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Labour Politics and Industrial Decline: A Historical Analysis of the Coir Industry in Alappuzha

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Abstract: Kerala's rural economy has historically been shaped by coconut fibre-based coir production, an industry that acquired an organised industrial form under European commercial intervention during the colonial period. The establishment of India's first coir factory in Alappuzha in 1859 and the formation of the Travancore Labour Association in 1922 marked key moments in the evolution of production and labour organisation. Despite recent improvements in output and export performance, the coir sector has experienced a sustained decline in employment, revealing a structural contradiction that remains insufficiently explained. This study examines the historical and political-economic roots of this paradox by foregrounding labour politics as a central explanatory factor. Employing a historical-analytical framework, the research analyses working conditions, wage structures, welfare regimes, and patterns of labour mobilisation under both Congress- and Communist-led governments in Kerala. The study draws on archival sources, secondary scholarship, policy documents, and fourth-estate materials, and applies binary component analysis to identify latent correlations between union activity, state policy interventions, and industrial performance. The findings demonstrate that recurrent labour disputes and union-led agitations significantly weakened productivity, employment stability, and long-term sustainability. Under Communist regimes, rigid trade union practices constrained labour's adaptive capacity to technological change, while under Congress governments the industry became a site of political contestation marked by disruptive protests during phases of attempted modernization. These dynamics contributed to the displacement of nearly four lakh traditional workers and the relocation of production to neighbouring states. By moving beyond dominant explanations centred on modernization or cost-profit dynamics, this article offers a critical reassessment of Kerala's coir industry by placing labour politics at the core of its historical decline and contemporary challenges.

Keywords: Coir Industry, Industrial Relations, Labour Politics, Trade Unions, Labour Movements etc

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Introduction

Production of coir and coir-based products has historically served as a subsistence occupation for low-income rural communities in Kerala, particularly in Alappuzha. Known as the “golden fibre of Kerala” for its distinctive texture and organic quality, coir is derived from coconut husk and has been used for nearly six millennia. While coir featured in early maritime technologies and trade networks—especially in the Persian Gulf—the industry acquired an organised industrial character only in the nineteenth century under European commercial intervention.

The availability of abundant coconut husk, extensive inland water systems for retting, and a supply of inexpensive labour led to the concentration of coir production in the coastal regions of Travancore and Cochin, especially Alappuzha. In 1859, James Darragh established India’s first coir factory at Alleppey with European capital, triggering the rapid expansion of factory-based production across Kerala. By the mid-twentieth century, Alappuzha had emerged as the core of the industry, housing a majority of the state’s coir units and attracting both European firms—such as Aspinwall & Co.—and major indigenous enterprises. The industry largely depended on workers drawn from economically and socially marginalised communities.

Harsh working conditions, low wages, and exploitative labour practices under colonial capital fostered early labour mobilisation. The formation of the Travancore Labour Association (TLA) in 1922 marked a decisive shift in class consciousness among coir workers. Initially functioning within the limits of contemporary social reform movements, the TLA later evolved into a militant organisation under socialist and communist influence, actively participating in broader labour struggles and campaigns for employment legislation and welfare rights.

By the mid-1930s, coir workers’ movements became integrated into Kerala’s wider left-oriented labour politics, culminating in the electoral victory of the first communist government in 1957. However, trade unionism in the coir sector subsequently developed complex alignments with ruling political regimes. While unions played a key role in securing labour rights, their increasing politicisation, resistance to mechanisation, and recurrent industrial disputes contributed to declining productivity and employment. From the 1990s onward, rising production costs, labour shortages, limited technological adaptation, and intense inter-state competition accelerated the contraction of cooperative and small-scale units, pushing much of the industry towards industrial stagnation and eventual decline.

The Research Question

Despite Kerala hosting the country’s largest coir industry, violent strikes and excessive trade unionism have contributed to the displacement of nearly four lakh traditional coir workers and the relocation of production to neighbouring states. While modernization and mechanization have driven industrial growth elsewhere, resistance from politicized trade unions in Kerala has

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constrained technological adaptation and industrial stability. This study examines how trade union practices and strike politics under Congress- and Communist-led governments have adversely affected productivity, profitability, and employment in Alappuzha's coir industry, leading to its structural decline.

Objectives

The coir industry is performing better than expected in terms of output and exports, but the employment opportunities for coir workers have decreased and many have been forced out of the sector. Using the question "progress or decline," the study assesses the state of the coir operations in Alappuzha in this socio-economic reality, concentrating on macro-level trade union politics and micro-level economics. The goal of the study was to pinpoint the causes of the industry's downfall in Alappuzha and its relocation of its manufacturing base to other states. In this regard, the potential for modernization and mechanization will also be looked at. Conclusions will be made based on binary factor analysis (Congress and Communist regimes period) of the working circumstances, work structure, wages structure, and benefits for workers.

Methodology

The status of the coir industry and the impact of trade union politics are examined using the historical method. Historical methodology looks at a range of primary and secondary historical sources and records in order to gather data. Archival materials, research studies, and reports from the fourth estate are the main sources used to evaluate the state of the coir industry, the origins and development of trade union politics among coir workers, the degree of influence left-wing trade unions had over coir workers, the nature and motives of strikes in the coir industry and their categorization as worker-right and politically motivated strikes, and the trade unionism within the coir industry during communist and congress led governments time. Binary component analysis is used in this study to assess the differences in trade union activity, particularly that of the left trade unions, in Kerala between the communist and congress governments. Binary component analysis, nonhierarchical research based on the reduction of binary space dimension, makes it possible to find hidden correlations in binary data, which is helpful for information retrieval through intelligent data mining, data compression, and data comparison.

Definition of Key Terms

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Alappuzha: The 19th century port city that became a district of Kerala on August 17, 1957, was the birthplace of the coir industry in India as well as the hub for the manufacture and export of coir worldwide.

Coir Industry: An agro-based exporting sector that uses several types of coir yarn and coir fiber produced from coconut husk to produce mats, matting, and other value-added products.

Traditional Coir Industry: In general terms, the pre-modern coir industry refers to the industrial practices up until 1990 that used non-mechanized production techniques using wooden looms or semi-mechanized loom segments that mostly relied on manpower.

Left Wing Trade Unions: The CITU and other tributary workers unions that are active in the coir industry and meddle in matters pertaining to coir workers, all fall under the direct supervision and influence of the Communist Party.

UDF: The United Democratic Front (UDF) is a political coalition that was founded in Kerala in 1979 and is presently the opposition in the state legislature. It was led by the Indian National Congress and has won several elections for state legislatures.

LDF: Since 2016, Kerala has been ruled by the Left Democratic Front (LDF), a left-wing political coalition headed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Since its founding in 1980, it has triumphed in six of the last ten elections.

Review of Literature

Scholarly inquiries into the origins and evolution of India's coir industry reveal a long historical trajectory shaped by ecological endowments, colonial capital, and labour relations. Early historical studies trace the domestication of the coconut palm and the use of coir fibre to ancient maritime economies, where it served purposes such as caulking, rope-making, and ship construction (Uragoda, 1975; Jose, 1977; Meera, 1983). Although coir production has deep antiquity, scholars agree that its transformation into a globally traded commodity occurred only in the nineteenth century with the expansion of European commercial networks (Thomas Isaac, 1983; Jeffrey, 1984; Maloney, 1993). Roy (2014) and Darshana (2016) further situate this transition within the broader political economy of colonial industrialization and export-oriented production.

Historical accounts note that the British coir industry emerged in 1840, while India's first coir factory was established in Alappuzha in 1859 by James Darragh, catalysing the spatial concentration of coir production in Kerala (Sharma, 1921; Venkataraman, 1941; Nimmi, 1996; Muneeswaran, 2022). Sharma (1921) provides a detailed overview of pre-independence coir production and export patterns, whereas Venkataraman's seminal work documents the regional specificity and commercial organisation of the industry in Malabar. These studies collectively highlight how colonial demand for inexpensive insulation materials and India's integration into British trade networks positioned Kerala as the epicentre of global coir production.

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A second strand of literature focuses on technological stagnation and structural inefficiencies within the Kerala coir industry. Studies by Thomas Isaac (1982, 1984, 1986, 1992), Mehta (1980), Stoneman (1987), Malecki (1997), Rajan and Kumar (2004), and Indu (2014) identify persistent reliance on outdated technologies, labour shortages, health hazards, weak marketing systems, and policy-induced protection of traditional practices as major constraints on productivity and competitiveness. Recent work by Florence and Padath (2024a) extends this analysis by demonstrating how delayed and uneven technological modernization in Alappuzha has intensified labour displacement rather than facilitating inclusive industrial growth.

Labour relations and trade unionism constitute a dominant theme in the literature on Kerala's industrial development. A wide body of scholarship examines the emergence of trade unions, left-wing politics, and militant labour movements, particularly in the coir sector (Jose, 1977; Patil, 1982; Mathew, 1984; Pillai, 1986; Subrahmanian, 1990; Shyam Sundar, 1999; Srivastava, 2001; Ratnam, 2007; Rao, 2007; Sodhi, 2013; Sen, 2013; Lenin Lal, 2016; Rashmi, 2018). These studies argue that while labour movements successfully secured wages, welfare measures, and employment protections, they simultaneously transformed industrial spaces into sites of prolonged conflict, often impeding modernization and capital reinvestment.

Recent empirical studies deepen this critique by foregrounding labour displacement and structural decline. Pratheesh (2021; 2021a; 2021b) documents work alienation, declining employment, and deteriorating livelihoods among coir workers in Alappuzha, while Pratheesh and Nair (2022a) empirically link trade union rigidity and policy inertia to large-scale labour displacement. Pratheesh (2025a) further demonstrates how mechanization-driven export growth has benefited capital accumulation without ensuring employment security. Pratheesh (2025) and Pratheesh (2025, HISTORICAL) situate the coir industry within broader processes of peripheral industrialization, colonial modernity, and urban transformation.

Complementary regional and socio-cultural studies, including Florence (2010) and Padath (2025a), contextualize coir labour within fragile coastal livelihood systems, highlighting intersections between industrial decline, gender roles, and community vulnerability. Together, the literature reveals a critical gap: while modernization and labour welfare are extensively examined, the contradictory role of politicized trade unionism in shaping industrial decline remains under-theorized. This study addresses this gap by positioning labour politics as a central explanatory framework for understanding the contemporary crisis of the coir industry in Alappuzha.

Genesis of Labour Movements in Coir Industry

Efficient and satisfactory labor is crucial for industry growth and development. A labor movement among Alappuzha's coir workers emerged in the 1920s due to tensions between local labor force and European owners of the city's coir factories. Trade unions, such as the

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Travancore Labour Group, have evolved to become legitimate institutions with significant influence on the nation's economic and political climate (T. M. Thomas Isaac, 1986). The Travancore Labour Association was formed to address the challenges of colonial capitalism in the coir industry. Interactions with specific capitalist environments shaped the sector's expansion during and after World War I, creating a special situation for the coir industry (Jeffrey, 1984).

Although exports suffered during the war, production went on. Following World War I, the European lower middle class chose coir floor coverings over other materials because they were less expensive during the Great Depression, which led to an increase in demand for coir products in global markets (Sandesara, 1988). Despite the enormous demand for coir products, the market surplus caused their prices to fall. While value increased by just 28% throughout that time, output jumped from 47% to 80%. After the war, the sector experienced a severe labor shortage due to rising exports and demand. To reach the higher output targets, more workers were employed, but their wages were reduced. Workers in the coir manufacturing industry witnessed a 45% salary drop during this time. The cost of food and other needs had skyrocketed then, but worker pay had decreased by 45% from 1920's. The coir industry's capitalist-proletarian friction was heightened by these circumstances.

The working class was also impacted by the socialist developments in Soviet Russia and the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921, especially coir workers which made up the bulk of the Ezhava caste. As mentioned in the article's introduction, P. K. Bava organized workers at "Empire Coir Works" and other coir companies in the port city of Alappuzha, which led to the formation of the Travancore Labour Association (TLA) in 1922. The organization's primary objective, aside from the early social welfare programs, was to unite laborers in opposition to colonial injustices. The TLA started a library and literacy program in 1924 to provide coir workers with a sense of community and pride in their labour. The association welcomed new members regardless of gender or social status, and its emphasis on worker welfare and socialization led to many coir workers joining.

In 1927, the organization arranged a march to commemorate the introduction of the Trade Union Bill. The Travancore Labour Association grew significantly as a union in Travancore starting in 1928, and it later extended its reach to Chungam Bridge, Muhamma, Ambalappuzha, Aroor and Cherthala. Travancore is the most literate region in India, with an estimated 75% literacy rate among factory employees in the late 1930s due to the influence of TLA (T K Sankara Menon, 1933). Under the political slogan "Workers of the world, unite!", the Travancore Labour Association brought together laborers from different classes and religions employed in the coir industry, promoting a united working class. The socialist political wing's presence in a coir plant undoubtedly contributed to the anti-capitalist feeling and increased consciousness of class throughout the coir industrial corridor that stretched from Cherthala to Alappuzha.

The Travancore Labour Association played a significant role in both the freedom struggle and the Abstention Movement (Jose, 1977). The association first collaborated with the Vaikom Satyagraha by sending volunteers and resources to the 'public road entry' steps in Vaikom. Non-

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cooperation and civil disobedience movements also had an impact on these coir workers, and in 1930, Alleppey workers welcomed and joined the March of Salt Satyagrahis from Trivandrum. The association endorsed the Indian National Congress's Karachi Resolution and took the lead in the Abstention Movement in Travancore. In low-income communities, the Abstention Movement and the Temple Entry Proclamation fulfilled long standing goals of the middle class, but they also caused a rift between the working class and its middle class communal leaders (Shyam Sundar, 1999). After being profoundly influenced by Socialist and Communist views in 1937-1938, the TLA leadership recognized the importance of separate class groups (Darshana, 2016). As a result, the SNDP and other caste and social organizations dissociated from the coir workers union, and socialists had a solid grasp on coir workers. As a result, the association's ideological foundation drastically shifted on the brink of World War II, and its policies and programs evolved to reflect this radicalization.

In response to labor union requests, the government and factory owners implemented measures to update the wages of workers in response to the increase in the price of coir products, lower unemployment, uphold labor laws, offer social insurance to all workers, and guarantee improved pensions for all (Sucha Singh Gill, 1991). The preservation of laws governing working hours, workplace safety, paid time off for illness, insurance protection, minimum wages, gender-neutral pay equity, guaranteed minimum labor days, timely wage distribution, bonuses, and other financial shares for employees were also the concerns of the labour unions at this time (Kathuria, 1986). However, class confrontations arose between workers and so-called capitalists, who were typically the owners and exporters of coir factories, once the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and CITU were established. The visible result of this particular left wing and their political interests in coir industry was the frequent labour conflicts and strikes. Due to the Marxian trade union's increasing influence in the coir business, labor strikes were frequent and the demands made were merely meant to thwart the expansion of capitalist forces within the firm rather than being genuine worker demands (Back Matter, 1987). As a result, the left trade unions' slavish opposition to the capitalist system of production rendered it impossible for coir enterprises to operate in Kerala, particularly in Alappuzha.

Coir Factory Strikes

The coir industry in Kerala, especially in Alappuzha, is still largely dependent on age-old techniques like weaving and hand spinning. However, in nearby states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Orissa, the industry has undergone major modernization. The mechanization of the coir sector has resulted in technological advancements, but it has also encountered resistance from labor unions and workers, as well as left-wing governments' policy of appeasement (Bardhan, 1989). Even though there were violent protests against mechanisation, currently, 39.3% of the coir industry is only partially mechanized, while 19% still uses traditional methods and is only 41.7% fully mechanized.

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The early 1970s saw a lot of trade union action, which negatively impacted the Alappuzha coir industries and ultimately led to the industry becoming more fragmented (K. P. K., 1987). Concerns about pay and working conditions led to the initial phase of labor strikes. After the country won its independence, the business was dominated by private exporters, and government regulations were restricted to the depot system's operation. However, through undistributed work orders and outstanding payments, the large manufacturers/exporters took advantage of household and small-scale coir units. These issues were partially resolved by the trade union efforts. Coir workers demand wage hikes in response to rising product prices, but exporters reject these demands until violent labor strikes occur (Not a Question of "Modernisation." 1978). At the end, the exporters consent to a pay raise, but the commitment is remains un-fulfilled until after the subsequent round of strikes. If the wage rate rise is approved and implemented by the exporters following a few months of strikes, the small and household units will stay dissatisfied while the large scale units hang onto the wage rate increase. This leads to the subsequent round of strikes from the handloom, small-scale, and household units and the coir yarn spinning sector.

Large-scale operations were compelled to employ mechanization in the coir yarn spinning and fiber extraction segments starting in the 1970s due to the high cost of labor and the scarcity of raw materials (Swaminathan, 2009). However, employees objected under a trade union banner, and the mechanization dispute has reached courtrooms. The state government established two commissions to look into the mechanization issue during the first legal proceedings, which began in 1971 and ended only in 1989. Based on the commissions' reports, the court approved the mechanization of large-scale manufacturers in the coir industry's raw material production segment. However, during this time, the neighboring states fully automated the coir fiber extraction and yarn spinning processes with the backing of their governments and without any opposition from trade unions (Mathew, 1995). As a result, the Kerala trade union protests have made it easier for our neighboring states to establish modern coir factories there.

Table 1 presents aggregated data on labor union strikes in Kerala's coir industry since 1950, taken from official records maintained by the state's Labor Department, Industrial Department, Coir Board, and Public Relations Department.

Table 1: Trade Union Strikes in Coir Industry of Kerala

Year	Strike Days	Participants	Reason
1950-60	567 (15.5%)	Small Scale, Household	Wage Revision, Bonus, Timely Pay, Medical Allowances
1960-70	692 (19%)	Household, Small Scale, Big Manufacturing units	Wage Revision, Bonus, Bonus Arrear, Dividend, Work Order, Insurance, Pension
1970-80	634 (17.3%)	Household, Small Scale, Big	Mechanisation, Loan Moratorium, Bonus Arrear, Dividend, Medical and

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		Manufacturing units	Insurance, Pension, Work Order, Minimum pay for household-small scale unit products
1980-90	1104 (30.2%)	Small Scale, Household, Cooperative Units	Mechanisation, Labour disputes in factories, Wage, Bonus, Work Order, Pension, Loan Moratorium
1990-2000	803 (22%)	Household, Small Scale	Mechanisation, Labour displacement, Work order, Protection of household-small scale units, Loan Moratorium, Wage, Bonus
2000-2010	729 (20%)	Small Scale, Household, Cooperative Units	Mechanisation, Labour displacement, Labour Disputes, Work order, Protection of household-small scale units, Loan Moratorium, Wage, Bonus
2010-2020	706 (19.3%)	Small Scale, Household, Cooperative Units	Depot system, Work order, Pending payments, Bonus, Labour disputes

Source: Official records of Coir Board, Labour Department, Industrial Department, and Public Relations Department.

The table makes it evident that labor union goals changed starting around 1970. Before then, the main causes of labor strikes were concerns related to direct coir workers' wages, bonuses, dividends, work orders, or pensions. However, since mechanization became the main tool of labor resistance in 1970 and labor displacement became a reality, the demand to preserve the traditional coir industry and its small-scale and household units—the majority of which are run by coir workers rather than businessmen—became more urgent after 1990. In 1950–1960, 15.5% of all work days were lost due to coir worker strikes; in 1960–1970, 19%; in 1970–1980, 17.3%; in 1980–90, 30.2%; in 1990–2000, 22%; in 2000–2010, 20%; and in 2010–2020, 19.3% of all work days were lost due to coir worker strikes.

These strikes had little effect on the coir business's export performance or profit, but they did have a direct impact on the socio-economic well-being of its workers. As a result of the unpredictability of work caused by strikes, there is frequent labor movement in the coir industry. Beginning in 1980, the coir industry lost 30.2% of its workdays during the decade, marking the beginning of mechanization. While the labor unions and their parent political parties benefited politically and received public support as a result, the impoverished coir workers lost one third of their lifetime earnings during this decade. They had no choice but to quit their coir work and find other ways to make ends meet.

One more factor relating to these strikes is that, up until 1980, there were manufacturing/export plants where fifty percent of the coir workers had permanent employment with full benefits. Additionally, most coir workers participated in labor union strikes until 1980. Their roles included de-fibering, spinning coir yarn, loom operations, and other related tasks. However, following 1980, the strikes were limited to small-scale household and coir cooperative

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units, and large factories fired workers who took part in the strikes (Subrahmanian & Pillai, 1986). As a result, their employees were not involved in the strikes. Therefore, the coir workers were directly impacted by the labor union strikes rather than the export or profit of the coir industry. The state and national governments accepted mechanization as part of their new economic plan in 1990, notwithstanding the futility of the anti-mechanization demonstrations (Thomas Isaac & Michael Tharakan, 1995).

Now examine the political basis of the labor strikes in the coir industry. The number of trade union strikes that occurred in Kerala during the governments led by the Communist Party and the Indian National Congress is displayed in the following table (Table 2).

Year	Political Party in Power	No. of Strikes	
1957-59	CPI - LDF	12	LDF Time- 116 Strikes (55 Strikes after 1980)
1960-62	PSP (Socialist Left)	27	
1962-64	INC -UDF	96	
1967-70	CPI(M) - LDF	9	
1970-77	CPI - LDF	12	
1977-78	INC - UDF	36	
1981-87	INC - UDF	112	UDF Time- 829 Strikes (697 strikes after 1980)
1987-91	CPI(M) - LDF	14	
1991-96	INC -UDF	207	
1996-2001	CPI(M) -LDF	16	
2001-2006	INC -UDF	182	
2006-2011	CPI(M)- LDF	17	
2011-2016	INC-UDF	196	
2016-2024	CPI(M)-LDF	8	

Of the 945 strikes, just 116 (12.2%) were called under the LDF's rule, with the remaining 87.8% being called during UDF regimes. Of all the strikes that have taken place, 752 have been coordinated since 1980, with 92.6 percent occurring when the UDF government is in power. The study uses Binary Factor Analysis (BFA) to analyze trade union activity, particularly left-wing trade unions, between Communist and Congress regimes in Kerala. BFA expresses p variables by m factors using dichotomous binary data, representing binary factor scores and loading matrices through boolean algebra. The effectiveness of BFA is evaluated by contrasting estimated and observed binary responses. The study uses a data table called 'computation time' to explore the formal correlation of non-hierarchical text document analysis of binary data. Data set p3 is a sparse matrix with low computational complexity, while data set p2 is similar but not a sparse matrix. A new algorithm based on formal concepts is used to compute exact BFA on p2 data set. Finding factors in p3 takes over 61 minutes, while finding factors in p2 takes almost 12 minutes and has a discrepancy of 743.

Table 3: Computation Time (1950-2020)

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Data Set	Factors	Occurrence	Time	Discrepancy	Remarks
P2	5	116	116/945	829	2 Assumptions
P3	5	829	829/945	116	2 Assumptions
Total	5	945			

P2 LDF time, P3 UDF time

The table provides a straightforward overview of all the trade union strikes that have occurred in Kerala's coir industry, particularly in Alappuzha. The P2 represents the Kerala LDF government led by the CPI (M), and the P3 represents the UDF government led by the INC. The P2 row has a greater discrepancy than the P3 row, indicating a neutral or inactive condition of trade union activity during that period. There are two presumptions about this situation: either the government's actions have been beneficial to the coir workers, and they are satisfied at this point, or the trade unions, under the control of their political masters, have been pacifying the workers' dissatisfactions, justifying the government's actions or inaction on worker issues and fostering political loyalty among the populace towards the ruling party.

The P3 raw discrepancy also indicates two assumptions. The first possibility is that the government's disregard for the problems facing the coir industry during the UDF government led to unhappiness among trade unions and coir workers. The other option is that, despite government efforts to address the problems in the coir firm, the left trade unions would take drastic measures, including going on indefinite strikes, to demonstrate their political outrage at the UDF government and acquire political leverage. Since the coir firm saw frequent worker-owner conflicts between 1950 and 2024—as well as concerns with wages, bonuses, gratuities, pensions, insurance, and modernization—neither of these two sets of assumptions have encountered any additional challenges. To put it briefly, since our independence, the coir sector has not at all been plagued by a problem free state. Then what causes these disparities. The data in Table 4, which displays a differential computation time, is created in order to analyze the relevant factors.

Table 4: Differential Computation Time

Data Set	Factors	Occurrence	Time	Discrepancy
P2 (1950-80)	5	61	61/193	132
P2 (After 1980)	5	55	55/752	697
P3(1950-80)	5	132	132/193	61
P3 (After 1980)	5	697	697/752	55
Total	5	945		

Table 4 separates the coir industry's history following Indian independence into two periods: before 1980 and after 1980. This allows for the identification of issues and developments pertaining to the modernization (mechanization) of the coir industry. Prior to 1980, there was less difference between the UDF and LDF governments in terms of trade union

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activism and strikes in the coir business. The trade unions handled the socio-economic problems of the coir workers, and the CPI (M) did not become a political party until 1965. However, the coir industry saw a significant raw material shortage after 1980, and this led to the need for modernization in order to address this basic problem in the industry. However, the left-wing trade unions fight modernization tooth and claw, citing the issue of loss of employment. Even though this is a continuous problem since then, the left-wing trade unions only saw it as a labor dispute when the UDF governance was in power. The discrepancy column, which displays the maximum discrepancy during the LDF government's rule after 1980, amply illustrates this. One such assumption, which may be confirmed with more data, is that trade unions and other tributary organizations were utilized by CPI (M) to establish their political base and garner widespread support in Kerala following their formation as a distinct political party.

Presumptions and Rationale

The binary factor analysis provided room for two sets of assumptions on the state of labor and labor union strikes in Kerala's coir industry, particularly in Alappuzha. Concerning the LDF government's term in office,

- a) The government has helped the coir workers, and they are now satisfied,
- b) The trade unions, controlled by their political rulers, have been stifling the workers' complaints, defending the government's actions or inaction on worker issues, and encouraging public support for the ruling party.

Concerning the UDF government's term in office

- a) Trade unions and coir workers were unhappy because of the government's disdain for the issues facing the industry during the UDF regime.
- b) The left trade unions would take extreme actions, including going on indefinite strikes, to show their political fury at the UDF government and gain political influence, even in the face of government attempts to address the issues in the coir sector.

In order to verify these claims, a brief analysis of the history of policies and legislation pertaining to the coir company operations as well as periodic worker welfare initiatives implemented by LDF-UDF governments is required.

Table 5: Periodic Welfare Initiatives & Industrial Policies of LDF-UDF

Coir Industry Specific Measure	UDF	LDF
Wage	1963- Rs. 5 Increase (Rs. 15/Week) 1966 – Rs. 10 Increase (25/Week) 1981 – Rs. 15 Increase (50/Week) 1993 – Rs. 200/day 2005 –Rs. 300/day 2015 – Rs. 390/day	1958 – Rs. 1 Increase (Wage was Rs. 10 /Week) 1970 – Rs. 5 Increase (Rs. 30/Week) 2000-Rs. 225/day 2010- Rs. 350/day 2020 –Rs. 400/day
Bonus	1962 – 14% 1925 – 17%	1960 -10% 2020- 29%

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	1995- 22% 2005 – 24% 2015 – 27% (13% increase up to this)	(Only 2% increase)
Pension	Pension Assured for coir factory workers since 1960 Pension scheme introduced for all coir workers since 1987 Periodic increase during UDF period	Period increase during LDF time
Loan	Financial assistance for coir workers to start coir looms. Financial assistance through Coir Board. Low Interest loans for household and small scale units. Subsidies for mechanisation	Subsidies for Mechanisation. Subsidy for raw material purchase for large scale manufacturers.
Budget Share	1962-64 -1 Crore each year 1981-87 – 2 Crore each year 1982- Welfare Pension – Bonus Increased 1982 -4500 New Coir Looms 1982 -2500 Small Scale units, 1000 coir cooperative units 1983- 3 crore for Coir Yarn 1983 – Coir Expo -Trissur 1985 – 20 Crore Loan Moratorium 1986- Traditional Unit Protection Scheme 1987- Domestic Market Development Scheme 1993- 200 Spinning Units 1994- 100 Defibering Units 1993-95- 25 Crores each year 1995 – Traditional Coir Worker Protection Scheme 2001-2005 – 25 Crore Each Year for Traditional Coir industry 2011-2015 – Loan Moratorium 2014-2015- Coir Expo	1969 – 20 Lakhs 1970- 15 Lakhs 1974- 110 Lakh for Mechisation 1980 -3 Crore for Welfare measures 1987-88 – Right to Flexible Pricing for Exporters 1989 – Depot system Withdrawn 1997 – 20 Crore for Mechnisation 1998 – Export Protection
Coir Industry Development	1. Coirfed, Apex Coir Cooperatives (1978) 2. Kerala Coir Workers' Welfare Fund Act (1987) 3. Coir Worker's Welfare Fund Board (1988-89) 4. Directorate of Coir Development (2005-06) 5. International Coir Museum (2014-2015) 6. Alleppey Coir - The Geographical Indicator (2005-206)	Formation of Coir Cooperation (1969)
Welfare Measures	Pension Scheme Introduced Increased Wages Increased Bonus Rate Medical Assistance (Coir Ward in Government Hospitals) Free medicines for coir born diseases	Coir Cooperatives Wage Increase
Modernisation	1990-91 – Liberalization Policy	1971-72 –Mechanisation of Primary Segments

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		1991 –Boosting Liberalization 1995 –Modernisation and Mechanisation Policy 2010 –Boosting Mechanisation 2020-Complete Mechanisation
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Source: Multiple Source; Coir Board, Coirfed, Industrial and Labour Departments

For a simple and practical interpretation of the facts contained in Table 5, the following statistical diagrams have been generated using the data presented in the table.

Figure 1: Welfare Initiatives & Industrial Policies

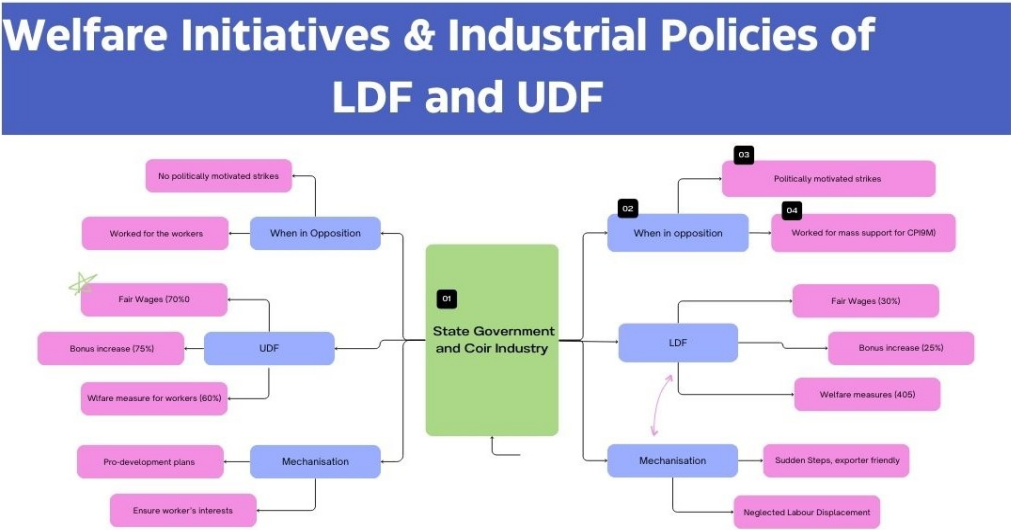
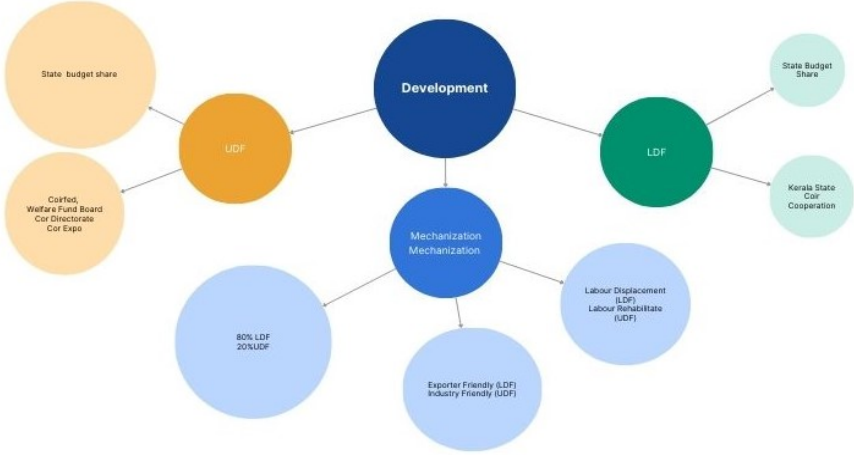


Figure 2: Industrial Strategies

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Industrial Policies -UDF & LDF



The distilled conclusion from Table 5 is that worker welfare initiatives and the expansion of the coir industry were planned and carried out throughout the UDF government's tenure. Compared to the LDF government's era, the UDF government's coir industrial worker's wage, bonus, and welfare policies are significantly more substantial and well-rounded. The LDF government is directly accountable for the mechanization of the coir industry, which was the most contentious topic that led to numerous labor strikes in that sector. It was also the instrument used to implement this change without causing a labor protest.

As a result, statement (a) is disregarded and statement (b) is accepted based on the initial set of assumptions on the duration of the LDF government. As a consequence, the statements made regarding the UDF government's tenure, statement (a) is proven to be false, while statement (b) is supported by evidence.

Conclusion

The formation of a working class is not complete merely with the emergence of trade union consciousness; it attains maturity only when workers recognize the broader social relations that shape their collective identity and the structural conflicts embedded within wage labour. Political consciousness, unlike economic or trade union awareness, does not evolve spontaneously but is mediated by ideological interventions, institutional arrangements, and the wider socio-political context. In the case of Kerala's coir industry—particularly in Alappuzha—this distinction is crucial for understanding the trajectory of labour mobilisation and industrial decline.

In its early phase, trade unionism in the coir sector played a constructive role by securing basic labour rights, welfare provisions, and social recognition for an otherwise marginalized

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workforce under both UDF and LDF governments. However, over time, trade unions increasingly functioned as instruments of partisan politics rather than autonomous representatives of workers' interests. The persistent opposition to mechanization, recurrent strikes, and prolonged industrial disruptions transformed labour mobilisation into a structural constraint on industrial adaptation and sustainability.

The history of the coir industry in Alappuzha thus mirrors the political history of its labour movements. Two contradictory tendencies stand out. First, left-oriented trade unions often resorted to extreme measures—such as indefinite strikes—not merely as tools of collective bargaining but as strategies of political confrontation against UDF regimes. Second, under Communist governments, the same unions tended to suppress workers' grievances, legitimize state inaction, and mobilize worker loyalty in defence of ruling party interests. In both scenarios, workers' long-term economic security was subordinated to political objectives.

This study argues that while class consciousness initially fostered solidarity and empowerment among coir workers, its later politicization and militant articulation undermined the industry's capacity to modernize, retain employment, and remain regionally competitive. The decline of the coir industry in Alappuzha is therefore not simply a consequence of technological lag or market pressures but a product of deeply embedded labour–state–party dynamics. Recognizing this contradiction is essential for rethinking labour politics, industrial policy, and sustainable employment strategies in Kerala's traditional industries.

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