



FIRST COMMUNIST MINISTRY IN KERALA: A NOVEL EXPERIMENT TOWARDS DEMOCRATISATION

Preethi Chandran.P.B

Research Scholar, History, International Centre for Kerala Studies Kariavattom

Campus e-mail:preethipnayar@gmail.com Mobile no.9497022773

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to analyse the significance of the First Communist Ministry of 1957. The Communist Party of India gained clear majority in the general election of 1957 in Kerala. The Ministry was sworn in 5th April 1957 with EMS Namboodiripad as Chief Minister. The Communist Government took several progressive policies and legislations which brings great changes in the society. Though the Government gave priority to agrarian and educational reforms, it also concentrated on industrial and administrative reforms like decentralisation. Within the limits, the Government tried to achieve real progress in various fields. Communist Party as the party of the downtrodden masses had the political will and sincerity to implement the necessary reforms.

Key words: Feudalism, Agrarian Relations Bill, 1957, Kerala Stay of Eviction Procedures Act, 1957, Kerala Education Bill, 1957, Kerala Panchayat Bill (9th December 1958) and Kerala Zilla Samithi Bill (6th April 1959), Industrialisation, Neutralisation of the Police.

INTRODUCTION

The EMS Ministry of 1957 in Kerala was the first communist government came to power among the Indian states. Communist ministry brings several legislative measures favouring the poor when they came to power in 1957. The Communists have played a vital role in the promotion of a democratic society in Kerala that protects the poor and endows them with a dignity arising from social and political awareness that is quite unique in Kerala. During the short period of 28 months the Communist Ministry took pioneering steps for land reforms, administrative restructuring, decentralisation, education sector, strengthening public health and distribution systems, minimum wages and social security measures¹, which differentiate it from other states of India. From the words of V.R.Krishnan Iyer, the objective of the Government is clear, “we are not invading the economy by Marxian revolution, but trying to eliminate feudalism, inaugurating agrarian transformation, refusing to misuse the police against the workers when their demands were legitimate and control rackets; corruption and industrial exploitation. In short we were only putting into practice what in the finer anti-imperialist era the Congress proclaimed but never implemented”² for land reforms, enhancing minimum wages and initiating welfare measures for the working people, democratizing the educational system and followed the pro-people policy. In fact this period was the base of modernization of Kerala society.

The Communists on assuming office immediately went about fulfilling their election promises. Within six days of its swearing-in, it banned eviction of cultivating tenants, and introduced land reform legislation which was the most far-

reaching in India. Besides agrarian reforms and education reforms, it instructed the police not to interfere on the worker – capitalist struggles. Some of the other steps taken included: (1) immediately commuted all death sentences, released all political prisoners and withdrew cases against political offenders; (2) increased salaries and allowances of village officers; (3) set up an Anti- corruption Department headed by a civil servant of Secretary rank; (4) secured the passage of its 1957-58 budget which showed a revenue surplus of over Rs.7 lakh; (5) reformed the jail system by restricting the use of local sub-jails; (6) constituted a seven-man Administrative Reforms Committee to review the state's administrative machinery and recommend measures for improving its efficiency.

Agrarian Reforms

The most important legislative reform attempted by the ministry was the Agrarian Relations Bill (ARB), which Nambudiripad regarded as the government's greatest achievement.³ When the Communist Party came into power in 1957 with its anti-landlord and anti-capitalist programme, land problem was its main concern. The Communist Party election manifesto itself stated that “fundamental changes would be made in the agriculture by introducing an Agrarian Relation Bill. The main aim of the bill would be to safeguard the interests of the tenants, put a ceiling on holdings, redistribute surplus land to the landless and fix fair rents.”⁴ It also promised peasantry that an anti eviction bill would be introduced to bring immediate relief to the tenants, maintained the present status quo in tenure and make sure that the tenants would not be evicted before the Agrarian Relation Bill was passed.⁵ The Ministry took immediate action to stop eviction shortly after taking office and announced its policy to introduce agrarian reform. In less than a week's time in office, the Communist Ministry issued an order to stop all land evictions in the State. The Kerala Stay of Eviction Proceedings Act of 1957 gave temporary protection to tenants including the lower tenancy like *varom pattom*. In 1957 Kerala Stay of Eviction Procedures Act gave temporary protection to tenants, including lower tenants such as *varom pattom*. This Act prohibited legal proceedings against tenants for evictions, either for the recovery of rental delays or for damages, etc.⁶

The first comprehensive Agrarian Relations Bill was introduced in the Assembly on December 21, 1957. The Bill was introduced in the Assembly by the then Revenue Minister, K.R.Gowri. The Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill, passed by the Kerala State Legislative Assembly was the first unified legislation covering the different aspects of agrarian relations in the three regions. The main provisions of the Agrarian Relations Bill were (1) The restriction of ownership in land to 15 acres per family; (2) Fixing of tenure to all types of tenants including sharecroppers; (3) Restriction on resumption of land by owners-resumption of land was permitted only for extension of any place of public religious worship or for the construction of residential buildings by landowners or for self-cultivation; (4) Tenants were given the right to purchase the land they cultivated by paying 16 times the fair rent fixed under the Bill, or 12 times the contract rent through 16 equal annual instalments. The landlords were to be given compensation on the basis of a graduated scale. People's committees with Panchayat and representatives of the mass organizations have been set up to supervise the operation and implementation of land reform measures.

All the provisions of the Bill evoked the opposition parties, big land owners and caste organisations.⁷ Therefore, in order to safeguard their wealth, they united to overthrow the Government within two days of the passing of the Agrarian Relations Bill; they called for the state wide action, 'Liberation Struggle'.⁸

The government had chosen an anti- feudal approach and not a socialist reconstruction of the agrarian system. Its limited purpose was to destroy the parasitic domination of the jennmis, landlords, intermediaries and money lenders and to make the tiller master of the land. Namboodiripad had argued that the initial aim of land reform should be to abolish feudalism and create capitalist agricultural relations. This, the correct tactical line for a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country, would rally all the non-feudal classes behind the reform.⁹

The important legislative reform initiated by the Communist Ministry was the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill, which EMS Namboodiripad regarded as the Government's greatest achievements. Ronald.J.Herring describes Kerala as "the only Indian state to abolish land lord-tenant nexus in a serious way."¹⁰ P.S.Appu says, "Of all these states, the best performance in the field of tenancy reform was that of Kerala."¹¹ Naturally this far reaching land reform which formed the basis of the so called 'Kerala Model of development' with its emphasis on social equity and security aroused the displeasure of vested interest.

Educational Policy

The CPI in Kerala pledged to regulate the education system as one of the main points on the electoral platform. Soon after coming to power, the Government announced that the statutory basis for the improvement of general education and of the conditions of the teachers was in active preparation.¹² Kerala Education Bill was introduced in the Assembly on July 7, 1957. The Bill was, simply and purely, a piece of protective legislation intended to secure and safeguard the interests of teachers employed in schools under private management in Kerala.¹³ Education Minister Joseph Mundassery said that the aim of the Bill was to protect the right of the teachers, "their independence on the sweet will of the manager should cease."¹⁴ The Communist Government conceded that the private educational institutions "had rendered commendable service in the matter of promoting education whether for proselytisation or for profit or perhaps for self rewarding social service."¹⁵ The Education Act included the regularization of appointment and conditions of service of the teachers of the private schools, the empowering of the Government to take action against the mismanagement, direct payment of the salaries of the private school by Government and authorizing the Government to take over any school required in the interests of education.¹⁶ The most controversial clauses were related to the takeover of aided schools: for a maximum period of five years, when necessary "in the interests of the pupils of the school, the Government may, under clause 14, and without notice, takeover the management of the school against payment of an objectively fixed rent. Within three months the educational agency may apply for restoration." Clause 15 gave the Government the legal ground for the takeover of the school "for standardising general education in the state, or for improving the level of literacy in any area or for bringing the educational institutions in any area or for bringing the education of any category under their direct control."¹⁷ The Bill also specified that the

administration of education should be carried on by the management, while inspection, control and supervision of their school by the education department.¹⁸ After the hotly debates the Bill was finally passed on November 29, 1957. The Select Committee added a clause that nothing in the Kerala Educational Bill should affect the rights of the minorities under the articles of the Constitution and therefore, the provisions of the Act should not apply to schools aided by the Government. Management could thus opt out of the aid- system and continued as recognised schools.¹⁹ The Education Bill was a giant step in ensuring that teachers could serve with dignity.²⁰ There was also a provision in the 11th Article of the bill that the teacher's appointment must be made from a list prepared by the PSC observing all rules of qualification and reservation for scheduled caste and other backward classes. Finally this section was forced to be withdrawn by pressure from central government but even after such change it was a bit a bone of contention in the hands of the notorious 'Liberation Struggle'.²¹

Industrial Policy

The Government was quite successful in the industrial policy. The achievement of rapid industrial progress was one of the main goals set by the Kerala Communist Government. Immediately after the ministry took over, the Industries Minister K.P.Gopalan appealed to industrialists to invest money in Kerala. He assured them of industrial peace if they gave the workers a fair deal, and promised them a reasonable profit.²² In the industrial sector, the government has initiated a long - term program to combine the need to increase production with protecting the legitimate interests of the working class. In order to achieve this objective, two points were stressed: cooperation between management and workers and the promotion of private investment in the state's industrialization drive. The party's perception and level were clear in its execution. Ajay Ghosh, the National Secretary of the CPI, described it as "the task of rebuilding Kerala, and therefore we need the cooperation of workers and capitalists."²³ The ideas were to allow the private sector to expand and the capitalist class to grow so that production and job opportunities could ultimately be improved. Subsequently the social environment needed for the realisation of socialism was to be created by organising the working class and democratising the state administration. K.P.Gopalan, Minister of Industries call upon industrialists to invest money in Kerala and guaranteed them of industrial peace if they gave workers a fair deal and promised them acceptable profit.²⁴ This was exactly what the party envisaged at that point of time. EMS Namboodiripad stated that "The Government would put in from 5-10 percent of the needed capital; private capital would be encouraged to invest to the extent of 30-40 percent and the rest would be borrowed from institutions like the Finance Corporation."²⁵ As a first step towards this G.D Birla was invited to invest in Kerala and launch the Mavoor Rayons factory at Calicut.

There was a conflict arose between the Central Government and state government on the nationalisation of plantations. The Communist party had declared that if it came to power it would nationalise the foreign owned plantations in Kerala and EMS Said that it was too essential for the economic development of Kerala. But this was objected by the Central Government Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru himself rejected it by saying that "I am not going to tamper with the honour and good

name of India just to gain a few crores of rupees.”²⁶ The Government wanted a cordial relation with the Union Government and aware that they were under the premise of the Indian Constitution. So they avoid a controversy with the Central Government and followed their suggestions.

When EMS Namboodiripad took over office, the Second Five Year Plan was already in its second year. The share of Kerala in the Second Five Year Plan was only eighty seven crores. The Government decided to shift as much as resources as possible from the non-productive to productive sectors.²⁷ During the Communist tenure, all targets were gradually raised in each sector and results were at least doubled, with the exception of irrigation and power. Although the government had abolished sales tax on commodities of daily consumption like food, dried fish and books, it raised its income largely through agricultural super-tax and surcharges on less needed commodities--thus, through more direct taxation. The number of factories were increased from 1,613 in 1957 to 2, 128 in 1958 and to 2,275 in 1958 indicating an increase of 30 percent in the first year. The small savings scheme also showed success. The gross collection in one year Increased from Rs.370 to 460 lakhs which resulted in a doubling of the net savings.²⁸ The Kerala government’s financial support gave much needed push to economic development of Kerala.

Administrative Reforms and Decentralisation

EMS realised that the socio-economic development of the state was impossible until “basic transformations are made in the existing administrative system, for the present system, handed down us from the erstwhile British rulers and their Indian allies, is inefficient, while it is unjust and oppressive in its relation to the basic masses producing the wealth of the country.”²⁹ The government has also placed great emphasis on the reform of the administration as a criterion for the democratization of society. After assuming the Office, the government Administrative Reform committee was constituted with Chief Minister as the Chairman, on 15 August 1957. On the basis of the recommendation of the committee, efforts were made by the government to introduce administrative decentralisation, and two legislations for the purpose – Kerala Panchayat Bill (9th December 1958) and Kerala Zilla Samithi Bill (6th April 1959) – were tabled in the Assembly. The theoretical justification behind this move was such as using decentralisation as a means of extending class struggle on a more manageable and tangible basis.³⁰ The plan was definitely to capture state power at the grassroots level and use decentralized institutions to protect the class interests of the subordinate sections. The entire process of administrative reforms and decentralization envisaged by the EMS ministry was thus defined by a clear class base and politics.

Police and the People

One of the Chief Minister’s first pronouncements contained the line of police reforms to be carried out. Before the law all citizens are equal but in experience of the class society, the law and order machinery is heavily loaded in favour of the upper classes. The police machinery could not be used for the active defence of the struggle of the working class; Namboodiripad put forward the idea of 'neutralisation' of the police, curtailing its interference in labour and land disputes. In courts and police stations the weaker sections of the people are always discriminated. It was

during the struggle of the workers and peasants that this discrimination became apparent in its full rage. The Chief Minister stated that his government wanted to put an end to these discriminations and practices, although the police would try to keep law and order strictly in accordance with the law. At the same time, the Chief Minister accentuate that the working classes in collective bargaining and direct action would not be allowed to exceed a precise limit. The Government experimented with a policy of “neutralisation of the police” to contain the oppressive class character of the organs of the state, but not with much success.³¹ The police would not be allowed to intervene in labour struggles. Previously, the state police acted as a militia of employers, who often used brute force to end strikes. The decision of the government put an end to such anti- people measures. Criticism against the government of Kerala during the first six months of its tenure was largely based on all alleged breakdowns in law and state order. The communists of Kerala were critical and made significant efforts to strengthen law and order. At the same time they demonstrated their tolerance of opposition by instructing the police not to interfere in peaceful demonstrations against the government.

Its focus was on liberating Kerala society from the clutches of feudalism and casteism to build a modern society. The outlook and policy of that government was to provide social welfare efforts for immediate relief of the people in distress and to take up projects for the long term development of the state. The world renowned Kerala development model had its origin in these efforts of the 1957 government led by EMS

Labour Policy

The labour policy of the Communist Ministry In addition to granting wage increases to all but the highest-paid government officials, the government has expanded the scope of the legislation on minimum wages was largely constructive. The bonus in government services was set at 8% as payable wages plus an additional 5-8% based on the income of the department. The Government paid bonus from rupees 52000 in 1955-1956 to rupees 83,307 in 1957-1958. According to the Pay Commission recommendations June 1958, wages of lower paid government employees got increased by 15 to 100 percent.³²

The Party organization helped the workers learn about their legal rights and was able to urge employers to fully implement the reforms.³³ The wage policy of the Communist regime was in line with Namboodiripad’s critique of Indian planning, in which he attacked the failure to increase people's purchasing power as a prerequisite for industrialisation.³⁴

Conclusion

Ranadive said in his article, “the Kerala Ministry was a voyage on uncharted seas. This was perhaps, the first time in the history of the world Communist movement that the Communist Party had agreed to form a ministry under capitalism with a bourgeois landlord government controlling the centre and with effective *economic* power in the hands of a handful few....”³⁵ The policies initiated by the CPI government were not revolutionary in the classical sense, but largely progressive in content. The Government wanted to reduce the social and economic inequality and provide social justice to those whom it was denied, through various policies and

legislations. If the Government would allow completing its tenure, the socio-economic status of Kerala society has received great boost. Its aim was to free Kerala from the clutches of feudalism and casteism to create a modern society. The purpose of this ministry, however, was to fulfil its promises, but to remain within the constitutional framework and without any ideological confrontation with the centre. The government's outlook and policy was to make social welfare effort to immediately relieve the people in distress and to undertake long - term state development projects. The world known Kerala Model has its origin from the efforts of the EMS Ministry of 1957.

But in 1959, the first ministry of Kerala was undemocratically dismissed by the Union Government under the Congress. Landowners unhappy with the laws of land reform, the Casteist and communal forces, the power hungry Congress Party and the imperialist forces found a common enemy in the Communists and formed a united front that manifested itself as Vimochana Samaram. The progress of Kerala was driven by comprehensive land reforms, the end of evictions, agitations to redistribute excess land, struggles for decent wages and reservations. The efforts of the left - wing progressive movements in the state and their governments have led to these changes in particular. The Government of 1957 was historically important as they take initiative in redefining social relations and democratising the development process within the confining limits imposed by a bourgeois democracy and centralised federal system.

End notes

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