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AGRARIAN DISTRESS: ROLE OF POLITICAL REGIMES IN KERALA

Ance Teresa Varghese¹

Abstract

Agrarian distress is an unabated issue, and has raised concerns regarding the role of the political regimes that come into power through the democratic method in responding to it. This paper is an effort to understand how the state of Kerala, with its dynamic political fronts, has over the years addressed the concerns of its farming population. The paper raises certain questions over the effectiveness and real motives of the initiatives taken by the political regimes. With the help of both secondary as well as empirical data, the paper argues that the political regimes have aptly identified the distress causing factors of marginal and small farmers and initiated several agrarian policies and schemes over the years. However, there are still substantial concerns in terms of the implementation of these initiatives. The plight of the agricultural labourers has not received adequate attention.

Key Words: Agrarian distress, political regime, political fronts, farming population, Kerala

Introduction

This paper delves into the role of political regimes in mitigating agrarian distress in the state of Kerala in general and Wayanad in particular. It also examines the conditions under which political regimes implement policies for the agrarian community. In particular, this paper analyses the agrarian relations of the political regimes.

In India, we have a democratic political regime. A political regime is a political party or coalition of parties in power with definite social bases and a clearly defined set of public policies; a) the party or parties in power, b) their social bases and c) their public policies differ from regime to regime.

Kerala has vibrant political parties that are aligned under two major fronts, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the United Democratic Front (UDF). How have these political fronts, when in power and otherwise responded to the issues of farmers and agricultural labourers? Are their interventions motivated by the needs of the society or for resource appropriation? These are some of the questions addressed through this chapter.

Over the years, the Left political parties have actively engaged in the mobilization of peasants and implementation of welfare policies for them. Such an active engagement with the peasants has contributed to the mass support base of Left in the state. There is a rich literature talking about the contributions of the Left political parties to the achievements of Kerala. There has been a large number of agrarian policies under the Left. In Wayanad, however, the Congress party has a hefty support basis owing largely to the backing of the settler population and other minorities.

The mobilization of the peasants and the initiation of policies by the Left political parties is consistent with a substantial literature that details about a modernization programme that consists of redistributive measures such as land reforms, food security and pension schemes; and an

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industrialization strategy largely premised on the public ownership of the means of production (Rajagopalan, 1993, p. 57), organization of the poor tenants and agricultural labourers under the Communist party against the brutalities of landlords and police and a strong culture of forming trade unions (Kaul & Kannangara, 2021), extension of their social basis, particularly among the agricultural labourers during the period of administration and struggle (Hardgrave, 1970), pursuit of a series of decentralization reforms in 1996 entitled the People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning and an organic farming policy as a solution to the innumerable agrarian problems (Thottathil, 2012, p. 33), inclusion of cabinet members who were themselves seasoned militants of the peasant and worker movements for the first time in Kerala and their electoral charge clearly included the demand for radical land reform (W.Franke & Chasin, 1994, p. 61) are among the several works. Mostly these works focus on the outstanding efforts of the Communist party from the time of state formation to the period of initiation of organic farming policy in 2010. There is hardly any academic literature on post-2010 initiatives of the Left government.

In order to understand the response of the political regimes empirically, data was collected from the research participants over the services they have received, especially the delivery of services to mitigate the causes of agrarian distress.

It was observed from the secondary as well as the empirical data that there were times of synergy formation and non-formation due to the weaknesses in implementation of the initiated policies. This aspect will be detailed in further discussions.

It is paradoxical to see agrarian distress in a state like Kerala which has witnessed strong peasant movements and agrarian policy initiatives in the past. Also, in a state much lauded for its human development indices. Suri (2006) writes that in political theory, it is presumed that in a mass electoral democracy, the voice of a larger number of people would tend to have a greater say in running the affairs of the government. However, this does not seem to happen in India. Specifically at the state level, a large proportion of political representatives claim to come from a farmers' background, but farmers' interests hardly find space in their imagination. National Election Watch data shows that most of the political representatives in Wayanad come from an agricultural background. The empirical study conducted in Wayanad tries to explore whether the voices of the farming community is heard by the political parties.

Political Regimes and Their Responses

Left Democratic Front and their initiatives

The Left of Centre parties have held power for a longer period in Kerala (Rajagopalan, 1993). In this section, a restating of the initiatives of the Left political parties with reference to the farming community is done to see why the party was in power for a long period of time. The agrarian struggles and movements under the Left political parties can be broadly categorized into pre- Independence period and post-Independence period. The post-Independence initiatives can be further categorized into pre-land reform era and post-land reform era.

Pre- Independence Period

The radical programmes of the Communist party facilitated the mobilization of a large number of unprivileged groups in the state during this period. The class struggles of the peasants and the landless against the power, property and police was the mainstay of communism spread during the national struggle. Kaul & Kannangara (2021) state that the brutalities of the landlords and police resulted in the spread and subsequent dominance of communism in the northern villages of Kerala. The poor tenants and agricultural labourers organised under the Communist party. And several agitators were killed in many villages that later came to be known as revolutionary villages. This led to the emergence of party villages² especially in northern Kerala. Hardgrave (1970) observes that it is within Kerala that the Marxist have had their greatest appeal. The communists have deepened their hold on the poorest classes, especially the agricultural labourers. The writings of K.C. Alexander (1975) show that the economic difficulties during the Second World War coupled with the ideological indoctrination enthused the labourers to join the labour unions, and under the leadership of CPI, the Travancore Agricultural Labourers' Union was formed and registered in 1938.

Post – Independence period

The Pre-Land Reform Era

The coming into power of a Communist ministry in Kerala in 1957 facilitated a perfect political climate for the union to grow swiftly. After the communists split in the mid-1960s into the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the latter came to control the larger part of the mass organizations, including the agricultural workers' union. Rajagopalan (1993, p. 92) opines that these unions are of enormous value to the political parties. They assist in the mobilization of unorganized groups which are otherwise difficult to reach.

Kerala being the first state to democratically elect a communist government in 1957, has always had a comparatively politicized and well-educated population, Frank 2006 and Lukose 2009 (cited in (Munster, 2012)). After the formation of the first government in Kerala, though technically not falling under the provisions of Land Reform Act, a large number of pattayams (possession rights) were distributed to peasants who had occupied land to advance agriculture. The first such distribution to settler farmers was organized in Rajakkad in Idukki district in 1958 by the first government under EMS Namboothiripad (Nair & Ramakumar, 2001). The evictions of tenants were considerably reduced during the communist government of 1957–1959, and in many parts of the state, the tenants stopped paying rent, becoming de facto owners of the leased-in land during the 1960s (Harilal & Eswaran, 2016). Kerala's Left leading coalitions initiated several reform bills in Kerala's Parliament. In 1959, the Communist government passed the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill which provided major economic relief to the tenants. The Kerala High Court declared it unconstitutional. In 1964, a Congress party ministry passed a watered-down Land Reform Act, which one socialist legislator ridiculed as the Kerala landlords' protection bill. Tenants and their allies continued with their agitation. In 1967, the United Left Front was voted into power. In 1969, this Communist coalition and other Leftist parties finally enacted the law that

² Party villages are not exclusively Communist; however, most of them are.

has come to be considered as Kerala's radical land reform (p. 62). Kerala's 1969 land reform is considered as one of the most radical and most successful in South Asia (W.Franke & Chasin, 1994, p. 54). Communists have contributed to these measures not only through the mobilisation of peasants in the north (against oppressive feudal relations) and the agricultural workers in the south (for better wages and work contracts) but also through their parliamentary practice in working out politically feasible solutions (Krishnaji, 2007). Despite many limitations of the reform, especially in preventing the large capitalist tenants from also enjoying the full benefits of tenancy abolition and the lapses in redistribution of surplus land to the agricultural labourers, it was the single most important progressive redistributive measure undertaken in Kerala (Isaac & Kumar, 1991). However, the agricultural labourers had received 10 cents of land which provided some sort of security to them. Krishnaji (2007) states that a worker with land is a better fighter than one wholly dependent on wages, especially in struggles for better working conditions. Shihabudeen *et al* (2019, p. 14) observe that the historical transformation of land relations by the land-to-the-tenant reforms provided a prominent place for the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI(M)) in the state of Kerala.

Post-Land Reform Era

Operation Flood was introduced in Kerala as a programme to increase milk production and thereby increase farm income. Rajagopalan (1993, p. 189) reports that the chairman of NDDDB argued that it was the enthusiasm of the then agricultural minister K. R. Gauri of the Left government, that finally convinced him to fund the programme in Kerala.

Following this, the Left government focused on pensions and labour rights for farm workers. In 1975, the Left government introduced labour legislation, providing regulated workdays, minimum wages, collective bargaining rights, and job security for Kerala's landless labourers, who were mostly from unprivileged castes. Padasekhara Samithis, present in many parts of the state today, are groups created by the LDF government in the late 1980s to promote effective and joint management of financial, natural and human resources.

During Kerala's class conflicts of 1960s-80s, the ground work on a moral economy centred on land emerged, influenced by communist-led mobilizations surrounding land. This moral economy grounded in an ideal of redistributive politics and how exactly land should be used – is also present in the institutions that Kerala's Left established and assembled (Thottathil, 2012, p. 37).

Kerala is the first Indian state to experiment with a pension scheme for agricultural workers. This particular scheme falls under the category of social assistance. This scheme came into effect in 1980. Expenditure on agricultural workers' pension is financed out of the budget of the state government. The goal of this scheme is to provide pensions to the labourers in agriculture who had attained the age of 60 and worked as agricultural labour and hold membership in Kerala Agricultural Workers' Welfare Fund Board. At that time, agricultural workers contributed the single largest work force in Kerala. The number of women agricultural labourers was also high. Leela Gulati (1990) observes that the agricultural workers in the state have been in the forefront of the trade union movement since the 1920s. Their demand for social security in some form started in 1960. The scheme was introduced in 1980 when the coalition government of Left parties was in power. It is also possible

that even though both husband and wife are eligible for pension in the case each of them can satisfactorily establish that they worked as agricultural labourers till the age of 60, in actual practice where the husband was drawing the pension, the wife's application tended to be rejected. The pension, even though the amount was small, increased the acceptability of the old age agricultural labourers at home. The entitlement met the basic food requirements of an above-60 person, given the facilities of the Public Distribution System in Kerala and had a small cash income above that.

The group farming programme was initiated by the Leftist coalition government in 1989 with the objective of improving agricultural productivity, particularly for raising the productivity of rice farming and preventing the conversion of paddy fields for commercial agriculture and property development. Despite an ambitious effort to mobilize farmers, agricultural workers, agricultural scientists, extension agents, and bureaucrats, the attempt failed in most parts of the state when the Left Front government was voted out of power and a new Centre-Right coalition came into power in 1992 (Parayil, 1998).

Kerala's Left leaning coalitions have vehemently opposed the Government of India's participation in free trade agreements. Regulating the market continues to be a constant struggle for the Left in Kerala, and, despite the Left's attempt to protect Kerala's civil society, the market's destructive forces manifested themselves throughout the state's agricultural arena beginning in the 1990s (Thottathil, 2012, pp. 43-44).

The decentralization agenda was fulfilled when the LDF was returned to power in 1996. Decentralisation in Kerala was a process of administrative institutional reform expected to deliver new opportunities for people's direct participation in local government. However, the question that arises here is whether this decentralization programme has helped in the inclusion and capability building of the already marginalized groups. The field work experiences provided with a different picture, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Williams and Thampi (2013) argue that simultaneously, however, it was a project of reform which emerged from within a particular party, gaining the support of the state CPI(M) leadership because of the positive effects they hoped it would have on broadening the party's own support base and strengthening its connection to its electorate. Their fieldwork indicated that decentralisation had provided a means through which the CPI(M) had revitalised and extended its control over the locality—a control which was being backed up by both its micromanagement of the official spaces for participation this offered, and also through the considerable resources which were at the panchayat's disposal. Referring to Mohan and Stokke (2000) they write about the dangers of localism.

The Brahmagiri Development Society (BDS) is an initiative that emerged as a response to the agrarian crisis during the neo-liberal era under the initiative of the Communist party. It supported dairy farming in Wayanad and the setting up of a modern slaughter house with a meat processing unit. The LDF ministry approved the proposal, allocated 2.5 million rupees in financing and gave it administrative sanction on March 31, 1999. The society has adopted modernized agro- industrial practices to boost the income of farmers by selling value added products. It procures poultry and cattle from livestock from the farmers at a fair price. The BDS also cultivates and procures tea, coffee and spices based on community farming and has brought more farmers into the cooperative supply chain. Its members have

developed a vast marketing network in Kerala under the collective ownership of peasants and workers. This helps the farmers secure high prices by marketing the value-added products, eliminating exploitative intermediaries and bypassing big corporations in the output market. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the society explored the possibilities of online marketing in Wayanad district. The Communist peasant and trade union leadership was behind this for the welfare of the agrarian communities over profit motives (Ali & Sarma, 2021).

Munster's (2012) ethnographic notes show that the local practice of identifying farmers' suicide became additionally complicated after 2004 by the decision of the new LDF government to actually pay a compensation of 50,000 INR to all families with cases of farmers' suicides out of the Chief Minister's Distress Relief Fund (CMDRF). All families affected by suicide cases tried to get them acknowledged as farmers' suicides. In the beginning, as a populist measure, the criteria were handled loosely and compensation was paid freely. Later, both to be able to present the success of the other relief measures of the new state and union governments and to curb costs, the practice became more stringent. The debt still had to be the cause of suicide, but now it had to be an institutional credit (excluding debt with moneylenders) and the loan had to have been taken for agricultural purposes (excluding consumer loans). The CM fund is the most specific programme that targets only cases of farmers' suicide.

Munster (2015) in his ethnographic notes shows how in the run-up to the Kerala state assembly election in 2006, both 'agrarian crisis' and 'farmers' suicides' in their most dramatic manifestations were the major campaign issues of the Left Democratic Front under the leadership of P. Krishnaprasad, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) candidate for the Sultan Bathery constituency. In the election, the Left Democratic Front had won all three seats of the conservative (United Democratic Front) stronghold of Wayanad for the first time in history.

NABARD's research study on farm loan waivers in India shows that The Kerala Debt Relief Commission Act was introduced in the year 2006, during the time of the LDF government. It was just before the 2006 election that the Communist party announced a farm loan waiver amidst the circumstances of a large number of farmer suicides and indebtedness. The party won in the election in May 2006. The commission was set up and it continues to function even today. Land owners, agricultural labourers and tenants were eligible for loan waiver under this Act. However, there are criticisms about its long processing time, delays and limited coverage.

In 2007, the LDF government led by V S Achuthanandan had launched a demolition drive against resorts and hotels that violated laws and rules in Munnar on the ground that they were on plantation land, which cannot be put to any other use. The government's task force had observed that there was serious violation of environmental and land-use laws. The unprecedented move ended midway when the landholders moved the Kerala High Court. The government lost the case.

Kerala's LDF government enacted the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act of 2008 in the backdrop of paddy lands shrinking in the state at an alarming rate.

In 2010, the LDF unveiled a policy to convert the entirety of the state to organic farming within 10 years. The agriculture department made an order to ban all red and yellow chemical pesticides in the state in 2011. Thottathil (2012, pp. 33-34) brings out the information that despite the Left's attempt to protect Kerala from the market, market society's destructive forces manifested itself throughout the

state's agricultural arena in the 20th century, causing immense ecological transition within Kerala. These environmentally destructive outcomes in Kerala's agricultural environment propelled Kerala's farmers, activists and LDF government into creating an organic agricultural countermovement with an explicit environmental framework. When agrarian crisis hit the state in 1990s, an organic counter movement materialized from the legacies of the earlier struggles (p. 112). Bio-diversity board emerged as one of the key entities under the LDF government to lead this in Kerala. The bio-diversity board is an institution that upholds Kerala's radical and redistributive politics, and during its formative years it received significant directional guidance from the LDF.

In 2013, the government came up with a PPP model as a solution to drought in the state. It announced the intention to establish a company, Kerala Drinking Water Supply Company Ltd with 51 per cent of the equity to private sector. The government of Kerala would hold 26 per cent of the total equity of 2.60 crore and the Kerala Water Authority, 23 per cent. The company was being set up for constructing, developing, maintaining and operating community-based water filtration and drinking water supply schemes across the state. This company would provide dedicated small water supply schemes to housing colonies and small communities through decentralized water supply schemes on a PPP basis. Activists were angered at this response of the state government to the worsening drought conditions, bordering on famine. Also, the Left leader V.S. Achuthanandan vehemently opposed this move and said it was an attempt to privatize the natural resources of the state. The activists opined that with an average consumption of 30,000 litres a month for a family of five, even 10 paise per litre would be a huge burden on a middle-class family. This would bring about two sets of water users, one capable of paying high prices who would get cleaner water and the other paying the current rates to the Water Authority and getting the less clean water. The government order said the state would provide raw water. The activists raised the issue that this would eventually lead to privatisation of the water sources and wetlands. Later in 2017, replying to a notice for an adjournment motion on drought moved by the Congress-led UDF Opposition, the then Chief Minister of LDF government, Pinarayi Vijayan said the state would take all possible steps including cloud seeding to tackle the situation. The UDF also supported the state initiative in this regard, but staged a walkout in protest against the government's refusal to discuss the severe drought. However, the plan was not embraced citing the prohibitive cost and the touch-and-go nature of the results as reasons for putting the rain-making project on the back-burner.

Recent developments under the LDF government are a base price for 16 varieties of vegetables, launched on November 1, 2020. The base price is 20 percent above the production cost. In case the market price falls down below the base price, the government will procure the produce from farmers at base price. For example, at Wayanad, the procurement of bananas had already begun at a rate of Rs 24/kg at a time when the market price abruptly fell to Rs 12-17/kg. The ambiguity of a fruitful harvest and fluctuations in price prevent many farmers from venturing into novel initiatives in farming. Lack of a fixed income is also a petrifying thing to many. In this digital era, not many youngsters are interested in a career in agriculture. The government sees this as a distressful situation and in order to save farmers from these fears and dangers, it has decided to take a historic decision; to form a Farmers' Welfare Fund. The initiative is the first of its kind in India. Besides ensuring agricultural

development, the bill guards the entire family of the farmer. Pension for the farmer and his family, insurance cover, financial aid for medical treatments, aid for marriage, educational aid of children, aid for meeting expenses in case of death, etc. are the benefits covered through this initiative.

The state government has placed agriculture to be an important staging ground for recovery in the post-Covid economy. It announced a large-scale agricultural programme called “Subhiksha Keralam” in 2020; the programme emphasises production, value addition, and marketing (Kerala Development Report : Initiatives, achievements, and Challenges).

Recently, there were demands to the present LDF government made by the NCP's farmer organisation that it should focus on problems created by wild animals (ANI, 2022).

In 2021, the LDF government announced that the wild boars that attack the crops and human habitats can be killed. Permission to shoot wild boars was given to forest officials, other officials who can use guns and members of the public with a gun licence. GPS enabled radio collars have been meant to be fixed on the elephants to track their movements and alert the locals. These actions were envisaged after considering the suggestions put forth by environmentalists, farmers and the general public.

Recently, Agriculture Minister V.S. Sunil Kumar of the LDF government raised the issue that the international trade agreements signed by the Centre without taking the states into confidence are posing a serious crisis to farmers in Kerala. Volatile international market prices and the lowering of import barriers under free trade agreements had affected the domestic production and export of cash crops, including pepper and rubber. Import of cheap, sub-standard copra was also posing threats. The State Agricultural Prices Board and the WTO Cell under the Agriculture department envisaged a two-day national workshop on ‘International Agricultural Trade and Free Trade Agreements: Towards Livelihood Security of Farmers’ from June 26, to come up with an action plan to counter the impact of trade pacts on the State.

As these recent initiatives happened after the conducting of the field work, primary data analysis is not possible in these cases. Also, these are new and the impact is yet to happen. However, the schemes and their purpose seem to be promising in creating synergy.

The Responses of the United Democratic Front

Land reforms, minimum wages legislation, social security measures such as pension and unemployment assistance were initiated by both Communist and Congress led governments (Rajagopalan, 1993, p. 80). In most cases, the UDF government also initiated similar redistributive policies or followed what was already initiated by the Left.

Kerala's government, both the Left controlled and the Congress led coalitions, continued to promote pepper cultivation throughout Kerala after Independence, especially to take advantage of Kerala's historic competitive advantage in pepper production (Thottathil, 2012, p. 46). The political regimes of Kerala promoted the commodification of pepper with the hope of bettering the livelihoods of Kerala's farmers and the economy, and Kerala's economic and political position within India.

The growth in the number of rubber cultivators and their geographical concentration facilitated their mobilization both through local farmers' organizations and political parties. The Kerala Congress,

especially, has been championing the cause of rubber cultivators. Personal as well as political considerations account for this. A number of prominent leaders of the Kerala Congress had extensive holdings of rubber. Rubber growing districts are vital to the party (Rajagopalan, 1993, p. 120).

In the case of dairy co-operatives, the Congress party benefited the most, as local leaders of the party had taken the initiative in organizing dairy co-operatives in south Kerala. The popularity of the co-operatives is due to the opportunity it affords the political actors to maximize the political and personal benefits. It is a launching pad for the political career of upwardly mobile local politicians, and they can offer various incentives to their followers such as easy credit and subsidized inputs (Rajagopalan, p. 141).

The ban on both yellow and red pesticides was promoted even under the government of United Democratic Front. Even before the LDF government introduced the organic farming policy, in 2002, UDF came up with a proposal for organic initiatives in the state. Thottathil (2012, p. 105) observes that the unreliability of certified organic farming for export is what led to the demise of the earlier organic farming policy, devised under the UDF government.

The Jala Nidhi project, a scheme of World Bank that ensures drinking water availability in the rural areas, started at the time of the UDF government, and the Question Hour sessions of 2001-2006 reveal this. Initially, it started in Calicut, Malappuram, Thrissur and Palghat districts of Kerala. The successive government also embraced this programme and expanded it to other parts of the state.

The issue of drought and drinking water scarcity was taken up under 'calling attention' in the Kerala Legislative Assembly during the UDF tenure 2001 to 2006. The issue was introduced by the then people's representative N.D. Appachan of Kerala Congress, from the constituency of Sulthan Bathery. The predicament of the people having to travel for four to five kilometres every day to avail drinking water was presented by him. Mullenkolly and Pulpally, adjacent to the state of Karnataka, experienced severe drought and drinking water shortage. As a result, the agricultural crops had dried up. He made a demand to create new sources of water as well as grant compensation for those who lost crops due to drought. It was noticed that the then revenue minister had taken some initiatives to provide drinking water through tankers. Even the then revenue minister K.M. Mani too cautioned the government regarding the severity of drought in Wayanad district. Later, the issue of drought in the state further surfaced during the UDF tenure of 2011-2016. The discussion was concluded by saying that more discussions were required to avoid a drought and some efforts had been made. A.K. Antony ordered the closure of the Kerala Coca-Cola plant in 2004 citing drought and the non-availability of drinking water. He also requested the then Prime Minister A B Vajpayee to sanction more drought relief assistance citing the insufficiency of the funds and goods received. The crop loss crisis and severe drinking water shortage were brought to the Prime Minister's notice by him. During his chief ministership, the Kerala government announced its decision to undertake a massive rainwater harvesting scheme throughout the state. It was envisaged as the collective effort of people, local bodies, non-government organisations and other service organisations. The government also ordered compensation for drought-affected farmers.

Human- wildlife conflict is an alarming issue in many parts of Kerala. In Wayanad, the farming community frequently faces issues of wild animal threat and huge crop loss. During the UDF tenure in

2011, 8 Rapid Response Teams started functioning based in Wayanad, Kannur, Palghat, Ranni, Kozhikode, Mannarkkad and Peppara. The team was entrusted with driving back the crop raiding wild elephants and to manage other problems related to human-animal conflict.

In the 2011-2016 Question Hour session of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, the Opposition LDF raised issues of measures taken to tackle drinking water issues in drought affected areas. The UDF government, in reply, said that they had achieved borewell digging in such areas and started small scale distribution of drinking water with the drought relief fund.

An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Initiatives

In this section, the first part focuses on the criticism of the initiatives in the secondary literature. Then the analysis focuses on the effectiveness of the initiatives taken by different political regimes based on the secondary data. An analysis of how the research participants perceive and experience the responses of the political regimes/political parties is discussed in the second part of this section.

The existing academic works on the reforms of Kerala expose the several weaknesses of the initiatives at their implementation and effectiveness. Some of the challenges identified by the social scientists are:

- The dividing line between the CPM and the labour union is very thin; the union is an instrument in the hands of the party to realize its political goals rather than organize workers to advance their economic interests (Alexander, 1975).
- Dalits are turning out to be some of the greatest critics of the Kerala model. They feel that upper-caste dominance has not been fundamentally changed by Kerala's history of social reform and Communist rule. Dalits in Kerala are apparently more limited to the agricultural sector and are more landless than elsewhere in India: In other words, land reforms have largely passed them by because tenants, not agricultural labourers, have got land (Omvedt, 1998).
- Democratic decentralization has failed to generate sustainable livelihood opportunities, in either industry or agriculture. Even though local governments have a major role in resolving the agrarian question, it presupposes greater involvement of higher tiers of government and deeper cooperation among different tiers (Harilal & Eswaran, 2016).
- An interview with C.K Janu by J. Devika (2010) reveals that the CPI(M), in power in 2005, has responded with promises of land redistribution to Dalit and tribal people, most of which remain unfulfilled or unsatisfactory.
- The drawbacks identified in the Kerala Conservation of Paddy and Wetland Act and its implementation by Nair and Dhanraj (2016) is that there were incidents of widespread crop destruction led by powerful agricultural labour unions that targeted small and marginal farmers, while powerful farmers, who were using paddy lands for construction purposes, were left alone. In the name of incentivising paddy farming, the government pressurised the farmers to carry on food crop cultivation. This was irrespective of the farming conditions and the low profitability of paddy cultivation, putting artificial constraints on the freedom of farmers.
- Suicide by eight farmers and one agricultural worker in Idukki after a flood shows that the curse of the flood continues to haunt a large section of the peasantry in the state even after six months.

Analysis of the suicide cases reported since January first week reveals that the measures initiated by the government to provide compensation to the flood-hit have not reached a major chunk of the farmers. A major relief measure taken by the government was a moratorium on farmers' loans for one year. However, all the eight farmers who have committed suicide in the state had allegedly resorted to the extreme step following pressure from banks to repay the outstanding loans. Curiously, almost all the lenders who have defied the government order are financial institutions that are under the control of the state government. The LDF government has even refused to acknowledge the crisis. While the Minister for the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Tribes said he was not aware of the farmer's suicides, Agriculture Minister VS Sunil Kumar has sought to downplay them, saying they were not related to issues pertaining to farming and indebtedness (Devasia, 2019).

- Referring to Pillai (1992) J. Devika (2010) writes that the fruits of militant and successful Leftist trade unionism have often been reaped better by the upper castes. Citing the work of Oommen (1985) she observes that nor does it seem to have brought many Dalits into the leadership of the Left parties. The shift away from labour-intensive crops after the land reforms reduced the incomes of agricultural labourers, a development that the Left could hardly stem (Narayanan 2003), is cited in her work.
- Both LDF and UDF governments have promoted the use of chemical inputs to promote agricultural output (Thottathil, 2012, p. 67).
- In recent years, both the CPM and the Congress party have come to regard the dairy sector as a potentially rich source for generating political capital. The potential candidate's credential as a successful dairy farmer or as a dairy expert were irrelevant (Rajagopalan, 1993, pp. 304-305).
- When the Left Democratic Front government assumed power in the state in 2016, the state was in the grip of a severe heat wave for the first time in its history. The election manifesto of the LDF had stated that if elected to power, it would take urgent steps to conserve the Western Ghats with people's participation. However, the very first statement of chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan after taking charge was "We will not tolerate environmental extremism. We will go ahead with the Athirappalli Power Project" (Suresh & Suchitra, 2021, p. 78). Both the political fronts opposed the Gadgil report and joined hands with the agitators when it was proposed.

In 2013, Karshaka Pardesh Congress, the feeder organization of the Indian National Congress, staged agitations against the ignoring of farmer issues by the UDF government in its budget. The Kerala Pradesh Karshaka Congress had prepared a document titled 'Farmers' Fundamental Rights' and submitted it to the UDF government for consideration in the pre-budget discussions. The Karshaka Congress leadership got angry that most of their suggestions were ignored in the previous state budget. Lal Varghese Kalpakavadi, president of the organisation, said that "people who are solely dependent on agriculture are bearing the brunt of an increasingly anti-farmer establishment". He pointed out that the Karshaka Congress had convinced Finance Minister K M Mani in the pre-budget discussions about the need to start a Farmers' Welfare Board and a Special Farmers' Court that would help in the quick redressal of specific violations faced by farmers. Farmers' Welfare

Board was planned to provide financial assistance to farmers to meet their domestic needs in times of agrarian distress.

Flood rehabilitation and crop failures that have triggered suicides among the farmers were the key issues on the agenda of election campaigns in the Idukki constituency (Nambudiri, 2019). Hunger strikes were conducted by the leaders of both the political fronts against the issue of farmer suicides in the same district, just before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The political fronts were blaming each other for the growing number of farmer suicides in the post-flood period. However, a positive sign that emerged from both the fronts was their joint resolution against the three farm bills introduced by the Central government.

In Kerala, due to the farmer friendly policies of the LDF between 2006 and 2011, there was an almost complete end to farmers' suicides. But farmers' distress suicides have returned to Kerala after the fall of the Left-led government in 2011, states the 20th congress of the CPI(M) (2012). The newspaper reports also show that between 2009 and 2011, no farmer suicides were reported from Kerala by the state government. Even in the Question Hour sessions of the Kerala Legislative Assembly of this period, the Agricultural minister replied that the farmer suicides were almost nil. However, the National Crime Records Bureau data does not support this claim:

Graph 1: Number of suicides, self-employed (farming/agriculture) in Kerala 2000-2015



Source: Accidental Deaths and Suicides (publications from 2000-2015), National Crime records Bureau.

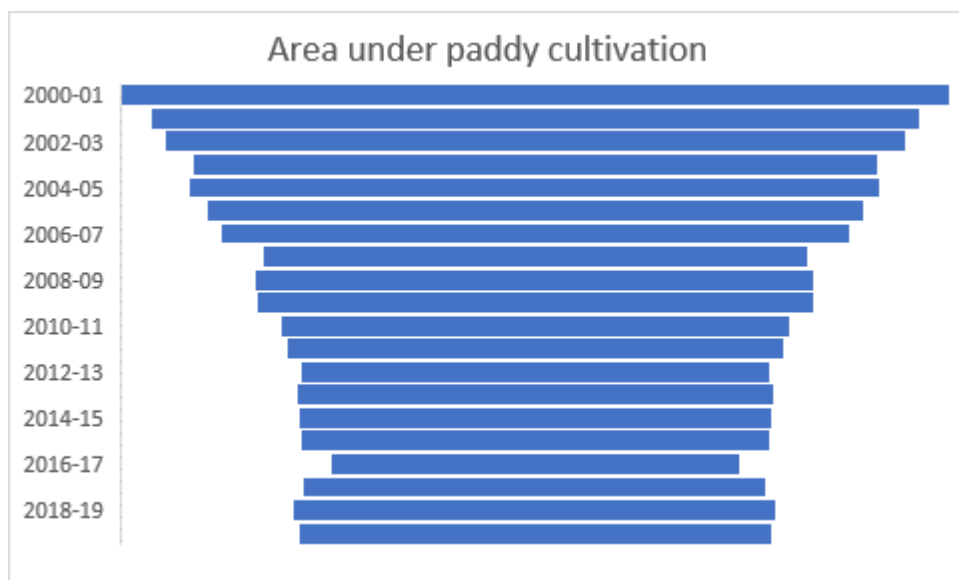
This data of NCRB is contradictory with the claims of the 20th congress of the CPI(M). From 2009 to 2011, the cases of farmer suicides were 896, 895 and 830 respectively. This is because indebtedness is not the sole reason considered for farmer suicide by the NCRB. A complete end as claimed is not evident from the NCRB data. There is a spike in the number of cases in 2012 during the UDF government. However, the numbers have reduced in the following years. A much lower value is seen in 2015 (210), during the UDF government. Recently, the previous opposition leader Ramesh Chennithala also claimed that the UDF tenure was largely free of farmer suicides. This claim does not

stand as per the above-mentioned data. However, post 2015, there was a reduction in the number of farmer suicides. It is true that over the years, there was gradual reduction in the number of farmer suicides and post 2015 there is a substantial reduction in the cases. The gradual decline of farmer suicides can be attributed to the long-term engagement of the government and civil society organizations along with the community in tackling the issue. Though the claims in the referred period do not stand, the efforts by different stakeholders cannot be negated. However, there is no reduction in the number of agricultural labourer suicides. There is a spike in such suicides in recent times. As discussed earlier, in all the agrarian discourse, agricultural labourers as a category of community have not received much attention.

Paddy area reduction

An analysis of the changes in paddy lands over a period questions the effectiveness of the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act, 2008.

Graph 2: Changes in the area under paddy cultivation in Kerala



Source: Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Kerala

The graph clearly shows that between a period of twenty years, there is a huge reduction of 43 per cent in the area under paddy cultivation. Even after the introduction of the Act in 2008, the declining trend has not reversed fully. However, after a sharp decline in 2016-17, there was some improvement in the following years except in 2018-19. The 2018 to 19 declines can be attributed to the floods. The improvements can be attributed to the recent paddy promotion activities of the government. Where have these paddy lands gone? Was the Act effective in its implementation? There are policy loopholes that allow conversion without proper monitoring, say Monish Jose and Martina Padmanabhan (2015). Chithra K.P. (2016) in her analysis of the 2015 amendment to the 2008 Act and The Kerala Finance (No 2) Act, 2015, passed by the Kerala State Legislative Assembly opines that the Act gives power to the district collector to regularize the unauthorized conversion or reclamation of paddy land

made before the commencement of 2008 Act by recovering a fee from the concerned person. In the last few decades, Kerala has lost many hectares of wetlands and paddy fields legally to industry, infrastructure and housing and illegally to benami transactions in the burgeoning land market.

Under every political regime, several initiatives are taken to prevent the human-animal conflict such as solar power fencing, elephant-proof trench, elephant-proof wall, stone pitched trench, bio fence, Kayyala (Malayalam word for wall) and others. Besides this, earlier in this chapter, the appointment of a Rapid Response Team was also mentioned. However, the data shows that the crop loss due to wild animals has not reduced. The data for human-wildlife conflict is available only for the years 2016, 2018 and 2019. The data for 2015 only shows the crop loss (6583) and property loss (91) was a separate category. The forest report before that does not have a section on human-wildlife conflict.

Table 1: Crop and property damage due to wild animal disturbance, number of applicants and compensation paid in Kerala.

Year	Crop damage and property loss	Number of applicants	Compensation paid (in Lakhs)
2016	5154	5154	382.94
2018	5703	7769	486.46
2019	6631	6933	525.55

Source: Kerala Forest and Wildlife department- Forest Statistics

The district-wise data for crop damage and property loss is not available. Wayanad falls under the northern forest division which is categorized as NC-Kannur.

Table 2: Number of applicants in NC-Kannur for crop and property damage and compensation paid

Year	Number of applicants	Compensation paid (in Lakhs)
2016	3130	134.02
2018	4293	192.96
2019	3241	212.99

Source: Kerala Forest and Wildlife department- Forest Statistics

Table 1 makes it clear that even after several initiatives, the number of cases related to wild animal disturbances and crop loss have not come down. Besides, in 2019, there is a surge in the number of cases. The Kerala Forest Statistics show that elephants and wild boars are the main threat in this regard. There are certain contradictions in this data. In 2018 and 2019, the number of applicants is more than the number of cases. Among all the forest divisions, the northern division which includes Wayanad has reported a major number of cases, evident from the number of applicants for compensation in table 2. In both sets of data, an increase in the compensation amount is witnessed. However, even after a slight reduction in the number of applicants in the northern region, the compensation amount has not reduced. Crop loss due to wild animal disturbances is one of the major problems faced by the farming community in Kerala, particularly in Wayanad. The data shows that the initiatives have not produced effective results. Forest falls under the concurrent list of the Constitution. The issue requires the joint efforts of central and state governments. Many times, it is the poor

response of the forest department that is causing a worry for the people. As reported by the respondents, the political parties do conduct protests on these issues. Yet, there are no solid outcomes. There is a need to change in the attitude of the forest officials as perceived by the surveyed households.

Field observations on the role of political regimes/political parties

The pilot visit to Wayanad gave the picture that Periya, one of the study areas, is a communist party village as only red flags and communist party symbols were present in the village. The interview with one of the leaders of the Adivasi Kshema Samithi (AKS), from the Kurichya tribe confirmed this belief. The conversation with him revealed how the Communist Party of India (Marxist) facilitated the mobilization of Adivasi communities in Periya to unite under AKS to struggle for the cause of their group, majority of whom are agricultural labourers. He remembered vividly how in the 1980s, finally they could achieve a pension scheme for the agricultural labourers, after a prolonged period of struggle. He was happy with the LDF government about achieving that for the welfare of agricultural labourers. Hence, for the next visit, the researcher planned to ask other Adivasi members and village farmers about the role of AKS and the initiatives of the CPI(M). However, the responses received from a majority of the other members of Adivasi communities were not in favour of the Communist party. Many were angry on the issue of the cases against their clan members due to occupancy of big landlords' lands with the advice of the party as part of Micha Bhoomi Struggle. They feel that many have done the act with the party's advice and later on, the party did not extend any help at the time of legal proceedings. As observed earlier, Periya is certainly a Left leaning village, but in a party village not necessarily everybody supports the actions of the party.

None of the research participants were aware about the presence of the Rapid Response Team meant to respond to human-wildlife conflict. Even after the initiation of several measures by different political regimes, the issue of wild animals destroying the crops of the farming community has not been resolved or reduced. As many as 66 (38 percent) of research participants who are either marginal farmers, small farmers or marginal farmers cum agricultural labourers reported wild animal disturbances as one of the major causes of their distress. The animals like elephants, wild boars and monkeys cause continued tension as they destroy the crops. Elephants are the major crop destroyers in some of the areas of Periya village. The entire village of Kappikkalam in Padinharethara Grama Panchayat faces continued disturbances of monkeys and wild boars. As a result, it is nearly impossible for the farmers to continue with cultivation in this region. It was observed that many of the small farmers are either converting their land for resort construction or selling it to the real estate dealers for resort purpose. This is highly probable in Wayanad as the district is one of the major tourist destinations in the state. In the case of marginal farmers, they seek other sources of income as construction workers, working in nearby shops like hotels, textile mills etc. In Mullenkolly, it is the presence of tigers and leopards in the summer months that are causing a threat to their lives as well as to livestock like goats and cattle. The presence of these animals also prevents them from going to the field and engaging in agricultural activities. In Periya, the research participants reported that after protest by the people, fencing was done, but it was damaged within two weeks by the elephants. In Padinharethara, no mechanism is

provided to tackle the disturbances of monkeys and wild boars. The people do not have a right to shoot these animals. Only a gun that produces a loud sound is allowed, and the animals have become accustomed to the sound. The demand is for some more effective measures like increasing the height and width of these walls and preventing the tigers from coming to the human habitat.

It was observed that regarding Kshemanidhi, the agricultural labour pension initiated by the LDF government, the people had mixed experiences. Out of the 36 full-time agricultural labourers interviewed, 10 were having membership in Kshemanidhi. Among the marginal farmer cum agricultural labourers, 53.1 per cent were the members of Kshemanidhi. There is a separate pension scheme for framers as well. The detailed information is given in table 3.

Table 3: Number of research participants who are members of Kshemanidhi

Operational Category	Yes	No
Agricultural Labourers	10(21.3%)	26(16%)
Marginal farmer cum agricultural labourers	26(55.3%)	23(14.1%)
Marginal farmers	10(21.3%)	91(55.8%)
Small farmers	1(2.1%)	22(13.5%)
Group framing	0(0%)	1(0.6%)
Total	47	163

Source: based the field survey conducted by the research scholar

However, there were weaknesses like late payment of the fund, and about not receiving monetary help during daughter's marriage and childbirth. There are some others who got financial assistance for daughter's marriage and for their children who achieved a meritorious result in the SSLC exam. The respondents were of the view that the amount (current amount is Rs.1100) is enough to meet the food requirements given the efficient distribution by the PDS; however, at the time of health issues, the amount was meagre. Also, a recipient of one social welfare scheme cannot avail another one. At present, the amount of old age pension is Rs.1500 without any previous deposit. The research participants reported timely payment of old age pension scheme. All these have contributed to the preference for old age pension availability by a majority of the respondents who were above the age of 60.

The basic necessities like housing and food requirements were met by all the respondents of the research, thanks to the housing schemes especially for the poor and the Adivasi communities initiated by both the LDF and UDF governments in the state. Under the Public Distribution System, that functions well in the state, the marginalized are ensured safety of their food requirements. However, the basic necessity of safe drinking water is still a worry for many in Wayanad, especially the people of Mullenkolly Grama Panchayat. In many parts of Wayanad, the Jala Nidhi project is facilitating water supply. However, the reliability of water through the Jala Nidhi is not experienced by the respondents in three of the studied grama panchayats. In that case, the research participants reported walking for miles for fetching water. If the water is not available for drinking purpose even, it is not possible to pursue agricultural activities as the research participants complained. Some of the respondents reported cases of elephants damaging the pipes which provide water from the forest. The issues of drought and

monsoon vagaries are still a cause of concern for the farming population which says the government has not taken up any constructive programmes. As many as 112 (53.3 per cent) of the research participants mentioned water facility as their immediate concern. The issue of lack of working days for the agricultural labourers were never in discussion.

Climate-based crop insurance is not finding any scope among the distressed farmers as they find it difficult to insure crops with their debts and inadequate income.

The loan waiver scheme had benefited 42 of the respondents between a period of 1980 and 2019 (including the loan waiver scheme of the central government in 1980s and 1990s). Out of these beneficiaries, 15 of them reported of having to struggle to get the loan due to the indifferent attitude of officials in the village office and repeated visits. Four of the respondents reported filing and not receiving the benefit. When the researcher inquired about this in the Krishi bhavan, it was learnt that sometimes there are delays with some applications. One of the marginal farmers from Nenmeni reported visiting of debt relief commission a week before the researcher's visit. Several of the villagers received the benefit but his was not considered as there were people with more issues. Still the commission asked him to try the next time.

The marginal and small farmers reported not getting any information on time regarding schemes and their benefits as the benefits would be already taken by the people in the close circle of the local level institutions. There is a clear nexus going on between the grassroot level institutional authorities, political parties and rich farmers. In this way, the marginalized are even denied awareness of the schemes available for them at the grassroot level. Rajagopalan (1993, pp. 22,33) argues that the interest group process in the polity biases resource allocation towards dominant groups that have access to state power and away from politics (p. 22). Policy is usually formulated in close elite groups, to which the demand group may not have adequate access (p. 38).

Political parties in Wayanad

The last three Lok Sabha general elections witnessed a hefty support for the INC in Wayanad. Wayanad has three state legislative assembly constituencies namely Kalpetta, Sulthan Bathery and Mananthavady. The major political parties in Wayanad are INC, CPI(M) and JD(S). The State Legislative Assembly elections witness fluctuations across support for these major political parties. The Janata Dal (Secular) leader Shreyamskumar was representing the Kalpetta constituency for a period of ten years since 2006. His alliance with the UDF in 2016 and LDF in 2021 witnessed a defeat in the constituency. Mananthavady constituency usually sees a tussle between CPI(M) and INC. The Sulthan Bathery constituency has been supporting INC for the past several years, except for being twice tilted towards CPI(M). The party candidate had a tight competition with the candidate of CPI(M) in the last election. The NDA candidate CK Janu, one of the prominent Adivasi leaders of Kerala, also received a considerable number of votes in 2016 and 2021 elections. There are other political parties like BSP, SP, SDPI and WPOI that are active in Wayanad.

Recently, actor-turned-politician Suresh Gopi, a former member of BJP in Raya Sabha (nominated) presented the condition of the tribals especially the agricultural labourers in the Rajya Sabha. He himself visited the district and observed several issues like lack of drinking water, poor

condition of the Adivasi huts among several other miseries. He said tribal life was pathetic in the state, especially in Wayanad. He along with P.C. Thomas of Kerala Congress played a major role in getting the district into the list of aspirational districts though the state government was hesitant initially in 2018.

An interview with one of the representatives of the INC provided information about the party's activities among the farmers and agricultural labourers. The party identified lack of insurance, insufficient price for the produce, wild animal disturbance, climate change and lack of irrigation facilities as the major causes of worry for the farmers and lack of working days for the agricultural labourers. The initiatives under the party are incorporation of Thozhilurappu (MGNREGA) in agricultural regions, initiation of interest-free loans through co-operative banks for the farmers and the facilitation of self-help groups and small farmers groups and efforts to extend the cultivation of short-term crops like paddy. During the pandemic, the party focused to provide medical assistance and food supply to the farming community. The representative opined that the farmer suicides had reduced over time; however, they were not completely absent. The initiation of Thozhilurappu helped to control the farmer suicides to some extent. The party made necessary interventions in settler areas as well as party stronghold areas among the Pepper Samithi and Padasekhara Samithi. They had interactions with civil society organizations. The interest-free loans were initiated during the Oommen Chandy government of 2011-2016. The farmers would be given loan as per the land area possessed and the amount was up to Rs. 3 lakhs. This loan is known as KCC. This is provided to those who have land above 10 cents³. Another representative opined that the loan is not taken by those who are not aware about it. Mostly the bank informs the farmers. This loan can be renewed every year with a minimum service charge. The interest that is made free for farmers in co-operative banks is borne by the government.

One of the CPI(M) party members of Mullenkolly said that the party conducted initiatives like planting more trees to address climate change. An initiative was started to harvest rain water but was not worked out in a persistent manner. The party now realizes the importance of rain water harvesting which will be beneficial in the summer months.

The interview with the CPI(M) area secretary of Panamaram threw light on the party's activities. The major causes of distress identified by the party are lack of sufficient price for the produce, wild animal disturbances (this is increasing, especially attacks by the elephants and wild boars), and climate change. There are no areas in Wayanad free of disturbances of wild boars and monkeys. One of the reasons for the increase in elephant disturbances in the months of June- July is the plentifulness of jack fruit. Even other fruits like passion fruit and avocado are mainly wasted, but have a high market value outside. Hence, the party is planning a food park as part of the Wayanad package. Even if the farmers overcome all the difficulties to bring out the produce, there will not be sufficient price. The party has done many protests about wild animal disturbances, adopted different measures like electric fencing. However, the animals especially the elephants have overcome all the hurdles. Mankulam model fencing (hanging fencing) was also a failure. The rail fencing in the model of Karnataka adopted lately with much expense also proved to be futile. There were initiatives to build strong stone walls. All the efforts have been proven to be lacking. There is an overpopulation of these animals over the last 15 years. Ten years back, only in a few pockets of Wayanad wild animals caused

³ Those who have ten cents of land will get Rs, 15,000 and those with 2 acres of land Rs 3 lakh.

problems. Now the situation has changed. Also, to find a solution to the pricing issues, the party conducted several protests. Above all, the Brahmagiri Development Society was started with the party initiative. The shift towards alternative agriculture related occupations like dairy and chicken is helping many. The prices of the products are almost stable. Kidari park at Pulpally was started by the party to provide quality cattle to the needy. This was a deviation from the traditional cultivation. The coffee has less value but the raw material when it turns to be branded packets like Nestle and Bru, has a value of Rs.1000 per kilogram. The only alternative is the cultivators of coffee should bring the final product in the market. Brahmagiri helps the farmers in this by branding the coffee as Malabar Coffee by giving an extra Rs.10 to the cultivators. During the time of pandemic, the value of the crops was much less. The price of tapioca (easily perishable) had gone down to Rs.2. The party collected the produce by giving more value than the market and distributed it among the households of Wayanad for free. When people were in quarantine, they could not feed the cattle properly. The party found a solution to this by providing feeding grass. The Milma outlets reduced the amount of milk taken during the pandemic and the party intervened in that. To increase the demand for milk, the party directly contacted the anganwadis (kids' nursery), schools and migrant workers. Another major work taken up by the party was food supply among the people. There are few facilities in Wayanad to make value added products of milk. The party is actively taking all these issues into consideration. Seeing all these difficulties, the government had introduced the Wayanad package of Rs. 200 crore. The party representative opined that the farmer suicides in Wayanad were almost nil. Earlier, it was on a daily basis and as a response the Karshaka Sangam of the party took the initiative under the leadership of Krishnaprasad (before he became the MLA of Bathery) and conducted a series of protests. The end result was the creation of the Kadaswasa Commission (Debt Relief commission). There was a huge waiver of loans during the pandemic period. Also, in collaboration with NABARD, agricultural loans (interest free) were given to the marginal and small farmers through co-operative banks. There was also gold loan at four per cent interest rate. All these had facilitated in reducing the farmer suicides in Wayanad. Recently, there was distribution of 10 tractors to Padasekhara Samithi in Sulthan Bathery with the help of the municipality. However, the party does not have any collaborative programmes with NGOs like WSSS and Shreyas as they are organizations under the aegis of church. The party representative perceived that the organizations like WSSS and Shreyas also actively work for the farming population though they are more area specific.

A comparison between the regimes

The analysis in this paper on the role of political regimes in addressing the issue of agrarian distress shows that there are differences in the approach of the political regimes of the state to the issue of agrarian distress. With the introduction of several of the popular initiatives, the Left has a more sustained long-term approach to the issue than the UDF. However, there are implementation weaknesses in several of these initiatives as identified in the analysis. For example, the organic farming policy envisaged long back in 2010 with a vision of accomplishment within ten years had not achieved the target. Field data showed that the widely accepted agricultural labourers' pension also suffers from issues like late payment, not receiving the benefits of the scheme by some of the respondents and

inadequate amount of pension. Though UDF had also initiated and worked along with the concerns of the people, many times the sustained efforts culminating in solid policy were lacking. For example, the UDF envisaged an organic farming policy before the LDF government introduced it, but the idea was dropped in between. Their responses, in several cases, were more concentrated on the immediate available solution to the concerns raised and had a short-term nature. The drought relief fund with repeated efforts was sought from the Centre by the then Chief Minister AK Antony in 2004 as Wayanad witnessed severe drought in 2003. There was no permanent long-term solution or policy derived for such a situation following that but immediate ways to console the distressed population was adopted. This is not to negate some of the long-sustained policies they have initiated. The MGNREGA initiated by the Congress at the Centre is still something the UDF feels proud about. Even the respondents were contented with such an initiative though there were periods of dormancy and late payment of the scheme during the field work. The resuming of the scheme during the pandemic period in full vigour caused happiness among several of the respondents contacted later. The sustained nature of bringing out policies by mobilizing the people is one of the reasons for stable party supporters of Left being the party in power for a long time in the state even when it was losing its hold in other states of India.

Summary

The political regimes, especially the Left, had initiated several agrarian policies in Kerala in the past and were at the forefront in the mobilization of agricultural labourers. The United Democratic Front too had initiated several policies and programmes. However, the analysis of the initiatives shows that the interventions were done with multiple goals. It was not completely aimed at the upliftment of the marginalized sections but for the growth of the party and party members as well. Yet, the initiatives created synergy as several benefited the people and witnessed progress from their previous status. It is true that the impact is not felt equally across the population but certainly brought some changes.

Though there are several schemes initiated, what affects the perceptions of the targeted groups in a negative manner is the way the schemes are implemented. The political regimes over a period have certainly realized a majority of the issues faced by the farming communities. The implementation side of the schemes needs to be addressed properly to sustain the image of the efforts of the political regimes.

Some of the basic requirements like housing and food are sufficiently met by the initiatives of these political regimes through different housing schemes and an effective public distribution system. However, the secondary data as well as field experiences show that the most worrying variables of agrarian distress like drought, flood and wild animal disturbances are not sufficiently addressed. The mechanisms devised to respond to human-wildlife conflict and subsequent crop loss have proved to be feeble in implementation as there is no explicit reduction in the number of cases. Also, there is a need for more effective solutions to this. Drought and flood related concerns of the farming population of Wayanad is still an area to be effectively responded to by the government. Apart from some of the compensation schemes of which there is poor coverage of the distressed, there are no effective schemes for coping with the extremities of climate change. Access to drinking water during the drought days are conveyed to be the major dreams of many in Wayanad today.

The agricultural labourers' pension, one of the biggest original contributions of the state, is also not without criticisms due to the delay in payments and clumsiness in its dispersal of benefits. Even after the introduction of the Paddy and Wetland Conservation Act in the state, the paddy fields are fast disappearing with the growing number of construction sites and other profiteering businesses. Even after the initiation of the organic farming policy, the chemical-based agricultural practices have not reduced, which has become worrisome for the ecology of the state. It is not an argument in favour of a sudden shift to organic farming, which has proved to be disastrous considering the case of our neighbour nation, Sri Lanka. The policy was initiated long back in the state in 2010 and envisaged to attain the goal by 2020. However, the state has not reached anywhere near the completion of this agenda.

It was also noticed that in the Question Hour session of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, the questions regarding agrarian distress are usually addressed as 'How many of the farmers committed suicide due to indebtedness'? This question is certainly biased as the only criteria they consider for farmers suicide is indebtedness. The crop failure and the resultant factors like depression are ignored in such cases. Also, agricultural labourer as a category with suicides due to distress is often forgotten by the political regimes these days.

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Appendix

Figure 1:

Year	Number of suicides, self-employed (farming /agriculture)
2000	1295
2001	1035
2002	1533
2003	1583
2004	903
2005	1118
2006	1124
2007	1232
2008	820
2009	896
2010	895
2011	830
2012	1081
2013	972
2014	807
2015	210

Figure 2:

Year	Area under paddy cultivation
2000-01	347455
2001-02	322368
2002-03	310521
2003-04	287340
2004-05	289974
2005-06	275742
2006-07	263529
2007-08	228938
2008-09	234265
2009-10	234013
2010-11	213187
2011-12	208160
2012-13	197277
2013-14	199611
2014-15	198159
2015-16	196870
2016-17	171398
2017-18	194235
2018-19	202907
2019-20	198180

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