

deviculom and after

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The acid test whether the Communist rule in Kerala enjoyed popular support or not was made at Deviculom. The result was convincing.

Bemoaning Communist victory at Deviculom, a hysterical anti-Communist mused: '...the defeat of the Communists in Kerala, if it is brought about, will hold within it the seeds of innumerable developments of a beneficial kind not only for India but for the whole world.... It is not alone in India but all over the world that lovers of democracy were hoping that this sound beginning in a final exorcisation of the Communist spectre would be made in Deviculom.' (*Indian Express*, Editorial entitled 'No Waterloo,' 28 April 1958.)

Rather elated by the crowds at the Cannanore Congress conference, a few weeks before the Deviculom bye-election, defence minister V. K. Krishna Menon said that Congress was 'not just a political party in the Western sense,' but a 'national movement' which had suffered an electoral reverse in Kerala alone. He exhorted Congressmen to work hard and win 'the moral and emotional sympathy' of the masses and show in the Deviculom bye-election that the State 'has returned to the national fold.' He said that Congress success in the bye-election should not be a 'mere scraping through,' but a convincing victory to make amends for the 'temporary' reverses it suffered in the last elections.' (*Times of India*, 28 April 1958.)

The defeat of the Congress in Deviculom, however, became a fitting climax to the one-year-old hate campaign sponsored by the anti-Communists and the Congress against the Communist regime in Kerala. Despite the fact that a

combined opposition pooled its entire resources against the Communist candidate, Rosamma Punnose, the workers and peasants at Deviculom reaffirmed their faith in the State government, and the first Communist government in India thus won a vote of confidence.

Congress defeat at Deviculom followed close on the heels of an interview by Nehru to a foreign paper to the effect that 'Communists would be lucky if they hold on to Kerala.' Deviculom answer, in effect, was that Congress would be lucky if it does not lose several more States in the next general elections. Deviculom, indeed, made real to India the alternative of many Keralas and many Namboodiripads.

In a way it may be said that the Deviculom bye-election was a symbolic struggle between the Communists and the democratic elements supporting them on the one side and the capitalists and anti-Communists on the other. The Deviculom electorate, and symbolically the entire Kerala people, gave their unambiguous verdict. The large percentage of voting in a constituency in which difficult terrain was expected to keep voters in their homes, and the wide margin by which the successful Communist candidate beat her Congress rival are convincing proofs of the above.

The most important feature of this election was that while no Kerala minister participated in the campaign, the Congress even pressed the services of the Madras chief minister, Kamaraj Nadar, and public works minister, Kakkannan, with a view to swing the Tamil votes in its favour. Kamaraj did not apparently make any speech but is reported to have gone round with a bag in hand and to have told the press in Madras on 13 May, after his return from Deviculom, that 'the chances of Congress success in the Deviculom bye-election in Kerala seemed to be bright from what he had observed.'

The Communist ministers, indeed, gave India a lesson in democratic electioneering by abstaining from the campaign in this most fateful bye-election. As against this, ministers coming to Deviculom from outside were remarkable for their unscrupulous campaign. For example, it was made out before the Tamil voters, who mostly hail from the so-called lower castes, that whereas Congress rule in Madras has made two or three Harijans as ministers, the Communists had made two Brahmins as ministers, and if

they vote Communist, the hated Brahmins alone will be strengthened.

And, in a way, Deviculom may also be said to have witnessed an inglorious defeat of communalism. It was communalism of a special type which the ministerial campaigners from outside sought to rouse. It was Tamils vs. non-Tamils. We are accustomed to the sordid spectacle of a Kayastha for a Kayastha, a Bhoomihar for a Bhoomihar, or a Thakur for a Thakur in North India, and of a Mudaliar for a Mudaliar, a Nayudu for a Nayudu or a Marvar for a Marvar in South India. But in Deviculom was witnessed a new type of communalism with the slogan of Tamils against non-Tamils. This low type of communal appeal failed. The labourers in the plantations and the peasants in the fields showed that such communal preaching does not result in their losing faith in the Communist capacity to look after their interests.

Anti-Communist leader writers comforted themselves with the thought that Deviculom after all could be 'no Waterloo' since 'it was a Communist stronghold' and a Communist victory is not surprising. The facts, however, are different. Deviculom was *not* a Communist stronghold. In fact, the Communists were not sure of this seat. The reasons were these. In the earlier election the Communists had no candidate for the constituency, they were so weak over there. The Tamil population, however, was at that time sore against State Congress policy of opposing the merger of southern Tamil districts of Travancore-Cochin with Tamil Nad, and they approached the Communists to set up a candidate. Rosamma Punnose was put up and she won. It was purely a negative vote.

Having been elected, Rosamma did organise some plantation labour unions. The area, however, required Tamil Party workers which the Kerala Party did not have and the Tamil Nad Communist Party could not spare. Thus, in spite of the electoral success, Deviculom was ignored by the Communists.

Therefore Communists faced a very serious situation and it speaks volumes for their ways of going about their business that no one knew of this reality. And comrades from the brother party of Tamil Nad came to Deviculom and did a wonderful job. Nearly one thousand Communists from Tamil Nad went to Deviculom. Among them were

four members (out of five) of the secretariat of the Tamil Nad Party, namely, P. Ramamurthi, Jeevanandam, Venkataraman, and Shankarayya. There came also twenty members of the Tamil Nad State Committee of the Communist Party, and the pick of the District Party leaders. Twenty-five women Communists also came from Tamil Nad. Quite a large number of the 1,000 Communists who came from Tamil Nad were from the working classes.

The Tamil voters in Deviculom constitute 60-65 per cent of the electorate and live in plantations. They are extremely poor and illiterate. In many places, where trade unionism has not spread and political consciousness is lacking, the local bullies dominate over the populace.

The basic task was to turn decisively this largely dumb mass, which could be easily swayed by Tamil-type communalism. Communist workers from Tamil Nad, quietly and with no outward display, settled in twos and threes in all the plantation habitations almost a month before the election date. Quietly and patiently they explained the Communist case. They lived with the workers, ate what they got and became one with them.

In their work of explanation, they were helped by the labour and police policy of the Communist ministry. The workers were unanimous that ever since Communist rule they are at least able to sleep peacefully in their huts. Formerly, the police constables and watchers used to knock at their doors at nights, harass them and extort cash on trumped-up charges and threats. They also knew that the planter now behaved better and was fast losing his earlier arrogant habits and ways.

The remaining voters were peasants of the area populated by the Malayalees. Here the Kerala Communists went into action and decisively turned the peasant electorate in their favour.

It would take too long to describe the election campaign in every detail. Suffice it to say that the Communists had the better of the Congress in all respects except funds. Their election machinery was efficiently organised and coordinated by M. N. Govindan Nair, the secretary of the Kerala State Committee of the Communist Party, who is noted for his organisational grit, and quiet, unperturbed style of work. The Communist workers were well trained in their

propaganda points. Every voter was approached. Nothing was left to chance.

The unscrupulousness of Congress propaganda was, indeed, amazing. Even the most responsible Congressmen indulged in it. B. K. Nair, the Congress candidate, speaking of the food-poisoning tragedy in Quilon district on 29 April, told a meeting at Periyar in Peermade that Namboodiripad got some poison and put it in some hotels in Quilon but luckily Nehru, when he came to Kerala, did not eat in hotels and was saved. This speech has been reported as such in more than one daily in Malayalam and has been publicised in some English weeklies as well, and has apparently not been contradicted. Its authenticity was vouchsafed to this author by a reputed newspaper columnist who was personally present at the meeting.

P. T. Chacko, the leader of the Congress opposition in the State assembly, told a meeting at Elappara in Peermade that if Communists are given the vote, the Tamil workers will be sent away and Communist workers will be brought from Alleppey and Sherthallai.

Pattom and Panampally also went campaigning, and each time they opened their mouths, a few dozen votes were lost to the Congress. Pattom, who was the chief minister when firing took place in the Tamil areas, is intensely disliked by the Tamil people. And Panampally's reputation being what it is, his exhortations could not but have a damaging effect for the Congress.

K. P. Madhavan Nair had also come down from Delhi. The *Times of India News Service* reported on election eve: "The Congress leader, Mr K. P. Madhavan Nair, who is anxious to see that the election does not suffer owing to a lack of funds, said the AICC would not "send us even one naya paisa.... He said help was coming from unknown men through money orders for small amounts like one or two rupees. And there was an excess of workers clamouring to come." And the report added: 'Still, there was confusion and anxiety writ large on the faces of the Congress leaders.'

On the evening of 16 May, the polling day, the following telegram was sent to Jawaharlal Nehru from a telegraph office in Deviculom constituency: 'Dear Panditji, Kerala has failed you several times but this time we are not going to fail you. You can go to Kulu and take rest

with the feeling that Kerala has again become a strong link. We will win with a big margin.—Madhavan Nair.'

Now, Madhavan Nair is a very common name in Kerala and we are not aware who this particular Madhavan Nair is, but the telegram no doubt expresses the feeling of exultation among Congressmen after the polling was over. That this was only wishful thinking was clear when the election result was announced on 19 May. Rosamma secured 55,819 votes to B. K. Nair's 48,730 and K. S. Subramaniam, the RSP supported candidate got only 7,690 votes. The *Indian Express* (20 May 1958) reported: 'The electoral victory of Mrs Punnose has greatly added to the moral stature of the Communist Party, besides strengthening its hands in the legislature. It has shown to the world that the people particularly of the working class and the peasantry, are behind the government, no matter what others may say. It has also dealt a blow to the already shattered prestige of the Congress.'

The Deviculom defeat shocked the Congress high command at Delhi. The special correspondent of the *Indian Express* (21 May 1958) reported: 'The Congress defeat at the Deviculom bye-election in Kerala has come as a shock to the Congress high command which, based on reports from its local representatives, had never bargained for such a huge majority for the Communists. It is regarded as a stunning blow to the Congress, especially to the Kerala unit. Its affairs have not evidently improved in spite of efforts to rehabilitate the party since it went out of office.'

While the central Congress leadership was shocked, the State Congress leaders were completely stunned. The *Times of India News Service* reported: 'The Deviculom defeat has shattered the morale of all opposition parties in Kerala. The Congress alone is not the sufferer. The Praja Socialist Party, the Muslim League, and the Revolutionary Socialist Party have all felt the blow.' (26 May 1958.)

Stunned by the defeat, the Congress could not immediately offer any explanations. All that the Kerala Congress president, K. A. Damodara Menon, could tell pressmen when the result was made known was that 'the defeat of the Congress at the Deviculom bye-election was unexpected,' adding, 'This defeat should serve only to make us more determined in our fight against Communism.' (*Indian Express*, 21 May 1958.)

Of course, it was never expected of the Kerala Congress to imbibe some humility, agonisingly reappraise their wrong policies and correct their ways. But that they will utilise the Deviculom defeat to run another smear campaign against the Communists was not expected even by the Congress critics. Apparently, concoction of stories took a few days, but soon enough the Deviculom defeat was being converted into an offensive against the Kerala Government and the 'determined fight against Communism' was thus continued.

The explanation of the 'unexpected defeat' soon poured forth. The defeated Congress candidate, B. K. Nair, came out with the story that the Communists had imported 20,000 people from outside for 'impersonation.' He also charged the election officials of partiality towards the Communists and that liquor and money flowed freely for the Communists.

It should be noted that this story was revealed not after 16 May, the polling day, but quite a few days after on 19 May, when the counting was over and result announced. It took some time to cook up stories, and even these changed. Within a few days, however, the 'defeat' stories came to have a well-defined aim. Kerala Congress president and other Congress spokesmen began to allege that the electoral rolls were seriously tampered with at Deviculom. This refrain has since continued. It was freely voiced in the short session of the State assembly in the first week of July.

While no better performance was expected from Kerala Congressmen, it was sincerely hoped that the Congress top leadership would at last realise the unfitness of the present Kerala Congress leadership and will take some drastic steps to improve the rotten state of Kerala Congress affairs. Indeed, many well wishers of the Congress in Kerala definitely hold the opinion that if any State Congress unit ever deserved to be dissolved by the Congress high command, it was that of Kerala.

These hopes were belied when the new Congress general secretary, Sadiq Ali, visited Kerala in the third week of June, that is, a month after the Deviculom defeat. It was expected that Sadiq Ali would probe deeper into Kerala Congress affairs. Instead, he disappointed people by singing the Kerala Congress tune. He told pressmen at Trivandrum

that 'the artificial inflation of the electoral rolls in many places in the State by the inclusion of "spurious names"... is a matter that needs looking into.' (*Indian Express*, 27 June 1958.) Further, as against the express declarations of such Congress leaders as Morarji Desai and V. K. Krishna Menon against Congress alliance with PSP, Sadiq Ali blessed the move by saying that the Pradesh Congress Committee was free to have agreement with any party.

While Sadiq Ali did not indulge in charges of 'totalitarianism' against the Communist government, he nevertheless made no secret of his belief that 'Communist conception of democracy' was 'not clear.' This statement of the new Congress general secretary can be usefully viewed in the background of an earlier pronouncement by him on Kerala. On 30 August 1957, Sadiq Ali, in his capacity as a member of the AICC advisory board on youth organisation, had inaugurated the All-Kerala Youth Congress convention at Ernakulam. Speaking on the occasion he had said that during his 'extensive tour of the State, including the interior' he had learnt that much that was going on in Kerala today in the name of democracy was 'subversion and destruction of the spirit of democracy.' (*Statesman*, 2 September 1957.) And he had even then said that all 'democratic forces' should unite to 'push the Communists out of office.'

Some local Congressmen apparently showed greater realism in the appraisal of the Deviculom defeat than the new Congress general secretary. K. R. M. Nair of Peruvambur, referred to earlier in this chapter, said: 'Group rivalries and communal jealousies have brought the Congress party to its present pitiable position. Both these maladies were very prominent in the present election.' (*Indian Express*, 2 June 1958.)

In fact, the *Times of India News Service* also reported that certain 'Congress leaders opposed to unity [of non-Communist parties] and against the present Congress leadership in the organisation and in the legislature had successfully sabotaged the campaign.' (26 May 1958.)

To understand Congress behaviour in Kerala after Deviculom it is necessary to say a few words about the factions in the Kerala Congress today to which the *Times of India News Service* has drawn a very pointed and intelligent attention. Personal rivalries and factionalism continue to be the dominating urges of Kerala Congress till today,

even after all the disasters which have befallen upon them. The group headed by ex-chief minister Panampally is against any alliance with PSP, the chief argument being that Congress is good enough to defeat the Communists if it is properly led. The clear implication is that the present leadership of the State Congress organisation, as also the Congress legislative party is not in competent hands. In fact, on certain occasions Panampally has made no secret of his dislike for the Congress leadership in the State legislature.

The matter is really related to the expected bye-election at Chalakudy where Panampally was defeated in the last general elections by a PSP candidate whom the Communists supported. Pattom Thanu Pillai, the PSP leader, demands that since the PSP supported the Congress candidate at Deviculom, the Congress must support the PSP candidate at Chalakudy. Panampally is very keen on being set up as a Congress candidate again and behind all moves of Congress-PSP unity he sees the shadow of Pattom, who undoubtedly dislikes him intensely since it was Panampally's intrigues that brought the downfall of his second ministry. Pattom, in fact, recently made no secret of the fact that 'some of the Congress leaders in the State had no interest to work in such a way as to save the State from Communist misrule.' He was speaking a few weeks before Deviculom, and he deplored that 'the Congress had not even now issued an official statement or passed a resolution urging all parties in the State, which believed in democracy to forge a united front against the Communists.' (*Indian Express*, 25 April 1958.)

P. T. Chacko's recent intimacy with Pattom is explained by their common dislike for Panampally, both being determined to see that he is not set up as a candidate from Chalakudy. In this, K. A. Damodara Menon, the KPCC president, seems to be backing them.

And so this bewildering disunity of the anti-Communists in Kerala has become the cause of most weird politics. To impress the powers that be, both are interested in proving that each is a more virulent anti-Communist than the other. This competition in anti-Communism has reached fantastic proportions. There is the spectacle, on the one hand, of Panampally leading processions and shouting slogans on the streets of Trichur in connection with a got-up strike in government-managed Sitaram Mills at Trichur.

More than 600 'volunteers' were jailed. Very many of these 'volunteers were picked up from the village vendors who come to Trichur and hardly earn a rupee a day. They were given forty-five rupees each for 'satyagraha' which lodges them in jail just for two weeks. So during the period, when they would otherwise earn only fifteen rupees, they get forty-five rupees—certainly not a bad bargain.

While Panampally was thus displaying his anti-Communist gallantry, P. T. Chacko, not to be left behind, thunders in the State assembly and outside. He made a great fuss in the State assembly during the brief July (1958) session about EMS's Coimbatore ('civil war') speech. He rounded off his performance at a press conference in Trivandrum on 8 July, in which he threatened 'annihilation' of the Communists who were out 'to wreck the constitution from within.'

K. A. Damodara Meon on his part excels in charging the Communist government of artificially inflating electoral rolls through inclusion of spurious names. He is equally vehement in levelling charges of 'intensification of terrorist tactics by the Communists,' which was 'intended to demonstrate that their party followers could alone lead a fearless and peaceful life in Kerala.' (*Indian Express*, 23 June 1958.) Damodara Menon, however, does not seem to command any notable attention in Kerala. When in March last he fulminated against the Communists at the Trichur district political conference, the *Kerala Kaumudi*, an independent and influential Malayalam daily wrote: 'As for Sri Damodara Menon's "Sermon on the Mount," it is not new to the people of Kerala. The people of Kerala are well versed in his ever-changing political history.' (1 April 1958.)

Thus, after Deviculom, the Congress leaders have intensified their hate campaign against the Communists. The danger of political controversy carried to a pitch of homicidal hatred may be obvious to all, but not to Kerala Congressmen, who have willy-nilly entered into competitive anti-Communism.

The problems of a State like Kerala, poor and overpopulated, cannot obviously be solved by a fight to the finish among the main political parties. The talk of mutual annihilation can only be regarded as insane.

Strangely enough, the best advice to the Congress came from the Communist Namboodiripad. After Deviculom,

EMS advised the Congress 'to reconsider its policies and function as a party of constructive opposition.' In later amplifications of this statement he said at Coimbatore that if instead of a constructive approach the opposition parties united only in somehow crushing the Communists, it can only lead to a disastrous situation, and he referred to the example of China. Instead of drawing any lessons from this pleading, the Congressmen jumped at the statement as a threat of civil war by EMS and the noise continued almost unabated.

Post-Deviculom developments in Kerala lead one to think that, gangrene having set in the body of Kerala Congress, it has become incurable and the only way may be to amputate this limb from the main body of the Indian National Congress. But this is a very doubtful possibility. The danger lies the other way. The Kerala Congress gangrene is apparently spreading to the all-India organisation. As it is, left to its present ways, Kerala Congress may be expected to reduce its strength in the legislature by at least fifty per cent in the next general elections.

As for the Communists in Kerala, their prestige has never been higher. The beneficial effects of their policies are increasingly being felt by the people. The *Kerala Kaumudi* recently said: 'If the present government is thrown out, and a little time allowed for the successor to run the administration, people will have to pray for president's rule once again. In these circumstances, is it not better to allow the Communist government, who have run the administration for one year, to continue in office without throwing it out, advising it to correct its mistake? Is it not the advice of the saint that one should not throw away the diamond and wish for lead.' (4 April 1958.)