to suppress the rebellion.

The Malabar Rebellion produced far-reaching consequences, setting back the freedom struggle in Malabar. After the Rebellion, Congress lost much of its popular appeal. For a long time after the rebellion, no public activity was possible in Malabar. Hindus and Muslims began to suspect one another and lost their cordiality, paving the way for the growth of communalism.

- ❑ Growth of communalism

Salt Satyagraha and New Forms of Mobilisation

The Salt Satyagraha of 1930 marked the spread of civil disobedience to deeper layers of Kerala society. Payyannur emerged as the main centre of agitation, attracting volunteers from various parts of the region. The simplicity of the protest, which challenged the salt monopoly, made it accessible to the general public. It demonstrated that political resistance could be expressed through everyday acts and encouraged new groups to participate in the national movement.

- ❑ Marked the spread of civil disobedience

The second phase of civil disobedience in 1932 intensified these trends. Boycotts of foreign goods, protest meetings, and voluntary resignations from government-controlled institutions indicated that nationalism had become a broad-based movement. Women, students, and labourers contributed actively, strengthening the democratic foundations of the struggle.

- ❑ Boycotts of foreign goods, protest meetings

Ideological Divisions and Rise of New Political Currents

The years following the Civil Disobedience Movement saw ideological differences within the Congress become more pronounced. A section of leaders began to argue that political freedom should be accompanied by social and economic transformation. This led to the formation of the Congress Socialist Party in Kerala. The socialist, and later communist, leadership introduced new methods of mobilisation, including peasant unions, workers' associations, and campaigns against feudal practices.

- ❑ New methods of mobilisation

These developments changed the nature of nationalist politics in Kerala. Issues of tenancy reform, rural indebtedness, and labour rights became central to political discussions. The movement gradually expanded beyond simple anti-colonial sentiment and gained a stronger social base. This helped shape the distinctive political culture of Kerala, which later became known for its emphasis on equality and collective welfare.

- ❑ Emphasis on equality and collective welfare

Growth of the Muslim League and Regional Political Assertions

- ❑ Concerns specific to the Muslim community

The emergence of the Muslim League in Malabar during the 1930s added another dimension to the nationalist movement. Although the League had been present earlier, it became organised only after the electoral victory of Abdul Sattar Sait in 1934. The League articulated concerns specific to the Muslim community, such as representation, education, and the protection of cultural identity. While operating within the wider national political framework, it reflected the diversity of Kerala society and contributed to the region's multiparty political culture.

Radical Movements and the Second World War Period

- ❑ The influence of socialist and communist ideas grew stronger

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, the influence of socialist and communist ideas grew stronger. Leaders associated with the Congress Socialist Party began mobilising peasants and labourers through direct action. Demonstrations in places such as Morazha, Kayyur, and Mattannur reflected tensions between peasant communities and colonial authorities. The Kayyur incident, which resulted in the execution of four activists, left a profound impact on Kerala's political memory.

The Quit India Movement in 1942 elicited a more limited response in Kerala, but underground activities by youth groups sustained the spirit of resistance. The Keezhariyur bomb case revealed the frustrations felt by young nationalists and their willingness to take risks despite the odds.

- ❑ The movement grew beyond the traditional boundaries

The nationalist movement in Kerala evolved over several decades through a mixture of constitutional demands, mass agitations, social reform initiatives, and ideological debates. It drew strength from diverse sections of society and reflected the region's social complexity. By engaging with issues such as caste inequality, tenant rights, labour conditions, and responsible government, the movement grew beyond the traditional boundaries of political nationalism.

- ❑ Distinctive political culture

As a result, the nationalist movement in Kerala produced not only political independence but also a distinctive political culture grounded in equality, social awareness, and active participation. This legacy shaped Kerala's later achievements in democratic development, social reform, and linguistic reorganisation.

2.2.2 Peasant Movements in Kerala

Peasant movements in Kerala developed out of a deeply unequal agrarian system that shaped the daily lives of cultivators across Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin. In Malabar, the janmi-tenant arrangement placed tenants in an insecure position, as landlords exercised extensive rights over land while cultiva-

❑ Wider structural injustice that needed organised resistance

tors lacked legal protection. Tenants could be evicted without notice, even after paying high rents, and were often burdened by a range of additional cesses that reduced their economic stability. Travancore and Cochin had different forms of land ownership but were marked by caste dominance, which restricted access to fertile land for large sections of the population. These systems created long-standing grievances, which remained suppressed until the early twentieth century. Rising literacy, a more informed rural public, and the influence of broader political movements gradually transformed these grievances into organised collective action. Peasants who had once felt isolated began to see their problems as part of a wider structural injustice that needed organised resistance.

Formation of Peasant Organisations

❑ Karshaka Sangham

The formation of the Karshaka Sangham in the 1930s was a turning point in Kerala's peasant politics. What began as small village-level groups soon developed into a wider network of organisations that brought thousands of peasants into collective action. These groups defended tenants against unjust evictions, protested against illegal demands imposed by landlords, and familiarised cultivators with the basic principles of tenancy rights. Teachers, students, young activists, and social reformers travelled across rural Malabar to organise night schools and public discussions, helping peasants understand their rights and the legal provisions that could be used to challenge arbitrary landlord power. Over time, these organisations built a sense of unity that transcended caste boundaries and local divisions. Public meetings, petitions, marches, and gatherings became common tools of mobilisation, gradually creating a culture in which peasants recognised the possibility of resisting oppression through organised collective action.

2.2.2.1 Major Peasant Movements in Kerala

Anti-Eviction Struggles (Malabar)

❑ Challenged the unchecked authority of janmis

The anti-eviction struggles in Malabar were among the earliest and most intense expressions of peasant resistance. Tenants who lived under the constant threat of eviction gathered in large numbers to protect one another whenever landlord agents or police approached their fields or houses. These gatherings were not merely defensive responses but powerful demonstrations of unity that challenged the unchecked authority of janmis. Through these struggles, peasants realised that organised solidarity could reduce the fear of eviction and allow them to negotiate more confidently. These actions helped define the political tone of rural Malabar and inspired the growth of peasant unions across the region.

Koothali and Plantation-Area Struggles

- ❑ Marked a significant shift in rural politics

In plantation regions such as Koothali, peasants and labourers faced an entirely different set of difficulties. Long working hours, low wages, harsh treatment by estate managers, and the persistence of debt bondage led to deep resentment among plantation workers. The workers' decision to organise and resist marked a significant shift in rural politics, as it brought together tenant cultivators and plantation labourers who had previously remained socially separate. These struggles highlighted the fact that land and labour issues were interconnected. They expanded the scope of peasant mobilisation beyond the traditional tenant–landlord conflict and demonstrated that rural injustice was part of a wider structure of economic dominance.

Kayyur Peasant Uprising

- ❑ Defining moments in Kerala's peasant movement

The Kayyur uprising became one of the defining moments in Kerala's peasant movement. While often associated with communist mobilisation, the incident was essentially rooted in agrarian tensions, as tenants resisted years of harsh treatment and insecure living conditions. The confrontation with the police revealed the depth of dissatisfaction among peasants who saw no alternative but open resistance. Although the aftermath of the Kayyur incident involved severe punishment, including the execution of four young activists, it produced a profound political impact in Malabar. The memory of Kayyur strengthened future struggles, as peasants across the region began to view their resistance as part of a long and honourable tradition of courage.

Waste-Land Cultivation and Land Occupations

- ❑ Peasants undertook wasteland cultivation

In several parts of Malabar, peasants undertook wasteland cultivation and occupied uncultivated tracts of land. These actions emerged from widespread land hunger, food shortages, and growing confidence that collective action could challenge traditional authority. Peasants entered unused lands and cooperatively began farming, asserting their right to survival and a dignified living. These occupations encouraged public debate about the rightful ownership of land and strengthened the idea that land should be made available to those who actually cultivated it. Such acts of resistance marked a shift in rural consciousness from a passive acceptance of land scarcity to a demand for fair access to agricultural resources.

Integration of Peasant Movements with Wider Politics

By the 1940s, peasant organisations had become closely linked to wider political developments, particularly the activities of left-wing groups. This connection strengthened the organisa-

- ❑ The cooperation between peasant movements and progressive political organisations

- ❑ Central role in shaping Kerala's future land reforms

- ❑ Emerged from unequal land relations

- ❑ Organised force in Kerala's political and social landscape

tional structure of peasant unions and widened their influence. The cooperation between peasant movements and progressive political organisations brought new strategies, better coordination, and a long-term vision for land reform. Peasant struggles were no longer isolated incidents but part of a larger political effort to democratise rural life. This integration gave peasants a sense of belonging to a broader social movement that extended beyond their immediate agricultural concerns.

Impact on Policy and Social Change

Peasant movements played a central role in shaping Kerala's future land reforms. Their demands for secure tenancy, fair rents, and ownership rights exerted tremendous influence on public debates both before and after independence. The success of these movements helped weaken the power of traditional landlords and placed agrarian reforms at the centre of Kerala's political agenda. In addition to influencing policy, peasant movements brought major social changes. They encouraged collective action across caste boundaries, reduced social distance between communities, and promoted a sense of shared identity grounded in economic and social realities rather than traditional hierarchies. The movements also helped peasants recognise themselves as active citizens with rights and responsibilities, laying the foundation for the democratic participation that became a hallmark of Kerala's later political life.

The peasant movements in Kerala emerged from unequal land relations but developed into a powerful force for rural transformation. Through organised struggles, educational campaigns, and solidarity across communities, peasants challenged long-standing structures of domination and reshaped rural society. Their actions not only influenced land legislation but also contributed to the creation of a politically aware and socially confident rural public. Together with the parallel growth of the left, the peasant movements laid the foundations for Kerala's later achievements in land reform, social welfare, and democratic participation.

2.2.3 Trade Unionism in Kerala

The growth of trade unionism in Kerala was closely linked to the broader social transformation that unfolded from the late nineteenth century onwards. The region had lived under rigid caste hierarchies, limited social mobility, and harsh labour conditions in both agrarian and industrial sectors. Reform movements led by Sree Narayana Guru, Kumaran Asan, and other social thinkers created a new climate of self-respect and political awareness among communities that had long been excluded from public life. Literacy increased, newspapers multiplied, and

reading rooms became common in towns and rural centres. This new social space encouraged discussions on rights, labour conditions, and the idea that workers could organise themselves. These elements together prepared the ground for the later emergence of trade unions as an organised force in Kerala's political and social landscape.

Early Attempts at Worker Organisation

The earliest experiments in labour organisation took shape in Travancore's coir and industrial centres. Factories in Alappuzha, Kollam, and other coastal towns employed large numbers of workers under highly exploitative conditions. Workers had no job security, supervisors exercised unchecked authority, and wages were minimal. In this atmosphere, early organisers such as B. K. Bhava began mobilising workers and encouraging them to discuss common grievances. These early meetings developed into the Travancore Labour Association, created in the early 1920s, which later grew into the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union. This was one of Kerala's first organised attempts to improve wages, regulate working hours, and prevent arbitrary punishments in factories. Though limited in geographic reach, it introduced the idea that workers could negotiate collectively rather than suffer individually.

❑ Travancore's coir and industrial centres

Formation of Trade Unions in Different Regions

Trade unionism did not grow uniformly across Kerala. In Travancore, the coir industry provided the earliest base, while Kollam later developed into a major centre for organised labour because of its cashew factories. In Malabar, the presence of tile factories, plantations, and weaving centres created small but active groups of workers who sought collective organisation. The arrival of British and Indian capital, along with new industrial enterprises, widened the scope for worker mobilisation. Over time, the trade union movement expanded beyond coir workers to include cashew labourers, plantation workers, beedi rollers, printing workers, and, later, employees in the public and service sectors. Each group developed its own unions, but all shared the belief that collective bargaining was the only means of resisting exploitation.

❑ Non uniform growth

Cashew Workers and the Growth of Union Consciousness

The cashew-processing industry played a crucial role in shaping Kerala's early trade union movement. Working conditions inside the factories were harsh. Women, who formed a significant portion of the workforce, had to start work before dawn and remained in unhygienic conditions throughout the day. Wages were based on piece rates, and workers often received less pay

- ❑ Role in shaping the broader politics of Kollam

- ❑ Plantation sectors in Travancore and Malabar

- ❑ close relationship with political movements

- ❑ Turning point in the evolution of trade unionism in Kerala.

due to broken kernels or manipulated weighing systems. These difficult conditions laid the foundation for union activity. Workers held meetings, formed their own associations, and eventually linked up with wider labour organisations. The cashew workers' movement is remembered for its determination and its role in shaping the broader politics of Kollam, which soon became one of Kerala's strongest centres of worker unity and agitation.

Trade Unions in Plantation and Industrial Sectors

Parallel to developments in the coir and cashew industries, trade unionism also spread to the plantation sectors in Travancore and Malabar. Large estates in Idukki and Wayanad employed labourers under strict supervision and paid low wages. Workers began organising themselves to demand better wages, humane working conditions, and resistance to debt bondage. Tile factories, timber yards, and weaving centres in Malabar also became sites of union activity. In many places, union organisers visited workers' settlements, conducted study circles, and strengthened the sense of class unity. This multi-sectoral spread helped consolidate trade unions as a permanent feature of Kerala's labour landscape.

Political Awakening and Trade Unions

Trade unionism in Kerala cannot be understood without recognising its close relationship with political movements. The national movement, the rise of socialist thought, and the spread of communist ideology all influenced the direction and intensity of labour organising. Leaders such as P. Krishna Pillai, A. K. Gopalan, and EMS Namboodiripad gave new vigour to the labour movement by highlighting class issues and the need for workers to participate in broader political struggles. Workers who had previously seen their hardships as individual problems now viewed them as part of a larger socio-economic structure. This connection between union organising and politics also meant that trade unions became important participants in movements for responsible government, civil rights, and democratic reforms in Travancore and Cochin.

Punnapra–Vayalar and the Mass Mobilisation of Workers

The Punnapra–Vayalar uprising of 1946 marked a turning point in the evolution of trade unionism in Kerala. What began as workers' protests in the coir sector grew into a broader movement against authoritarian governance in Travancore. The harsh response of the state deepened workers' resolve and underlined the political potential of organised labour. Although the uprising was met with heavy repression, it demonstrated that trade unions had become a powerful force capable of shaping political

outcomes. It also cemented Alappuzha's reputation as the cradle of Kerala's labour movement.

Trade Union Expansion After Independence

- ☐ Phase of rapid growth

After 1947, the trade union movement in Kerala entered a phase of rapid growth. The lifting of earlier bans allowed unions to reorganise themselves, and new groups emerged in plantations, transport, public-sector institutions, and service industries. National-level centres such as AITUC, INTUC, HMS, and UTUC became active in the state. Independent unions also appeared for a brief period, emphasising non-affiliation to political parties and industrial-level bargaining. However, competitive political conditions soon made complete independence difficult. Kerala's workers were highly politicised, and this political energy encouraged unions to take clear ideological positions rather than remain neutral.

Trade Union Solidarity and Collective Bargaining

- ☐ Culture of solidarity on issues that affect workers

Despite political divisions, Kerala's trade unions developed a culture of solidarity on issues that affected workers across industries. Joint action councils and combined bargaining committees are often formed when disputes involve wage revision, safety standards, working hours, or the dismissal of workers. This collective approach prevented employers from exploiting divisions and strengthened workers' bargaining power. Even today, trade unions in Kerala engage in coordinated negotiations, thereby making labour relations in the state distinct from those in many other parts of India.

Legacy and Social Impact of Kerala's Trade Union Movement

- ☐ Major role in shaping the state's political and social identity

Trade unionism in Kerala played a major role in shaping the state's political and social identity. It helped secure better wages, safer working conditions, and legal protections for workers. It also contributed to Kerala's broader democratic culture by encouraging public participation, collective decision-making, and political awareness among ordinary people. The trade union movement influenced social reform, promoted class consciousness, and made Kerala one of the most politically mobilised regions in India. Its legacy is evident in the state's emphasis on welfare, rights-based policies, and active civil society participation.

Summarised Overview

Nationalist mobilisation in Kerala took shape through campaigns that connected anti-colonial ideas with local economic and social grievances across Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin. Peasant uprisings, tenancy struggles, and caste-based mobilisation revealed the depth of agrarian inequality, while the formation of early trade unions in the coir, cashew, and plantation industries brought workers into organised politics. These movements, along with regional differences in political leadership and community participation, gradually generated a broad social base for mass politics. By bringing peasants, workers, students, and reformers into the nationalist sphere, these struggles reshaped Kerala's political alignments, strengthened left-oriented formations, and laid the foundation for the state's later labour rights framework and welfare-driven development pattern.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What were the main agrarian issues behind the Malabar Rebellion?
2. How did the Khilafat movement influence Kerala's nationalist mobilisation?
3. Why were coir and cashew workers among the earliest groups to unionise?
4. What role did Karshaka Sangham play in peasant struggles?
5. How did trade unions change after 1947?
6. Which regions of Kerala experienced the most intense peasant mobilisation?
7. How did nationalist leaders address labour issues?
8. What were the long-term effects of worker mobilisation on Kerala's political culture?

Assignments

1. Analyse the Malabar Rebellion from both agrarian and political perspectives.
2. Discuss the link between nationalist agitation and agrarian discontent in Kerala.
3. Compare peasant mobilisation in Malabar and Travancore.
4. Evaluate the contribution of trade unions to Kerala's labour legislation.
5. Examine the role of religious networks in shaping early mass movements.
6. Assess how worker struggles influenced the growth of left parties in Kerala.
7. Explain the significance of early unions in establishing Kerala's welfare state model.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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UNIT 3

Socialist and Communist Movements

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain the early spread of socialist and communist ideas in Kerala
- trace the organisational growth of communist and socialist groups
- assess the impact of radical movements on Kerala's welfare and political institutions
- understand how worker–peasant linkages strengthened left-oriented politics

Background

Kerala's social reform tradition, growth of literacy, and expanding print culture created conditions in which socialist and communist ideas could spread quickly. The Congress Socialist Party played an early role in introducing socialist thinking, which later evolved into organised communist activity. Workers in coir, cashew, plantations, and peasants facing agrarian oppression found these ideologies meaningful as they connected economic struggles with a larger political vision. Newspapers, study circles, and reading rooms built a political community that was receptive to radical ideas.

Keywords

Socialism, Communism, Congress Socialist Party, EMS Namboodiripad, Punnappra-Vayalar, Kayyur, Land Reforms, Deshabhimani, Radical Movements.

Socialist and communist movements in Kerala developed from a blend of social reform, political education, and grass-roots organising. Rising literacy, the spread of newspapers, and the growth of reading rooms helped ordinary people access new political ideas. The Congress Socialist Party introduced socialist thinking and trained a generation of leaders who later shaped Kerala's radical politics. These leaders used study circles, night schools, and public lectures to explain the links between economic inequality, caste dominance, and political power. As workers in coir, cashew, plantations, and peasants in Malabar faced exploitation and insecurity, socialist and communist ideas offered interpretations of their experiences and introduced organisational methods for collective action.

The strength of these movements grew from their ability to build disciplined networks among peasants, workers, students, and youth. Newspapers like *Prabhatham* and later *Deshabhimani* helped spread ideological clarity, while cultural forms such as political theatre and street performances carried messages to remote villages. Major struggles—including Morazha, Kayyur, and Punnapra–Vayalar—revealed the depth of public dissatisfaction and the high level of mobilisation achieved by left organisations. These movements also highlighted the willingness of ordinary people to confront autocratic governance and exploitative economic structures. As communist movements expanded into electoral politics, they combined mass mobilisation with parliamentary strategy, eventually leading to the historic election of the world's first democratically elected communist ministry in Kerala in 1957.

The radical movements of Kerala played a transformative role in shaping the state's development trajectory. They placed issues such as land reform, wage protection, literacy, social welfare, and decentralised governance at the centre of political debate. Internal ideological debates and party splits altered organisational structures but did not reduce the influence of socialist and communist thought. Over time, these movements helped build a political culture that values equality, social justice, and public participation, contributing significantly to Kerala's image as a welfare-oriented society.

2.3.1 Socialist and Communist Movements in Kerala

An important feature of the freedom movement in Kerala was the development of the leftist ideology, which, along with

socialist and communist ideologies, led to the formation of the Communist Party.

- ❑ Socialist ideas spread among young Congress workers

During the 1930s, following the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience movement, socialist ideas spread among young Congress workers throughout the country. Many young Congress members were dissatisfied with the Congress leadership in general and Gandhi's leadership in particular. They were attracted to socialist ideas. This resulted in the formation of several local-level socialist groups in India. Against this background, the Kerala Congress Socialist Party (KCSP) was formed in Calicut in 1934. P. Krishna Pillai was elected as KCSP's secretary. At this time, the groups were working within the Congress movement but preferred to call themselves socialists.

- ❑ All India Congress Socialist Party

It was in this context that the All India Congress Socialist Party (CSP) was formed in Patna in 1934. E.M.S. Namboodiripad represented the KCSP at the Patna Conference. Soon after the formation of the All India Congress Socialist Party, its national leader, Jayaprakash Narayan, visited Kerala and attended several public meetings of the KCSP in Malabar. He emphasised the strengthening of the socialist groups within the Congress movement.

- ❑ New awakening to the national movement in Malabar

The formation of the CSP brought a new awakening to the national movement in Malabar. The Socialist Party served as the Congress Party's institutionalised left wing. However, most socialist leaders had different political outlooks from those of their national leaders. Many of the KCSP leaders were already drawn to communism. As the Communist Party of India was banned, the Malabar Communists had no choice but to work as socialists within the Congress umbrella. They criticised Gandhiji for his approach. These conditions paved the way for internal conflicts within the KPCC between rightists and leftists, which was reflected in the next KPCC election. The leaders of the Socialist Party, E.M.S. and A.K. Gopalan Nair, were elected as Secretaries of the KPCC. The Socialists started a newspaper called 'Prabhatam' as the KPCC's official organ, publishing articles on the 'October Revolution' and about the communist leaders.

- ❑ Labour organisations were formed

The left wing was very active in organising the unorganised sectors of society. They began forming separate class organisations for peasants, workers, primary teachers, unemployed youth, and others. To resist the landlords' cruel exploitation, they formed peasant organisations.

The KCSP leaders also started organising the labourers. Labour organisations were formed through their struggle for wage increases and against job terminations. The labourers from Kerala also participated in the South Railway strike in 1928. La-

❑ Pattini Jatha

bour organisations were established in Travancore and Cochin between 1931 and 1934. The Socialist Party convened the first workers' conference in Calicut in 1935, providing organisational leadership to the working-class movement in Kerala.

The 'Pattini Jatha' (Hunger March), organised by two Socialist leaders, A.K. Gopalan and K.P.R. Gopalan, was a unique incident in the history of the national movement in Kerala. The march began in Kannur and ended in Madras, covering more than 250 miles. It aroused new enthusiasm among the people to fight against the imperialist, burdensome rulers and for the country's freedom. The low-paid primary teachers were also organised by the Socialists; these teachers later became the grass-roots leaders of left-wing politics. The KCSP also organised the unemployed youth.

❑ P. Krishna-Pillai, EMS, K. Damodharan, and N.C. Sekhar

The communists within the KCSP had been making contact with the north Indian leaders of the Communist Party of India since 1934. Accordingly, a communist group was secretly organised in Malabar in 1937 by P. Krishna-Pillai, EMS, K. Damodharan, and N.C. Sekhar as its members. They were all socialists, Congress members, and communists simultaneously. These communists could not come out in the open as the Communist Party of India was banned by the British government. The remaining leaders of the KCSP in Malabar also adopted communism as their political ideology in due course. The communists within the Congress utilised their label as Congress members to spread the idea of communism among the common people of Malabar, especially in North Malabar.

❑ Polarisation between the leftists and the rightists intensified

The polarisation between the leftists and the rightists intensified after the formation of the communist group in 1937. EMS was elected as the KPCC Secretary in 1938, and he began criticising the national leadership of the Congress movement. By 1939, almost all the CSP members in Malabar had become either actual communists or communist sympathisers. When World War II broke out in 1939, the KPCC, under the communist wing, opted for a mass struggle against the British. When the Forward Bloc was formed by Subhash Chandra Bose, the left wing left the Congress and joined the new organisation. They continued their anti-imperialist struggle in various parts of Malabar. The leftists, under the leadership of A.K. Gopalan, EMS Namboothiripad, and P. Krishnapillai, met in a secret conclave at Pinarayi and formed the Communist Party of Malabar in December 1939.

2.3.2 Major Communist Movements in Kerala

- ❑ Feudal authority, colonial repression, and exploitative labour systems

The growth of communist movements in Kerala was closely linked to the social tensions, economic hardships, and political aspirations that shaped the region in the early twentieth century. Peasants, workers, and youth began to organise themselves against feudal authority, colonial repression, and exploitative labour systems. These struggles soon developed into powerful collective actions that transformed local politics and awakened a new sense of social consciousness. The following movements highlight how organised resistance gradually evolved into a major force in Kerala's political history.

Morazha Protest

- ❑ 1940 signalled the arrival of organised left-wing political action

The Morazha protest of 1940 signalled the arrival of organised left-wing political action in North Malabar. It began as part of a broader anti-imperialist campaign and brought together students, peasants, and youth activists. The police responded with force, leading to serious clashes. The incident revealed the growing confidence of left organisers and the readiness of rural communities to participate in political struggles. It also brought national attention to Malabar, showing that the region had become an active centre of anti-colonial and anti-feudal resistance.

Kayyur Struggle

- ❑ Emerged from tensions between exploited tenants and a system that supported landlord authority

The Kayyur struggle became one of the defining events of Kerala's communist movement. It emerged from tensions between exploited tenants and a system that supported landlord authority. When police intervention escalated the situation, it sparked a confrontation with far-reaching consequences. The trial that followed resulted in the execution of four young activists. Though tragic, their sacrifice left a powerful mark on Kerala's political imagination. The story of Kayyur spread across villages and towns, strengthening the conviction that organised struggle was the only way to challenge injustice. The event encouraged many more young people to join trade unions, peasant organisations, and political groups that opposed exploitation.

Labour Movements in Alappuzha

- ❑ Coir workers in Alappuzha

In Travancore, one of the strongest centres of communist activity developed among coir workers in Alappuzha. These workers lived under harsh conditions and received low wages despite long hours of work. Communist organisers helped them form trade unions, creating a platform for bargaining and resistance. Strikes, marches, and public meetings became common, and workers gained the confidence to negotiate better working conditions. The movement in Alappuzha also produced a generation of committed leaders who understood the link between in-

dustrial struggle and wider political change. The consolidation of union activity in this region became the foundation for larger worker-led movements in Travancore.

Punnapra–Vayalar Uprising

❑ Turning point in Kerala's communist movement

The Punnapra–Vayalar uprising of 1946 marked a turning point in Kerala's communist movement. Coir workers, trade union activists, and communist supporters joined together to protest harsh labour policies and the political decisions of the Travancore administration. The state responded with severe repression, and the event resulted in many casualties. Although the uprising was suppressed, it had deep political consequences. It demonstrated the power of organised labour and showed that workers were willing to take great risks for dignity and justice. It also generated widespread sympathy across Travancore and further momentum for responsible government in the princely state.

Growth of Communist Electoral Politics

❑ This shift to electoral politics

By the late 1940s, the communist movement had expanded far beyond its early activist phase. The party began participating in elections, formed strong unions among workers and peasants, and created mass organisations for students, women, and youth. This shift to electoral politics strengthened the movement's legitimacy and showed that it could combine popular mobilisation with parliamentary action. The communist movement's ability to win support from diverse social groups made it a major political force in Kerala's public life.

Contribution to Kerala's Political Development

❑ Decisive role in shaping Kerala's political development.

The communist movements played a decisive role in shaping Kerala's political development. They introduced ideas of social justice, equality, and welfare into mainstream politics. Their work among peasants and workers helped bring issues such as land reform, labour rights, and social security to the centre of legislative debates. The movement also contributed to the growth of Kerala's democratic culture. Through disciplined organisation, cultural communication, and deep engagement with everyday struggles, the communist movement helped create a politically active citizenry. This legacy influenced Kerala's later achievements in welfare, education, land policy, and grassroots participation. The movement thus became not only a political force but also a vital part of Kerala's modern social identity.

2.3.3 Socialist Movement in Kerala

The socialist movement in Kerala emerged from a wider atmosphere of political awakening, social reform, and dissatis-

❑ Climate for socialist ideas

❑ International developments

❑ Address the economic foundations of inequality

❑ EMS Namboodiripad, A. K. Gopalan, P. Krishna Pillai, K. Damodaran,

❑ Emphasis on dignity, self-respect, and education

faction with economic inequalities. From the early decades of the twentieth century, Kerala's society was undergoing transformation. Literacy was spreading, newspapers encouraged public discussion, and organisations inspired by social reformers challenged long-standing caste hierarchies. At the same time, workers in the coir and cashew industries, agricultural labourers on plantations, and tenants in Malabar faced poor wages, insecurity, and harsh working conditions. These realities created a climate in which socialist ideas, which emphasised justice, equality, and collective welfare, found receptive audiences.

National developments also played a role. The Russian Revolution of 1917 generated worldwide interest in socialist and Marxist ideas. Indian political thinkers began discussing economic inequality as a central political question, not just a social problem. Kerala's students, teachers, young political workers, and professionals became part of this larger movement and began exploring socialist thought to understand the structures of inequality around them.

Congress Socialism and the Spread of Socialist Thinking

The formal entry of socialism into Kerala's political landscape occurred through the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in the early 1930s. The CSP emerged within the Indian National Congress as a platform for leaders who wanted the national movement to address the economic foundations of inequality. In Kerala, socialist leaders argued that political freedom would remain incomplete without social justice, land redistribution, and the transformation of the economic system.

Important figures such as EMS Namboodiripad, A. K. Gopalan, P. Krishna Pillai, K. Damodaran, and others led the spread of socialist principles. They organised study circles, reading room discussions, and night classes, where a generation of young activists learned about economic inequality, landlordism, workers' rights, and the need for collective organisation. These initiatives helped create a politically literate base that could connect nationalist goals with economic and social reform. The influence of the CSP extended beyond the Congress, as many of its ideas travelled to trade unions, student bodies, and rural organisations.

Influence of Social Reform Movements

The socialist movement in Kerala grew alongside major social reform initiatives that had begun earlier in the century. The teachings of Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Chattampi Swamikal, and Vakkom Moulavi prepared society to question social inequality and caste discrimination. Their emphasis on dignity, self-respect, and education helped reduce caste barriers and

encouraged marginalised communities to participate in modern political life.

- ❑ Combination of social reform and socialist politics

The socialist thinkers built on this foundation, arguing that caste oppression and economic exploitation were interconnected, and that removing one without the other would be incomplete. This argument found wide acceptance, especially among lower-caste communities who saw socialism as a pathway to both social equality and material improvement. The combination of social reform and socialist politics strengthened the movement and gave it a broad social base.

Role of Youth, Students, and Teachers

- ❑ Socialist leaders of later decades emerged

Youth played an important part in the socialist movement from its early years. Colleges in Thiruvananthapuram, Kozhikode, and Palakkad developed strong student groups that discussed socialist literature and participated in political campaigns. Teachers and young professionals organised study classes on economic issues, colonialism, and national liberation. Many prominent socialist leaders of later decades emerged from these student circles.

- ❑ Participated in protests, circulated political literature

Student groups participated in protests, circulated political literature, and took part in national campaigns such as the Civil Disobedience Movement. These activities exposed them to the hardships faced by workers and peasants. As a result, the socialist movement in Kerala developed a youthful and energetic character, constantly renewing its leadership through student activism.

- ❑ Participated in early trade union activities

Socialist Involvement in Workers' and Peasants' Struggles

Although not identical to communism, the socialist movement shared many concerns with workers and peasants. Socialist leaders participated in early trade union activities in the coir, cashew, and plantation sectors. They helped organise meetings, negotiated with employers, and encouraged workers to form associations. Many of the early unions in Kerala received guidance from socialist thinkers before being influenced by other ideological currents.

- ❑ Karshaka Sangham and other peasant organisations

In rural areas, socialists played a role in the early phases of the Karshaka Sangham and other peasant organisations. They supported tenants resisting eviction and helped raise awareness of land rights. Their emphasis on parliamentary democracy and peaceful agitation shaped the early strategies of several rural movements. This experience laid the foundation for the later shift of many socialist leaders towards more radical paths, including communism.

Debates, Divergence, and Reorganisation

- ❑ Debates emerged about the movement's future direction

As socialist ideas spread, internal debates emerged about the movement's future direction. Some leaders argued for a more parliamentary and gradual approach to reform, while others believed that economic inequality could not be addressed without a more radical transformation of society. These debates intensified during the late 1930s and 1940s, especially as the global political climate shifted with the Second World War and the rise of Marxism.

- ❑ Moderate socialists and Radical Socialists

This period saw the gradual divergence between moderate socialists and those who eventually joined the Communist Party. The moderate socialists emphasised civil liberties, parliamentary participation, and democratic socialism. They later contributed to the formation of socialist parties at the national and regional levels. Meanwhile, radical socialists concluded that the structural roots of inequality required a more transformative political approach and moved closer to communist ideology. Despite these differences, both streams played important roles in shaping Kerala's political culture.

2.3.5 Impact on Kerala's Political and Social Development

- ❑ Contributed significantly to Kerala's distinctive political identity

The socialist movement contributed significantly to Kerala's distinctive political identity. Its emphasis on equality, citizenship, and collective welfare shaped the values that later guided state policies. The movement encouraged ordinary people to participate in political discussions, question established hierarchies, and demand accountability from authorities.

- ❑ Influenced Kerala's approach to public health, education, local governance, and land policy

Socialist thought influenced Kerala's approach to public health, education, local governance, and land policy. It supported the idea that democracy must extend beyond elections and enter everyday life through active civic engagement. Even when organisational forms changed, the ideas associated with socialism became part of Kerala's political culture. They encouraged a broader vision of development grounded in human dignity, social justice, and collective responsibility.

Summarised Overview

This unit explores how socialist and communist ideas took root in Kerala through reading rooms, study circles, and worker–peasant organising. Mass actions such as Punnapra–Vayalar and Kayyur revealed the depth of public discontent and helped create strong communist and socialist organisations in both rural and urban spaces. The first communist ministry in 1957 attempted major reforms, including land and education measures, showing how radical movements connected ideology with governance. Over time, debates, splits, and evolving strategies shaped the direction of left politics, leaving a long-lasting influence on Kerala's welfare model and political culture.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What social conditions helped socialist and communist ideas spread in Kerala?
2. How did reading rooms and study circles contribute to political education?
3. What were the main issues behind the Punnapra–Vayalar struggle?
4. Why is the Kayyur incident considered important in communist history?
5. How did the 1957 ministry shape Kerala's reform agenda?
6. What led to the ideological split in the Communist Party in 1964?
7. How did worker and peasant networks strengthen communist organisation?
8. What long-term effects did radical movements have on Kerala's welfare policies?

Assignments

1. Analyse the growth of socialist and communist movements in Kerala and their links with earlier social reforms.
2. Discuss the organisational strengths that helped communists mobilise peasants and workers.
3. Evaluate the achievements and limitations of the 1957 communist ministry, particularly in land and education reforms.
4. Examine the ideological and strategic differences that led to major splits within the Left movement.
5. Assess the role of newspapers, reading rooms, and cultural institutions in shaping radical political consciousness.
6. Compare the nature of mobilisation in the Punnapra–Vayalar and Kayyur movements.

7. Explain how radical movements contributed to Kerala's welfare-oriented development path.

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Suggested Reading

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

BLOCK 3

Institutionalization of Democracy

UNIT 1

Land Reforms and Socio-economic Changes

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain the historical structure of land relations in Kerala
- describe the role of caste, class, and tenancy in shaping agrarian inequalities
- analyse the political processes that led to major land reform legislation
- discuss the objectives, stages, and impact of land reforms
- assess why Kerala's land reforms are viewed as a major social transformation

Background

Kerala's agrarian system was shaped by caste-based landownership, where upper-caste landlords controlled most land while tenants and agricultural labourers lived with insecurity. The absence of ownership rights, high rents, and the threat of eviction kept cultivators dependent. Social reform movements, rising literacy, left-led peasant organisations, and political changes after state formation created the conditions for challenging the old structure. By the 1950s and 1960s, land reforms became central to Kerala's political agenda.

Keywords

Janmi system, Tenancy, Kudikidappu, Land Ceiling, Agrarian Relations, Peasant Mobilisation, Kerala Land Reforms Act.

Discussion

Kerala is among the few states in India that took bold initiatives in land reforms in the early years. The reforms brought about considerable change in the socio-economic status of the poor people of Kerala. The reforms were not designed simply to improve agricultural output but to dismantle the deeply hierarchical structures that had shaped Kerala's rural society for centuries. Before the reforms, land distribution mirrored caste privilege and ritual authority. Brahmin landlords, Nair intermediaries, and large estate holders controlled most of the land. Tenants from lower castes worked under insecure conditions, and Dalit agricultural labourers lived in severe deprivation. The reforms emerged from a long history of peasant resistance, social movements, political mobilisation, and constitutional developments. By the middle of the twentieth century, Kerala had developed both the social energy and the political leadership needed to challenge inherited inequalities. The reforms, therefore, represented a deliberate political choice to promote a more equal rural society based on rights rather than customary subordination.

3.1.1 Background of Land Reforms in Kerala

Kerala's agrarian landscape before land reforms was the product of long historical processes. From early medieval times, land relations developed within a feudal and caste-bound environment. Across Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar, the structure of landownership reflected a clear divide between those who controlled land and those who laboured on it. Temples, Brahmin households, and aristocratic families accumulated land through religious endowments and hereditary claims. Over time, land became not only a productive resource but also a sign of ritual status and political dominance. The result was a system in which a small elite enjoyed ownership, while the majority of cultivators lived in insecure conditions.

❑ Cultivators lived in insecure conditions

3.1.1.1 Travancore and Cochin: Temple Authority and Landed Aristocracy

In Travancore and Cochin, agrarian relations were shaped by a close link between the temple economy and the Brahmin order. A large portion of land belonged to temples and was administered by Brahmin trustees. Nambudiri families held large estates, and Nair aristocratic households acted as intermediaries who supervised agricultural activities. Cultivators had limited rights and were subject to obligations enforced by custom rather than law. Tenants could be removed without formal procedures, and agricultural labourers were tied to households through

❑ Close link between the temple economy and the Brahmin order



forms of semi-bonded work. Early reforms introduced by the Travancore state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to clarify certain tenancy rights, but they avoided challenging landlords' authority. The core of the system, therefore, remained intact until the middle of the twentieth century.

3.1.1.2 Malabar: The Janmi–Kanam–Kudiyar Structure

❑ Rigid and layered agrarian arrangement

Malabar presented an even more rigid and layered agrarian arrangement. Under the Janmi system, the Janmi enjoyed superior rights over land and collected rent from tenants at different levels. Kanam tenants held land for a fixed period, but their rights depended on contracts that could be cancelled. Kudiyars, the actual cultivators, had almost no legal recognition and were dependent on the goodwill of upper-level tenants. Agricultural labourers, especially those from Dalit communities, were the most vulnerable. They had no homestead rights, lived in makeshift huts at the edge of estates, and worked for wages paid in grain. Their lives were marked by constant insecurity, social exclusion, and poverty. This structure made Malabar one of the most unequal agrarian regions in India at the time.

Caste Hierarchy and Rural Power Relations

❑ Decisive role in shaping land relations

Caste played a decisive role in shaping land relations across Kerala. Landownership largely rested with the upper castes, while the lower castes performed agricultural labour without gaining access to land. The close connection between caste privilege and land rights created a rural order where economic inequality was reinforced by ritual superiority. Dalit labourers faced severe restrictions on movement, housing, and employment. Their condition was shaped not only by economic exploitation but also by the denial of social dignity. Land reforms, therefore, required more than a change in land records; they demanded a transformation of power relations maintained for centuries through caste norms.

Growth of Peasant Organisations and Social Unrest

❑ Peasant unions, inspired by nationalist movements

The imbalance in agrarian relations generated growing discontent from the early twentieth century onward. Tenants in Malabar and Travancore began organising themselves through peasant unions, inspired by nationalist movements and local struggles. The rise of left political groups provided these organisations with structure and ideological direction. Tenants protested against high rents, arbitrary evictions, and landlord authority. Agricultural labourers also began forming unions demanding better wages and homestead rights. These movements created political pressure on the state and brought agrarian issues into

the public sphere. By the 1930s and 1940s, the demand for land reform had become central to Kerala's political debates.

Formation of Kerala State and New Political Possibilities

When Kerala was formed in 1956, the political atmosphere favoured structural reforms. The new state brought together regions with shared experiences of agrarian inequality but different legal systems. Peasant movements were stronger than ever, and political parties, especially the left, had made land redistribution a core part of their agenda. Public discussions had shifted from minor tenancy adjustments to a more comprehensive restructuring of rural society. This political maturity marked the beginning of a new phase in Kerala's agrarian history. Land reform became more than an economic policy; it became a moral and political project to dismantle inherited hierarchies and expand social justice.

❑ Political atmosphere favoured structural reforms

3.1.2 Major Legal Initiatives and Legislative Trajectory of Land Reforms

The push for land reforms in Kerala began in a political environment marked by vigorous peasant mobilisation and a rising consciousness about agrarian injustice. By the mid-1950s, peasant movements in Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin had developed strong organisational structures. These movements had exposed the insecurities of tenants, the exploitative rent systems, and the near-total landlessness of Dalit labourers. When the first elected Communist government took office in 1957, land reform became a central instrument of political transformation.

❑ Push for Land reforms

The government introduced the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill of 1957, landmark legislation for its time. The Bill challenged the foundations of landlordism by proposing full ownership rights for actual cultivators and strict ceiling limits on the extent to which any household could possess land. It also sought to abolish tenancy forms that had survived from the feudal era. The Bill alarmed the landed elite, who controlled wealth, social authority, and political influence. A coordinated opposition emerged, involving landlords, conservative caste groups, and sections of the church. They challenged the Bill in courts and mobilised a statewide movement known as the "Liberation Struggle". The central government dismissed the Communist ministry in 1959, halting immediate implementation.

Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill of 1957: Major Features and Controversy

❑ Legal and political aspects of the Bill

The Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill of 1957 marked one of the earliest and most ambitious efforts in India to restructure a deeply unequal agrarian system. Introduced by the first elected Communist ministry under E. M. S. Namboodiripad, the Bill addressed centuries of landlord dominance, insecure tenancies, and extreme landlessness among Dalit agricultural labourers. Although the Bill faced intense opposition and was never fully implemented, it set the intellectual and legislative foundation for subsequent reforms that transformed Kerala's rural society. The history of the Bill is therefore not only legal but also political, reflecting a period of heightened peasant mobilisation and fierce resistance from entrenched landed interests.

Major features of the Bill are as follows:

Abolition of Landlordism

One of the most significant provisions of the Bill was its attempt to abolish the institutional structure of landlordism. The agrarian economy in Kerala had been dominated by Janmis in Malabar, as well as by Brahmin and Nair landed families in Travancore and Cochin. These groups held superior rights over vast estates despite having little involvement in cultivation. The Bill sought to change this by restricting the extent of land that landlords could legally retain. Land beyond the ceiling was to be taken over by the state and redistributed. This shift undermined the customary authority that landlords enjoyed and challenged a social order in which land ownership was tied to ritual status and caste privilege.

Security of Tenure and Ownership Rights

Another major feature of the Bill was its strong protection of tenant rights. Tenancy in pre-reform Kerala had been marked by insecurity, high rents, and arbitrary eviction. The Bill introduced permanent occupancy rights for tenants who had cultivated land for generations. They could remain on the land and could be evicted only on clearly defined legal grounds. The Bill also gave tenants the right to purchase the land they cultivated at a legally determined price. This provision had far-reaching consequences because it shifted economic power from landlords to cultivators, encouraging agricultural productivity and giving farming households a sense of dignity and stability.

Ceiling on Landholdings

The Bill introduced strict ceiling limits on land ownership to prevent further concentration of land. The limit applied not

☐ Strict ceiling limits

only to individuals and families but also to institutions such as temples, religious trusts, and plantations. Ceiling provisions varied by category of land and family size, but the overall goal was clear: to eliminate large estates and release surplus land for redistribution. This was a bold step because it touched the core economic interests of influential social groups that had long exercised control over Kerala's rural economy.

☐ Exploitative tenures and regulating rents

Regulation of Rent and Reform of Tenure Systems

Kerala had a complex network of tenancy arrangements, such as Kanam, Verumpattom, and the Janmi-Kanam-Kudiyan system. These systems had developed historically but functioned in favour of landlords. The Bill sought to simplify this structure by abolishing exploitative tenures and regulating rents. Landlords could no longer charge rent beyond the limits prescribed by law. These provisions disrupted the long-standing mechanisms of surplus extraction and placed cultivators in a more equitable position. They also laid the groundwork for a transition from customary agrarian relations to a more uniform, legally protected land-use structure.

Recognition of Agricultural Labourers

The Bill attempted to address the extreme marginalisation of agricultural labourers, many of whom were Dalits living in poor conditions. It introduced measures for minimum wages, protection from arbitrary dismissal, and improved working conditions. Significantly, it acknowledged the need to provide labourers with homestead rights, ensuring security over the small plots where they lived. Though these measures were modest in scope, they represented a shift in state policy by recognising the rights of a group that had been historically excluded from legal protection.

☐ Liberation Struggle

Political Controversy and Resistance

The Bill triggered intense political resistance across Kerala. Landlords viewed the Bill as an assault on their economic base, leading to widespread mobilisations by the Nair Service Society, Christian organisations, Brahmin associations, and other powerful groups. They framed the Bill as a threat not only to property rights but also to religious institutions and traditional social order. This opposition culminated in the well-known "Liberation Struggle," a campaign that brought together diverse social groups against the Communist government. Demonstrations, political lobbying, and public agitation created an environment of instability. The central government, under pressure from conservative forces, dismissed the EMS government in 1959, halting the implementation of the Bill.

Judicial Challenges

☐ Legal obstacles

Alongside political opposition, the Bill faced serious legal obstacles. Several provisions were challenged in the High Court and Supreme Court on the grounds of violating fundamental rights, particularly the right to property. The absence of constitutional protection for agrarian reforms at the time made the legislation vulnerable. Courts struck down portions of the Bill, weakening its impact and delaying implementation. These legal challenges highlighted the difficulty of undertaking radical agrarian transformation within the constitutional framework of the 1950s.

Legacy and Influence on Later Reforms

☐ Historic attempt to break from feudal agrarian relations

Although the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill of 1957 did not come into full force, it had a lasting influence on the state's political trajectory. Its ideas and provisions shaped the Kerala Agrarian Relations Act of 1960 and, more significantly, the Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1963. When the 1969 Amendment strengthened the 1963 Act, many of the original principles of the 1957 Bill finally became operational. The Bill, therefore, stands as a historic attempt to break from feudal agrarian relations and remains a milestone in India's broader struggle for social and economic justice.

3.1.3 The Kerala Agrarian Relations Act of 1960 : A Diluted Measure

☐ Limits of reform

After the fall of the Communist government, the new administration introduced the Kerala Agrarian Relations Act of 1960. This Act retained the rhetoric of reform but compromised on important provisions. Ceiling limits were relaxed, and tenancy protections were narrower. Several categories of land, especially plantations and institutional estates, received exemptions. Even these moderate provisions encountered strong judicial resistance. The High Court and later the Supreme Court struck down sections of the Act on the grounds that they violated property rights. These legal challenges revealed the limits of reform within the existing constitutional framework and the strength of landed interests in shaping policy.

Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1963: Constitutional Shielding

☐ Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1963

A significant shift occurred when the Union government placed the Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1963 in the Ninth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This shielded the Act from most judicial interventions and demonstrated a national commitment to structural agrarian change. Yet the Act remained largely inactive for several years. Administrative delays, electoral shifts,

and resistance from powerful groups slowed progress. The political system lacked the stability needed to undertake such a wide restructuring of rural society.

The 1969 Amendment: Turning Reform into Reality

The land reform process in Kerala reached a decisive turning point with the 1969 Amendment to the Kerala Land Reforms Act. Earlier laws from 1957 and 1963 had introduced the ideas of tenancy abolition and land ceilings, but these laws remained weak due to political instability, landlord resistance, and repeated legal challenges. By the late 1960s, however, peasant movements had gained strength across the state, and the political climate under a left-led coalition allowed the government to address the loopholes that had protected landlord interests. The amendment emerged from this context of growing social pressure and political determination to restructure Kerala's agrarian order.

❑ Political determination to restructure Kerala's agrarian order.

The Amendment Act provides for:

1. Conferring rights to Kerala Kudikidappukar of small plots up to 10 cents.
2. Granting ownership rights to the actual tillers of the land.
3. Fixing the ceiling on land holdings and distributing excess land to landless peasants and agricultural workers.

Another major contribution of the amendment was the strengthening of ceiling laws. Earlier ceilings contained several exemptions that landlords exploited by dividing property among relatives or transferring ownership to religious institutions. The 1969 reform simplified definitions, reduced exemptions, and set clearer limits on how much land a family could retain. Surplus land identified under these rules would automatically vest in the state. This legal clarity allowed land tribunals and revenue authorities to begin redistribution on a scale that had not been possible before.

❑ Strengthening of ceiling laws

The amendment also widened protections for the most vulnerable rural groups. Agricultural labourers and hut dwellers, many of whom were from Dalit communities, received legal recognition for the sites on which they lived. Although the land distributed to them was often small and not always suited for cultivation, the right to a homestead afforded them a degree of dignity and security that had long been denied. For tenant cultivators, the law opened the path to ownership; for landless labourers, it provided the first formal step towards stability.

❑ Widened protections

Despite these achievements, the reform had limitations. Large plantations growing tea, rubber, and coffee remained exempt, which reduced the total area available for redistribution. The quality of surplus land was uneven, and administrative delays slowed implementation. Dalit families often received home-stead land rather than productive agricultural plots, revealing a gap between the law's intention and its social impact. Yet, even with these shortcomings, the 1969 Amendment succeeded in breaking the backbone of landlordism and laid the foundations for Kerala's more egalitarian and democratic rural society.

3.1.5 Objectives of the Land Reforms Act

The chief objectives of the Acts are:

1. Abolition of intermediaries between the state and the tillers.
2. Conferment of security of tenure on cultivating tenants.
3. Regulation of rent.
4. Consolidation of holdings.
5. Establishment of co-operative farming.

Dismantling the Landlord Order

The central aim of the Act was to dismantle the centuries-old landlord system. The Act cancelled the legal status of the landlords who extracted rent without engaging in cultivation. They could retain only a limited amount under ceiling rules. This meant a significant reduction in the holdings of Brahmin and Nair families, who had dominated rural society.

Ensuring Security of Tenure

All tenants, including farm servants, gained security, preventing arbitrary eviction. It provides for them to become full owners by paying an instalment of fair rent to the state.

Land Ceiling

Ceiling on land holdings has been fixed in Kerala as per the provisions of the Act (and Amendment Act of 1969). According to the Act, the maximum area of land that can be owned by a family of two or more adult members, but not more than five, is 5 standard acres, while a family of two or more adult members, but not more than five, can own up to 10 standard acres. One standard acre is equal to 1.5 ordinary acres. However, this varies from place to place depending on soil fertility and the crop cultivated. The maximum area of land that a family can own can never exceed 20 ordinary acres. Exceptions are made for plantations such as tea, coffee, rubber, cardamom, and cocoa, as

❑ Exceptions are made for plantations

❑ Mechanism for determining fair rent

❑ 8.6 million applications from tenants and 'hutment' dwellers

❑ Provided for the purchase of homestead land

well as for land owned by co-operative societies and religious, charitable, and educational institutions of a public nature. The prescribed land ceiling in Kerala is the lowest in India.

Fair Rent Fixation

The Act establishes a mechanism for determining fair rent, usually a small fraction (such as $\frac{1}{4}$ or less) of the gross produce, thereby reducing exploitation. The abolition of intermediaries: The Land Reforms Act has abolished landlordism and intermediary tenures in the state once and for all. The elimination of intermediaries was a prerequisite for the reorganisation of agriculture; therefore, top priority was given to their abolition. With the removal of intermediaries, lakhs of 'Kudiyans' and 'Kudikidappukars' became landowners, putting an end to the exploitation by landlords. The state acquired the landlords' property rights upon payment of compensation. With the disappearance of the semi-feudal landownership system, cultivators now enjoy the air of freedom and equality.

Tenancy Reforms

The progress of land reform implementation in the state has been commendable. The provisions relating to tenancy reforms and the purchase of Kudikidappu rights have been nearly fully implemented. The Land Tribunals have received more than 8.6 million applications from tenants and 'hutment' dwellers since the implementation of land reforms commenced. About 1.6 million out of 2.5 million 'Kaivakudiyanmars' secured 'Janma-vakasam'. Lakhs of tenants have not been paying rent because they have become de facto owners of the land. Further conflict or other types of exploitation have become mere stories of the past.

Redistribution of Surplus Land

Redistribution was the heart of the reforms. Once the surplus land was taken over, it was classified and allocated to the landless. Priority was given to agricultural labourers, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and families living in extreme poverty. Although the extent of surplus land varied across districts, tens of thousands of families received small plots that allowed them to gain basic economic security.

Recognition of Homestead Rights

The Act provided for the purchase of homestead land for hutment dwellers, many of whom belonged to the Dalit community. For the first time, the Act recognised their right to occupy the land on which they had built their houses over generations. This provision in the Act went a long way toward preventing evic-

tions, giving their families security and improving many of their living conditions.

Land Resumption Restrictions:

There are limited reasons for landlords to resume land, mainly for religious worship or specific cultivation needs.

Land reforms aim to redistribute land for greater equality, boost agriculture, and reduce poverty by removing middlemen. However, they often face implementation hurdles such as political resistance, corruption, and land fragmentation.

❑ Redistribute land for greater equality

❑ Position was shaped by caste hierarchies

❑ Legal right to the house sites

❑ Reduced the power landlords exercised over labourers

3.1.6 Land Reforms and Dalit Land Issues

Before land reforms, Dalit communities in Kerala lived under extreme forms of agrarian and social dependency. They owned almost no land, worked as attached agricultural labourers, and lived in small huts built on land owned by landlords or temple estates. Most Dalit households did not have any recognised right to their homes and could be evicted without reason. Dalits lived on the margins of fields, often in degrading conditions, with wages paid in kind and complete exclusion from agrarian decision-making. Their position was shaped by caste hierarchies and feudal relations that had evolved over centuries in the Janmi-Kanam-Kudiyar system and similar tenures across Kerala.

Land reforms promised to correct this deep historical injustice. However, the process showed both achievements and shortcomings. While the reforms weakened the old feudal structure, they did not fully overcome the landlessness of Dalit communities. The following sections examine these aspects in detail.

Achievements of Land Reforms for Dalit Communities

One of the most meaningful gains for Dalit families was the legal right to the house sites they had occupied for generations. This right provided them with a secure residential base, something denied to them under the older agrarian structure. The Homestead Pattas ended the constant threat of eviction and helped many families move from fragile huts to more stable houses. This improvement had emotional, social, and economic significance, as stability at home gave them greater dignity and the possibility of long-term planning.

Weakening of Landlord Control

The abolition of landlordism through the 1969 Amendment reduced the power landlords exercised over labourers. Previously, Dalit families lived under constant surveillance and control. They had to follow caste rules, observe restrictions on movement, and accept humiliating treatment. With the decline of

landlord authority, they gained greater autonomy in work and social life. Many Dalit labourers felt a perceptible improvement in their social interactions once feudal control weakened.

Access to Redistributed Land

A smaller but significant section of Dalit households received land through redistribution. This land was usually small in size, but it provided a sense of ownership and security. Even when the land was not agriculturally rich, the pattas became symbols of social equality and proof that the state recognised their citizenship. In some villages in Palakkad, Kannur, and Kollam, redistributed land enabled Dalit families to grow vegetables, rear livestock, and supplement their incomes.

☐ Sense of ownership and security

Rise of Dalit Labour Organisations

After the reforms, Dalit workers became active in agricultural labour unions, particularly those affiliated with left movements. Collective bargaining improved wages and working conditions. This political empowerment was an indirect but substantial outcome of the reforms.

3.1.7 Limitations of Land Reforms

The implementation of land reforms in Kerala was ambitious in design but uneven in practice. The legal framework was strong, yet the historical power of landlords, the weaknesses of the administrative system, and several structural exemptions reduced the reform's reach. These limitations are important for understanding why the outcomes, though significant, fell short of the original vision of complete agrarian transformation. The constraints reveal the tension between a progressive state policy and the resistance of entrenched social and economic interests.

☐ Ambitious in design but uneven in practice

Evasion Techniques by Landlords

Landlords across Kerala anticipated the introduction of ceiling laws and adopted several methods to protect their estates. Many transferred property to relatives or registered land under temples and religious bodies to avoid classification as surplus land. The documents relating to Malabar indicate that benami transfers were particularly widespread, where land was informally partitioned or sold on paper while full control remained with the landlord. These evasions sharply reduced the quantity of land available for redistribution and undermined the equalising goals of the reforms.

☐ Many transferred property to relatives

Administrative Weaknesses

- ❑ Weak record-keeping and shortages of revenue staff

Weak record-keeping and shortages of revenue staff created serious difficulties during implementation. Land tribunals struggled with outdated and incomplete land registers. In several cases, landlords evicted cultivating tenants just before the reforms came into effect, taking advantage of gaps in documentation. These administrative constraints slowed the pace of reform and made it difficult to verify tenancy claims. The mismatch between legal ambition and bureaucratic capacity became one of the most persistent obstacles.

Plantation Exemptions

- ❑ Exemption granted to plantations

One of the most significant structural limitations was the exemption granted to plantations. Plantations, especially in high-land districts, controlled vast areas of land and employed large numbers of Dalit and Adivasi labourers. By excluding these estates from ceiling laws, the reforms allowed concentrated land-ownership to survive in significant pockets. This exemption limited the scope of redistribution and continued the dependence of plantation labourers on wage work without access to cultivable land.

Limited Surplus Land

- ❑ Final figures were modest

Because of evasions and exemptions, the actual surplus land that came into government hands was far smaller than expected. Initial estimates assumed that the reforms would release large tracts of cultivable land, but the final figures were modest. This restricted the scale of redistribution and reduced the state's ability to provide meaningful landholdings to all landless households. The gap between legal intentions and practical availability remained a major limitation.

Marginal Impact on Agricultural Labourers

- ❑ labourers received mainly homestead plots

Agricultural labourers, especially from Dalit communities, gained the least from the reforms. While tenants became owners, labourers received mainly homestead plots and continued to depend on agricultural wages. As a result, the reforms altered the structure of tenancy but did not fully tackle long-term rural poverty.

- ❑ Limited surplus land

The limitations of Kerala's land reforms show that structural inequality cannot be dismantled through legislation alone. Landlord evasions, administrative shortages, plantation exemptions, and limited surplus land constrained the programme's redistributive potential. Even though the reforms reduced many feudal practices, they fell short of transforming the lives of agricultural labourers. These limitations offer valuable lessons for

future policies aimed at addressing persistent landlessness and social inequality.

3.1.8 Social and Economic Impacts of Land Reforms

Despite their limitations, land reforms in Kerala produced far-reaching changes in society, politics, and the rural economy. They marked a decisive shift away from caste-based authority and created a more democratic foundation for development. The reforms redefined rural relationships and contributed to the growth of Kerala's distinctive social model. Their social and economic impacts must be viewed not only in terms of land redistribution but also in how they transformed expectations, institutions, and political participation across the state.

☐ Far-reaching changes in society

Social Transformation and Reduction of Caste Hierarchy

The most immediate impact was the decline of landlord authority. For centuries, landownership had been tied to caste status, and the reforms weakened this connection. Tenants who became owners gained dignity and security. Rural society gradually moved towards more egalitarian relations. The dissolution of feudal obligations reduced social distance between communities and contributed to Kerala's later achievements in literacy, political mobilisation, and public welfare.

☐ Decline of landlord authority

Economic Changes in Rural Kerala

Land reforms shifted the rural economy towards smallholder cultivation. Owners who lived on their land invested more in agriculture than absentee landlords. This encouraged improvements in productivity and crop diversification. Rising wages and the strengthening of labour unions helped agricultural labourers negotiate better working conditions. Although the reforms did not create uniform prosperity, they reduced the harshest forms of exploitation and stabilised rural livelihoods.

☐ Shifted the rural economy

Political Effects and Growth of Democratic Culture

The reforms strengthened political participation at the village level. Peasant organisations, labour unions, and local leadership structures gained visibility. The weakening of landlord dominance created space for new forms of political expression. This encouraged a culture of negotiation, public debate, and electoral engagement. Kerala's later achievements in decentralisation and grassroots planning can be traced to this shift in rural power relations.

☐ Strengthened political participation

Influence on Human Development

- ❑ Expanded access to education, health care

By reducing social barriers, land reforms expanded access to education, health care, and welfare schemes. A more equal social structure allowed public institutions to reach people who had long been excluded. The Kerala model of development, characterised by high literacy, low infant mortality, and strong social security, owes much to this early transformation in rural society. Land reforms laid the moral and institutional foundation for a more inclusive state.

- ❑ The social and economic impacts

The social and economic impacts of land reforms in Kerala extended well beyond land redistribution. They weakened caste-based inequality, empowered small cultivators, and created a political culture grounded in participation and public welfare. While agricultural labourers continued to face challenges, the overall trajectory of rural change was positive and transformative. Land reforms remain one of the central pillars of Kerala's development experience, shaping its social values and democratic institutions.

Summarised Overview

Land reforms in Kerala were the result of long struggles against feudal structures that denied cultivators security and dignity. Organised peasant movements, political parties, and reform leaders argued for tenancy rights, fair rents, and the redistribution of surplus land. The legislation that followed aimed to abolish landlordism, protect Kudikidappukar, impose ceilings, and establish ownership rights for actual cultivators. These reforms reshaped rural society by weakening caste-based dominance, improving livelihoods, and laying the foundation for Kerala's later achievements in social development.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What were the main features of the old land system in Kerala?
2. Why were tenants and cultivators insecure under the Janmi system?
3. How did peasant movements influence land reform legislation?
4. What were the objectives of the Kerala Land Reforms Act?
5. Who are Kudikidappukar and why were they protected?
6. How did land ceiling laws change landownership patterns?
7. What were the long-term social effects of land reforms?
8. How did land reforms contribute to Kerala's welfare achievements?

Assignments

1. Analyse the caste-based structure of Kerala's agrarian system and its impact on tenants.
2. Discuss the role of political parties and peasant organisations in shaping land reforms.
3. Evaluate the achievements and limitations of the Kerala Land Reforms Act.
4. Explain how land reforms influenced social mobility among marginalised communities.
5. Compare pre-reform and post-reform agrarian structures in Kerala.
6. Assess the relationship between land reforms and Kerala's development indicators.
7. Examine the stages of land reform implementation and their political significance

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Suggested Reading

1. Franke, R. W., & Chasin, B. H. (1994). *Kerala: Radical Reform as Development*. Vistaar Publications.
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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 2

Political Parties and Electoral Politics

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- describe the evolution of political parties in Kerala
- explain the role of social coalitions in shaping party systems
- analyse the behaviour and voting patterns of Kerala's electorate
- evaluate the significance of major elections since 1957
- discuss the alternation of UDF and LDF governments

Background

Political parties are the lifeblood of democracy and brokers of public opinion. They call for the involvement of more people in the decision-making process. The parties aggregate people's demands, educate the public, and promote policies. The style of party functioning, which may be described as the party system, explains the political process to a large extent. The presence of a party system indicates dissent, without which democracy is a mirage.

Keywords

Coalition Politics, UDF, LDF, Electoral Behaviour, Party System, Voter Turnout, Political Alliances.

Discussion

Kerala's political landscape took shape through the growth of organised political parties, strong social movements, and an active electorate that responded sharply to changes in governance. From the first election in 1957, parties relied on deep social

networks, such as trade unions, student groups, and community organisations, which helped create a political culture rooted in public participation. Over time, coalition politics became the defining feature of Kerala's democracy, with the LDF and UDF emerging as stable fronts that reflected diverse social, religious, and regional interests. Electoral politics in the state shows a pattern of high voter turnout, performance-based evaluations, and strong ideological debates on welfare, secularism, and social justice. The evolution of elections—from the historic communist victory in 1957 to the performance-driven re-election of the LDF in 2021—reveals a society that values accountability, public welfare, and political stability. This history highlights how Kerala combined competitive politics with a strong commitment to democratic participation.

❑ Stabilised electoral competition

3.2.1 Political Parties in Kerala

Kerala's party system developed gradually from the late 19th and early 20th-century reform movements. Leaders from caste associations, labour unions, peasant groups, and literary circles played important roles in shaping early political consciousness. After state formation in 1956, several organised political parties emerged as major players. The Communist Party, the Congress, socialist groups, and community-based organisations formed the early backbone of political activity. Over time, party alliances became a defining feature of Kerala politics. Coalition politics stabilised electoral competition and enabled diverse communities to participate in government formation.

The character of the political parties in Kerala has been largely determined by the different socio-economic structures in the political development of the Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar regions. Most major parties maintain strong grassroots structures, including trade unions, student wings, and cultural forums. These structures provide parties with a wide social base and ensure that political debates reach local communities.

❑ One of the oldest political organisations

3.2.1.1 Political Parties in Kerala: An Overview

Indian National Congress (INC)

The Congress is one of the oldest political organisations active in Kerala. It emerged as a major force during the national struggle and later guided the transition from princely rule to democratic governance. The party's ideology is rooted in parliamentary democracy, socialism, secularism, and a mixed economy. Key Congress leaders in Kerala include K. Karunakaran, A. K. Antony, Oommen Chandy, and R. Sankar, each of whom shaped different phases of the party's influence. The Congress has been an umbrella organisation, sheltering individuals of all

shades under its broad canopy. Minority voters form its major support base. In the past, its support base mainly consisted of forward communities; however, it seems that nowadays the upper classes do not support the party as they did in the past.

❑ Central position in the UDF coalition

Electorally, the party has led several governments in Kerala, particularly during the 1960s, 1970s, and early 2000s. It occupies a central position in the UDF coalition, coordinating the roles of regional allies such as the IUML and various factions of the Kerala Congress. However, the party faces challenges such as leadership fragmentation, competition from the CPI(M) in rural areas, and the rising influence of the BJP in urban centres. Internal factionalism continues to weaken its organisational depth, especially among youth and grassroots workers.

❑ Dominant left party in Kerala

Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M)

The CPI(M) was founded in 1964 after ideological splits within the communist movement. It has since become the dominant left party in Kerala. The party relies on a strong organisational structure comprising branch, area, and district committees. Leaders such as E. M. S. Namboodiripad, V. S. Achuthananadan, Pinarayi Vijayan, and Koderi Balakrishnan have defined its political trajectory. The CPI(M)'s ideology focuses on class struggle, welfare expansion, and participatory development.

It draws its support from the middle and lower classes, with its base consisting of the working class, poor peasants, and employees. The SCs and STs it supports are based on this foundation.

❑ Largest component of the LDF

Electorally, the CPI(M) has led several governments and remains the largest component of the LDF. It performed strongly in the 2016 and 2021 elections, breaking the long pattern of alternating governments. The party's strengths lie in its disciplined cadre base, its influence in trade unions, and its wide presence across rural and semi-urban Kerala. However, it continues to face challenges, including allegations of bureaucratisation, declining appeal among certain sections of youth, and the need to adapt to economic changes without losing ideological clarity.

❑ Claims to be the true communist party of India

Communist Party of India (CPI)

The CPI was founded in 1925, with MN Roy playing a vital role in its establishment. The party faced repression from the British colonial administration and maintained close links with the Communist Party of Great Britain and various International Revolutionary Movements. In 1964, a split occurred when a radical group left the CPI to form the CPI(M). The CPI claims to be the true communist party of India.

❑ Socialist transformation through democratic means

❑ Core partner in the LDF coalition

❑ continuation of the Jana Sangh

❑ Ideology centres on cultural nationalism

❑ Central role in the UDF

The CPI became active in Kerala through workers' movements, peasant struggles, and anti-feudal campaigns. Its ideology is based on socialist transformation through democratic means. Before the 1964 split, the CPI was the dominant communist force in the state and formed the historic first elected communist government in 1957 under E. M. S. Namboodiripad. Leaders such as C. Achutha Menon, P. K. Vasudevan Nair, and Veliyam Bhargavan helped sustain its relevance even after organisational divisions.

The CPI remains a core partner in the LDF coalition. Its electoral presence is modest compared to the CPI(M), but it remains influential in sectors such as public-sector unions, teacher organisations, and agricultural collectives. The party faces challenges related to the recruitment of new cadres, competition from the CPI(M) for ideological leadership, and reduced influence in rapidly urbanising areas.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

The BJP was founded in April 1980, following a split in the Janata Party. It is the continuation of the Jana Sangh, established in 1957 by Shyamaprasad Mukherjee. In 1977, the Jana Sangh was dissolved and became part of the Janata Party formed in the same year.

The party's ideology centres on cultural nationalism, market-oriented economic reforms, and a unitary national identity. Although it has not won significant seats in the assembly, leaders like KJ Marar and O. Rajagopal have helped expand its base. Its support is concentrated among a section of upper-caste Hindus and segments of the urban middle class; however, backward classes have also begun to support the party.

Despite an increased vote share in some elections, especially in Thiruvananthapuram, the party struggles to convert votes into legislative seats. Organisational competition from the Left among working-class Hindus and the lack of strong regional allies limit its influence. The party's challenge remains building a broader social coalition that can break the entrenched LDF-UDF bipolarity.

Indian Union Muslim League (IUML)

The IUML was formed in 1948 and has remained the main political voice of Kerala's Muslim community. Leaders such as Panakkad Syed Mohammedali Shihab Thangal, C. H. Mohammed Koya, and P. K. Kunhalikutty have shaped its growth. The party's ideology emphasises minority rights, secularism, and community welfare. The IUML plays a central role in the UDF

❑ Strong in Malappuram

❑ K. M. Mani, R. Balakrishna Pillai, and P. J. Joseph

❑ Emerged from socialist and anti-Congress traditions

❑ Shaped by the stability of two broad coalitions

and often provides numerical stability to Congress-led governments.

Its electoral performance is strong in Malappuram and other northern districts. The party faces the challenge of maintaining influence among younger voters and addressing internal differences between traditional leadership and emerging social groups.

Kerala Congress (Various Factions)

The Kerala Congress emerged in 1964, representing the agricultural interests of Christian farmers in central Travancore. Leaders such as K. M. Mani, R. Balakrishna Pillai, and P. J. Joseph shaped its evolution into multiple factions. Although the party has fragmented several times, each faction maintains regional pockets of influence in Kottayam, Pathanamthitta, and Idukki.

The party's ideology centres on agrarian protection, irrigation, market support for cash crops, and decentralised administration. Its role as a flexible coalition partner enables it to switch between the LDF and UDF, depending on the political context. Its main challenges include internal divisions and declining support due to demographic changes in agricultural communities.

RSP, Janata Dal (Secular), and Other Minor Parties

These parties emerged from socialist and anti-Congress traditions. RSP leaders like Baby John played important roles in coastal politics. Janata Dal (Secular) draws support from backward classes in select regions. Their influence is limited but crucial in coalition arithmetic. Their main challenge is attracting new cadres and staying relevant in a bipolar system dominated by the CPI(M) and Congress.

3.2.2 Coalition Politics

Kerala's political landscape is shaped by the stability of two broad coalitions: the Left Democratic Front, led by the CPI(M), and the United Democratic Front, led by the Congress. This model emerged in the late 1970s as a response to fragmented mandates and frequent changes in government. Over time, these alliances have brought predictability to electoral politics. Each front accommodates parties that represent specific social groups, religious communities, and regional interests. As a result, coalition politics has become a way of maintaining political balance in a socially diverse state. The presence of strong parties such as the IUML and various Kerala Congress factions within the UDF, along with the CPI, RSP, and JD(S) within the LDF,

ensures that both alliances reflect a wide cross-section of Kerala's society.

❑ Brings internal pressures

However, coalition politics also brings internal pressures. Partners within each front must negotiate seats, ministerial responsibilities, and policy priorities. This bargaining can create tensions, especially when regional parties seek greater influence or ideological differences surface. Coalition governments must constantly work to keep allies on board, which can slow decision-making or require compromises that dilute policy goals. Yet, despite these challenges, the coalition model has strengthened Kerala's democratic culture by encouraging consultation, accommodation, and power-sharing. It remains a defining feature of the state's political stability and electoral behaviour.

3.2.3 Evolution of Electoral Politics in Kerala (1957–2021)

❑ Evolution of electoral politics

The evolution of electoral politics in Kerala is one of the most studied political developments in India. Since the formation of the state in 1956, Kerala has displayed a high degree of political awareness, a competitive party system, and strong public participation. Unlike many other regions, elections in Kerala are shaped by a mix of ideological commitments, social reform traditions, coalition politics, and active civil society organisations. The presence of strong left parties, the influence of minority communities, a large migrant population, and a politically literate electorate have produced a unique electoral pattern. Over the decades, Kerala has shown both stability and change. While two major coalitions dominate electoral contests, shifts in public expectations, welfare performance, and social movements continue to redefine political outcomes. The following sections examine each Legislative Assembly election from 1957 to 2021, capturing the context, outcomes, and broader trends that have shaped Kerala's political trajectory.

1957 Election: The First Communist Government

❑ First election

The first election to the Kerala assembly was held in March 1957. Kerala became internationally visible in 1957 when it elected the first democratically chosen communist government. The Communist Party of India won sixty seats and formed the government under E. M. S. Namboodiripad. The Congress secured forty-three seats and became the main opposition. This government introduced key reforms in education, land relations, and administration. These measures generated conflict with private managements, religious groups, and sections of the middle class. Opposition movements, collectively known as the Liberation Struggle, created intense political pressure. In 1959, the

central government dismissed the ministry using Article 356. The election set the stage for ideological politics and strong party mobilisation.

1960 Election: Congress-led Coalition Returns

- ☐ Congress-led coalition

Following the Communist government's dismissal, fresh elections were held in 1960. A Congress-led coalition that included the Praja Socialist Party and the Muslim League secured a majority, with Pattom Thanu Pillai becoming the chief minister. Gradually, differences of opinion emerged between the Congress and the Muslim League, leading to the resignation of Pattom Thanu Pillai. As a result, R. Sankar became the chief minister. The government revised many reforms introduced between 1957 and 1959. Internal disagreements, factionalism, and administrative challenges weakened the coalition. The politics of the early 1960s reflected the struggle between reformist and conservative forces. A political crisis emerged in September 1964, leading to the formation of a dissident group within the Congress Party. A non-confidence motion was introduced against the ministry and passed.

1965 Election: No Majority and President's Rule

- ☐ First election after the split in the Communist Party

The 1965 election did not produce a workable majority. The Congress, CPI, CPI(M), and smaller parties split the vote without forming a stable coalition. This was the first election after the split in the Communist Party, with the CPI and CPI(M) contesting against each other. Since no government could be formed, Kerala came under President's Rule for more than two years. This election highlighted the need for more organised coalition structures.

1967 Election: The Seven-Party Front

- ☐ Strong left coalition

In 1967, a strong left coalition known as the Seven-Party Front came to power. The alliance included CPI(M), CPI, the Muslim League, and several smaller socialist parties. E. M. S. Namboodiripad again became chief minister. The government expanded measures for land reform and education. Differences among coalition partners and political tensions led to the ministry's collapse in 1969. This period demonstrated the strength of mass political mobilisation and the complexity of broad alliances.

1970 Election: Stable Congress-CPI Coalition

- ☐ A stable coalition

The 1970 election brought a stable coalition headed by C. Achutha Menon of the CPI, supported by the Congress. This government completed its full term and implemented major land reform measures. It stabilised administration, promoted de-

velopment boards, and expanded welfare schemes. The election marked the beginning of more durable coalition arrangements in Kerala.

1977 Election: Post-Emergency Dynamics

- ❑ Congress-led UDF won

Coming after the end of the national Emergency, the 1977 election showed renewed political activity. The Congress-led UDF won, and K. Karunakaran became chief minister. He resigned soon after due to the Rajan case controversy, and A. K. Antony succeeded him. The left opposition strengthened its organisational presence in several districts. The election reflected national political currents and public resentment against the Emergency.

1980 Election: LDF Victory and Bipolar Politics Begin

- ❑ Beginning of Kerala's stable two-front competition

In 1980, the Left Democratic Front returned to power with E. K. Nayanar as chief minister. The LDF's rise corresponded with the UDF's consolidation as the main opposition. This election marked the beginning of Kerala's stable two-front competition. The ministry faced economic constraints and internal tensions, and the assembly was dissolved early in 1982.

1982 Election: Strong UDF Mandate

The 1982 election brought a solid victory for the UDF. K. Karunakaran once again became chief minister. The alliance won more than ninety seats, while the LDF formed the opposition. The government expanded welfare programmes and prioritised stabilising the economy. The political environment became more structured, and alliance politics became clearer.

1987 Election: LDF Returns to Power

- ❑ Reflected the regular alternation of power

The LDF won the 1987 election, and E. K. Nayanar returned as chief minister. The campaign emphasised anti-corruption, price rises, and administrative reform. The government initiated industrial projects and decentralisation measures. The UDF continued to exercise influence in several regions. The election reflected the regular alternation of power that would later become a hallmark of Kerala politics.

1991 Election: UDF Victory and Economic Reform Context

- ❑ UDF secured a narrow majority

In 1991, the UDF secured a narrow majority. K. Karunakaran became chief minister but stepped down in 1995, succeeded by A. K. Antony. The election took place at the beginning of India's economic liberalisation. Kerala faced unemployment and fiscal pressure. Welfare schemes continued, and the opposition LDF expanded its organisational presence, preparing for a comeback.

❑ People's Planning Campaign

1996 Election: LDF and the People's Planning Initiative

The LDF won decisively in 1996, and E. K. Nayanar became chief minister for the third time. This government launched the People's Planning Campaign, shifting a large share of plan funds to local governments. Decentralisation became a major reform. The UDF criticised the programme but could not counter the widespread support it received. This period strengthened Kerala's reputation for participatory governance.

❑ Shift in the debates on governance

2001 Election: UDF Back to Power

The 2001 election gave the UDF a clear majority, and A. K. Antony became chief minister. The government focused on fiscal discipline and administrative reform. Welfare spending was limited due to financial pressures. The LDF criticised the government for moving away from pro-poor policies. Antony resigned in 2004, and Oommen Chandy took over. The election marked a shift in the debates on governance and investment.

❑ Internal conflicts within the CPI(M)

2006 Election: LDF Government under V. S. Achuthanandan

In 2006, the LDF returned to power with V. S. Achuthanandan as chief minister. The campaign focused on corruption cases, land encroachments, and price issues. The government implemented social security measures, strengthened pension schemes, and attempted to secure land rights for tribal communities. Internal conflicts within the CPI(M) and coalition pressures influenced the government's functioning.

2011 Election: UDF's Narrowest Victory

The 2011 election produced one of the narrowest margins in Kerala's history. The UDF won seventy-two seats against the LDF's sixty-eight. Oommen Chandy became chief minister. The government expanded welfare pensions, introduced student scholarships, and promoted infrastructure projects. Allegations related to the solar panel case weakened the administration. The LDF gained support by focusing on issues of corruption and governance.

❑ Efficient welfare delivery

2016 Election: Strong LDF Mandate under Pinarayi Vijayan

The 2016 election resulted in a clear LDF victory. Pinarayi Vijayan became chief minister. The government focused on public health, digital education, road development, and coastal protection. Issues such as political violence and corruption were debated during the campaign. The UDF formed a strong opposition but could not prevent the LDF's rise through disciplined organisation and efficient welfare delivery.



2021 Election: Historic Re-election of the LDF

- ❑ Same coalition returned to power

The 2021 election was a turning point. For the first time in four decades, the same coalition returned to power in consecutive elections. The LDF won ninety-nine seats. Pinarayi Vijayan continued as chief minister. The election took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, repeated floods, and economic challenges. The government's crisis management, welfare measures, housing missions, food distribution programmes, and public health interventions earned widespread support. The UDF remained the main opposition but struggled to provide a compelling alternative. The BJP failed to win a seat, underscoring the limits of its presence in Kerala despite greater visibility in earlier years. This election suggested that voters were now rewarding performance rather than following the tradition of alternation.

- ❑ Demonstrates a deep and resilient democratic culture

The electoral history of Kerala from 1957 to 2021 reveals a politically conscious society that responds sharply to issues of welfare, governance, and accountability. The rise of two stable alliances, high voter turnout, strong ideological commitments, and active mass organisations has produced a competitive but stable political system. Each election reflects the social currents and political debates of its time. Kerala's political trajectory underscores the importance of coalition-building, welfare performance, and public participation. The pattern of alternation has shaped the state for decades, while the LDF's re-election in 2021 signalled new shifts in voter behaviour. Taken together, Kerala's electoral evolution demonstrates a deep and resilient democratic culture.

3.2.4 Major Characteristics of Kerala's Electoral Politics

- ❑ Historical elements

Kerala's electoral politics has developed through decades of social reform, literacy expansion, and political mobilisation. These historical elements have produced a highly engaged electorate that actively engages with democratic processes. The state has also developed a stable coalition system where political competition is structured rather than fragmented. Together, these features make Kerala's electoral landscape distinct from that of most other Indian states.

Major Characteristics of Kerala's Electoral Politics are as follows

High political awareness

Kerala's electorate is shaped by long traditions of literacy campaigns, social reform movements, and public debates. This

☐ Voter turnout remains consistently high

☐ LDF and UDF

☐ Ideological debates

☐ Reflects Kerala's social diversity

☐ Trade unions, student groups, teachers associations

has created a society capable of critically assessing political promises and governance performance. As a result, voter turnout remains consistently high, often rising above 70 per cent. Elections, therefore, reflect widespread participation rather than the influence of narrow elite groups.

Bipolar coalition system

Kerala's politics revolves around the Left Democratic Front, led by the CPI(M), and the United Democratic Front, led by the Congress. These alliances bring together parties with shared ideological positions and complementary social bases. The two-front system prevents excessive fragmentation, ensures predictable transitions of power, and encourages programmatic competition. It also keeps coalition partners accountable to broad public expectations.

Central role of ideology in shaping political choices

Electoral competition is deeply influenced by ideological debates on social justice, secularism, welfare policies, and workers' rights. Parties must present credible positions on these issues to gain public support. This distinguishes Kerala from regions where caste, personal loyalty, or patronage dominate political decisions. Ideological consistency also strengthens voter attachment to political fronts.

Influence of minorities and community-based networks

Kerala's Muslim and Christian communities, as well as various backward caste organisations, play meaningful roles in elections. Their support shapes coalition strategies, candidate selection, and policy priorities. This community influence reflects Kerala's social diversity and ensures that minority interests are integrated into the political process. It also makes political alliances more inclusive and broad-based.

Active participation of civic organisations and social movements

Trade unions, student groups, teachers' associations, and women's networks remain central to political mobilisation. These organisations keep public discussions alive outside election cycles and act as watchdogs over government functioning. Their presence also strengthens political education, making citizens more aware of their rights and responsibilities. This vibrant civic culture reinforces Kerala's democratic stability.

Transparent and peaceful electoral administration

Kerala's elections are known for high administrative efficiency and low levels of malpractice. Strong regulatory oversight

❑ Known for high administrative efficiency

❑ Focus on social protection

❑ Social reform traditions

and an informed electorate discourage corrupt practices. Polling stations function smoothly, and political parties usually abide by electoral norms. This contributes to public trust in electoral outcomes and strengthens democratic legitimacy.

Welfare-centred electoral competition

Most political campaigns emphasise food security, pensions, public distribution, housing schemes, and school improvement. Voters expect continuity in welfare and assess governments based on the quality of delivery. The focus on social protection makes elections issue-based rather than purely identity-driven. It also pushes governments to maintain strong commitments to public services.

The major characteristics of Kerala's electoral politics highlight a society where democratic practice is deeply rooted in social reform traditions. High political awareness, stable alliances, and welfare-based competition create a political environment that values accountability and inclusion. These features have allowed Kerala to maintain a strong and vibrant democratic culture that continues to evolve with social and economic changes.

3.2.5 Trends in Kerala's Electoral Politics

Kerala's electoral trends reflect long-term changes in society, political participation, and state policy. Over time, the state has moved from unstable coalition experiments to stable two-front competition. Voting patterns, issue preferences, and party strategies have evolved in response to welfare expansion, migration, and rising political awareness. These trends show how Kerala's democracy adapts while retaining its core values.

Key Trends are as follows

Shift from fragmented early politics to stable coalition competition

In the decades after 1957, political instability and frequent shifts in alliance partners were common. Over time, parties consolidated into two major alliances, reducing unpredictability. This stability helped governments implement long-term programmes and deepen administrative reforms. It also improved public trust in political institutions by minimising frequent government collapses.

❑ Political instability and frequent shifts

Long-standing pattern of alternation between LDF and UDF

For many decades, Kerala's electorate consistently changed governments every five years. This pattern reflected a strong

❑ Changed governments every five years

demand for accountability and public scrutiny of governance. Voters closely monitored performance in welfare, education, health, and infrastructure before making choices. Alternation also ensured that no coalition monopolised political space for too long.

Increasing centrality of welfare and social protection in elections

Welfare delivery became a major factor in electoral choices, with voters carefully assessing pensions, food security, public health, and education services. Parties began expanding welfare schemes to appeal to broader social groups. This trend strengthened the link between citizens and public institutions. It also shifted political debate from purely ideological arguments to performance-based evaluation.

Greater grassroots participation through decentralised governance

Decentralisation reforms expanded the role of local bodies in planning and welfare distribution. This made citizens more aware of how policies affect their daily lives. Gram Sabha participation, neighbourhood groups, and Kudumbashree networks strengthened political engagement at the local level. These grassroots interactions influenced how voters judged state-level elections.

❑ Decentralisation

Growing influence of crisis-based evaluations

Recent elections show that voters increasingly value administrative competence during crises. Flood management, public health preparedness, and pandemic response shaped voter behaviour in the 2016 and 2021 elections. This shift suggests that governance delivery and crisis leadership now carry more weight than party identity alone.

❑ Governance delivery and crisis leadership

Steady Rise of the BJP in Vote Share Without Significant Seat Gains

The BJP has expanded its presence in urban areas, gaining visibility and support among certain social groups. However, this increase in vote share has not translated into substantial legislative representation. Kerala's coalition structure and stable minority support patterns limit the BJP's electoral breakthrough.

❑ Major departure from Kerala's traditional voting pattern

Breaking of the Alternation Trend in 2021

The LDF's re-election in 2021 marked a major departure from Kerala's traditional voting pattern. Voters rewarded continuity based on welfare expansion, administrative stability,



and effective crisis governance. This trend indicates a more nuanced and sophisticated evaluation of performance by the electorate.

□ Trends

The trends in Kerala's electoral politics show an evolving democracy shaped by welfare commitments, political awareness, and local participation. While coalition competition remains stable, voting patterns reflect significant changes in how citizens evaluate governance. Kerala's democracy continues to adapt to shifting social realities, making its electoral landscape dynamic, competitive, and strongly rooted in public engagement.

Summarised Overview

Political parties and elections in Kerala have developed through a combination of social mobilisation, ideological conflict, and active public participation. The emergence of coalition fronts reflects the diversity of Kerala's society, while high voter turnout demonstrates the strength of democratic engagement. Over time, electoral competition has been shaped by welfare policies, development debates, and the performance of governments. The history of elections reveals a politically conscious society that evaluates parties based on governance and social outcomes.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What social conditions shaped the emergence of political parties in Kerala?
2. Why is 1957 an important year in Kerala's political history?
3. What are the major features of coalition politics in Kerala?
4. How do caste and religion influence electoral outcomes?
5. Why do Kerala's elections show high voter turnout?
6. What factors explain the alternation of UDF and LDF governments?
7. How did the 2021 election differ from past trends?
8. What policy issues commonly influence voter preferences?

Assignments

1. Analyse the growth of coalition fronts in Kerala and their social bases.
2. Discuss how political parties used social movements to strengthen their influence.

3. Evaluate the impact of key elections on Kerala's political trajectory.
4. Compare voter behaviour in Kerala with national voting patterns.
5. Assess how welfare politics shaped election outcomes.
6. Explain the role of ideology in party competition in Kerala.
7. Examine the importance of leadership and performance in determining electoral success.

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Suggested Reading

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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UNIT 3

Panchayat Raj Experiment and People's Planning

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain the evolution of Panchayati Raj in Kerala
- describe the objectives of the People's Planning Campaign
- evaluate the impact of decentralisation on local development
- discuss the challenges faced by local governments
- examine the link between decentralisation and Kerala's welfare achievements

Background

Kerala has a long tradition of social reform, strong civil society groups, and political mobilisation, which have created favourable conditions for decentralised governance. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments strengthened local bodies across India, and Kerala used these reforms to build a distinctive model of participatory planning.

Keywords

Decentralisation, Panchayati Raj, People's Planning, Gram Sabha, Local Governance, Participatory Planning.

Discussion

Kerala's experience with Panchayat Raj and People's Planning represents one of the most significant attempts in India to bring ordinary citizens into the heart of development. The state's long history of social reform, literacy campaigns, and civic activism created a setting where decentralisation could take deep root. The Panchayati Raj reforms strengthened local governments by giving them legal authority, financial resources, and administrative control, while Gram Sabhas made

local planning more accessible and transparent. With the launch of the People's Planning Campaign in 1996, planning shifted from government offices to community spaces, allowing citizens to identify priorities, design projects, and monitor outcomes. This participatory approach improved schools, health centres, local infrastructure, and welfare schemes, while also building a stronger democratic culture. Kerala's model shows that decentralisation works best when supported by social mobilisation, financial devolution, and active cooperation between local governments and community organisations.

3.3.1 Kerala's Panchayat Raj Experience

Kerala's decentralised governance has roots that extend far beyond modern administrative reforms. The state's history of caste reform movements, temple assemblies, community initiatives, and high political consciousness created favourable social conditions for participatory democracy. When the state was formed in 1956, it inherited a population accustomed to collective discussions, public campaigns, and literacy initiatives. This legacy shaped the evolution of Panchayat Raj in Kerala. What distinguishes Kerala's experience is that decentralisation was not limited to transferring powers to local bodies but became a social project involving mass participation, political commitment, and administrative restructuring. Over the decades, Kerala developed a model in which citizen participation became central to rural governance and planning.

3.3.1.1 Evolution of Panchayat Raj in Kerala

The first major effort toward decentralisation began soon after Kerala's formation. The Communist ministry of 1957 viewed local bodies as important instruments for democratising development. This idea took shape through the Kerala Panchayat Act of 1961, which introduced elected Panchayats in rural areas. These early Panchayats had limited autonomy but represented a significant departure from earlier bureaucratic control. Their emergence was influenced by Kerala's older forms of local institutions, including temple sabhas, Nadu councils, and community gatherings, which had historically encouraged collective management of resources.

☐ Kerala Panchayat Act of 1961

☐ District Councils, expanding decentralisation

During the 1980s, administrative reforms brought further innovation. The 1987 reforms introduced District Councils, expanding decentralisation beyond the village level. These councils attempted to integrate development planning with regional needs, although they lacked strong legislative backing. Despite their short lifespan, they demonstrated that Kerala was gradually preparing for deeper administrative devolution.

☐ Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth Constitutional Amendments

A decisive moment came with the Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth Constitutional Amendments of 1992. These national reforms gave constitutional protection to Panchayati Raj Institutions and required states to establish stable three-tier systems. Responding to this directive, Kerala enacted the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act of 1994. This Act reorganised local government into gram, block, and district Panchayats. It clarified the distribution of administrative powers and financial responsibilities and mandated the formation of the Gram Sabha as the foundation of participatory democracy. The Gram Sabha provided a structured forum where ordinary citizens could express priorities, evaluate public works, and monitor local governance. This legal and institutional shift laid the foundation for the remarkable decentralisation experiment that followed.

☐ Role of Civil Society

Civil society played an important role in shaping Kerala's decentralisation. The Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad, which had worked on literacy campaigns and local resource mapping since the 1970s, became an important partner in the decentralisation process. Their scientific approach to local planning, environmental awareness, and community mobilisation contributed crucial tools for later participatory planning efforts. Social reform movements, high literacy levels, and political mobilisation across caste and class groups created a supportive environment in which decentralisation could take deep root.

☐ Transferred substantial powers to local governments

3.3.2 Kerala Panchayat Raj - An Overview

Kerala's decentralisation stands out in India for combining legislative reforms with active citizen participation. After the 1994 Act, the state transferred substantial powers to local governments. Local bodies were entrusted with major responsibilities in sectors such as primary education, local infrastructure, health, agriculture, housing, and poverty alleviation. This transfer of responsibilities was supported by financial devolution, with nearly one-third of the state's annual plan expenditure allocated to local governments. This scale of fiscal devolution was unmatched in most Indian states.

☐ Deliberate strategy

Studies on Kerala's decentralisation show that the state followed a deliberate strategy. First, it devolved functional responsibilities to local governments. Second, it provided predictable financial support through the regular constitution of State Finance Commissions. These commissions reviewed the financial position of Panchayats and recommended how taxes and grants should be shared. Third, Kerala invested in administrative restructuring by placing officials in development departments under the functional control of local bodies. This enabled Panchayats to execute development projects using their own plans rather than following directives from higher departments.

☐ Citizen oversight mechanisms

Citizen oversight mechanisms were also strengthened. Panchayats were required to hold open meetings, publish annual reports, and maintain transparency in expenditure. Local organisations, neighbourhood groups, and voluntary associations played an active role in monitoring public works. The culture of public debate, nurtured by decades of civic activism, allowed citizens to participate in evaluating local decisions. Through this mix of legal reforms, financial devolution, and social participation, Kerala built a decentralisation system that was both democratic and development-oriented.

☐ Public involvement in local decision-making

Kerala's Panchayat Raj experiment represents a major transformation in the relationship between the state and its citizens. From early attempts in the 1960s to the major reforms of the 1990s, decentralisation was shaped by political will, civil society involvement, and a population accustomed to public discussion. The evolution of Panchayat Raj institutions created the base for Kerala's later innovations in participatory development, particularly the People's Planning Campaign. This experience demonstrates that decentralisation succeeds when legal frameworks are supported by social mobilisation, administrative commitment, and opportunities for direct public involvement in local decision-making.

Major Features of Kerala's Panchayat Raj System

☐ Addressed both institutional capacity and democratic participation

The Panchayat Raj system in Kerala developed as a comprehensive framework that combined legal clarity, administrative reforms, and participatory practices. Its effectiveness rested on the way the state linked the devolution of power with strong public involvement. While the legal foundation came from the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act of 1994, the system gained wider social legitimacy because ordinary citizens participated directly in local planning and monitoring. The design of decentralisation in Kerala stands out because it addressed both institutional capacity and democratic participation, ensuring that local governments did not function merely as extensions of the state bureaucracy.

☐ Clear definition of responsibilities

One major feature of the system was the clear definition of responsibilities assigned to local governments. Panchayats at the village, block, and district levels were entrusted with a wide range of developmental functions, including primary education, basic health services, local infrastructure, agriculture, drinking water, sanitation, and welfare schemes. By shifting responsibility for these areas to the grassroots, the state ensured that development decisions reflected local needs rather than central directives. This functional devolution helped Panchayats become active institutions of public service rather than symbolic bodies.

☐ Commitment to financial devolution

Equally important was Kerala's commitment to financial devolution. The state allocated a substantial share of annual plan funds directly to local bodies, often reaching nearly one third of the total development outlay. This was supported by the recommendations of State Finance Commissions, which periodically assessed the financial needs of Panchayats and suggested formula-based transfers. This system made local governments financially stable and allowed them to implement long-term development projects without depending on irregular grants. The predictable flow of funds strengthened their administrative confidence and encouraged local innovations in development planning.

☐ Centrality of the Gram Sabha

Another significant feature was the centrality of the Gram Sabha. Kerala treated the Gram Sabha not as a symbolic gathering but as a space where citizens could directly engage in governance. People attended meetings to express local concerns, scrutinise development proposals, and select beneficiaries for welfare programmes. These meetings also offered an opportunity to discuss budgets and review implementation. Sustained participation strengthened the democratic character of Panchayats and ensured that decisions reflected collective priorities. For many rural communities, the Gram Sabha became a practical expression of grassroots democracy.

☐ Transparency and public accountability

Transparency and public accountability were also core features of Kerala's Panchayat Raj system. Panchayats were required to display key documents, including project lists, beneficiary names, expenditure details, and annual development reports. Participatory tools, such as social audits and public evaluation meetings, enabled citizens to assess project progress. These practices reduced opportunities for corruption and increased trust in local institutions. The emphasis on openness encouraged a political culture in which development debates became part of everyday public life.

☐ Kudumbashree Mission

Finally, Kerala's decentralisation benefited from close co-ordination between Panchayats and various community-based initiatives. Organisations such as the Kudumbashree Mission supported women's participation, while local resource mapping programmes strengthened scientific planning at the village level. The involvement of neighbourhood groups, voluntary associations, and social reform organisations amplified the reach of local governments. This partnership between formal institutions and civil society contributed to the depth and quality of Kerala's decentralised governance.

Together, these features made Kerala's Panchayat Raj system a strong and participatory model. The combination of legal authority, financial autonomy, and active public engage-

ment enabled local governments to function efficiently and with legitimacy. The system became a foundation for the People's Planning movement, which later transformed the state's development trajectory.

3.3.3 People's Planning: Concept and Implementation

People's Planning in Kerala, launched in 1996, marked one of the most important moments in India's history of decentralised development. It represented a conscious attempt to shift the planning centre from the state government to local communities. The initiative grew out of Kerala's long tradition of social reform, political participation, and grassroots literacy movements. These earlier developments created a social base prepared to engage in democratic planning. People's Planning, therefore, emerged not as an isolated experiment but as a natural extension of Kerala's political culture, which valued public discussion, collective responsibility, and social justice.

❑ Decentralised development

Concept and Objectives of People's Planning

People's Planning was built on the principle that development must be shaped by those who understand local conditions. Earlier planning models were controlled by state-level departments that rarely captured the everyday needs of villages and towns. The new initiative attempted to reverse this pattern by transferring a large share of plan funds to local governments and entrusting them with preparing local development plans. The aim was to make planning more democratic, transparent, and effective.

❑ Transferring a large share of plan funds

One core objective was to strengthen the role of Gram Sabhas. Under this system, every adult member of a village could participate in identifying problems, selecting priorities, and approving projects. People's Planning also sought to build a system that combined technical expertise with local knowledge. This helped ensure that plans were grounded in scientific methods while still reflecting community needs. The initiative aimed to reduce bureaucratic distance, prevent elite domination, and involve women and marginalised groups in decision-making.

❑ Strengthen the role of Gram Sabhas

Institutional Framework and Preparatory Phase

The success of People's Planning depended on strong institutions and clear procedures. Before the initiative was launched, the state prepared detailed guidelines that explained the planning steps, sectoral norms, and evaluation methods. State-level resource groups worked with experts from universities and voluntary organisations to create training materials for local planners.

❑ Strong institutions and clear procedures

District Planning Committees played an important role in coordinating the consolidation of plans prepared by local bodies. At the local level, Panchayats organised working groups for different sectors such as agriculture, health, education, housing, and public works. These groups included elected representatives, technical experts, social workers, and volunteers. Their task was to analyse local problems using participatory tools and prepare draft project proposals.

The preparatory phase also involved capacity-building. Thousands of elected representatives and volunteers participated in intensive training programmes. These activities helped local governments understand financial rules, project design, and monitoring methods. The involvement of civil society, especially organisations such as the Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad, ensured that scientific methods, such as resource mapping and household surveys, became part of the planning process.

☐ Involvement of civil society

Campaign Approach and Public Participation

People's Planning adopted a campaign mode to ensure that participation was widespread and genuine. The Gram Sabha became the central space for public discussion. Meetings were held in every ward, attracting large crowds. Women, agricultural labourers, and other marginalised groups participated in these discussions in significant numbers. This participation was supported by Kerala's history of literacy movements and active civil society networks.

☐ Campaign mode

In the initial phase, Gram Sabhas were used to identify local needs and rank them according to urgency. Issues relating to water supply, housing, schools, health centres, and agricultural support were commonly raised. These inputs formed the basis for the priorities listed in the Panchayat plans. After working groups prepared project proposals, the Gram Sabhas met again to approve them. This step ensured that planning remained accountable to the community.

☐ Planning remained accountable to the community

The campaign approach also encouraged collective problem-solving. Volunteers conducted surveys, gathered household data, mapped natural resources, and documented local infrastructure gaps. These exercises helped create a strong evidence base for planning. The sense of ownership fostered by these activities was one of the strongest features of People's Planning.

☐ Collective problem-solving

Technical Support and Administrative Restructuring

The programme introduced new administrative arrangements to support local planning. Panchayats were provided with technical staff for engineering, agriculture, and social welfare. Block and district offices offered additional professional support. The

☐ New administrative arrangements



creation of working groups provided a forum where experts and community members could collaborate.

❑ Financial reforms

Administrative restructuring also involved financial reforms. Large portions of the plan funds were directly transferred to local governments. State Finance Commissions recommended regular revisions in financial devolution, helping local bodies plan with predictability. Procedures for auditing and monitoring were strengthened to ensure transparency. Public display of documents, open discussions on budgets, and regular social audits helped prevent the misuse of funds.

Implementation Process

The implementation of People's Planning followed a structured sequence of steps that were repeated every year. First, Gram Sabhas prepared development reports listing local problems. Second, working groups developed sector-specific projects based on these reports. Third, these draft plans were discussed and finalised by the Panchayat committee. Fourth, district-level bodies verified technical feasibility and sanctioned the projects. Finally, implementation was monitored through public audits and review meetings.

❑ Plan priorities

The planning cycle covered a wide range of sectors. Projects included irrigation systems, small roads, drinking water schemes, school improvements, anganwadi renovation, agricultural extension, and women's livelihood programmes. Many plans prioritised the needs of weaker sections, reflecting Kerala's commitment to social justice.

❑ Ordinary citizens into active participants

People's Planning changed the relationship between the state and society in Kerala. It transformed ordinary citizens into active participants in development and gave local governments meaningful control over funds and decisions. The initiative strengthened democratic culture, improved transparency, and helped local administrations respond to specific community needs. Though challenges such as uneven capacity and workload pressures existed, the broader impact was significant. People's Planning demonstrated that decentralised development can be both efficient and socially inclusive when citizens are treated as partners in governance. It remains one of Kerala's most important contributions to democratic decentralisation in India.

3.3.4 Increased Role of Grama Sabha and Other Agencies

The strengthening of Panchayat Raj in Kerala gave the Grama Sabha and various community-based agencies a central role in local development. This shift made governance more open, par-

☐ Governance more open, participatory, and socially rooted

☐ Space for ordinary citizens to participate in governance

☐ coordinating agencies

☐ Kerala Sashtira Sahitya Parishad

ticipatory, and socially rooted. With legal reforms, social mobilisation, and administrative restructuring coming together, citizens and local organisations became active partners in planning and monitoring development activities.

1. **Central Role of the Grama Sabha :** The Grama Sabha became the primary space for ordinary citizens to participate in governance. Every adult resident had the right to attend meetings, raise concerns, and review local development proposals. These gatherings discussed issues such as drinking water, housing, health centres, school facilities, agriculture, and welfare programmes. They also played a major role in selecting beneficiaries and assessing project progress. Through this regular interaction, the Grama Sabha helped align local plans with community priorities and strengthened public trust in Panchayats.
2. **Participatory Planning and Working Groups :** Working Groups created at the Panchayat level played an important supporting role in increasing citizen participation. These groups included elected representatives, technical experts, social workers, and volunteers. Their task was to analyse local problems scientifically, using tools such as surveys and resource mapping, and to prepare sector-wise project proposals. They ensured that technical expertise and local knowledge worked together to help Panchayats design development projects that were both realistic and people-centred.
3. **Support from District Planning Committees :** District Planning Committees (DPCs) acted as coordinating agencies in the decentralised planning system. They reviewed and consolidated plans prepared by local bodies, ensured sectoral balance, and provided technical guidance. DPCs helped maintain consistency across districts and ensured that Gram Sabha priorities were reflected in larger development strategies. Their oversight strengthened the planning process and reduced bureaucratic delays.
4. **Role of Civil Society and Community Organisations :** Civil society organisations contributed significantly to Kerala's participatory governance. Groups like the Kerala Sashtira Sahitya Parishad offered training, promoted scientific planning methods, and helped conduct resource mapping. Kudumbashree networks broadened women's involvement in planning and project implementation. Neighbourhood groups, voluntary associations, and social reform organisations monitored development activities, supported vulnerable households, and acted as watchdogs over local governance.

☐ Social audits

☐ Strengthened the social base

5. Citizen Oversight and Transparency Mechanisms :

Transparency became a core element of Kerala's Panchayat Raj system. Panchayats were required to display project lists, beneficiary details, budgets, and expenditure statements in public spaces. Tools like social audits, open meetings, and public evaluation sessions gave citizens direct opportunities to question decisions and assess progress. Local organisations often assisted with this monitoring, ensuring accountability and reducing the risk of fund misuse.

6. Collaboration with Local Development Agencies : Panchayats built partnerships with multiple local agencies to improve service delivery. Kudumbashree, cooperatives, neighbourhood groups, and voluntary organisations worked closely with Panchayats to implement livelihood programmes, infrastructure projects, and welfare schemes. Their involvement helped reach marginalised communities more effectively and strengthened the social base of decentralised governance.

The rise of the Grama Sabha and community-based agencies transformed Kerala's decentralisation into a genuinely participatory process. Their active involvement made planning more inclusive, improved transparency, and strengthened local problem-solving. By combining public engagement with institutional support, Kerala created a model where development decisions reflect the needs and voices of ordinary people.

3.3.5 Impact of People's Planning on Kerala's Political Life

The impact of People's Planning extended beyond administrative reform. It reshaped governance, improved social indicators, and influenced Kerala's long-term developmental pathway. The programme's effects were visible in education, health, gender relations, and poverty reduction.

Strengthening of Governance Institutions

People's Planning led to the creation of new institutional structures within local governments. Working groups, technical committees, and monitoring mechanisms helped local bodies function effectively. Panchayats became more capable of managing funds, maintaining records, and coordinating development activities. This administrative strengthening had long-term benefits for service delivery.

☐ Creation of new institutional structures

- ❑ Direct effect on Kerala's social sectors

Improvements in Key Social Sectors

Local-level planning had a direct effect on Kerala's social sectors. Investments in primary health care improved preventive and community health services. School improvements and support for educational programmes helped raise enrolment and retention rates. Women's empowerment increased through Kudumbashree activities, microcredit initiatives, and active participation in Gram Sabhas. Local governments also designed welfare projects for older persons, persons with disabilities, and vulnerable households.

Deepening of Democratic Culture

One of the lasting effects of People's Planning was the growth of a more participatory political culture. Citizens became more aware of planning processes and more confident in airing their concerns. Public discussions on local budgets and development priorities contributed to political literacy. Even when the intensity of participation reduced in later years, the habit of public involvement remained strong.

- ❑ Cooperation between Panchayats and community networks

Partnerships with Community Organisations

People's Planning encouraged cooperation between Panchayats and community networks. Kudumbashree groups, cooperatives, neighbourhood organisations, and voluntary agencies worked with local bodies to implement projects. These partnerships helped reach poorer households and strengthened social support systems.

The impact of People's Planning was both institutional and social. It improved governance, strengthened the social base of development, and expanded the idea of citizenship. The programme played an important role in shaping the Kerala model by linking welfare outcomes with democratic participation.

3.3.6 Lessons from Kerala's Participatory Planning Experience

Kerala's experience with participatory planning offers valuable insights for decentralisation efforts across India. It shows that decentralisation is effective only when political commitment, social mobilisation, and administrative reforms work together.

- ❑ Mass involvement

Need for Deep Social Mobilisation

A key lesson is that meaningful decentralisation requires mass involvement. Kerala's strong history of literacy movements, reform traditions, and citizen activism enabled large numbers of

people to participate in Gram Sabha discussions. Without such mobilisation, decentralisation remains symbolic.

Importance of Adequate Fiscal Devolution

Kerala demonstrated that local governments must receive adequate funds to carry out real planning. The substantial transfer of development funds enabled Panchayats to design projects that met local needs. Fiscal autonomy is essential for decentralisation to be more than an administrative formality.

☐ Adequate funds

Role of Capacity-Building

Decentralisation needs trained institutions. Kerala invested in training elected representatives, working groups, and volunteers in planning methods, resource mapping, and financial management. These activities improved the technical quality of projects and strengthened local decision-making.

☐ Trained institutions

Constructive Role of Civil Society

Civil society organisations such as the Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad played a major role in preparing manuals, conducting training, and promoting scientific planning methods. Their involvement demonstrated that decentralisation works better when the state and civil society collaborate.

☐ Civil society organisations

Ensuring Inclusiveness

Kerala's planning process highlighted the value of inclusive institutions. Women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes participated actively in Gram Sabhas and working groups. Their involvement improved the responsiveness of plans and helped ensure that the benefits of development reached marginalised households.

☐ Value of inclusive institutions

Decentralisation as a Continuous Process

The Kerala experience makes it clear that decentralisation must be sustained through ongoing reforms. Administrative changes, political support, and public participation must continue over time. Participatory planning cannot remain effective if it becomes a one-time campaign.

Kerala's participatory planning model offers important lessons for democratic governance. It shows that decentralisation can succeed when communities are involved, funds are devolved, and institutions are strengthened. The experience highlights the possibilities of local democracy and the challenges of sustaining it in the long term.

Summarised Overview

Decentralisation in Kerala evolved from early experiments in local governance and gradually developed into a robust system, supported by constitutional reforms and active public involvement. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments helped expand the authority of Panchayats and Municipalities in areas such as planning, budgeting, and development administration. When the People's Planning Campaign was introduced, local governments received substantial financial powers and were encouraged to prepare detailed development plans through open Gram Sabhas, neighbourhood groups, and community participation. This allowed citizens, including women, workers, and marginalised communities, to play a direct role in identifying priorities, designing projects, and monitoring their progress. Over time, decentralisation improved local services, strengthened institutions, and deepened democratic participation, while also revealing challenges related to administrative capacity, coordination, and resource management.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What factors prepared Kerala for strong decentralisation?
2. How did the 73rd and 74th Amendments influence local governance?
3. What was the purpose of the People's Planning Campaign?
4. Why are Gram Sabhas important in participatory planning?
5. How were development funds allocated in Kerala's decentralised system?
6. What challenges did local bodies face in implementing plans?
7. How did decentralisation contribute to welfare improvements?
8. What role did community organisations play in People's Planning?

Assignments

1. Analyse Kerala's decentralisation model and its distinguishing features.
2. Discuss how People's Planning changed the role of local governments.
3. Evaluate the impact of Gram Sabhas on democratic participation.
4. Assess the challenges that affect decentralisation in Kerala.
5. Compare Kerala's participatory planning with decentralisation in other states.
6. Examine the contribution of local governance to Kerala's welfare achievements.
7. Discuss the relationship between social mobilisation and decentralised development.



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Suggested Reading

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SGOU

BLOCK 4

Development and Issues in State Politics

UNIT 1

Kerala Model of Development

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- identify the key features of the Kerala Model
- describe the role of social reformers and public action in building human development
- discuss criticisms of the Kerala Model
- assess the long-term relevance of Kerala's development experience

Background

The Kerala Model emerged from a wide set of reforms and social changes that began in Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. Missionaries, social reform movements, and early public investments in schooling and health created strong foundations for later development. After state formation, land reforms, welfare schemes, and decentralisation further strengthened social indicators. The idea of the Kerala Model was later used to describe this pattern of high social development with low income growth.

Keywords

Human development, welfare state, social reform, land reforms, publicaction, literacy, health, Kerala Model.

The concept that later came to be known as the "Kerala Model of Development" grew out of attempts to understand why a small state with modest income levels and slow industrial growth consistently achieved social outcomes comparable to those of far more prosperous societies. This discussion took a structured form during the late 1970s and early 1980s at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Thiruvananthapuram, where scholars such as K. N. Raj, Amartya Sen, Richard Franke, Barbara Chasin, and Robin Jeffrey began describing Kerala's experience as an alternative path to development. Their studies highlighted high literacy, low infant mortality, improvements in life expectancy, and widespread access to basic services, all achieved without the economic growth normally associated with such progress.

These early writings sparked a wider academic debate. Some scholars viewed Kerala as proof that strong social mobilisation, redistributive policies, and public action could improve human development even when economic resources were limited. Others questioned whether Kerala's achievements were sustainable or replicable, citing unemployment, fiscal pressures, and a heavy reliance on remittances. This debate raised a fundamental question: did Kerala become a model because of state policies, historical reforms, community participation, or a unique combination of all these?

Kerala's own history provides part of the answer. Long before the modern state emerged, the region had witnessed intense social reform movements, missionary-led education, and early public health initiatives. Later, democratic mobilisation, political consciousness, and widespread literacy helped shape a society that consistently demanded accountability from the state. It is this interplay between historical reform traditions and modern welfare measures that laid the foundation for what scholars began to identify as the "Kerala Model," not as a perfect blueprint, but as a distinctive developmental pathway shaped by collective action and social commitment.

4.1.1 Historical Foundations of the Kerala Model

The foundations of what later became known as the Kerala Model were established long before the state's formation in 1956. Kerala's social structure was shaped by a series of gradual yet transformative historical processes that shifted the region from a rigid caste-based system towards a society that valued literacy, public health, and civic participation. These early changes cre-

ated the social conditions that allowed welfare measures in the post-independence period to take strong root.

☐ Important influences

One of the most important influences came from the princely states of Travancore and Cochin. During the nineteenth century, these states invested in modern schools, hospitals, vaccination programmes, and public health campaigns. Missionaries added an equally significant layer by establishing schools for women, lower castes, and marginalised communities who had been excluded from formal learning. Female literacy in Travancore was rising even before the twentieth century. Infant mortality had also begun to decline earlier than in most other regions of India. These advances gave Kerala a strong social base as it entered the post-colonial era.

☐ Social Reformers

These reforms grew alongside major social movements led by Sree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, Ayyankali, and other reform associations. Their interventions challenged caste discrimination, encouraged access to education, and demanded dignity for oppressed groups. The spread of libraries, reading rooms, and discussion forums created a culture of public debate and collective learning. This environment set Kerala apart from many other regions of India, where caste and gender discrimination continued to restrict access to knowledge and mobility.

☐ Land reforms

Agrarian relations also underwent a decisive change. The land reforms that followed independence dismantled the old landlord system and redistributed rights to tenants. This reduced long-standing economic inequality and gave agricultural communities a new sense of security. The rise of trade unions, peasant organisations, and political mobilisation during the 1950s and 1960s strengthened this process. These developments created a politically aware and active population that later played a major role in decentralised planning and public action.

☐ Debates

Scholars continue to debate how far these historical developments justify the claim that Kerala is a model. Some argue that Kerala demonstrates how long-term social reform, widespread literacy, and sustained public action can produce impressive human development even without rapid economic growth. Others question whether Kerala's achievements are a product of unique historical circumstances. Yet, there is broad agreement that the region's early investments in human capability, shaped by reformers, missionaries, princely states, and popular movements, formed the essential background for what later became known as the Kerala Model of Development.

4.1.2 Conceptualising the Kerala Model of Development

❑ Distinctive pattern

The Kerala Model of Development refers to a distinctive pattern in which a society with limited economic resources achieves high levels of social development. Scholars began using this term after noticing that Kerala's literacy rates, life expectancy, infant mortality rates, and gender indicators were comparable to those of far more prosperous regions. These observations, made by K. N. Raj, Amartya Sen, Richard Franke, Barbara Chasin, and others, encouraged a rethinking of how development can be measured and achieved.

❑ Expansion of human capabilities and social opportunities

The idea gained importance within wider debates on growth and welfare. Conventional development thinking argued that industrial expansion and high incomes were necessary for social progress. Kerala's experience questioned this belief. It showed that human development could advance through public action, widespread access to education and health care, progressive social movements, and redistributive policies. This perspective suggested that development should be understood not only as economic growth but also as an expansion of human capabilities and social opportunities.

❑ Economic stagnation and unemployment

The Kerala Model has also been examined critically. Some scholars celebrate its achievements in raising living standards, while others note that economic stagnation and unemployment remain persistent concerns. Yet, the model continues to attract attention because it demonstrates how a region with deep historical inequalities can improve human welfare through collective commitment and strong public institutions.

4.1.3 Major Characteristics of the Kerala Model

❑ Kerala consistently invested in education, public health, and welfare

The idea of the Kerala Model emerged from the state's ability to achieve high levels of human development even with modest economic growth. Over several decades, Kerala consistently invested in education, public health, and welfare, creating a social environment where people from different communities could access essential services. Strong political participation, active civil society networks, and a long tradition of public action supported these achievements. Together, these elements shaped a development path that focused on social justice, community involvement, and broad-based welfare, making Kerala's experience distinct in the wider Indian context.

1. **Strong Human Development Outcomes** : Kerala's achievements in literacy, life expectancy, and infant mortality are the core of the model. These results grew out of long-term investments in schooling, public health infrastructure, and social awareness, which ensured that people from diverse backgrounds benefited from basic services.
2. **Effective Public Action and Mass Mobilisation** : Workers' unions, peasant movements, women's organisations, and cultural groups pushed for equitable policies and public accountability. This tradition of public engagement ensured that welfare measures reached a broad population and encouraged active citizenship.
3. **Redistributive Reforms and Social Justice** : Land reforms weakened feudal hierarchies and provided security to tenants and labourers. Social welfare measures such as food security, pensions, and housing supported vulnerable groups and reduced poverty, contributing to a more egalitarian society.
4. **High Political Participation** : Kerala's electorate is known for its high voter turnout and strong political awareness. Citizens engage with public institutions and hold governments accountable. This environment has strengthened democratic practices and supported inclusive governance.
5. **Universal Access to Education and Health** : Schooling and healthcare reached both rural and urban populations. Public health programmes, vaccination drives, and early medical facilities reduced mortality and improved quality of life well before national initiatives expanded.
6. **Strong Decentralisation and Local Governance** : Kerala's commitment to decentralisation created space for community participation in local planning and decision-making. Local bodies gained financial and administrative powers, enabling them to address development needs more effectively.
7. **Welfare-Oriented State Policies** : Governments in Kerala consistently prioritised social protection. The public distribution system, social pensions, housing schemes, and subsidies offered safety nets that protected people against extreme poverty and economic insecurity.
8. **Gender Progress and Social Inclusion** : Kerala made early advances in women's education and maternal health. Women's participation in social, economic, and political life improved over time, supported by local groups, cooperatives, and state programmes.

- 9. Role of Civil Society and Community Organisations**
: Reform movements, cooperatives, scientific literacy groups, and community associations helped spread awareness, encourage critical thinking, and monitor public services. These networks strengthened Kerala's social foundations.

4.1.4 Public Action and Mass Mobilisation

☐ Sustained public action

Kerala's human development achievements were the result of sustained public action, shaped by a politically aware society that actively demanded state intervention. Trade unions, peasant associations, and social reform movements had already built a strong foundation for collective participation by the mid-twentieth century. These groups mobilised workers, agricultural labourers, and women to pursue better wages, public schooling, and access to essential services. The mass literacy campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s expanded reading skills among populations that had historically been excluded. Women's neighbourhood groups, health volunteers, and community organisers deepened local involvement, encouraging regular engagement with public institutions.

☐ Demand for strong public services

The demand for strong public services became a consistent feature of Kerala's political culture. Governments, regardless of ideology, were obliged to invest heavily in welfare because citizens closely monitored policy outcomes and participated in political discussions through reading rooms, libraries, and local committees. This societal pressure led to sustained expenditure on social services. For example, the data presented in the uploaded readings show that Kerala continued to spend more than one-third of its budget on education, health, and social security through much of the post-independence period. Such public action created a system in which state responsibility and community participation reinforced each other, sustaining the development path now associated with the Kerala Model.

☐ People's Planning Campaign

Decentralisation and Participatory Governance

Decentralisation became a defining characteristic of Kerala's development pathway. The People's Planning Campaign of 1996 marked a turning point by devolving almost forty per cent of the state's plan funds to local governments. Kerala's Panchayats were empowered to prepare detailed development plans with community participation. Gram Sabhas, development seminars, and resource-mapping exercises enabled citizens to identify local needs and prioritise projects. The existing literature on decentralisation emphasises that more than two lakh people participated in the planning exercises during the first year of the

campaign, creating a scale of citizen involvement unmatched elsewhere in India.

Local governments assumed responsibility for essential services such as primary schools, primary health centres, drinking water supply, rural roads, and housing programmes. Funds for these sectors were transferred directly to Panchayats, enabling speedy decision-making. The readings show that Kerala's local bodies spent almost 90% of the devolved funds in the early years of the People's Plan, demonstrating administrative capacity and community oversight. Public audits, open discussions, and monitoring groups increased transparency and strengthened trust between citizens and the state. This participatory governance structure ensured that developmental priorities reflected local needs rather than centralised administrative preferences.

☐ Public audits, open discussions, and monitoring groups

4.1.5 Human Development Achievements

Kerala's social indicators stand out because they improved early and consistently. The state's life expectancy crossed seventy years well before other Indian regions, and infant mortality dropped sharply—from around 120 deaths per 1,000 births in the early 1950s to fewer than 15 by the end of the twentieth century. These improvements were achieved despite limited economic resources, showing that public health campaigns, universal schooling, and community participation had a decisive impact.

☐ Social indicators

Female literacy rates, reported in missionary and princely state records, were already among the highest in India by the 1930s. By the 1990s, Kerala achieved near-universal literacy, with women's literacy exceeding ninety per cent. These achievements supported the demographic transition. Kerala's fertility rate fell to replacement level well before the national average, partly because women were more educated, healthier, and better able to access reproductive healthcare. Improvements in nutrition, maternal care, and sanitation deepened these gains and created a socially capable and politically aware population.

☐ Female literacy rates

4.1.6 Education and Literacy as Development Drivers

Education served as the backbone of Kerala's development model. Schools established by missionaries, princely governments, and later community groups reached socially marginalised populations at a time when caste and gender restricted access to learning. By the 1960s, Kerala's literacy rates—already above fifty per cent—were significantly higher than in most other Indian states. Public expenditure on education consistent-

☐ Education

ly remained above five per cent of the Gross State Domestic Product, supporting teacher salaries, school infrastructure, and learning materials.

☐ Strong social accountability

The schooling system also benefited from strong social accountability. Teachers' unions, parent-teacher associations, and community monitoring systems ensured the regular functioning of schools. Public examinations, introduced early in the twentieth century, created uniform standards. The high literacy environment encouraged reading habits, community discussions, and widespread political awareness. This educational foundation facilitated later achievements in health, social mobilisation, and local governance.

4.1.7 Health Care System and Public Health Outcomes

☐ Extensive public investment and community engagement

Kerala's health system evolved through extensive public investment and community engagement. The network of primary health centres, maternity clinics, and dispensaries ensured that even remote villages had access to basic medical care. Kerala maintained one of the highest doctor-to-population and hospital bed-to-population ratios in the country. For example, the state achieved one bed for every eight hundred people, compared to the national average of one bed for more than one thousand eight hundred people during the same period.

☐ Preventive healthcare

Immunisation rates also rose quickly. Public campaigns against smallpox, malaria, and filariasis were widely successful, and Kerala reached immunisation coverage of almost 90% by the late twentieth century. Maternal health programmes significantly reduced maternal mortality. Preventive healthcare, supported by community health volunteers and local self-governments, helped control infectious diseases and promoted the early adoption of health practices. The population developed a high level of trust in the public health system, enabling it to respond effectively to later health challenges.

☐ welfare and social protection

Welfare Policies and Social Security Measures

Kerala invested heavily in welfare and social protection, creating a system that addressed basic needs through public support. The public distribution system ensured access to essential food grains at subsidised rates, thereby reducing hunger and improving household nutrition. Kerala often achieved coverage levels exceeding ninety per cent of households, including vulnerable communities.

☐ Social security systems

Social security systems were developed through welfare boards for workers in traditional and informal sectors. These

boards provided pensions, maternity benefits, and assistance during illness or unemployment. More than forty welfare boards eventually existed, covering workers such as agricultural labourers, construction workers, coir workers, and toddy tappers. Housing programmes, old-age pensions, and disability benefits strengthened household resilience. These measures reduced the impact of economic shocks and protected low-income families from falling into poverty.

Remittances from migration added another layer of social protection. Income from migrant workers in the Gulf region supplemented state welfare efforts, improved household savings, and supported education and healthcare. Together, these welfare measures contributed to Kerala's strong human development outcomes and increased social stability.

☐ Remittances from migration

4.1.8 Limitations and Structural Challenges

While Kerala's development achievements attracted global attention, they were accompanied by several long-standing constraints. Economic growth remained modest for most of the twentieth century, limiting the creation of productive employment. Educated unemployment became a persistent problem, as the state produced a large pool of skilled youth without generating equivalent opportunities. This mismatch placed pressure on families and pushed many to seek work outside the state.

☐ Long-standing constraints

Welfare commitments were extensive, and although they improved living standards, they also created fiscal stress. The state had to allocate a large share of its revenue to pensions, housing, healthcare, and subsidised food, leaving limited space for capital investments. Industrial growth lagged behind national trends due to high labour costs, complex regulations, and adversarial labour relations. Investors often viewed Kerala as a challenging environment for setting up industries, which further slowed diversification.

☐ Welfare commitments

Migration to the Gulf region offered an escape from local unemployment and transformed household incomes, but it also created a strong dependence on external earnings. Remittances supported consumption, housing, and education, yet they masked weaknesses in local job creation. Regional inequalities persisted, with tribal settlements in the Western Ghats and coastal fishing communities experiencing lower access to health care, education, and land rights. These structural issues demonstrate that high social indicators do not automatically translate into balanced economic development.

☐ Migration to the Gulf region

4.1.9 Critiques of the Kerala Model

❑ Long historical foundation

Debates around the Kerala Model highlight both its strengths and limitations. Some scholars argue that Kerala's achievements were built on a long historical foundation, including early schooling, social reform movements, and welfare practices that pre-dated modern state interventions. This perspective suggests that later policies reinforced existing strengths rather than creating them entirely.

❑ Approach centred on redistribution and welfare

Other critics focus on the economic aspects of the model. They note that an approach centred on redistribution and welfare may improve human development but does not necessarily stimulate economic productivity. Slow industrial growth and limited private investment are frequently cited concerns. Fiscal challenges emerged as welfare commitments expanded without parallel growth in state revenue. Analysts also point to new social issues such as population ageing, rising health care costs, and widening economic aspirations that demand fresh strategies. In a globalised economy, Kerala faces competition and technological changes that require innovation and more diversified economic activity.

Prof K.P. Kannan, in his research article 'The Kerala Model of Development Revisited', lists four spectacular failures of the Kerala Model:

- a. Unemployment among the educated class
- b. Declining efficiency in tax collection;
- c. The public sector as a drain on public resources; and
- d. The loss of public resources due to costly time.

His paper examined "six decades of the 'Kerala Model of Development'" and termed the result a mixed bag of success stories in human development and "spectacular failures" of the state in critical areas like employment creation, management of public finance, and delivery of economic services.

❑ Sustainable model

Though the Kerala Model of development is both attacked and advocated, criticised and defended, the fact remains that the model is sustainable. Efforts have been made to limit population growth and inequality. The development of Kerala has only just begun, and more needs to be explored in all areas of sustainability. In this connection, it may be stated that effective steps must be taken to address the problem of increasing public debt.

Despite these critiques, Kerala's emphasis on equity, public action, and social welfare continues to be recognised as an im-

portant counterpoint to purely growth-centred development models.

4.1.10 Future Prospects of the Kerala Model

The Kerala Model remains a significant example of how human development can advance even without rapid industrial expansion. Its achievements in literacy, health care, gender outcomes, and participatory governance continue to influence national and global discussions on alternative development strategies. The challenge now is to preserve these social gains while building a stronger economic base.

☐ Continue to influence national and global discussions

☐ Need to create new opportunities

Future progress depends on expanding productive employment, modernising agriculture, strengthening small and medium industries, and attracting investment that aligns with Kerala's social strengths. The state must also address regional disparities and create new opportunities for young people seeking skilled and meaningful work. As Kerala's population ages, investments in health care, social security, and innovation will become even more important.

The model's long-term relevance lies in its ability to adapt. If Kerala can combine its strong human development foundation with economic diversification and technological readiness, it will continue to serve as a compelling example of socially conscious and inclusive development in the twenty-first century.

Summarised Overview

Kerala's development experience grew out of early social reforms, the expansion of education, and improvements in public health introduced during the princely state period. These foundations strengthened after state formation through land reforms, welfare programmes, and a growing culture of public action. Together, these processes created high levels of literacy, life expectancy, gender development, and access to essential services, forming what later came to be described as the Kerala Model. The unit also examines debates over unemployment, slow industrial growth, and fiscal pressures, showing that Kerala's achievements coexist with challenges that require ongoing policy attention.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What early reforms helped shape Kerala's development experience?
2. Why is literacy considered central to the Kerala Model?



3. How did land reforms support social development?
4. What role did social reformers play in Kerala's progress?
5. Why is the Kerala Model described as welfare-oriented?
6. What are the main criticisms of the Kerala Model?
7. How did decentralisation strengthen welfare delivery?
8. Why is public action important in Kerala's development story?

Assignments

1. Examine the historical roots of the Kerala Model and its long-term effects.
2. Discuss the role of public action in shaping welfare outcomes in Kerala.
3. Analyse how land reforms influenced social development indicators.
4. Evaluate the strengths and limitations of the Kerala Model.
5. Compare Kerala's development path with that of another Indian state.
6. Assess the role of decentralisation in sustaining the Kerala Model.
7. Explain how Kerala achieved high social indicators despite limited income growth.

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UNIT 2

Coalition Politics

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- describe how coalition politics became a stable feature of Kerala
- analyse voting behaviour and major electoral trends
- explain the formation of the UDF, LDF and the role of regional parties
- assess the stability and challenges of Kerala's two-front system

Background

Kerala's political system developed through a combination of social reform, strong community organisations, trade unions, and ideological movements. The first elections in 1957 set the stage for an active democratic culture. Over time, political competition organised itself into two major alliances: the Left Democratic Front and the United Democratic Front, each built on wide social coalitions. Elections in Kerala are characterised by high participation, informed voting, and recurring shifts based on performance and leadership.

Keywords

Coalition politics, UDF, LDF, electoral behaviour, voter turnout, regional parties, party system.

Discussion

Coalition politics refers to a political arrangement in which several parties cooperate to form a government because no single party can secure a clear majority on its own. This model emerged in Kerala much earlier than in most other Indian states, mainly due to its socially diverse population, active political organisations, and competitive party system. From the very first

elections, the state witnessed a fragmented political landscape shaped by ideological differences, caste and religious identities, and strong regional parties. These factors made coalition governments the normal pattern of governance in Kerala.

The formation of Kerala as a linguistic state in 1956 brought together regions with different political histories, including Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. This integration created an electorate with multiple interests and allegiances. As a result, political power could be gained only through alliances that brought together parties representing peasants, workers, minorities, upper-caste groups, and emerging middle-class sections. The Communist Party of India formed the first elected government in 1957, supported by smaller parties, setting the stage for coalition alignments that have continued throughout the state's political history.

Over time, Kerala developed a two-front coalition system that remains one of the most stable in India. The Left Democratic Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), brought together left-wing parties and working-class organisations. The United Democratic Front, led by the Indian National Congress, emerged as its principal rival, receiving support from the Indian Union Muslim League, Kerala Congress factions, and other centrist and regional groups. These two fronts institutionalised coalition politics in the state, creating a predictable structure for electoral competition and government formation.

Although smaller than the other alliances, the National Democratic Alliance, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, also attempted to create a third political space. It built support mainly among a section of Hindu upper-caste groups and urban voters. Despite increasing its vote share over time, the alliance has not succeeded in achieving significant representation in the state assembly, which remains dominated by a two-front system.

Kerala's coalition politics is often seen as a product of high political awareness, strong community organisations, and the historical influence of social reform movements. The need to accommodate diverse social interests has made coalitions a necessity rather than a temporary political arrangement. This structure has helped create a culture of negotiation, alliance building, and shared governance, which continues to define Kerala's political landscape today.

4.2.1 Coalition politics in Kerala

Kerala has experienced political and ministerial instability more than any other state in India. This instability was present in the states of Travancore (from 1947 to 1949) and Tra-

Travancore-Cochin (from 1949 to 1956), even before Kerala came into being in 1956. This represents a legitimate and historical political continuation of the Travancore and Travancore-Cochin states.

❑ Evolution

The communist regime, the liberation struggle against it, and subsequent political developments obstructed the possibility of one-party, single-majority rule. This has led to coalition politics in the parliamentary process. In Kerala, caste, communal, and pressure groups have organised into political parties. Currently, there are more than two dozen political parties, the majority of which are caste, communal, and religious in nature. This multiplicity of political parties representing sectional caste, communal, and religious interests has made the electoral process extraordinarily complex.

❑ Single party rule

The trouble is that almost all parties in Kerala have been faction-ridden; splits, counter-splits, mergers, and remergers are quite common. Often, the formation of a new political party or faction in Kerala has been driven by personal and other vested interests rather than ideological considerations. Since the formation of Kerala, no single party has been voted to power with a majority. However, the state has witnessed two brief spells of single-party rule. In 1957, the Communist Party was the largest party, with the support of five independents. The second experience of single-party government occurred during 1962-64 under Congress leader R. Shankar. However, these two governments did not complete even half of their full tenure.

Kerala emerged not only as a political laboratory but also as a cradle of coalition politics in the country.

Overall, there were four elections and seven ministries between 1948 and 1956, and nineteen elections and twenty-six governments between 1957 and 2026. In total, only eight coalition governments have completed their full terms.

❑ Coalition ministries

The first coalition ministry was led by Pattom A. Thanupillai, the leader of the PSP. From 1980 onwards, the coalition experiments took the form of bipolar politics: the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF), with the Congress as the leading constituent of the UDF and the CPI(M) as the leading party of the LDF. The scope for a third front or any party to gain election is very limited in bipolar coalition politics.

The BJP's challenges in Kerala exemplify this situation. Although it polled up to 20% of the vote, it was unable to play a dominant role in the state's political process.

❑ Harmonisation of bipolar politics

The harmonisation of bipolar politics with a multi-party system makes the entire apparatus of the coalition system workable. However, the decline of the Congress and the CPI(M) and the consequent growth of minor parties are notable in this context. Therefore, it can be safely predicted that the multi-party system will continue to dominate Kerala politics against the backdrop of coalition politics.

Paradoxically, the popular base for coalition politics is weakening in the state. This is evident from the election survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). At the same time, the survey indicates that no party in Kerala has the potential to form a single-party government.

Formation of the LDF, UDF and NDA in Kerala: Background and Political Context

The three major political fronts in Kerala emerged through a long process of political change. In the early years following the state's formation, no single party could stabilise power. The Congress, CPI, and newly formed CPI(M) repeatedly formed short-lived coalitions. Governments often collapsed because partners had different ideologies and competing interests. This repeated instability pushed parties to search for more permanent alliances.

The split of the Communist Party in 1964 deepened ideological divisions. The CPI moved closer to the Congress, while the CPI(M) adopted a more radical programme. This created two clear political spaces. By the late 1970s, it became evident that voters preferred stable coalitions. The experiences of the 1967 and 1970 coalition governments demonstrated the limits of temporary alliances. The Emergency also encouraged opposition parties to work together. These developments led to the formal creation of the Left Democratic Front and the United Democratic Front in 1980.

The National Democratic Alliance emerged later as a third space. The BJP had limited influence in Kerala for many years but attempted to build an alliance structure similar to national politics. The NDA became active in the state from the late 1990s. However, it did not stabilise as the other two fronts did because the BJP lacked strong regional allies and consistent support across districts.

Together, the LDF, UDF, and NDA have shaped Kerala's modern political system. The two major fronts dominate state politics, while the NDA functions as a smaller but persistent third force that influences debates and voter alignments.

The Left Democratic Front: Formation, Ideological Orientation and Social Base

☐ Formation

The LDF was formed in 1980, bringing together the CPI(M), CPI, RSP, JD(S), and other left-aligned parties. They shared a commitment to social justice, land rights, workers' welfare, and public investment. The LDF developed strong organisational networks through trade unions, student groups, and women's associations, which helped the front maintain close links with ordinary citizens.

☐ Social base

Its social base includes workers, agricultural labourers, teachers, government staff, sections of Dalits and OBCs, fisher communities, and parts of the lower middle class. The LDF also strengthened its support by leading decentralisation initiatives, especially the People's Planning movement. Over time, the front built an image of administrative discipline and welfare-driven governance. The front is now headed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), which includes the CPI and other minor parties like the RSP, JD(S), and NCP.

The United Democratic Front: Formation, Ideological Orientation, and Social Base

☐ Formation

The UDF was also formally created in 1980 under the leadership of the Indian National Congress. It united the IUML, Kerala Congress groups, and other regional parties. This coalition offered a broad social and regional alliance that could counter-balance the Left's strength.

☐ Centrist development approach

The UDF followed a centrist development approach. It supported welfare programmes but also encouraged the private sector, agricultural reforms, and cooperative development. The social base of the UDF includes Muslim communities in Malabar, Christian farming groups in Travancore, a section of Nairs, Dalits, and urban professionals. The IUML played a major role in stabilising the coalition and shaping its policies.

The National Democratic Alliance: Formation, Ideology, and Social Base

☐ Third front

The NDA entered Kerala's political scene much later. The BJP attempted to build a third front to offer opposition to both fronts. Smaller regional parties such as the Bharat Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS) joined the alliance, giving the NDA a limited but noticeable presence in some districts.

☐ Support base

The NDA's ideology is shaped by the national vision of the BJP, which combines nationalism, social conservatism, and economic modernisation. Its support base in Kerala remains concentrated among sections of upper-caste Hindus, urban mid-

dle-class groups, and a small segment of youth voters attracted to national leadership.

However, the NDA has struggled to grow in Kerala for several reasons. The state's political culture is shaped by strong left and centrist traditions, high minority participation, and deep networks of local organisations. The BJP won its first assembly seat only in 2016 and lost it in 2021. Many regional parties hesitate to join the NDA because of its limited winnability in the state.

Even though the NDA has not emerged as a major electoral front, it influences political debates, especially on issues related to national identity, governance models, and minority politics. Its presence has added a third dimension to Kerala's competitive electoral landscape.

4.2.2 Coalition Experiments in Kerala - History in Evolution.

The state of Kerala was created by merging the former state of Travancore-Cochin and the Malabar district of Kasargode Taluk from the former Madras state, based on language, as determined by the State Reorganisation Commission. It came to political prominence when it elected the world's first Communist government in a secret ballot. The election results assumed epic importance, and for the Communist Party, it was 'the biggest event in our national life'.

As mentioned earlier, the state of Kerala is the political continuation of Travancore-Cochin. President's Rule was in force on the eve of the formation of the new state on 1 November 1956.

Immediately after the linguistic division of the state, elections to the Kerala Legislative Assembly were held in February 1957. The elections paved the way for the establishment of the Communist ministry headed by EMS Namboodiripad. The ministry introduced far-reaching reforms in vital areas such as agrarian issues and education, which challenged the vested interests in the state. By 1959, the 'Liberation struggle' had taken on an organised form, dividing the people of Kerala into communists and non-communists. The leaders of the liberation struggle demanded the immediate resignation of the ministry. The situation in Kerala became very tumultuous, and the Governor reported that the state administration could no longer be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. Upon receiving the report, the President issued a proclamation dismissing the ministry under Article 356 of the Constitution.

It was alleged that the failure of the constitutional machinery in the state was engineered by the leaders of the liberation struggle, who deliberately created points of tension in various parts of the state. In this context, Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer observed that the dismissal of the

ministry was a neatly worked-out secret plot. The Kerala episode proved that President's Rule can be imposed when radical governmental reforms disturb and challenge the dominant economic, caste, and communal groups.

1960 Elections

Mid-term elections took place in February. No single party could secure an absolute majority to form the government. A three-party alliance comprising the Indian National Congress, the PSP, and the Muslim League was returned to power. Pattom A. Thanu Pillai, the leader of the PSP, became the chief minister. When Pattom was appointed as the Governor of Punjab, R. Sankar (Congress) was sworn in as chief minister on 26 September 1962. Though the Congress remained the ruling party under Sankar's chief ministership, it was deeply faction-ridden. P.T. Chacko, the Home Minister, had differences with Sankar. A political crisis was precipitated in September 1964, leading to the formation of a dissident group within the Congress Legislature Party. This group, consisting of 15 MLAs, lent support to the no-confidence motion moved by the PSP leader against the Sankar ministry on 8 September 1964. The motion was carried, leading to President's Rule for the third time in the state.

1967 Elections

The state's political life grew increasingly confused, and Kerala emerged as a 'problem state'. Dissident Congressmen formed a new party called the Kerala Congress. The midterm elections held in March 1965 did not resolve the political confusion, as no party secured a clear majority. It is worth noting that the CPM emerged as the single largest party in the Assembly. The Governor, A.P. Jain, after a brief discussion with the party leaders regarding the formation of a ministry, reported to the president that no stable ministry could be formed under the existing circumstances. Consequently, the legislature was dissolved, and president's rule was imposed again. The opposition party called for the newly elected Assembly to convene to explore the possibility of forming a government. If no agreement or coalition could achieve this, then the Assembly would be dissolved. This procedure was not accepted, and an emergency was declared. The reason for this was political, not constitutional: the elections of 1970.

After 13 months of president's rule, Kerala went to the polls in 1970. A seven-party coalition led by the CPM secured a majority, and an EMS ministry was sworn in. Soon after the formation of the ministry, differences among the coalition partners, particularly between the CPM and CPI, emerged over the implementation of electoral promises. The gap between the CPM and the rest of the coalition partners widened day by day, leading to the formation of a 'Mini Front' within the United Front. Ultimately, the Mini Front parties reached an agreement to form an alternative ministry under CPI leadership. On 24 October 1969, EMS submitted his resignation from the ministry.

On 1 November 1969, the Mini Front government headed by C. Achutha Menon of the CPI was formed. The ruling alliance consisted of the CPI, PSP, Muslim League, RSP, and the Kerala Congress. However, a split occurred within the PSP, and three members of the party joined the Mini Front. To avert this crisis, Achutha Menon advised the Governor to dissolve the Assembly; presumably, he wanted to secure a fresh mandate. Consequently, the state was placed under president's rule again.

After a brief spell of President's Rule, the state went to the polls in October 1970. In the elections, the coalition Front headed by C. Achutha Menon secured an absolute majority, and accordingly, he formed the ministry on 4th October 1970. The Congress and those who had once been part of the ruling front did not join the ministry initially but extended support from outside. The cabinet was expanded on two occasions: when the Congress joined in September 1971 and to induct the nominees of the Kerala Congress in December 1975. For the first time in the state's history, the ministry was able to complete the full five-year term. This was attributed not only to the unique circumstances of the state but also to the political sagacity of the chief minister as a capable coordinator, the strong leadership of the Home Minister, and the cooperation of other coalition partners, especially the Muslim League.

1977 Elections

Elections were scheduled for the Assembly in 1975. However, the internal emergency was followed by a constitutional amendment. As per this amendment, the term of the House of the Lok Sabha and the state Assemblies was extended by one year. Therefore, the next election to the Assembly took place only in March 1977. The ruling Front, headed by the CPI, once again secured an absolute majority. However, after the elections, Congress leader K. Karunakaran became the Chief Minister but had to resign within 50 days following the Rajan case.

A.K. Antony of the Congress then became the Chief Minister in April of the same year. It is worth noting that the Congress faced criticism for its excesses during the emergency. Within the Congress, attempts were made to alienate Mrs Gandhi and her close supporters, resulting in a split within the party. The Congress group under A.K. Antony in Kerala felt that they should take the initiative to form a third bloc. Unfortunately, during his efforts, Antony submitted his resignation. This was followed by the formation of another ministry by P.K. Vasudevan Nair of the CPI. Although Vasudevan Nair had a majority in the Legislature, the ruling coalition was defeated in several by-elections.

The strong desire of the Antony Congress and the CPI to ally with the CPI(M) led to the resignation of Vasudevan Nair, followed by a realignment of parties.

Mohammed Koye, the Muslim League leader, was sworn in as Chief Minister on 12 October 1979. However, the four-member ministry could not continue in office due to the withdrawal of support by the Congress faction led by A.K. Antony. He advised the Governor to dissolve the Assembly and hold fresh elections to end the political uncertainty in the state.

Following the resignation of the 40-day-old Koye ministry, President's Rule in the state was proclaimed on 30 November 1979.

1980 Elections

The 1980 mid-term poll revealed an entirely new pattern of political alignment. There were two fronts contesting the elections: the LDF and the UDF. The LDF comprises the CPM, CPI, RSP, Congress (S), Kerala Congress (M), and All India Muslim League of the Kerala Congress (B). The UDF consists of the Congress (I), Indian Union Muslim League, Kerala Congress (J), NDP, SRP, and PSP. In the election, the LDF secured a commanding majority of 93 seats out of 140 and formed a ministry headed by E.K. Nayanar.

During its time in power, the so-called democratic partners of the Front began to part company with the CPM for various reasons. The law-and-order problem was attributed to the government, even by the LDF's partners. The RSS-Marxists conflict proved highly precarious for the government's existence. Within 21 months, Kerala witnessed several political murders across various parts of the state. In this context, the Congress (S) and the Kerala Congress (M) withdrew their support. Consequently, it became untenable for Nayanar to remain in power, and he resigned. As a result, President's Rule was imposed on 21 October 1981, but the legislature was kept suspended on the

grounds that a viable alternative ministry was not immediately possible.

A few days after the imposition of President's Rule, K. Karunakaran, the Congress (I) leader, formed a ministry. The formation of the ministry provoked angry protests from LDF leaders, who alleged that the UDF did not possess the requisite majority in the 141-member Assembly. The ministry depended solely on the casting vote of the speaker, A.C. Jose, who had to cast his vote 16 times to maintain the ministry. Under these circumstances, Karunakaran resigned on 17 March 1982. The Assembly was dissolved at Karunakaran's advice, and the state once again fell under President's Rule, as reported by the Governor.

1982 Elections

Kerala went to the polls in May 1982, and the Congress (I) led UDF, under K. Karunakaran, was reinstalled in office immediately after the termination of President's Rule on 24 May 1982. The UDF won 77 of the 140 Assembly seats, and the ministry remained in office for the full term.

1987 Elections

In the 1987 Assembly elections, the UDF suffered at the hands of the opposition LDF, and a new LDF ministry led by CPM leader E.K. Nayanar came to power in Kerala on 25 March 1987. It is significant to note that, in this context, the LDF went to the polls with a clear stance that it would have no alliance with communal or caste-based parties, a stance that was endorsed by the electorate. Thus, after a long time, a coalition ministry without the Muslim League and the Kerala Congress as partners came to office in Kerala. This experience opened a new chapter in the history of coalition politics in the state. This ministry continued until 24 June 1991, with elections held one year earlier than the normal term of the Assembly.

1991 Elections

In the 1991 elections, the UDF was returned to power, and another ministry, with Congress leader K. Karunakaran as Chief Minister, assumed office. This ministry had to resign on 22 March following a revolt within the ranks of the coalition parties against his leadership. A new UDF ministry with A.K. Antony as Chief Minister came to power in the 1996 elections.

In the 1996 elections, the LDF was returned to power, and E.K. Nayanar became Chief Minister. He was not an elected member of the Assembly at that time; later, he was elected from the Thalassery constituency. As a measure to strengthen

the decentralisation of power, the number of ministers was reduced to 14, and a 14-member Cabinet was sworn in.

2001 Elections

Elections to the 11th Assembly were held in May 2001, in which the UDF secured 99 seats. The Electronic Voting Machine was used in all 140 constituencies for the first time. A government was formed with A.K. Antony as Chief Minister. The Cabinet comprised 20 ministers. However, A.K. Antony resigned in August 2004, and a new ministry under the chief ministership of Oommen Chandy was formed.

2006 Elections

The elections to the 12th Assembly were held in three phases on 22 April, 28 April, and 3 and 5 May 2006. In these elections, the LDF secured a thumping majority with 98 seats. A 19-member ministry under V.S. Achuthanandan was sworn in. The ministry completed its full term.

2011 Elections

The 21st ministry, headed by Oommen Chandy as Chief Minister, was sworn in on 18 May 2011. The Chief Minister's mass contact programme has been widely lauded (winning the UN award for public service) as a unique democratic experiment. In the programme, the Chief Minister met thousands of people directly without any intermediaries. In light of the outcome of the Assembly elections held on 16 May 2016, the ministry tendered its resignation on 20 May.

2016 Elections

After the completion of Oommen Chandy's ministry, fresh elections were held in May 2016. The LDF was elected to power. The ministry headed by Pinarayi Vijayan as Chief Minister assumed power on 25 May 2016.

2021 Elections

Elections were held in May 2021. The ruling L.D.F. Front was voted into power, and once again, Pinarayi Vijayan formed the government.

It appears that Kerala has been living under coalition rule at regular intervals. Since the late 1970s, politics in Kerala has been dominated by two coalition fronts: the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF). Kerala was the first Indian state where communists came to power. Since the early 1980s, these two coalitions have alternated in power; however, they have been

unable to secure a second consecutive term. The only exception to this practice was in 2016, when the LDF won the elections and is now in power.

4.2.3 Salient Features of Kerala's Coalition Politics

Kerala's coalition politics has evolved over several decades and has developed a set of features that distinguish it from most Indian states. These features emerged from the state's long history of social reform, high literacy, and strong political awareness. Together, they have produced a coalition system that is competitive, inclusive, and shaped by continuous negotiation. The following points explain the core characteristics of this model in greater depth and with greater analytical rigour.

Broad-Based Representation and Social Inclusion

Kerala's coalition politics is built on the principle that diverse communities must be represented in the political system. Parties representing Muslims, Christians, Nairs, Ezhavas, Dalits, and regional farming groups are included in alliances. This ensures that governments cannot ignore minority concerns or local needs. Coalitions encourage negotiation between groups, so policies reflect social diversity rather than the interests of a single community. This reduces the risk of majoritarian politics and maintains social harmony in a state with a complex social structure.

- ❑ Diverse communities must be represented

Predictability and Policy Stability

Even though parties in coalitions follow different ideologies, Kerala has maintained a high degree of policy continuity. Coalition partners agree on a common minimum programme and adhere to coordination mechanisms that prevent sudden changes in direction. Regular meetings, joint committees, and structured negotiations help avoid surprise policy shifts. This predictability allows welfare schemes, local governance reforms, and public health programmes to continue across different governments. It also builds confidence among citizens, who can expect basic services to function regardless of which front is in power.

- ❑ High degree of policy continuity.

Strong Role of Civil Society and Public Participation

Kerala's high literacy and active civic life have created a political culture where people constantly engage with public issues. Trade unions, student groups, women's collectives, and rights organisations participate actively in political debates. Media and local forums, such as reading rooms, encourage public discussion. These groups monitor government perfor-

- ❑ High literacy and active civic life

mance and demand accountability. As a result, parties in coalitions cannot ignore public sentiment and must justify their decisions. This deepens democratic participation and strengthens the relationship between the state and society.

Performance-Based Voting and Electoral Accountability

Kerala's voters are known for evaluating governments based on performance rather than identity politics. Welfare delivery, public health, education, local infrastructure, and crisis response shape voting behaviour. This trend has intensified in recent years. The Left Democratic Front's 2021 re-election, breaking the long cycle of alternation, reflected voter appreciation for effective crisis management and welfare expansion. When voters reward or punish coalitions based on performance, political parties work harder to maintain public trust. This makes governance more results-oriented and encourages stable coalitions.

☐ Results-oriented

Culture of Negotiation and Coalition Discipline

Kerala's parties have learned to work together through compromise. Coalition partners negotiate seat-sharing, ministry allocation, and policy priorities before elections. Once in power, they observe a discipline that prevents frequent collapses. This culture was shaped by earlier decades of instability, which taught parties that cooperation is necessary for survival. The result is a coalition system that handles differences through dialogue rather than confrontation. This sets Kerala apart from states where coalitions often collapse due to internal conflicts.

☐ Negotiate seat-sharing, ministry allocation,

4.2.4 Challenges to Coalition Politics in Kerala

Kerala's coalition model has often been praised for its stability and inclusiveness, but it also faces several challenges that affect its functioning. These challenges arise from party rivalries, organisational weaknesses, changing voter expectations, and the pressures of managing diverse partners within a single alliance. Understanding these challenges helps explain why coalitions must constantly negotiate, adjust, and rebuild public trust.

Factionalism Within Major Parties

Factionalism remains one of the most persistent challenges in Kerala's coalitions. Both the Congress and CPI(M) have experienced internal rivalries that influence coalition behaviour. In the Congress, competing groups often disagree on leadership, ticket distribution, and policy direction. These divisions weaken the United Democratic Front by reducing strategic uni-

☐ Divisions



ty during elections and governance. In the Left Front, internal debates also surface, though the party controls them more firmly. Factional tensions sometimes disrupt decision-making and create communication gaps within the alliances.

Party Splits and Reorganisation

Kerala's political history includes repeated splits in regional parties such as the Kerala Congress factions and smaller socialist groups. These splits affect coalition arithmetic and bargaining power. When a regional party divides into smaller groups, each faction seeks a better share of seats or ministries. This increases the pressure on major parties to negotiate and complicates coalition management. Frequent reorganisations also confuse voters and weaken party identity.

❑ Repeated splits

Defections and Shifting Loyalties

Defections pose another challenge in periods of political uncertainty. Leaders sometimes move between fronts for electoral advantage, community support, or internal disagreements. Defections weaken disciplined coalition politics and create unpredictability during government formation. They also force alliances to spend more energy balancing interests rather than focusing on governance.

❑ Defections weaken disciplined coalition politics

Managing Diverse Ideologies and Interests

Coalitions in Kerala bring together parties with very different ideological positions and community bases. Balancing the interests of Muslims, Christians, Nairs, Ezhavas, Dalits, and regional farmer groups requires constant negotiation. While this inclusiveness is an advantage, it also creates pressure on governments to satisfy competing demands. At times, coalition partners push for policies that reflect the priorities of specific communities, which may not always align with broader state goals.

❑ Balancing interests

Limited Expansion of a Third Front

Attempts to build a third front around the Bharatiya Janata Party have not succeeded, primarily because the two established alliances already dominate Kerala's political space. The BJP has grown in vote share but remains marginal in terms of seats. Its limited reach among minority communities restricts its ability to attract stable partners. This keeps Kerala locked in a two-front system, limiting the possibility of alternative coalition arrangements.

❑ BJP and limited growth

4.2.5 Future Trends in Kerala's Coalition Politics

Kerala's coalition system continues to evolve as society, the economy, and political behaviour change. New forms of mobilisation, rising expectations from welfare governance, and shifts in public opinion are reshaping how coalitions operate. The following trends highlight how coalition politics may develop in the coming years.

Greater Importance of Performance-Based Governance

Voters in Kerala are increasingly judging governments on their ability to deliver welfare, respond to crises, and maintain effective administration. The 2021 election showed that people are willing to break long-standing electoral patterns if they believe a coalition has performed well. This trend will strengthen accountability within alliances and encourage better coordination between partners.

Growing Role of Welfare Politics and State Support

Coalitions in Kerala will continue to rely on welfare schemes as a major political resource. Public expectations for pensions, healthcare, housing, food security, and crisis support have increased. Alliances will need to design policies that uphold Kerala's welfare commitments without placing undue financial strain. This pressure may push coalitions toward more targeted and sustainable welfare strategies.

Strengthening Local Governance and Decentralised Planning

Local governments will remain central to Kerala's political culture. Coalitions will increasingly depend on Panchayats and municipalities to deliver development programmes. This requires cooperation between state leaders, local representatives, and community organisations. Strengthened local governance may improve transparency, but it also demands greater internal discipline within coalitions.

Rising Influence of Youth and Digital Mobilisation

With increasing internet access and youth participation, political communication is changing. Digital platforms, social media debates, and online campaigns will influence public opinion. Coalition politics will need to adapt to faster communication, more critical voters, and increased demands for transparency.

Space for BJP and Alternative Forces

Although the BJP has not consistently won assembly seats, its growing vote share suggests that political space is slowly expanding. Issues such as identity politics, national-state tensions, and urban middle-class concerns may shape this trend. However, large sections of minorities still align with the two major fronts, limiting the rise of any third alliance in the near future.

Continuing Relevance of Community-Based Politics

Kerala's social structure will continue to influence political alignments. Community organisations, religious institutions, and caste associations remain important in shaping alliances. Coalitions will need to balance these social expectations with broader development agendas, especially in regions experiencing economic and demographic changes.

Kerala's coalition politics remains one of the most stable and inclusive systems in India. It has evolved through decades of negotiation, electoral competition, and public engagement. While challenges such as factionalism, party splits, and shifting loyalties continue to shape political behaviour, Kerala's coalitions have shown a strong capacity to adapt. Future trends indicate that performance-based governance, welfare commitments, decentralised planning, and new social forces will play a decisive role in shaping alliances. Overall, Kerala's coalition model continues to reflect the state's democratic culture, social diversity, and high political awareness, while also facing the need to reform and innovate in a rapidly changing environment.

❑ One of the most stable and inclusive systems

Kerala's coalition system has matured over several decades. It blends competition with consensus and accommodates a wide range of social groups. The two-front structure stabilises elections, while public involvement strengthens accountability. At the same time, coalition politics continues to evolve due to shifting voter expectations, internal party dynamics, and the slow rise of new political actors.

❑ Blends competition with consensus

Kerala's experience shows that diverse societies can build stable governance by embracing negotiation, representation, and public engagement. As voters increasingly focus on performance, future coalitions will need to meet higher expectations in welfare delivery, transparency, and economic management. The coalition system remains an enduring feature of Kerala's democracy and continues to adapt to new social and political realities.

❑ Diverse societies can build stable governance

Summarised Overview

Strong social movements, ideological conflicts, and the need for broad-based alliances in a diverse society shape the evolution of Kerala's party system. The early emergence of communist and Congress-led political formations created intense competition, and by the 1980s, these forces had consolidated into two stable fronts: the LDF and the UDF. Elections in Kerala are marked by high voter turnout, shifting coalition patterns, the growing importance of regional parties, and the active role of community organisations. The unit shows how coalition politics, leadership changes, policy performance, and social coalitions have shaped Kerala's political stability and electoral outcomes from 1957 to the present.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What social factors shaped Kerala's early party system?
2. Why was the 1957 election significant?
3. How did coalition politics become a permanent feature in Kerala?
4. What role do regional parties play in elections?
5. Why is voter turnout consistently high in Kerala?
6. What policy issues commonly influence elections?
7. How did the two-front system stabilise Kerala politics?
8. What major trends define Kerala's electoral behaviour?

Assignments

1. Analyse the historical evolution of Kerala's coalition politics.
2. Discuss the social bases that support the LDF and UDF.
3. Evaluate the impact of major elections on Kerala's political direction.
4. Examine the role of regional parties in shaping coalition strategies.
5. Assess how welfare politics influences electoral outcomes in Kerala.
6. Compare voter behaviour in Kerala with national trends.
7. Explain how leadership changes have shaped political competition in the state.

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5. Tharamangalam, J. (1998). *The Political Economy of Development in Kerala*. Sage Publications.

Suggested Reading

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

UNIT 3

Social Exclusion: Women, Dalits, Adivasis

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain how caste, gender and ethnicity shape exclusion in Kerala
- describe the structural and historical factors behind exclusion
- analyse patterns of exclusion faced by women, Dalits and Adivasis
- discuss gaps in education, work participation and political representation
- understand welfare programmes and targeted interventions

Background

Kerala's social development achievements coexist with structural inequalities rooted in caste hierarchy, patriarchy and land relations. While literacy and health indicators have improved across communities, women, Dalits and Adivasis continue to experience different forms of exclusion. Their exclusion is evident not only in economic terms but also in social norms, political representation, land access, and institutional discrimination. Kerala's welfare policies, decentralised institutions and targeted programmes have attempted to reduce these gaps, but progress remains uneven.

Keywords

Social exclusion, Gender inequality, Dalit marginalisation, Adivasi deprivation, Labour participation, Education, Targeted programmes, Welfare state.

Discussion

Social exclusion in Kerala must be understood through the long historical processes that have shaped access to land, education, dignity, and public institutions. While the state's human development achievements are impressive, groups

such as women, Dalits, and Adivasis continue to face barriers rooted in caste hierarchy, patriarchy, land alienation, and regional inequalities. Exclusion here is not only economic; it operates through discrimination, social stigma, limited political voice, and unequal opportunities in areas such as higher education, employment, and public decision-making.

Women in Kerala benefit from early advances in literacy and health; however, they face low labour force participation, unequal domestic responsibilities, and barriers to political leadership. Dalit communities have benefited from welfare measures, improved schooling, and legal protections, but continue to face persistent land disadvantages and underrepresentation in higher education and skilled employment. Adivasi communities experience a different pattern of exclusion, shaped by land loss, geographic isolation, and weaker institutional access, even as targeted programmes have improved schooling, health, and welfare delivery.

Kerala has attempted to address these patterns through universal welfare, reservation policies, targeted development schemes, and decentralised planning. Kudumbashree, tribal hostels, land distribution schemes, and Gram Sabha participation have expanded inclusion, but deeper gaps remain in economic mobility, land restoration, and access to higher learning. The unit highlights that Kerala's development story combines strong social gains with unresolved structural inequalities, requiring continuous public action and policy commitment to ensure meaningful inclusion.

4.3.1 Social Exclusion – Concept and Definition

❑ Defining concepts

Social exclusion refers to the processes through which individuals or communities are prevented from participating fully in the social, economic, cultural, and political life of society. It is not only about material deprivation but also about the denial of dignity, recognition, and equal opportunities. In Kerala, patterns of exclusion have been shaped historically by caste hierarchy, land relations, patriarchy, and uneven development. Though the state has achieved high human development, several groups continue to experience marginalisation in different forms.

❑ Influential definitions

Well-known organisations and scholars have offered influential definitions. The European Commission describes social exclusion as "the process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully because of their poverty, lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or discrimination." The United Nations

Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) explains it as "a dynamic phenomenon rooted in structural inequalities that restrict people's access to resources, rights, and opportunities." These definitions emphasise that exclusion is not accidental but shaped by long-term social structures.

Understanding social exclusion in Kerala, therefore, requires attention to its historical background. Groups such as women, Dalits, and Adivasis entered the modern period with unequal access to land, education, and public institutions. While welfare policies reduced many visible barriers, hidden forms of exclusion persist in employment, political representation, gender relations, and access to development. Conceptualising exclusion in this wider sense helps in examining not only what Kerala has achieved but also what remains unresolved.

4.3.2 Characteristics and Dimensions of Social Exclusion

Social exclusion takes multiple forms, and each reflects the deeper social structures of Kerala. The following characteristics capture the major dimensions of exclusion in an analytical and structured way:

Economic Deprivation and Unequal Access to Resources

Many marginalised groups continue to lack access to productive assets such as land, secure employment, and stable income. Dalits and Adivasis, in particular, remain concentrated in casual labour and low-paid work. This economic disadvantage reduces their ability to benefit from development programmes.

Caste-Based and Community-Based Discrimination

Caste hierarchy still influences social relations in subtle ways. Practices such as residential segregation, unequal treatment in everyday interactions, and limited representation in institutions continue to affect Dalits and other historically oppressed groups. Social mobility is often slow despite formal equality.

Gender Exclusion and Patriarchal Control

Women face structural barriers in employment, property rights, political representation, and safety. Even with high literacy, women's economic participation remains low. Gender-based violence, unequal care responsibilities, and limited decision-making power reflect deeper patriarchal norms.

Spatial and Regional Exclusion

Certain regions, such as tribal settlements, coastal areas, and highland colonies, receive fewer development opportunities.

Adivasi communities face isolation due to distance, poor connectivity, and limited access to healthcare, schooling, and markets.

Political Marginalisation and Limited Voice

Excluded groups often have restricted participation in political processes. Their presence in elected bodies may be limited or symbolic. Decision-making spaces may not adequately reflect the needs and priorities of women, Dalits, or Adivasis.

Educational and Knowledge-Based Exclusion

Although Kerala has high literacy rates, the quality of schooling, access to higher education, and digital learning opportunities vary across communities. Students from marginalised groups often face discrimination, inadequate support, and limited pathways for upward mobility.

Social Stigma and Cultural Exclusion

Deep-seated prejudices continue to influence social interactions. Cultural stereotypes, symbolic boundaries, and exclusion from dominant cultural spaces reinforce marginalisation. For many communities, social acceptance remains conditional and incomplete.

Institutional Barriers and Unequal Implementation of Policies

Welfare programmes sometimes fail to reach the groups most in need due to bureaucratic hurdles, lack of awareness, or discrimination. The gap between policy design and field-level implementation creates new layers of exclusion even within an inclusive development model.

4.3.3 Historical Background of Exclusion in Kerala Society

Kerala's social structure was historically shaped by a rigid caste hierarchy that regulated access to land, labour, mobility, and dignity. Dalits were placed at the bottom of this hierarchy and denied ownership of land, entry to public spaces, and participation in community institutions. Their lives were governed by practices of untouchability, forced labour, and severe spatial segregation. Adivasis in the hilly tracts faced a different form of exclusion, marked by geographic isolation, bonded labour, displacement from forests, and limited interaction with formal institutions. Women across caste groups experienced patriarchy through restrictions on inheritance, mobility, marriage, and public participation. These early structures produced deep social

☐ Dalits in Kerala

inequalities that continued to influence development even after major reforms.

❑ Discriminatory practices

During the colonial and early post-colonial periods, reformers and social movements challenged many of these discriminatory practices, yet the legacy of exclusion persisted. While reforms improved access to education and public services, the benefits were uneven. Dalits entered schooling later than upper castes and were often limited to low-paid labour. Adivasi communities continued to face land alienation as plantations expanded and forest laws restricted traditional livelihoods. Women's literacy improved much earlier than in other states, but access to employment, property rights, and political leadership remained constrained. These long-term inequalities shaped the starting point from which Kerala entered its modern development phase.

❑ Kerala Model and Exclusion

Scholars who have studied the Kerala Model have pointed out that high social indicators often mask the persistence of exclusion. Amartya Sen and Richard Franke observed that improvements in literacy and health did not automatically translate into equality in land ownership, wages, or political voice for Dalits and Adivasis. Critics such as K. Ravi Raman and Patrick Heller argue that the success of the Kerala Model rests heavily on outcomes experienced by the middle classes, while marginalised communities continue to face structural barriers. They note that Adivasis remain the most excluded group, with the least access to land, education, and healthcare, and Dalits continue to experience discrimination in labour markets and local institutions. Feminist scholars also point out that despite high female literacy and health achievements, women's economic participation remains low, suggesting that gender equality within Kerala's development experience has significant gaps. Together, these critiques show that historical exclusion continues to shape Kerala's social landscape and requires deeper policy attention.

4.3.4 Women and Social Exclusion in Kerala

Women in Kerala occupy a unique position in India's social landscape. They benefit from high literacy, strong public health systems, and a long tradition of reform movements, but they also face forms of exclusion that limit their economic, political, and social opportunities. This mixed reality creates what many scholars describe as a paradox: Kerala displays impressive gender indicators on paper, yet women experience structural disadvantages in mobility, employment, and public power. Understanding this paradox requires examining the different layers through which exclusion operates.

Historical and Cultural Roots of Gender Exclusion

☐ Social reform movements

Kerala's social reform movements challenged caste discrimination and promoted education, yet patriarchal norms remained strong across communities. Inheritance systems, control over sexuality, and restrictions on education shaped women's lives for generations. Even reforms such as the abolition of matriliney did not lead to full empowerment; instead, they often strengthened male control over property. Women from Dalit, OBC, and coastal communities faced additional barriers because caste and class limited their access to schooling and safe work environments. These historical patterns explain why high literacy did not automatically translate into equal social power.

Educational Gains and Persistent Structural Barriers

☐ Education and Social Exclusion

Education has been Kerala's greatest achievement, with women achieving near-universal literacy and high school and college enrolment. Yet educational gains have not ensured equal outcomes. Many women continue to be tracked into traditional fields such as humanities or nursing, while participation in technical, professional, and research fields remains lower. Social expectations around marriage, household responsibility, and childcare influence educational choices. Even highly educated women often face pressure to prioritise domestic work over career development. This shows that exclusion operates not only through access but also through social norms that shape how women utilise their education.

Labour Market Exclusion and Economic Dependency

☐ Female labour force participation

One of the most visible forms of exclusion is the low presence of women in Kerala's workforce. The state has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in India, despite high education levels. Many women work in informal, low-paying sectors such as domestic work, retail, fisheries processing, and teaching in unaided schools. The lack of safe transportation, poor childcare support, wage discrimination, and limited formal sector opportunities restrict women's economic independence. The migration of men to the Gulf has further increased women's unpaid care responsibilities, placing financial and emotional burdens on many households.

Violence, Safety and Public Participation

☐ Unequal access to public spaces

Women's exclusion is also shaped by fear of violence and unequal access to public spaces. Cases of domestic violence, harassment, and exploitation are widely reported. Restrictions on mobility, especially late at night, reflect social attitudes that expect women to conform to rigid gender roles. These factors not only limit women's employment opportunities but also re-

duce their participation in public life. While literacy creates awareness, it does not automatically challenge patriarchal control within families and communities. This creates gaps between legal rights and lived experiences.

Political Representation and Public Voice

- ☐ Political representation is uneven

Kerala's reservation policy in local governments has increased the number of women elected to Panchayats and municipalities. Many women leaders have become active in development planning, social welfare committees, and local governance structures. However, political representation is uneven across levels. Women remain underrepresented in the state assembly, political parties, and higher administrative positions. In several cases, women elected at the local level face pressure from male relatives or party workers who exert informal control over decision-making. This shows that political inclusion must be supported by training, institutional backing, and social change to become meaningful.

Government Interventions and Welfare Strategies

- ☐ Programmes to reduce exclusion

The state has introduced a range of programmes to reduce exclusion. Kudumbashree is one of the world's largest women's community networks and provides microcredit, livelihood support, and social empowerment. Its neighbourhood groups help women gain confidence, leadership skills, and financial stability. Government schemes for reproductive health, maternal care, scholarships, and support for domestic violence also promote inclusion. Gender budgeting has encouraged departments to allocate resources for women's needs. However, many studies note that these programmes function more effectively when supported by strong local governance and continued social mobilisation.

4.3.5 Dalits and Social Exclusion in Kerala

- ☐ Structural Gaps

Dalit communities in Kerala have experienced long historical exclusion, yet they have also benefited from the state's strong commitment to social justice, education, and welfare. Kerala's achievements in literacy, health, and democratic participation have improved Dalit lives far more than in many other Indian states. At the same time, certain structural gaps continue, especially in land ownership and higher education. Understanding Dalit exclusion requires recognising both the progress achieved and the challenges that remain within Kerala's wider development experience.

Historical Exclusion and the Land Question

☐ Land ownership

Land ownership remains one of the most important markers of Dalit exclusion in Kerala. Historically, Dalits worked as agricultural labourers for dominant-caste landlords and lived on small homestead plots without legal rights. When land reforms were implemented, tenants were the main beneficiaries. Dalits, who were primarily landless labourers, received homestead rights but not enough cultivable land, creating a long-term disadvantage.

☐ Land Disparity

Even today, Dalits own a very small share of agricultural land in Kerala. Surveys indicate that Scheduled Castes constitute more than 9 per cent of the population but own less than 3 per cent of the total land. This disparity affects livelihood security, savings, and access to credit. However, compared to several other Indian states, Kerala's social welfare programmes, housing projects, and homestead pattas have helped reduce extreme deprivation. Many Dalit families have also benefited from new schemes that provide secure titles for small house plots, improving their living conditions.

☐ Improved social conditions

Improving Social Conditions and Declining Atrocities

Kerala performs better than most states in indicators related to caste-based violence, police protection, and legal intervention. While incidents do occur and must be addressed seriously, Kerala's overall rate of atrocities against Scheduled Castes is lower than the national average. Strong literacy, active civil society organisations, and responsive media help ensure that cases receive public attention. The presence of Dalit organisations, human rights groups, and legal aid centres has strengthened Dalit communities' confidence in seeking justice.

Social mobility has also improved. Many Dalit youth now pursue higher secondary and college education, and their participation in public employment has increased due to reservation policies. Urban migration, public-sector opportunities, and welfare board support have helped reduce older forms of stigma and economic dependency.

☐ Gap in higher education

Access to Higher Education and Skilled Employment

Participation in schooling is high among Dalit children, but a gap emerges at the higher education and professional course levels. Dalit representation in universities, engineering colleges, and research fields remains lower than that of the general population. Financial constraints, limited exposure to competitive centres, and the need for stronger academic support contribute to this gap.

☐ Reservation policies

Kerala has attempted to address this issue through scholarships, hostels, career guidance centres, and coaching programmes for competitive exams. Reservation policies have also expanded opportunities in colleges and government jobs. However, the need for focused mentoring and support systems continues, especially for first-generation learners. Compared to many other states, Kerala has made steady progress, yet the challenge remains to convert educational access into long-term mobility.

☐ Addressing Dalit exclusion

State Welfare Measures and Reservation Policies

Kerala's welfare policies have played a major role in reducing Dalit exclusion. The state provides free textbooks, uniforms, pre-matric and post-matric scholarships, housing schemes, land purchase assistance, and welfare pensions. Reservation in public employment and education ensures steady representation of the Scheduled Castes in state institutions. Kerala also implements a rule that reserves half of the SC reservation benefits for the most disadvantaged subgroups within the Dalit community, preventing the benefits from being concentrated among a small elite.

The Scheduled Castes Development Department and various welfare boards have implemented livelihood support, microfinance, and housing improvement programmes. These interventions have contributed to a gradual rise in Dalit living standards, and in many regions, Dalit families have moved out of extreme poverty.

☐ State's strong social sector investments

Progress and Remaining Gaps

Dalit exclusion in Kerala has significantly reduced due to the state's strong social sector investments, active civil society, and democratic culture. Educational access, political representation, and basic living conditions have seen major improvements. Kerala's performance is stronger than that of many other Indian states in reducing caste-based poverty and enhancing welfare access.

☐ Structural gaps

Yet, certain structural gaps continue. Land ownership remains limited. Higher education needs further strengthening, and representation in high-skilled jobs is still low. Addressing these issues requires long-term measures that combine education, land support, livelihood opportunities, and better access to institutional resources. Kerala's development experience shows clear progress, and with focused policies, Dalit inclusion can advance even further.

4.3.6 Adivasis and Social Exclusion in Kerala

☐ Adivasi exclusion

Adivasi communities in Kerala are among the most culturally diverse in the state, with distinct identities, languages, and ways of life. Historically, they lived in forest regions with self-sustaining livelihoods, but over time, they faced pressures from land alienation, the commercial exploitation of forests, and limited access to state institutions. Kerala has made major improvements in literacy, health, and welfare access for Adivasi groups; yet their experience of exclusion reflects long-term structural challenges relating to land, education, and political representation. Understanding Adivasi exclusion requires recognising both their historical marginalisation and the steady social improvements achieved through targeted interventions.

☐ Land and Adivasi exclusion

Historical Land Loss and Economic Marginalisation

Land is the core issue that shapes Adivasi exclusion in Kerala. Traditionally, Adivasi communities occupied large forest tracts in Wayanad, Palakkad, Idukki, and Kasaragod. Their customary ownership was rarely recorded under colonial or early land revenue systems. As settlers, plantation companies, and traders expanded into the highlands, Adivasi families lost significant portions of land. Studies from Kerala show that by the late twentieth century, Adivasis formed nearly 1.5 per cent of the population but owned far less than this proportion of cultivable land. Many were pushed into daily wage labour or forest-dependent occupations.

☐ Land reforms

Despite these historical losses, Kerala introduced land distribution schemes specifically for Scheduled Tribes. Thousands of families received house plots and small agricultural holdings. The government also initiated programmes to restore alienated land in districts like Wayanad. These interventions improved living conditions; yet the restoration process remained slow due to legal disputes, fragmented land records, and limited availability of suitable land. Nevertheless, compared to many other states, Kerala's policy commitment to Adivasi land rights remains stronger and continues to evolve.

Social Development Gains and Improving Welfare Access

Adivasi communities have benefited from the expansion of public health, schooling, and welfare programmes. Infant mortality has declined, immunisation coverage has increased, and access to primary health centres has improved even in remote settlements. Nutritional support through anganwadis, tribal hostels, food security schemes, and mobile medical units has strengthened the welfare base.

Kerala's literacy programmes have brought noticeable improvements in schooling among Adivasi children. Many communities that previously had very low enrolment now send children to residential schools and government institutions. Scholarships, hostels, and bridge courses have helped first-generation learners transition into mainstream schooling. While dropout rates remain a concern, the overall trend shows steady improvement and greater institutional support.

Higher Education and Skill Development Challenges

❑ Gaps in education

The main gap emerges not in basic schooling but in higher education and skilled employment. Adivasi youth often face difficulties entering universities, technical colleges, and professional training centres. Limited exposure, financial constraints, language barriers, and the need for continuous academic support contribute to this challenge. The proportion of Adivasis in higher education remains below the state average, and representation in government jobs and skilled professions is still low.

Kerala has responded through pre-metric and post-metric scholarships, special coaching programmes, and dedicated hostels for tribal students. The state also reserves seats for Scheduled Tribes in professional courses and public employment. While these efforts have improved participation, continued mentoring, residential support, and bridge courses are necessary to help Adivasi learners thrive.

Cultural Identity, Autonomy, and Political Voice

❑ Cultural autonomy

Adivasi communities value their cultural autonomy, traditional knowledge, and collective decision-making systems. However, many of their institutions have weakened over time due to displacement, loss of forest access, and assimilation pressures. Kerala has attempted to restore some autonomy through the recognition of tribal hamlets (oorus), the creation of Tribal Development Agencies, and elected representation through reserved seats in local bodies.

Political visibility has increased, and Adivasi movements have become more active in demanding land rights, better services, and accountability for welfare. Groups in Wayanad and Idukki, for instance, have successfully pressed for land distribution, educational support, and improved housing. This growing political voice reflects a positive shift in Kerala's democratic landscape.

Progress and Structural Gaps

Kerala's Adivasi communities continue to face structural disadvantages, especially in land ownership, livelihood security,

and higher education. These challenges originate from historical patterns of marginalisation rather than present-day neglect. At the same time, Kerala has made consistent progress through welfare schemes, educational interventions, and targeted development programmes.

Compared to many parts of India, Adivasis in Kerala benefit from better access to healthcare, food security, schooling, and local governance. The challenge today is to sustain these gains while focusing on deeper issues of land restoration, quality education, cultural protection, and effective implementation of development programmes. With continued public support and policy attention, Adivasi inclusion can advance within the wider trajectory of Kerala's development.

☐ Adivasi inclusion

4.3.7 State Policies and Inclusion Strategies

Kerala's approach to inclusion grew slowly through a series of policies that supported education, health, and welfare. The state aimed to reduce the historical disadvantages faced by women, Dalits, and Adivasis by combining general welfare measures with special protections. Over time, this created a system where basic services reached most people, while targeted programmes supported groups that needed extra help. The overall aim has been to make development more equitable and to ensure that no community is left out of the benefits of growth.

☐ Equitable development

Major features of Kerala's approach to inclusive politics are as follows:

1. Universal Welfare and Basic Social Security

Kerala's inclusion efforts rest on a strong base of universal welfare. Schools, health centres, and subsidised food shops are present across rural and urban areas. Free or low-cost healthcare has helped reduce infant and maternal deaths, even among poor households. Public schools and public exams have improved educational access for all sections. Basic pensions for the elderly, widows, and people with disabilities provide a minimum level of security.

☐ Strong base of universal welfare

Because these schemes cover the entire population, they have helped women, Dalits, and Adivasis more than others. These groups entered modern development late, so universal welfare reduced early disadvantages and created more equal starting conditions.

- ❑ Special protections for marginalised groups

2. Group-Specific Protections for Women, Dalits, and Adivasis

Along with universal schemes, Kerala introduced special protections for marginalised groups. Dalits and Adivasis benefited from reservations in education and government jobs. Residential schools, hostels, training centres, and scholarships expanded their access to higher education. Public institutions were also instructed to prevent discrimination and improve service delivery in SC/ST settlements.

Women received support through laws on equal wages, protection against domestic violence, and the reservation of 50 percent of seats in local bodies. This increased women's role in politics and local decision-making. These protections helped many women move from informal roles to public leadership and community participation.

3. Targeted Development Programmes

Several programmes were designed to reduce the specific disadvantages faced by each group. For Dalits, land distribution schemes, housing support, and small enterprise loans created opportunities for economic improvement. The SC and ST Development Departments also funded coaching programmes and model schools to help students gain admission to universities and professional colleges.

- ❑ Adivasi-focused programmes

Adivasi-focused programmes addressed land rights, healthcare, and schooling in remote areas. Mobile medical units, nutrition support, and housing projects aimed to improve living conditions in settlements. Programmes to restore alienated tribal land and support forest-based livelihoods have also been introduced, though progress has been mixed.

Women's development programmes gained strength after the formation of Kudumbashree. Its neighbourhood groups supported small businesses, farming projects, microcredit, and leadership training. This has helped many women earn an income and gain more confidence in public life.

4. Decentralised Governance and Local Participation

Decentralisation has played a key role in reducing exclusion. When Kerala transferred planning powers and funds to local governments through the People's Planning Campaign, it created space for communities to participate directly in decisions. Gram Sabhas became platforms where women, Dalits, and Adivasis could raise their concerns.

Political reservations expanded their role further. Seats for SCs, STs, and women ensured that local governments repre-

- ❑ Role of Decentralisation

sented the diversity of the population. Local bodies took responsibility for school development, health centres, housing schemes, and welfare delivery. This brought the administration closer to communities that had long been left out. In many tribal areas, special Gram Sabhas and local committees increased the visibility of Adivasi concerns.

5. New Priorities and Emerging Directions

Kerala now focuses more on improving higher education, skills, and employment for marginalised communities. New hostels, scholarship schemes, and coaching programmes aim to support SC and ST students in pursuing professional education. For women, recent policies encourage entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and safety in public spaces. Programmes for Adivasis include land restoration, nutrition support, and better connectivity to schools and hospitals.

The main challenge for the future is to move beyond basic welfare. Kerala now needs stronger measures to promote economic mobility, better-quality education, and more inclusive job opportunities. While the state has a strong welfare base, deeper social inclusion will require continued investment and careful planning.

Summarised Overview

This unit examines how the benefits of Kerala's development have been uneven across gender, caste, and tribal communities. Women face barriers in labour force participation, public safety, and political voice despite high literacy. Dalits continue to experience limited land ownership, poor access to higher education, and social discrimination. Adivasis face distinct challenges, including land alienation, geographical isolation, and limited institutional access. The unit also discusses welfare programmes, tribal development schemes, Dalit education initiatives, and the role of decentralised governance in creating spaces for participation. It shows that Kerala's progress is significant but incomplete, as deeper social inequalities continue to influence opportunities and outcomes.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. Why is social exclusion still a concern in a high-literacy state like Kerala?
2. What structural barriers limit women's participation in public life?
3. How does land ownership shape exclusion among Dalits?
4. What are the major challenges faced by Adivasi communities?
5. How does violence influence the exclusion of women?
6. What role do welfare programmes play in reducing exclusion?



7. How has decentralisation supported the inclusion of marginalised groups?
8. Why are education and health not enough to eliminate deeper inequalities?

Assignments

1. Analyse the different ways in which women experience exclusion in Kerala.
2. Discuss how caste-based structures continue to shape Dalit marginalisation.
3. Evaluate the impact of targeted development programmes for Adivasis.
4. Assess the role of decentralised governance in addressing social exclusion.
5. Compare the exclusion experienced by women, Dalits, and Adivasis.
6. Examine why Kerala's social achievements have not fully eliminated inequality.
7. Explain the long-term policies required to ensure meaningful social inclusion.

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3. Devika, J. (2010). *Gender and public space in Kerala*. Orient Blackswan.
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5. Tharakan, P. K. M. (1998). Social justice and development in Kerala. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(19), 1104–1111.

Suggested Reading

1. Devika, J. (2010). *Gender and public space in Kerala*. Orient Blackswan.
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6. George, K. K. (1999). Understanding social sector achievements in Kerala. Centre for Development Studies.
7. Kumar, A. (2006). Caste discrimination and Dalit marginalisation in Kerala. Indian Journal of Political Science, 67(3), 543–559.
8. Government of Kerala. (2020). Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe development reports. Department of SC/ST Development.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

MODEL QUESTION PAPER SETS



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

QP CODE:

Reg. No:

Name:

FOURTH SEMESTER MA POLITICAL SCIENCE EXAMINATION

Discipline Core Course - M23PS12DC STATE, SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN KERALA

2024-25 Admission Onwards

Model Question Paper SET-1

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Answer any **ten** questions in a word or a sentence. Each question carries **one** mark.

(10 × 1 = 10 Marks)

1. Who founded the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam?
2. In which year was the unified linguistic state of Kerala formed?
3. Name the first Chief Minister of Kerala.
4. What is the full form of KSSP?
5. Which social reformer led the famous Vaikom Satyagraha?
6. What is the primary objective of the Kudumbashree mission?
7. In which year was the first comprehensive Land Reform Act passed by the Kerala Assembly?
8. Who authored the anti-caste work 'Jathilakshanam'?
9. Which major environmental movement in Kerala was fought to save a tropical evergreen forest from a hydroelectric project?
10. What does the term 'Kerala Model of Development' primarily highlight?
11. Name the organisation founded by Ayyankali for the upliftment of the marginalised castes.
12. Which constitutional amendment paved the way for decentralised planning in Kerala?
13. What was the 'Vimochana Samaram' (Liberation Struggle)?
14. Name one major Adivasi land struggle in contemporary Kerala.
15. What was the central demand of the Aikya Kerala movement?



SECTION B

*Answer any **five** questions in two or three sentences. Each question carries **two** marks.*

(5 × 2 = 10 Marks)

16. Write a short note on the historical significance of the Malayali Memorial.
17. Briefly define the paradox of the 'Kerala Model of Development'.
18. What is the political significance of the 1957 assembly elections in Kerala?
19. State the main objectives of the People's Plan Campaign (PPC) introduced in 1996.
20. What was the impact of the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936?
21. Briefly explain the context of the Muthanga incident.
22. Define 'coalition politics' in the context of Kerala's LDF and UDF fronts.
23. Write a brief note on the 'Gulf Diaspora' and its economic impact on Kerala.
24. Define the issue of Social Exclusion of Women
25. What are the major Acts related to Kerala Land Reform

SECTION C

*Answer any **five** questions. Each question carries **four** marks.*

(5 × 4 = 20 Marks)

26. Analyse the role of Sree Narayana Guru in initiating social renaissance in Kerala society.
27. Evaluate the immediate and long-term impacts of Land Reforms on the socio-economic structure of Kerala.
28. Discuss the emergence, growth, and consolidation of the Communist movement in Kerala prior to 1957.
29. Examine the role of Kudumbashree in fostering economic and political empowerment among women in Kerala.
30. Trace the history and political significance of the Malayali Memorial and Ezhava Memorial.
31. Discuss the key social indicators and common criticisms of the Kerala Model of Development.
32. Explain the significance of the Guruvayur Satyagraha in the broader anti-caste movement.
33. Assess the impact of environmental movements in Kerala, paying special attention to the Plachimada struggle.

SECTION D

*Answer any **three** questions. Each question carries **ten** marks.*

(3 × 10 = 30 Marks)

34. Critically examine the legacy of 19th and 20th-century social reform movements in democratizing Kerala's society. How did they pave the way for modern democratic politics?
35. Discuss the evolution, changing dynamics, and impact of bipolar coalition politics (LDF and UDF) in Kerala since the 1970s.
36. Critically evaluate the 'Kerala Model of Development'. What are the contemporary challenges faced by this model in the era of globalisation?
37. "Decentralisation in Kerala has fundamentally deepened democracy at the grassroots level." Discuss this statement by analysing the successes and failures of the People's Plan Campaign.
38. Analyse the emergence of New Social Movements (Dalit, Adivasi, and Feminist movements) in Kerala. How do these movements expose the limitations of mainstream political parties?
39. Analyse the social conditions that prevailed in Kerala during the nineteenth century. In this context, critically evaluate the contributions of major social reformers in addressing these conditions.





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Discipline Core Course - M23PS12DC STATE, SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN KERALA

2024-25 - Admission Onwards

Model Question Paper SET-2

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Answer any **ten** questions in a word or a sentence. Each question carries **one** mark.

(10 × 1 = 10 Marks)

1. Who founded the Nair Service Society (NSS)?
2. What was the main objective of the Guruvayur Satyagraha?
3. Name the major political front in Kerala led by the Indian National Congress (INC).
4. In which year was the People's Plan Campaign launched?
5. Who was the prominent leader of the Malabar Rebellion (1921)?
6. Which multinational corporation was targeted during the Plachimada anti-Coca-Cola struggle?
7. Who is widely considered the father of the Library Movement in Kerala?
8. Which Article of the Indian Constitution was controversially invoked to dismiss the first EMS Namboodiripad government?
9. Who led yachanayathra?
10. Name the prominent land struggle led by Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala in 2007.
11. Who authored the influential book 'Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi'?
12. Identify the central trade union affiliated with the CPI(M) in Kerala.
13. What was the primary grievance raised in the Malayali Memorial (1891)?
14. Name one demographic indicator where Kerala significantly outperforms the national Indian average.
15. What is the role of the Grama Sabha in Kerala's Panchayat Raj system?



SECTION B

Answer any **five** questions in two or three sentences. Each question carries **two** marks.

(5 × 2 = 10 Marks)

16. What was the significance of the Ezhava Memorial submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore?
17. Briefly explain the demographic transition experienced by the state of Kerala.
18. What is the three-tier division of Power, and what is their role in decentralised planning?
19. Write a short note on the contributions of Chattampi Swamikal.
20. What is meant by the 'agrarian crisis' in contemporary Kerala?
21. Briefly describe the historical context of the Chengara land struggle.
22. How do caste and communal organisations act as pressure groups in Kerala politics?
23. Explain the basic premise of the 'Aikya Kerala' (United Kerala) movement.
24. What was the primary objective of the SNDP founded by Sreenarayana Guru?
25. Write a brief note on the significance of the Paliyam Satyagraha.

SECTION C

Answer any **five** questions. Each question carries **four** marks.

(5 × 4 = 20 Marks)

26. Discuss the specific contributions of Ayyankali toward the educational and social rights of Dalits in Kerala.
27. Analyse the political and social reasons that led to the 'Liberation Struggle' (Vimochana Samaram) and the subsequent dismissal of the 1957 government.
28. Explain the structural crisis in the development model of Kerala in the post-liberalisation period.
29. Assess the role of civil society organisations, particularly KSSP, in Kerala's public action and decentralisation.
30. Evaluate the socio-economic impact of massive out-migration to the Gulf countries on Kerala's society.
31. Trace the development of the SNDP and analyse its impact on the social consciousness of the state.
32. Discuss the nature of Renaissance Movement in Kerala
33. Examine the structural limitations and major criticisms towards the Kerala Model of Development.



SECTION D

Answer any **three** questions. Each question carries **ten** marks.

(3 × 10 = 30 Marks)

34. Detail the historical trajectory of anti-caste struggles in Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. How did these movements lay the structural foundation for a modern Kerala?
35. Critically analyse the history of Land Reform legislation in Kerala. Did these reforms successfully achieve their intended socio-economic goal of "land to the tiller"?
36. Discuss the history of the Communist movement in Kerala. How has the Left shaped the state's socio-economic policies, particularly in education and healthcare?
37. Evaluate the democratic decentralisation experiment in Kerala. Has the devolution of power and funds successfully mitigated local development issues? Provide examples.
38. "The recent emergence of environmental and marginalised land rights struggles highlights the exclusions inherent in the Kerala Model of Development." Critically evaluate this statement with reference to specific social movements.
39. Analyse the role and influence of major Coalitions in shaping electoral politics, policy-making, and electoral dynamics in contemporary Kerala.

സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം
ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണേ

കൂരിരുട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പാറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം
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ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ
ജ്ഞാനകേന്ദ്രമേ ജ്വലിക്കണേ

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**DON'T LET IT
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**SAY
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DRUGS**

**LOVE YOURSELF
AND ALWAYS BE
HEALTHY**



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