

THE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIRST COMMUNIST LED MINISTRY IN KERALA

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This April 5th 2007 marks an important fiftieth anniversary in the history of Independent India. A Golden Jubilee to be celebrated. It is on that date, fifty years ago a communist led ministry for the first time in India was sworn in and took power. The state was the newly formed Kerala, the land of Malayalam speaking people who constitute almost four percent of Indian population. The land just a small strip in the south west coast of India between Arabian Sea and the Western ghats. The Chief Minister was an outstanding leader of freedom movement and the Communist party of India viz. namely Com. E M Sankaran Namboothiripad.

From the narrow electoral point of view it was not a thumping success for the Communist party of India. Out of 126 elected members of the legislature CPI had only 60 members plus 5 independents who contested with the support of the party. Total votes won by the party and its allies were less than 37 percent of the total polled votes. With all these limitations the first popular ministry headed by the CPI in the new state of Kerala formed only on 1st November 1956 created history and drew world wide attention of both supporters and opponents. What is the reason for this

inscrutable phenomenon? The reason was not exactly as was claimed in media and general discourse the communist led ministry in Kerala was not the first communist government to come to power through peaceful ballot box. There were some previous examples of communist coming to power through ballot box even before the Kerala experience. For example in a small land locked and sovereign country called San Marino on Italian Mainland communists came to power through elections just after the Second World War and repeated performance with intervals. Even before the Second World War in Spain and France communists came to power through ballot box in alliance with like minded radical parties. The Republican United Front government in Spain and the Popular Front government under socialist leader Leon Blum in France did not survive long because of fascist insurrection in the first case and unscrupulous maneuverings in the second case. In 1950's in the then British Guyana in Latin America communist Cheddi Jagan and his Peoples Progressive Party came to power by the electoral process. Because of these experiences it is wrong to attribute chronologically first place to the elected communist led government of Kerala. Kerala is not a sovereign independent country; it is a unit of Federal India with all the decisive power vested in the centre. But still it is a fact that the world media took unusual interest in the Kerala communist experiment. Why? We will

try to figure out the reasons for this, widespread elation and equally widespread panic ridden opposition in due course. It is this opposition that finally led to the union government headed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru to stoop down and dismiss Namboothiripad government even when it enjoyed unambiguous majority in the legislature. Nehru's reputation for being the architect of Indian democracy suffered a body blow by his infamous resort to the article 356 which is now agreed by all as a dark spot in the Constitution of India.

II

THE BACKGROUND

Before we enter into the actions taken by the government of Namboothiripad and the controversies it generated we have to look at the reasons which were behind the victory of the CPI in Kerala, which was almost a bolt from the blue for those who did not exactly understand the history of this state. A close examination of this history will convince everyone that this victory of EMS and his party was not a bolt from the blue and that it was the logical culmination of a number of historical developments, the beginning of which can be traced back to the days of freedom struggle. During the colonial times the present day Kerala was divided into three parts of which Travancore the southernmost and Cochin the middle part were princely native states. The northern part was the Malabar

district under the direct rule of British and a part of Madras Presidency. The struggle for freedom against the colonial domination and for responsible governments in Travancore and Cochin had one important objective which inspired the Malayalam speaking people – United Kerala State (Aikya Kerala samsthanam). EMS Namboothiripad on behalf of his party was in the forefront of this struggle for united Kerala. He wrote a number of historical economic and political studies on the future setup of united Kerala like “*Keralam; The Abode of Malayalees*”, “*National Question in Kerala*” etc. In these he visualized and put before the people not only a political and administrative amalgamation of Malayalam speaking areas, but also a state without feudal or landlord exploitation, universal literacy, decentralization of power and accelerated pace of industrialization. Therefore the idea of united Kerala that the CPI projected was radically different from those put forward by the bourgeois land lord parties like Indian National Congress. That this idea received widespread acclaim from the people is proved by the fast growth of left wing parties and ideology within the traditional national movement and outside it. When the Congress Socialist Party was formed at Patna in 1934 with Jayaprakash Narayan as its General Secretary and rallying large sections of congress activists who were disappointed and disillusioned by the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1932 and the vacillations

of the congress leadership as a whole as evidenced by their performance in London Round Table conferences, twenty five years old Namboothiripad was chosen as one of its two joint secretaries. Com. P Krishna Pillai reputed to be the founding leader of the Communist Party in Kerala was the secretary of the Congress Socialist party's Kerala unit formed in the same year. But national and international developments were fast overtaking the events in Kerala as well as in India. The social democratic constraints of the CSP was found wanting. Kerala's radicals and socialists fastly moved into the communist movement and the first communist party unit in Kerala was established in 1937 at Kozhikode with P Krishna Pillai as its secretary and EMS Namboothiripad, NC Sekhar and K Damodaran as its members. At the same time the Indian National Congress in Kerala came under left leadership with EMS as General Secretary and radical congressman Abdur Rehman Sahib as President. At the same time the movement for responsible government with Travancore State congress and Kochi Prajamandalam gathered momentum and in those movements also communists were the leading factor. The Second World War which began in 1937 and the problems it threw out in the national movement also led to another momentous change in Kerala politics. At a meeting of the Socialist and communist activists at Pinarayi near Thalassery in the present day Kannur district in 1939 the entire

CSP transformed itself into Kerala state committee of the CPI with Com. P Krishna Pillai again as its secretary.

Though the Quit India movement of 1942 from which the communists kept away led to a standoff between congress and communists, the immense foundation laid in the 1930's stood in favour of the communists and by the close of the war they became an indomitable force in Kerala politics. The post second world war upsurge for democratic and freedom found the communists in the forefront with their participation in the historic armed struggle of Punnappra Vayalar in Travancore in 1946. Immediately after the freedom when the congress rulers declared a semi fascist offensive against the communists and ban the party and unleashed a reign of terror the resistance movement in North Kerala took unprecedented dimensions.

It is in this background that the first general elections took place under the republican constitution enacted on 26th January 1950. By that time the native states of Travancore and Cochin were integrated into a single state, so elections took place to Travancore – Cochin legislature in 1951-1952 along with elections in the northern Malabar district where people elected their representatives to Madras legislative assembly and parliaments. In both these units congress was trounced and driven to a minority by the united fronts under the leadership of the Communist party. With massive success in the

Telugu speaking areas of Madras Presidency and on a lesser level on Tamil Nadu, congress could not gather up a majority to form governments in the presidency. Thus in Travancore-Cochin, Malabar district and also in Madras presidency communists were the most decisive political force. It is another story that by dictatorial methods and distortion of constitutional proprieties the communists were kept out of power both in Travancore-Cochin and Madras presidency.

III

THE RED DECADE AND ITS CLIMAX

Though the general perception of those days was that due to the sectarian and adventurist deviations of the second congress of the communist party of India (Calcutta, 1948) and the fierce oppression unleashed by the congress governments weakened the party and its movements. What actually happened was just the opposite. In the imagination of the people the party's stature grew as a staunch leader of the oppressed and dispossessed masses. The unscrupulous political tricks by which the defeated congress tried to keep the opposition away from the power did not in anyway increased their credibility. Both in Travancore-Cochin and Madras presidency the internal strife's within the congress led to perennial instability of the government. In Travancore-Cochin one after another governments came and collapsed and led to many interim

elections. In those elections also they could keep their heads above water by unprincipled alliances, horse-trading and by central interventions. Travancore-Cochin became a byword for instability and not only the leftwing followers but also the congress followers were fed up with this ugly spectacle of political horse-trading. The communists led a left united front with RSP and KSP and in all elections they were the largest single group in the assembly making the congress a minority. In the second interim elections in Travancore-Cochin which took place in 1954 the Praja Socialist Party (a later incarnation of the social democratic and anticommunist CSP) under the leadership of Pattom Thanu Pillai which always refused to have any tie with the communists finally came round and allied with the left front. The promise was that “we will fight unitedly and rule unitedly”. But as soon as the elections were over with the PSP-Left front winning a handsome majority Thanu Pillai with his mere 20 members broke the promise and formed a government with congress support. The congress after a while withdrew their support and Thanu Pillai’s PSP ministry collapsed and along with that the social democratic prestige also was washed away. The congress which formed the next government also failed and when in 1956 November 1 the united Kerala state was formed as per the recommendation of the State Reorganization Commission, Kerala was under Presidents rule.

When Travancore-Cochin was going through such political circus another drama was being enacted in Madras Presidency where Chief Ministers came and went and even the legendary congress leader C Rajagopalachari who was catapulted into power by his arch critic Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru found himself in doldrums and was moving towards the formation of laissez-faire 'Swatantra Party'. From all these it is clear that both the Travancore-Cochin and Madras presidency were unable to undertake any creative steps for the amelioration of people's plight during the first decade of India's independence. What ever they could do was unleashing oppressive steps against people's struggles for land, livelihood and education. In the first five year plan with all its defects remained unfulfilled, no serious attempt was made to implement even the minor benefits envisaged in it.

At this time new developments were taking place in the Indian politics with government of India seeking closer alliances with Soviet Union and Peoples China. Nehru's policy of Non Alignment was taking a sharper anti-imperialist edge. This development also led to a new framework for the second Five Year Plan emphasizing the state sector. In 1956 Indian National Congress met at Avadi near Chennai and adopted the Socialistic pattern of society as its objective. Though all these steps and even gimmicks were intended

to keep away the left and radicals from power. It had also an opposite impact of raising the prestige of leftist ideals and programs.

From an establishment point of view the political instability of Kerala's northern and southern half seemed to be dismal it drove home to the people the need for a credible alternative and they looked towards the left leadership to provide that. In 1954 elections took place to the Malabar District Board (a district level local self government institution) in which communist won a majority. Though the powers of the district board were very much restricted and elementary the Malabar district board and its president Com. P T Bhaskarapanikker were able to give a positive and promising aspect to it in education, health and general agriculture. Malabar district board under the communist leadership was almost a minor dress rehearsal of the 1957 communist led state government. All along these years the Communist party in Kerala under the leadership of EMS, AKG, C Achuthamenon , MN Govindan Nair , KC George and others were regularly putting forward alternate policies and mobilizing the people behind it. The mass organizations grew by leaps and bounds. Party's publications also grew in numbers, circulation and quality with 3 dailies (*Janayugam*, *Deshabhimani* and *Navajeevan*) and many weeklies and monthlies and well run publishing house.

This upsurge was reflected in art and culture also. A number of highly competent drama troupes under the leadership of the party gained popular support. Kerala Peoples Art Club (KPAC), Prathibha Arts Club, Kendra Kala Samithi etc brought out almost a sea change in performing arts. The film production also increased in a phenomenal scale like the dramas. Communists like Thoppil Bhasi, P Bhaskaran, Vayalar Rama Varma, ONV Kurup, P J Antony, Cherukad and others were in the forefront of this cultural upsurge. These political cultural and ideological struggles and advance gave the 1950's led to the historians naming it as the red decade. The victory of the communists in 1957 elections was the climax of the red decade. So it was not an unforeseen event which happened with a big bang.

IV

THE SMALL BUT FIRM STEPS

The first and the most remarkable success of the ministry was the gathering together of eleven outstanding politicians and professionals who were uniformly imaginative and efficient. Every one of them had a reputation of being incorruptible and knowledgeable. The Chief Minister though only 48 was among the top leaders of the Indian Left. The next in the list was C Achutha Menon of great intellectual capacity and impeccable character. VR Krishna Iyer who later rose to be a judge of the Supreme Court was already a

legal luminary. Health Minister AR Menon was one of the senior most freedom fighters and a popular surgeon. The education minister Prof. Joseph Mundassery was an eminent Sanskritised literary critic an activist in teachers and co-operative movement and an eminent educationist with many remarkable books to his credit. The Speaker of the assembly Sankara Narayanan Thampy was also a legendary figure in freedom struggle and a professional lawyer. Kerala has never had the privilege of such a brilliant collective to rule over them and it is very unlikely that any other state could claim such a ministry of stalwarts at any point of time.

In a speech over the AIR on the eve of the swearing in ceremony of the ministry on April 5th the Chief Minister elect EMS gave the general perspective of his ministry. He made it quite clear that the 'communist led ministry in Kerala did not have an agenda to establish socialism or communism in the state, it is impossible with the limited power that we had under the constitution.' He added further that even if he had the power the economic and social situation in India or its part Kerala was not right to launch such ambitious programmes, which need a number of pre-requisites. What he could do and wish to do was simply the implementation of the promises given to the people by the congress during the days of freedom struggle. Among them the first priority was the land reforms promised by the Indian National Congress in 1936 in its

famous Faizpur resolution. Then questions like adoptions of mother tongue as medium of administration and education, the reorganization of educational system, a change in the policy of law and order to keep with the spirit of the letters of law in favour of the dispossessed and oppressed classes, decentralization of power and establishment of gram swaraj as was the dream of the Father of the Nation, eradication of corruption and inefficiency in the civil services etc etc.

The first steps of the government were in fulfillment of these modest but significant programmes.