

## **the 'rent in the congress armour'**

(ii)

At Gauhati, with the mien of Lord Siva swallowing the bitter poison, Congress president Dhebar gallantly took upon his head the responsibility for 'the rent in the Congress armour' in Kerala. In Kerala, more than anywhere else, the Congress, has become a type of Adullamite cave, to which all reactionary elements in social life have gravitated. The organisation is full of opportunists, of ex-loyalists turned patriots, of power-seekers, of persons who, when in power, were so engrossed in helping themselves and favouring their friends that they cared not a dime for the country. The Congress party machinery existed for the aggrandisement of a small elite, the others being mute spectators or active camp followers ever alert to step into the elite group, which fought and wrangled within itself interminably. And whenever one chief was overthrown, the new overlord invariably gained recognition from New Delhi. In every case, loyalty was not to the people, but to New Delhi. Ambitious careerists thus engulfed the Kerala Congress, backed by the plantation millionaires.

There is another aspect of the question. The Congress in Kerala, barring perhaps the Malabar part, can hardly lay claim to traditions of selfless service and struggle in the cause of the people, as is the case in those Indian States of today which were under direct British administration. And when at last the common people of T-C moved in stride with the high tide of the irresistible upsurge of India's millions, those who later joined the Communist Party and constitute its leadership today were among its chief inspirers, organisers and leaders, along with Pattom Thanu Pillai,

C. Kesavan, T. M. Verghese and others. These veterans have been eliminated by new upstarts.

One more factor has to be borne in mind. It has been said that nothing changes the face of politics as the change from one generation to another. The Congressmen in Kerala, as elsewhere, sought votes on the basis of the glories of the Congress in the freedom struggle and gibed at the Communists for all that they did or failed to do during those days. But past glory proved of no avail. The recent record of the Congress, as also of the Praja Socialist Party, left no doubt in the minds of the Malayalee people as to what sort of government they would get if they came to power again. They could not forget that even in 1948 when the Congress commanded all the seats in the legislature, its government cracked within six months of its formation.

So the Congress started in the 1956-57 elections with this initial drawback of fallen prestige. There was a mad scramble for tickets because it was thought certain that just as in Andhra where the Communist strength in terms of seats in the legislature declined in the 1954 elections, Kerala Communists, too, would be licked at the polls. 'The Congress, after all is unpredictable.' Then there were such international incidents as the Hungarian affair, which was seized upon to paint the Communists as bloodthirsty murderers. It was also anticipated that the exposure of Stalin by Khrushchov had blown Communism skyhigh in Kerala certainly, if not in the world. With all this the hope of regaining the lost power was felt by Congressmen. The scramble for tickets degenerated into the worst ever seen indiscipline and factionalism inside the Congress.

To meet the situation, S. K. Patil, generally reputed to be the best election manager of the Congress, was assigned to Kerala to organise the campaign. He had done the trick in Andhra, and Kerala Congressmen believed that he would give a repeat performance in Kerala. Patil's selection by the Congress High Command as Kerala election manager, in fact, intensified the scramble for tickets. Shrewd Patil, however, took no time to realise that an impossible situation awaited him, and he, therefore, struck upon the device of striking a united front of the Congress with the Muslim League and the Kerala People's Party comprising of 'rebel' Congressmen—who had brought about the fall of the Panamally ministry—and, if possible, the PSP.

The efforts for a united front with non-Communists parties (even the Muslim League!) may seem a sad commentary on Congress strength. On an earlier occasion prime minister Nehru had poured ridicule on the efforts of the Communist and other left parties to forge a united front by saying: 'Three lame men joining together cannot make a strong man.' Little must he have then realised that a day would come when the best electioneer of the Congress would seek this type of alliance of lame men!

In view of the earlier Bangalore decisions of the PSP forbidding any alliance with other parties and of the deep animosities between the PSP leader Pattom Thanu Pillai and the Congress top of Kerala, Patil's efforts to woo the PSP failed, and he concentrated on the Muslim League. Patil's proposal roused intense opposition in the ranks of the Congress, especially from Muslim Congressmen.

Despite all this, Patil is reported to have arrived at some sort of an understanding with the League, but when the whole case was placed before the High Command at the Indore session, they did not support it. The alliance with the Kerala People's Party, itself a product of irreconcilable Congress factions, was also given the go by. After this the Congress propaganda took on a virtuous look in Kerala by saying that it was not going to have any sort of alliances. The people of Kerala, however, very well knew that it was a case of 'sour grapes.'

A tragic commentary on Congress management of Kerala elections is provided by the fact that till 27 January, that is, 48 hours before the last date for filing nominations, the organisation had not succeeded in finalising the names of candidates for more than a dozen constituencies. Frantic efforts continued to be made to 'discover' suitable candidates for some constituencies where Congress victory was rather uncertain. In this background, Congress claims of being the only organisation capable of providing a stable government to the newly-constituted Kerala State aroused only popular scorn and laughter.

No sooner had the Congress election campaign started, squabbles of another type emerged among the party workers. There were rumours about huge sums coming to Kerala from the Congress Parliamentary Board and its disbursement among the candidates and constituencies. And these rumours were followed by charges, counter-charges and

mutual recriminations about election funds being personally appropriated by this or that Congressman.

Considerations of space prevent us from describing the style of Congress propaganda during the elections. The directive of the Congress top was that Congressmen must adopt clean propaganda methods and not stoop to low levels. It was observed only in its breach.

Congress president Dhebar came campaigning to Kerala. And of all places, at Alleppey, a Communist stronghold with a Communist municipality, Dhebar thundered: 'No books are there in Moscow libraries on how to run the administration of an Indian State.' He sought to snub the Communists by saying that statecraft is no child's play, and if the Communists could run one or two municipalities, that is no reason why they could take over the State administration. At another place, in the constituency of a Communist-supported independent, the Congress president struck a rather low level in his propaganda. He compared independents to painted women flirting with different parties and warned that these 'independents' are the greatest danger to the nation. Contradictorily enough, a few days later Congress ex-chief minister Panampally Govinda Menon waxed eloquent at Kasargod in support of an independent, Dr. Shenoy, who was contesting against A. K. Gopalan for the Lok Sabha.

One more aspect of Congress election campaign in Kerala may be mentioned, namely, the support lent to the Congress by the Catholic clergy and the Christian planters. Catholic bishops had earlier sent out a postoral letter exhorting the faithful to vote against the ungodly 'Marxists.' When, however, they subsequently witnessed the serious Communist challenge to Congress monopoly of power, they became more positive in their exhortation. The pastoral directive was now amended to advise the faithful to vote only for the Congress. No less valuable was the propaganda for the Congress by the mouthpiece of vested interests like the *Malayala Manorama*, which specialised in telling the Kerala electorate of the harm likely to come to the State in case the electorate voted Communists to power. Among other things, it sedulously propagated that the decision to start half-a-dozen large-scale industries in Kerala, 'now under consideration of the Planning Commission,' would largely depend upon Congress prospects in the State.

As against Congress inefficiency, indiscipline and indecision, the Communist management of Kerala elections provides a study in contrast. The Communists could not mobilise as much funds and other resources as the Congress (which, in any case, is impossible since capitalists are not likely to loosen their purse strings for the Communists as they do for the Congress). As against the non-intellectual and hackneyed talking points of the Congress, the Communists approached the highly literate and intellectual electorate of the State on a different plane. A research group in the State Committee of the Party had worked for many months to prepare an economic plan for building up New Kerala. The results of this study were published in a pamphlet written by C. Achutha Menon, then Secretary of the State Committee and presently finance minister. This pamphlet evaluates the natural and human resources of Kerala, analyses the economic malaise of the people, and puts forward concrete and practical proposals which can be implemented within the four corners of India's Constitution. These points were also incorporated in a Manifesto of the State Communist Party which was issued as a supplement of the CPI Election Manifesto. While the Congress propagandists were relying more on the power of the lungs, saying hardly anything worth the name in relation to Kerala's concrete and pressing economic problems, Communist propaganda was directly related to the economic problems the Malayalees have to face in their daily life.

The effect on the electorate of this qualitative difference in Congress and Communist propaganda was great. The lack of any understanding of the Congress economic programme in the Congress ranks led them to repeat vague generalities which later degenerated into downright slander and abuse and did not hesitate, if it became necessary, to play up caste feelings, e.g., Congress propaganda against 'Catholic' Professor Mundassery (present education minister) in favour of an Ezhava candidate opposing him. The Communist rank-and-file, however, withstood all the provocations and slanders and patiently explained to the electorate the political and economic implications of the policies of different political parties.

The most astonishing feature of Communist election management in Kerala is the ease with which the selection of candidates was effected. In fact nothing else so sharply

brings forth the basic and diametrically opposite difference between the Congress and the Communist Party as the selection of candidates by the two parties. What was the former's greatest weakness proved to be the latter's strongest point. Here was no scramble for tickets, no factions and groupings for the purpose. On the other hand, there was the spectacle of comrades sincerely anxious to stand down to make way for the best ones. As against the Congress method of choosing not the men with work to their credit but those who were in the good books of the local party bosses or the higher echelons, the Communist Party in Kerala selected its candidates on the basis of recommendations of the lower committees. This important job was finished much in advance of the date of nomination and the entire Party jumped into electioneering as one man.

Thus the Communists proved their superiority over the Congress on two most vital issues which matter in an election, namely, propaganda and discipline. Furthermore, shrewdly learning from the mistake of their Andhra comrades in 1952, who dissipated their energies in contesting almost all seats, the Kerala Communists confined themselves to only 100 seats. And whereas the 'new blood' recruits of the Congress comprised of people only a few of whom had participated in national struggles, the Communists presented to the electorate as their candidates a galaxy of tried veterans of many a battle, acknowledged even by their opponents as of spotless integrity, sincerity and sacrifice. To name only a few, among the Communist candidates were—E. M. S. Namboodiripad, A. K. Gopalan, C. Achutha Menon, K. P. R. Gopalan, K. C. George, T. C. Narayanan Nambiar, T. V. Thomas and R. Sugathan.

Before finalising its list of candidates, the Communist Party did its level best to arrive at some united front agreement with the PSP and the RSP and offered them big concessions, more than could be justified on the basis of their political and mass influence. At the same time it attempted to arrive at agreements with non-party democrats of proved integrity like Dr. A. R. Menon, who today is the State's health minister. We need not go here into the long tale of tortuous discussions and playing for positions that characterised the behaviour of the PSP and the RSP during the negotiations. The Kerala Committee of the Communist Party had clearly given the call for an alternative govern-

ment and it went to the farthest limit to bring about some kind of left unity on the basis of the above slogan. The PSP and the RSP, however, misunderstood the Communist position, thinking that the Communists in any case will have to come to an agreement with them, and regarded themselves to be in an advantageous bargaining position. When it seemed to the Communists that their demands were beyond the limits of reasonableness, the negotiations broke down.

The failure of the PSP and the RSP to arrive at an agreement with the Communists proved disastrous for them. The RSP failed to secure a single seat out of the 28 it contested, and the PSP strength was reduced from 19 in the previous assembly (T-C State) to 9 (in Kerala), and even out of these, two, namely C. Janardanan and Joseph Chazhikad, could be elected only because of Communist support. Reporting from Trivandrum, the special correspondent of *The Statesman* (New Delhi, 20 March 1957) said: 'Analysing the results at this distance of time no one can quarrel with the pre-election Communist claim that in the earlier general election, i.e., of 1954, they had unnecessarily sacrificed some seats to placate the Praja Socialists and the Revolutionary Socialists in a bid to form a united anti-Congress front. But it required an embittered battle of ballot box to prove that the Revolutionary Socialists were a spent force in Kerala politics and that Praja Socialists were making unreasonable demands for seats if the Communists wanted a pre-election alliance.'

As for the Congress, not even the worst pessimist in the Congress ranks expected the debacle it met. In the Travancore-Cochin assembly, the Congress commanded 45 seats, but they could not secure as many even with the inclusion of Malabar which returned no fewer than 49 members to the assembly. As the *Statesman* correspondent remarked: 'Even the Congress "fortress of Trichur district" fell like a pack of cards and the defeat of the last Congress chief minister, Mr. Panampally Govinda Menon, in his home constituency was a very heavy blow to Congress prestige.' Indeed, the news of this famous and stunning defeat pleased all sections of the people in Kerala, including some Congressmen, as few things have done in recent years. Panampally, to the people of Kerala, symbolised the corruption and nepotism of the Congress.

A special election review published in Kerala's leading pro-Congress daily *Mathrubhoomi* (21 March) castigated the Congress leaders in the State as parasites on a giant tree whose roots were once deep. And pointing out one 'crucial aspect' of the reasons for Communist victory, it said :

'Deep-rooted in the soil of Kerala and tended by the constant care and attention of its activists is the Communist Party of Kerala. In every remote village there are Communist activists who are closest to the most down-trodden of the people and have identified themselves with these sections. It might be that this activist may not be well-known. It might be that he goes about like a vagabond. But in his village, he keeps daily contact with all individuals. And he takes the message of the Party to every heart. He has an objective which keeps him inspired. And to achieve that objective he devotes his self-sacrificing endeavours. The better morrow might perhaps be a mirage, but to him it is the complete truth. And the means to achieve his aims he finds in the Communist Party. The Party is his body and soul.'

Realism, so characteristic of Kerala Communists, also marked their evaluation of their great victory. From the very beginning they realised that apart from their solid strength, their victory was also largely due to the desire of Kerala's intelligent electorate to give them a chance, having found the Congress and the PSP wanting. M. N. Govindan Nair, who succeeded C. Achutha Menon as Secretary of the State Committee of the Communist Party when the latter was made finance minister of the Communist cabinet, said : 'There was the experience of the people with the Congress and PSP ministries and with president's rule. There was also the popular experience with the Communists, both as leaders of struggle and as administrators in local bodies. There was the swing of a large section of the electorate which, while not necessarily pro-Communist, felt that they should be given a try.' (See his article in *New Age Monthly*, April 1957, entitled "Challenge of Kerala.")

Compared to the last general elections, the percentage of votes polled by the Communists went up from 17.5 to 36.5, while the Congress percentage declined from 42.3 to 38.2 and the PSP registered a fall from 20.3 to 10.8. The Communist percentage does not include the votes polled by independents who stood with Communist backing. Out of

the 65 Communist or Communist-supported independent members of the Kerala legislature, 33 were returned with 50 per cent or more of the votes polled; corresponding figures for the other parties in the State are : Congress 23, PSP 3, Muslim League 3.

The Communist legislators met at Ernakulam on March 30 to elect their leader. E. M. S. Namboodiripad was their unanimous choice. It was a festive day in Ernakulam. Huge masses of people poured into the city from all neighbouring areas. The enthusiasm of the people was unprecedented. They went round the city shouting, singing and dancing. A three mile long procession moved from one end of the city to the other. And in the mammoth mass rally which followed, nothing could be seen except red flags, festoons and banners. Nothing could be heard except drum-beats, slogans and bursting crackers. And the mass singing and dancing, drum-beating and cracker-bursting continued till a late hour after the rally was over.

The people of Kerala were celebrating their victory, for the 'rent in the Congress armour' was simultaneously the triumph of the common man in Kerala. It may well prove to be the beginning of the triumph of the common man throughout this ancient land of India. Indeed, history may later record that this Kerala 'rent in the Congress armour' had necessarily to be a pre-condition for the Indian people to achieve their final triumph and destiny.