

# The Communist Government of Kerala and its record

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THE publication of the book *Kerala, Past and Present* (Lawrence and Wishart) by A. K. Gopalan, Deputy Leader of the Communist Group in the Indian Parliament, could not have found a more appropriate moment. Just when the Congress Government in India has intervened in Kerala to remove from office the democratically elected Communist Government, still enjoying the support of the majority in the Legislature, and to dissolve the Legislative Assembly—thus fulfilling the demand of the two-month-old “direct action” launched by a combination of all reactionary forces—the publication of this book puts the whole situation in the correct perspective and puts the Congress Government at the Centre in the dock.

Although the book does not cover the situation following the launching of the “direct action”, it provides all the essential background material, including a whole chapter on the role of the opposition parties in Kerala, to enable readers to follow the recent developments.

## **Kerala's Past**

References to the land of Kerala are found even in very ancient literature, the ancient epic *Mahabharata* refers to the Kerala lands and there is substantial description of Kerala to be found in the annals of almost all ancient travellers in India—Chinese, Arabs and Europeans. Marco Polo, for instance, devotes a whole chapter to Kerala in his descriptions of his travels among the people of India. Kerala has been for centuries a centre of international trade, and the people of Kerala were a brave, industrious, enterprising and seafaring people. Even during the medieval period when most parts of India had come under a very decadent conservatism, and had shut all doors to, and communications with, the rest of the world, Kerala continued to be a meeting place of Arab, Moorish and Chinese traders. Earlier, Kerala had been a major centre of trade with the Roman Empire. Prior to the British conquest of Kerala, the people there had also had experience of Portuguese and Dutch invasions. This greater contact with the rest of the world and lack of narrow conservatism is reflected in many traces of foreign influences on local architecture and sculpture not found anywhere

else in India. It was a Keralan navigator who guided Vasco da Gama from South-East Africa to come to Calicut by crossing the Arabian Sea. Thus the land of Kerala has been known to Europe for many centuries now. Consequently, Kerala was among the earliest centres of European trade and later of political conquest by the European powers. Even though not industrially developed in the sense of modern techniques, Kerala has been a centre of investment of vast amounts of British capital, mostly in various plantations. No wonder then that planters' money had a good deal to do in giving financial support to the agitation to bring down the Communist Ministry.

## **The General Election of 1957**

Since April 5th, 1957, the word “Kerala” has appeared many a time in the pages of various journals and newspapers all over the world. The reason was the advent of the Communist-led government in Kerala—one of the fourteen constituent states of India—certainly the biggest event in the post-independence history of India. No doubt this was a landmark, but it was at the same time a touchstone, for it put major political parties, their policies and leaders on test not only in Kerala but in the country as a whole. The latest action on the part of the Central Government in Delhi is precisely a confirmation of this fact. The Central Government at the end of July last intervened in Kerala to dismiss the democratically elected State Legislature and Ministry and imposed President's rule in the state. That this was a touchstone is proved by the history of the “direct action” during the last two months conducted by the Kerala Congress Party in alliance with communal reaction and the Catholic Church, with the sanction and blessings of the All-India Congress Party leaders, including Central Ministers.

At the second general election in early 1957, the Indian Communist Party in Kerala, together with independents, secured 65 out of 126 seats—60 Communists and 5 Independents. And, on April 5th, 1957, the eleven-man ministry of E. M. S. Namboodiripad assumed office. So, in Kerala, for the first time in India, or in any capitalist country, a Communist-led government was formed through

the process of elections conducted under bourgeois rule. But to conclude from this that a socialist revolution had taken place in Kerala would be a mistake. The powers of the State Government are strictly limited. It is required to function within the framework of the Indian Constitution, which proclaims all private property to be sacred and inviolable, besides conferring wide powers on the President of the Republic. And the Ministry has to carry out its work through the existing judicial and administrative machinery, the higher officials of which have been trained to look upon themselves as a privileged caste. It must also be borne in mind that Kerala is a small state (population: 14 million), with a high density of population, severe pressure on land, very few industries and a high degree of unemployment.

### United Kerala

The Malayalam-speaking state of Kerala was until recently divided into three parts—Malabar in the Madras State, and the two princely states of Travancore and Cochin. In the 1942-45 period the Communist Party took the initiative in putting forward the slogan: *Aikya Kerala*: that the areas of the Madras Presidency, Cochin and Travancore with a Malayalam-speaking majority, should be united into a single democratic state within the Indian Union. The Party saw the struggle for United Kerala as “an indivisible part of the struggle of the people of India for the ending of imperialist rule”, as well as “a struggle for the ending of princely rule and other remnants of feudalism, and the introduction of full democracy”.<sup>1</sup>

More than a decade later, on November 1st, 1956, the prolonged struggle of the people of Kerala led to the formation of the unified State of Kerala on the democratic basis first proposed by the Communist Party. And, in the first election after the formation of the state, the people of Kerala voted for a majority of candidates of the Communist Party and brought the Communist Government to power.

Before discussing the record of the achievements of the Communist-led Ministry in Kerala, it is necessary to analyse the background against which the second general election had taken place and the basic line pursued by the Communist Party of India.

Significant developments had taken place in India during the five years since the 1951-52 general election. In the field of foreign policy, a radical change had come about, in bringing about which the democratic movement and the Communist Party had made a major contribution. India's stand for peace, for co-existence, for friendship with the socialist countries and for Afro-Asian solidarity

had been generally acclaimed and had given a new status to India in the world and gives a natural sense of pride to all patriotic Indians, after centuries of foreign domination.

Certain welcome changes had come about in the internal sphere as well. The bastions of reaction in the former princely states had disappeared. With the exception of Bombay State, the states of India had been reorganised on a linguistic basis. The common urge for national reconstruction had found partial expression in the objectives and some of the proposals of the Second Five-Year Plan.

In bringing about these changes, the continued mass movement, the determined campaign of the Communist Party, and the consistent fight put up in Parliament and in the State Legislatures by the democratic opposition, had played a decisive role.

The internal policy of the Central Government, however, still fell short of the needs of the people and the possibilities of the situation, retaining most of its earlier essentially undemocratic and anti-popular features. The Communist Party in its Election Manifesto analysed the situation as follows:

“The claims made by Congress that all-sided advance has been registered by the country in recent years are belied by facts. A little progress has been made here and there, but the whole picture that emerges from a study of the Indian scene is far from what the ruling party would like us to believe. Not merely has very little overall advance been made, but even the foundations of real advance have not been laid, the conditions have not yet been created for the effective utilisation of the country's vast resources and manpower for national reconstruction. The conditions have not yet been created for forging that popular unity, for rousing the ardour and enthusiasm, without which the gigantic task of rebuilding the country cannot be carried out.”

The Party did not stop here by making this criticism only. It formulated concrete alternative national policies and programmes in detail (even at state levels, various Party committees further developed these alternative policies in view of the concrete situation in each province), pointing out the steps that could and should be taken for ensuring national advance and regeneration.

With this perspective the Communist Party of India worked out its general line for the general elections at the national level. The main plank of policy for the elections had to be primarily a struggle against the anti-popular policies of the Government, with a view to revising and modifying them. The Party was fully aware of the fact that in the existing correlation of forces it was impossible to remove the Congress from power, either at the centre or in the majority of states. Therefore,

<sup>1</sup> E. M. S. Namboodiripad: *The National Question in Kerala*.

it outlined the specific tasks for those states in which the democratic forces were especially strong, in order to create conditions for forming coalition governments of democratic parties, including the Communist Party, governments which would work on the basis of an agreed minimum programme which would be in the best interests of the people and acceptable to a large mass of democratic opinion. The Party's task in other states would be to strengthen its own position and the position of the democratic opposition in the legislatures.

The strengthening in a big way of the democratic opposition in the country would intensify the fight for the rights and liberties of people and raise it to a new level. It would also strengthen and mature the forces of socialism and democracy in the Indian political and economic life. It will be seen later that this analysis of the Party has been fully confirmed since the general elections.

The Central Committee of the C.P.I. was of the opinion that the possibility of alternative governments existed in the states of Kerala and West Bengal; in other states the aim was to strengthen the democratic opposition.

#### **Unity Proposals in Kerala**

The Communist Party in Kerala, therefore, approached the other Left parties in the state, the Praja Socialists and the Revolutionary Socialists, with a view to forming a united front to fight the elections, and then, if victorious, to set up an alternative government. But the Left parties rejected the united front proposals, and instead of fighting the Congress decided to fight the Communists. They demanded more seats than they had secured in the Kerala elections of 1954. The Praja Socialists bargained for 34 seats, whereas they had only 19 in the previous Assembly, and the Revolutionary Socialists for 19, as against 9 which they secured in the 1954 elections. After placing all these facts before the people the Party decided to contest all the seats, while backing some of the independent candidates, and appealed for votes so that a stable government could be elected.

#### **No Stable Government Before**

Before the 1957 general election, the people of Kerala had a very bitter experience of not having any stable government for a long time since Indian independence in 1947.

The first elections of the legislatures of Travancore and Cochin (two of the three constituent parts of Kerala State) took place in February and September, 1948, respectively. The results of these elections showed that the Left and democratic forces were uniting against Congress. In Travancore, the Communist Party and the newly formed Kerala Socialist Party established a united front to fight

the Congress. In Cochin, they united in boycotting the elections. Though the united front candidates in Travancore did not get a single seat, their joint campaign helped the people in the task of fighting for real democracy, and the fact that they received 200,000 votes out of 2 million votes showed that there was a solid mass basis for the struggle against Congress. In Cochin too, though the boycott of the elections was comparatively ineffective, the campaign that the two parties carried on served to show that new forces were emerging to fight every form of reaction.

The Government declared in 1951 that the first general election would be held at the end of that year under the new constitution of India. When the announcement was made the Communist Party was banned in many states and most of its leaders were either in prison or had been driven underground. This was sufficient reason for the ruling Congress Government to believe that the Communist Party had been rendered helpless and that therefore they would sweep the polls. But the results of the elections came as a great surprise to the Congress. Only four out of thirty Assembly seats went to the Congress, and two out of six seats in Parliament. The Communist Party fought the elections in Malabar on the basis of a united front with the Kisan Mazdur Praja Party (newly formed party of dissident Congressmen). The Socialist Party refused to join this alliance. In this election, on one side were the forces of princedom, landlordism, Christian and Hindu reaction, bureaucratic corruption, all aligned under the banner of Congress. On the other side were the toiling masses—workers, peasants, middle classes, and even those sections of the bourgeoisie and feudal ruling class who wanted genuine national advance and economic development of the country. It was a victory for the latter.

On the eve of the elections in Travancore-Cochin, many leaders and active workers of the Communist Party were put behind bars. But this did not prevent a united front being formed of the Communist Party, Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Kerala Socialist Party. Out of 109 seats, the Congress secured 44, the Communists 25, Travancore Tamilnad Congress 8, Revolutionary Socialists 6, Kerala Socialists 6, Praja Socialists 12, and Independents 13.

Congress came to power with the support of the Travancore Tamilnad Congress (representing the Tamil-speaking areas in Travancore) and some independents, although Congress itself secured only a minority of seats. But this happy alliance did not last long, and the Congress Government fell with the withdrawal of support by the Tamilnad Congress.

Hence, in 1954 another mid-term election was held in Travancore-Cochin. In this election, again,

there was a united front of Communists, Revolutionary Socialists and Kerala Socialists. With this united front the Praja Socialist Party had an understanding that they would together form a united front government. But after the elections the Praja Socialist Party, with 19 seats out of 118, broke its pledge and formed a government with the support of Congress. Congress had 45 seats, Communists 23, Revolutionary Socialists 9, Kerala Socialists 3, and others 15. This honeymoon, however, did not continue for long, and the Congress Party itself formed its own government with the help of the Tamilnad Congress which had eight seats in the Assembly. But the crisis did not come to an end there. The Congress Government itself proved to be unstable, because of continued squabbles and personal rivalries within the Congress. And, finally, the President of the Republic intervened and for about one year there was President's rule.

This has been the post-independence history of Kerala. The Congress became a minority party; in Travancore-Cochin there was no stable government, and the people's discontent kept mounting, and they started looking to the Communist Party more and more as the only Party which could provide a stable government and solve some of their pressing problems.

#### **The Communist Party in Office**

Thus, in 1957, at the second general election, the people of Kerala voted the Communist Party into office.

The results of the 1957 elections not only vindicated the line of the Communist Party of India in the State of Kerala but also on a national scale, and bore out the correctness of its slogans. They demonstrated a significant advance made by the forces of peace, democracy and socialism.

Kerala was not an isolated example. The formation of the Communist-led Ministry in Kerala has to be viewed in an all-India perspective, against the background of the considerable advance made by the democratic and socialist forces throughout the country, and the total of 13 million votes (a 100 per cent increase from the first general election) secured by the Communist Party of India. In all the fourteen state legislatures now the Communist Party is represented. In West Bengal the number of Communists rose from 28 to 46, in Bombay from 1 to 21, in Uttar Pradesh 1 to 9, while in Madhya Pradesh 3 Communists were elected for the first time and in Bihar 7. In the country as a whole the Communist Party has emerged as the second largest party with thirty seats in the Central Parliament at New Delhi.

This tremendous shift to the left that has already taken place in the political life of the country is not only of great significance to the Indian people

but for the democratic forces in all countries, especially with India's present important international position. It was a victory for the world forces of peace, democracy and socialism.

Internally, the immediate effect of the advent of the Communist-led Ministry in Kerala was to break the Congress Party's monopoly of power, and show to the people that, on the strength of their unity, Congress could be dislodged from power. Second, despite the constitutional limitations on the powers of the State Government, and despite the unfriendly attitudes and actions of some sections of the ruling Congress Party and its Government at the Centre, the Communist Government in Kerala was hailed by the widest sections of democratic opinion. They saw in it a new type of government, not merely a non-Congress ministry. They found it the representative of the toiling masses who had won through to power, although only in one state. Third, it provided them with a possible alternative to the Congress governments in other states. Fourth, patriotic Indians saw in it a government which will go forward boldly to realise fully the cherished goals of the national liberation movement, and implement all the urgently necessary reforms as far as possible within their limited powers. Above all, it gave them a new inspiration and confidence to do their utmost and thereby intensify their campaign to challenge Congress.

Alongside this great advance of the democratic forces there has come about a further intensification of class struggle not only in Kerala but also on a national scale. All the reactionary forces started to gang up together. All those who had been opposed to the peace policies of India, communal and anti-socialist elements became increasingly restive and increased their activities, primarily with a view to bringing down the Communist-led Ministry in Kerala, even at the cost of subverting parliamentary democracy of which they had always paraded themselves as the defenders and champions.

#### **The Government's Achievements**

E. M. S. Namboodiripad, the Communist Chief Minister of Kerala, in a feature article in the *Daily Worker* of May 20th, 1958, wrote that if he was asked to name the biggest single achievement of the Communist-led Ministry of Kerala, he would not mention agrarian reforms, the police policy, the Education Act, but he would state that far more significant is the fact that even a few months of Communist government in Kerala had begun to break down the barrier between the Communists and the large mass of ordinary people belonging to other parties who have the same national objective as the Communist Party—the objective of building a Socialist India.

It has been proved that when the Communist

Party and its Government in Kerala declared they would work within the Constitution they meant not merely working within the letter of the Constitution but within its real spirit. This was further confirmed when the Kerala Government accepted the Education Act after it had been amended considerably by the Supreme Court of India. This fact had enabled honest people to realise that it would be wrong to divide the nation between the Communists and the rest. It had enabled the socialist-minded people in all parties to realise the fallacies of their anti-Communist prejudices, and the importance of coming together and working for common national objectives.

While considering the measures taken by the Kerala Government, it becomes clear how much closer they are to common national objectives than those of the other Congress state governments.

While the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee's report was published a decade ago, and while the Land Reform Panel's report came out over four years ago, most of the Congress state governments have so far failed to implement the recommendations. It was against this background that the Communist-led Ministry assumed office in Kerala, and following this, an ordinance was issued staying all evictions; an Indebtedness Bill was framed providing relief for the indebted peasantry; a Bill was framed to complete the process of abolishing a particular category of landlordism; and finally, the Agrarian Relations Act was passed by the Legislature and forwarded to the President of India for his assent, just before the Central Government intervention had removed the Kerala Government. This is a comprehensive agrarian reforms Act which, for the first time in any state of India, attempted to implement the proposals of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee. By this Act, the Kerala Government was also fulfilling its promise and slogan, "The land to the tiller". To these attempted reforms should be added the introduction of minimum wages for agricultural labourers. These measures did raise a number of complicated problems, and as a consequence tense situations arose. This also explains the nature and character of the "direct action" launched by the opposition parties in Kerala to bring down the Government.

One of the first major changes introduced by the Kerala Government in the direction of establishing full democracy was to adopt a new policy regarding the role of the police and other organs of the state machinery. The role of the police and other organs of state was no longer to intervene on the side of capital against labour but to prevent acts leading to breaches of peace. The police force must not be used as a weapon of oppression against the exploited classes but as a weapon of peace, used

by a government which is bringing about vital social and economic changes in a peaceful way. Apart from these measures for extending democracy, the Kerala Government withdrew all restrictions and bans over public meetings and demonstrations which are generally imposed by Congress governments in other states. For instance, throughout the "direct action" the Ministry refused to make use of the undemocratic Preventive Detention Act passed by Parliament and frequently used by the Congress in other provinces. Similarly, shadowing of political workers of all parties and taking down speeches of political workers were forbidden. Political parties, trade unions, peasant organisations and other popular bodies were guaranteed the fullest measure of freedom of speech and association.

#### **A. K. Gopalan's Book**

A. K. Gopalan's book provides an accurate history of the step-by-step development of the national movement in Kerala. The national movement in Kerala has passed through several distinct stages: the early Social Reform movements for religious reforms against upper caste hierarchy; the rise of the national movement proper as an impact of the movements launched by Mahatma Gandhi all over the country; the various political reform movements against feudal oppression under the princely rule in Travancore and Cochin; then the emergence of the working class movements and the subsequent formation of the Socialist Party and its almost wholesale transformation later into the Communist Party; the struggle for the linguistic unification of the Malayalam-speaking areas into one Kerala etc. All these stages are recorded in the book, and we see that the major core of the Communist Party today has been the leading element in all the significant movements throughout these different stages of development. It is in this that we see that the Kerala Communists even more than in other states of India were born out of the anti-imperialist national liberation struggles of the people and have their roots deep among the masses through all these successive movements. Apart from the peculiar ministerial instability obtaining in the state since 1947, no wonder that this factor too was in no small measure responsible for the fact that the Communist Party could command the confidence of the people of Kerala and was entrusted with the task of running the state.

One of the most satisfactory aspects of the book is that it really gives a full survey of Kerala, past and present. After providing a background in the form of the history and geography of Kerala, the book briefly traces all the important politico-economic developments in Kerala following the British political conquest. The popular anti-imperialist resistance during the nineteenth century

and the beginning of the twentieth century, early social reform movements, changes in the economy of the area, the emergence of the working class and the development of the different political parties in Kerala—all this is given a competent treatment by a mass leader of Kerala itself, and the development is traced with adequate data and evidence. A detailed analysis is made of the present economic situation in Kerala against the all-India background and the author has described the economic programme and the varied economic legislation of the Communist-led Ministry in this perspective.

One very significant aspect of Kerala's economy as pointed out in the book is the still dominant feudal character of the economy. Although compared to the all-India average of 69.8 per cent of the total population dependent on agriculture, in Kerala the percentage is only about 53, it does not mean that Kerala has achieved any higher level of industrialisation. Actually of the remaining 47 per cent, only 13 per cent of the total population can be classified as urban, while the remaining 34 per cent, though classified as non-agricultural, are essentially country folk. The village economy differs substantially from that of other parts of India, in being much less purely agricultural in character, particularly growing a large number of catch crops and plantation products as against producing the usual food crops only. It is this peculiar economic position in Kerala where the commercialisation of agriculture and the large number of non-agricultural producers indicate the degree of commercialisation of the economy as a whole. Yet in the absence of any proper industrial development an adequate urban development has not taken place, and without the implementation of any real land reform, feudal relations were still rampant over the economy. It is because of this that in Kerala large sections of people of the middle classes have considerable vested interest in land. Even though they may not own large areas, it is because of this vested interest in land that these sections stood up against the comprehensive Agrarian Relations Act passed recently by the Kerala Legislature. As has been pointed out elsewhere, none of the legislation carried out by the Kerala Government had gone very much outside the limits of the recommendations of the Central Government's Planning Commission or the declared policies of the Congress Party, but the Kerala legislation raised for the first time the prospect of their genuine implementation, thus rousing the anger of all these sections, while parallel with this process, increasing sections of middle-class opinion have been won over to the popular policies of the Ministry.

The main factor, however, was that by their new

police policy, by their genuine efforts for making a beginning towards real land reform and all-round progress, by the sympathetic treatment of the movements of workers and the agricultural labourers the new Government had given such a new sense of confidence to the poorer classes in society as had brought about a complete change in the balance of forces among the different strata in society.

### Now or Never for Reaction

While the real base and popular support for the Ministry had actually markedly increased as shown in the by-election last year and in a large number of District Board and village council elections, it had become a matter of *now or never* for the vested interests. With the implementation of the Agrarian Relations Act and the Education Act breaking down the Catholic and Nair communal reactionary vested interests in the running of schools with public funds, there was an immediate and real "danger" of large sections of peasantry as well as members of the middle classes, e.g. school teachers, being so permanently benefited that any hopes of the bourgeoisie ever winning back their support would have vanished for ever. It is this situation which has brought about the strange unity of reaction of all shades and colours from the Congress and the Praja Socialist Party to the Catholic and Nair communalists for the illegal "direct action" for the dissolution of the Communist-led Ministry in Kerala.

The dangerous consequences of such an overthrow campaign which challenges the democratic system of government and the Constitution of India were foreseen by millions of democratic-minded people all over India, including prominent newspapers, public men, lawyers and constitutionalists, and they were not afraid of raising their powerful voices of protest against the Kerala policy of the Congress Party.

Ignoring this mighty democratic opinion in the country the Presidential rule was clamped down on the Kerala State by dissolving the Ministry still enjoying the majority support in the Legislature and by dismissing the Legislative Assembly.

The serious political implications of this high-handed action of the Central Congress Cabinet are analysed in the following terms by the Kerala State Committee of the Communist Party of India:

(a) that this has enabled the reactionary communal and religious forces to enter the political field, pushing back the political parties to the background and even controlling and leading them;

(b) that this has encouraged totalitarian tendencies within the shell of democracy by destroying its essence, consisting of respect for the people's verdict and democratic institutions;

(c) that this has given added strength to the

minority vested interests to organise violence and anarchy and to start open revolt against a constitutionally established government and its progressive legislative measures that make inroads into their vested interests;

(*d*) that this has struck a heavy blow against the people's belief in democracy and in the possibility of peaceful socio-economic transformation.

The Kerala State Committee of the Communist Party of India is confident that in the coming elections the Party will be voted into power again

with a greater majority, and it declares in the concluding part of its latest resolution: "In the final analysis, it is not the Central Government nor the Congress High Command that is going to decide who should rule in Kerala. That right belongs to the people of Kerala. Very soon the people will get an opportunity to give their verdict on the twenty-eight months' rule of the Communist-led Ministry and also on the activities of the Congress leaders and others for illegally overthrowing that Ministry and on the Central intervention".