

Chapter V

IMPERIALISM COMES ON THE SCENE

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The process described in the last chapter was not a feature unique to Kerala: a process essentially similar to it was also taking place in other parts of India. National languages and national literature were developing, folk culture was flowering into national culture in Maharashtra, Bengal and other parts of India. The 16th and 17 centuries witnessed the emergence of great national poets and writers in almost all the languages of India. The great Mughal Empire was breaking up and foundations were being laid for the establishment of national states. The great Shivaji and other national heroes were coming out as the champions of a new form of social and state organisation—an organisation based on national language and national culture—although many of them were also national oppressors in relation to nationalities other than their own.

The process is thus similar to what took place in Europe where “the British, French, Germans, Italians and others formed themselves into nations at the time of the victorious advance of capitalism and its triumph over feudal disunity” (Stalin). It was taking place however under a severe handicap, viz., the absence of a strong class of merchant capitalists who were, in Europe, “the leaders and masters of the process of the creation of nationalities.” (Lenin)

The characteristic feature of the Indian village community is this: “The chief part of the products is destined for direct use by the community itself, and does not take the form of commodity. Hence, production here is independent of that division of labour brought about, in Indian society as a whole, by means of the exchange of commodities. It is the surplus alone that becomes a commodity, and a portion of even that, not until it has reached the hands of the State, into whose

hands from time immemorial a certain quantity of these products has found its way in the shape of rent in kind." (Marx, *Capital*). It was therefore impossible for these village communities to develop a strong class of merchant capitalists as were developed in mediaeval Europe. For, it is only when a substantial part of the product becomes a commodity and when the exchange of commodities plays a major role in the country's economy, that the class of merchant capitalists comes to assume a dominant place in society.

It was thus that leadership in the process of national unification in India was assumed by the non-merchant classes, classes that were not connected directly either with the production or with the exchange of commodities.

It was again this that enabled the merchant capitalists from outside to come to India and dominate our market instead of our merchant capitalists going abroad and dominating foreign markets.

The result was that, while "in Western Europe the nations developed into states" and while "in Eastern Europe multi-national states were formed each consisting of several nationalities" (Stalin), the process in India was of a type different from that of both Western and Eastern Europe. There being no indigenous class of merchant capitalists, it was the merchant capitalists from outside—the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, and the British—who, together with the non-capitalist leaders of Indian society, created the national market and politically unified the nations of India. The State which was thus formed was not simply multi-national as in Eastern Europe but a multi-national state dominated by a foreign nationality—the British—assisted by the representatives of the pre-capitalist mode of production, i.e., feudal lords or leaders of the village communities.

Far from helping the growth of nationalities and the establishment of national states, this was a direct hindrance to it as we see even to this day. The unification of India that was brought about by the British was in reality a disruption of the process of national development, a violent check to the emergence of the Malayalis, the Tamils, the Andhras, etc., as distinct nationalities. It was by artificially dividing each of these nationalities into two or more administrative units that the British rulers created their Indian States and British Indian Provinces.

This violent interference of the imperialists did not leave Kerala unaffected as we shall see in the following pages.

(2)

If ancient and mediaeval Indian society as a whole failed to develop a strong class of merchant capitalists, Kerala developed it still less than the rest of India. We have already seen that the caste system as it was modified to suit the conditions of Kerala did not include a caste of merchants similar to the Vaisyas in the rest of India. This does not of course mean that trade was not a part of the economic life of Kerala, nor that there was nobody who engaged in trade as a profession: the very little effort that was sufficient to gather or even produce such valuable articles as pepper, ivory, other forest produce, etc. had in fact brought Kerala into the arena of international trade as far back as in the prehistoric epoch. All this however was done by people who did not form part of the aristocratic ruling classes who were confined to such pursuits as intellectual study, administration, training in and use of arms, etc.

Hence, increase in production in general, and particularly in the production of such articles as can become commodities, led on the one hand to the development of a merchant class outside the scheme of castes according to the Hindus of Kerala; while, on the other hand, it led to the dependence of the aristocratic ruling classes on these merchants. The Jews and Christians of the centuries before and immediately after Christ were privileged to carry on trade and hence occupied an honoured place in society; they were nevertheless outside the circle of upper class Hindu society. The same happened to the Arabs who came later on and established themselves in Calicut and other places: they too got an honoured place and various privileges from the rulers of the land but were outside the circle of the privileged upper society.

It was however only in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries that the dependence of the indigenous ruling classes on the merchant class assumed such proportions as to threaten the very social order of Kerala. For, it was then that the place of Jews, Christians and Arabs from the Eastern Mediterranean regions was taken by the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English from Western Europe. While the former were

the representatives of a social order basically not very different from that of India, the latter represented a social order that was on the eve of gigantic revolutions. Nay more, they were the very people who were carrying out these revolutions in the entire social order, the people who were very fast developing into that class which, "wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations; . . . has substituted for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation; . . . has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe; . . . has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers; . . . has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts and Gothic cathedrals". (Marx & Engels, *Manifesto*)

It was as the representative of such a class—not yet developed, of course, into its full stature but in its early stages—that Vasco de Gama landed in Calicut one day in 1498. He was warmly welcomed by the Zamorin of Calicut but, as the Arabs were already entrenched in Calicut, de Gama could not get a foothold there. He therefore went to the other port towns in Kerala—Quilon, Cochin, Cannanore—where he was more welcome. In a few years' time, the Portuguese established themselves safely on the Western coast of Kerala stretching from Goa in the North to Quilon in the South.

The basic policy pursued by the Portuguese in Kerala was to take advantage of the political rivalry between the Zamorin of Calicut and the Rajah of Cochin. The former had already brought all the feudal chieftains in what is present-day South Malabar under his suzerainty, extended his power and influence to a part of what is present-day Cochin and was on the point of overpowering the Rajah of Cochin himself through sheer physical force. He (Cochin) was therefore in desperate need of help in maintaining his position—help which the Portuguese were in a position to give. The Portuguese were themselves in need of an alliance with the Rajah of Cochin not only in order to get facilities for trading but also for them to be in a position to wreak their vengeance on the Arabs in Calicut. It was thus that, in the five successive wars waged between Calicut and Cochin during the 165 years of Portuguese ascendancy (1498-1663), the Rajah of Cochin saved himself from being devoured by the Zamorin; while the Portuguese saved themselves from their Arab rivals.

The alliance between the Portuguese and the Rajah of Cochin led to other similar alliances—those with the Quilon and Cannanore rulers. The terms of all these alliances were substantially the same—fixing the price of pepper, agreeing to give the Portuguese a monopoly in buying pepper, recognising the supremacy of the Portuguese in naval matters, exempting the Portuguese from taxation, giving the Portuguese captain alone the authority to try and punish offenders from among the Portuguese and native Christians, etc. These agreements were thus the beginning of the process through which the rulers of Kerala were surrendering their sovereignty to foreign traders, the process through which what was attempted without effect by the Cheras and the Perumals was accomplished by foreign capitalists.

While the Portuguese were using the Rajah of Cochin against the Zamorin and thus establishing themselves in Kerala, their trade rivals, the Dutch, were becoming a powerful force. They landed on our coasts almost a century after Vasco de Gama but, using the same policy of setting one ruler against his rival, they very rapidly strengthened themselves. An internal family quarrel was taking place at that time in the ruling family of Cochin and one of the princes sought the assistance of the Dutch who had already established themselves in Ceylon. The Dutch seized upon this golden opportunity, helped the prince to ascend the throne and in the process eliminated the Portuguese from their supremacy in Cochin, nay, from Kerala altogether. The Rajah of Cochin who was thus put on the throne by the Dutch became the virtual vassal of the Dutch who were, even in official correspondence, referred to by the Rajah as "the masters." After thus establishing themselves in Cochin, they turned to other princes with several of whom they signed trade pacts.

The Dutch however could not become masters of Kerala because they had a rival in the English. Since the Dutch were very powerful in Cochin, the English turned their attention towards South and North—Cannanore and Tellicherry in the North where they established their factories and Quilon and Trivandrum in the South. Just as the Portuguese used the Raja of Cochin, just as the Dutch used the quarrel in the ruling family of Cochin to establish their virtual rule through a puppet prince, so did the English use the ambitious prince of Venad, Marthanda Varma, to establish their supremacy.

That prince was one of those rulers of Kerala who wanted,

on the one hand, to expand the geographical territory of their kingdoms by annexing neighbouring kingdoms and, on the other hand, to curtail the powers of the feudal chieftains under them. It was he who, in one generation, expanded his kingdom from a petty principality of a few dozen square miles to the present-day Travancore and is thus rightly considered "the Builder of Modern Travancore". He was able to do this only because, he skilfully and successfully utilised the rivalry between the Dutch and the English. The English for their part knew that by strengthening him they were strengthening themselves. Nor did he or his successor fail them, for it was the powerful King of Travancore that was the one supporter that they had in Kerala when they had to fight and overcome the combination of Mysore and the French.

But, as soon as the Dutch and the French-Mysore combination of rivals were overcome, the English treated the Rajah of Travancore in the same way as the Portuguese and the Dutch treated the Rajah of Cochin. The treaty of 1795, its modification by the new treaty of Colonel Munro as Resident-Diwan—all this together made Travancore a tributary kingdom of the English in the full and real sense of the term.

This reduction of Travancore, the strongest of the rulers of Kerala, to the status of a dependent vassal of the English, together with the transfer of the allegiance of the Rajah of Cochin from the Portuguese, the Dutch and Mysore to the English and the assumption of direct English authority in the rest of Kerala made the end of Mysore (Tippu Sultan) the beginning of British rule.

(3)

The establishment of British rule stabilised the political divisions of Kerala as they existed at the end of eighteenth century, i.e., it permanently divided Travancore and Cochin both from each other as well as from the rest of Kerala; it divided the nationally TAMILIAN parts of South Travancore permanently from the rest of TAMILNAD. Thus was the natural process of formation of nationalities artificially checked by the violent interference of a foreign imperialist power.

We will see further on that this intrusion of imperialist power was resisted by the people of Kerala who have written some of the most glorious chapters in the history of the anti-

imperialist movement in India. It however remains true that the ruling classes as a whole acquiesced in this loss of their freedom and the freedom of their subjects. The ruling families of Travancore, Cochin and Calicut gave up their mutual struggle for the title of the Emperor of Kerala, all of them accepting the British as their lord and master. So did the lesser ones of the feudal hierarchy—those Naduvazhis, Desavazhis, Madambis, etc. who survived the process of liquidation started by successive rulers in their attempt to set up a strong administration—accept Britain as the sovereign ruler of the land. The Namboodiris for their part also gave up their claim to be the spiritual leaders of Kerala society and accepted the supremacy of the British in all respects including the spiritual. All sections of the ruling classes were, in fact, trying their utmost to salvage their former glory and, to this end, gain the favour of the new supreme ruler.

The British rulers too knew that they would be unable to stabilise their rule unless they got the willing consent of the former ruling classes, unless they made them loyal adherents of the new regime. They therefore set themselves the task of making such adjustments in the state system which they wanted to set up as would satisfy the former rulers. The acceptance of Travancore and Cochin as separate states ruled by the dynasties that had ruled for centuries was, of course, the first step. But that was not all. Other families like those of the Zamorin of Calicut, the Rajas of Chirakkal, Arakkal, Kottayam, Kadamnad, Walluvanad, etc., were also given various privileges including regular pensions. These families were even allowed the vainglorious formality of succession to the throne; for example, when the eldest male member of one of these families dies, the next seniormost male member is allowed to have performed the formal ceremony of taking the *gadi*. As for the Namboodiris and other non-ruling families, they were given back all the lands that they had once owned and, what is more, were made full owners of these lands with no restrictions whatsoever in their relations with the tenants. The establishment of British rule, therefore, did not deprive any of the former ruling classes of the rights and privileges enjoyed by them, except to the extent that those of them who were ambitious enough to dream of extending their territories were stopped from all further efforts in that direction.

All this however does not mean that things remained as

they were. On the contrary, the very establishment of British rule was the biggest shock administered to the hitherto tranquil social order of Kerala, the order which had been built up through centuries. For, the state system that was set up by the British was meant precisely to further carry forward the process that had started within Kerala's social order — the development of market relations. We will see in the next chapter how the establishment of British rule hastened this process and brought Kerala into the arena of the world market; we will also in subsequent chapters examine the tremendous socio-political changes that followed this process of economic transformation, changes that have made Kerala an active partner in the democratic and socialist revolutionary movements of the world. It is sufficient at this stage to note that the force that brought about these upheavals was the new state system set up by the British.

The changes brought about in the state system of Cochin by Colonel Munro, the British administrator who functioned both as Resident and Diwan of the two states of Cochin and Travancore and who in that capacity made the administrative system of these states such as to serve the needs of British supremacy, are described as follows by the author of the *Cochin State Manual* :

“Administrative Reforms

“The Karyakars, who were placed in charge of Talukas when the chiefs were divested of their administrative powers, had hitherto combined in themselves all the functions of government. They were not only revenue and executive officers but were Munsiffs, Sub-Magistrates and Police Inspectors. They were now divested of their judicial and police powers, and their duties were confined to the collection of revenue. For the proper administration of justice, two subordinate courts were established at Tripunittura and Trichur in 1812, each presided over by a Hindu and a Christian Judge and a Sastri, and a Huzur Court presided over by four Judges including the Diwan. Justice was to be administered according to the Dharma Sastra and the customs and usages of the country, but a simple code was enacted for the guidance of the judges in the matter of procedure. A force of Police or Tannadars was organised and placed under Tanna Naiks, one for each Taluk, the supervision over the Naiks being

vested in an officer attached to the Huzur under the designation of Daroga. These Tannadars had the duties of the modern police and preventive forces combined in them. Court fees began to be levied according to a definite scale, and stamped 1812 and 1816, a large number of Proclamations and Hukumnamas was issued, defining the duties and powers of judicial, police and other officers. A definite scale of pay was established in the place of the indefinite exactions which the officers had hitherto been authorised to make, and some provision was also made for granting pensions to retired officers. Several of the vexatious imposts which pressed heavily on particular individuals or classes, and transit duties on grain and food stuffs, were abolished, and all arrears of revenue which remained uncollected till 1809 were relinquished. Several roads and bridges were constructed, though of a primitive pattern, and a large number of Sirkar buildings, which had through the neglect of years fallen into a dilapidated condition, were repaired or reconstructed.

“Revenue and Finance

“The system of farming land revenue, customs and forests, which had hitherto been in force, was abolished, and Sirkar officers were appointed to collect these revenues directly. Vigorous measures were taken to extract large quantities of teak departmentally, while junglewood and minor forest produce were allowed to be removed by the people on payment of duty at the Chaukai (inland customs) stations. Preventive measures were taken to minimise the smuggling of tobacco and pepper which were articles of Sirkar monopoly, and salt was also made a monopoly article. The Devasvams and Uttupuras (religious and charitable institutions), which had in recent years been grossly mismanaged, were placed on a satisfactory footing, and a definite scale of expenditure was laid down for their maintenance. An account department was organised and a system of accounts introduced, similar to the one then obtaining in the Company's territories. Thirty-three vernacular schools were established, one in each Pravritti, with a view to turn out a number of young men fit to be entertained as writers and accountants under the Sirkar. The successful carrying out of these measures obviously involved an immense deal of labour and diffi-

culty, but Colonel Munro and Captain Blacker had the satisfaction of seeing their labours bear excellent fruit. The land revenue rose from Rs. 2,85,000 in 1811-12 to Rs. 3,27,000 in 1816-17, tobacco from 21,000 to 157,000, customs from 25,000 to 35,000, salt from 2,000 to 63,000 and forest from 10,000 to 62,000, and the total revenue from 4,96,000 to 7,55,000. The Raja's Government was thus enabled during these seven years to pay off all arrears of subsidy and war indemnity and also the major portion of the debts due to private parties, and His Highness expressed his immense satisfaction at these achievements in a remarkable letter to the Governor-General. 'Since Colonel John Munro was appointed Resident in my country in the year 1811,' he said, 'that gentleman has by his indefatigable exertions and vigilance rescued me from an ocean of debt in which I was unfortunately involved by the corrupt and treacherous conduct of my ministers, and has enabled myself, my family and my subjects now to live happy and unconcerned, which favourable circumstances I cannot in justice avoid bringing to the notice of your Lordship in Council.'

That the same changes were made in Travancore too has been explained in the *Travancore State Manual* (Vol. IV, pp. 2-6.)

Needless to say that this was in keeping with what was done in Malabar and other parts of India. The only difference was that while in Malabar and other parts of "British India", the Collector or other British officials were the direct authorities appointed by and responsible to the representatives of the British Emperor (the Governors and the Governor General), the Diwan, Peshkar and other officials in the Indian States were formally under the authority of the Rajah who was formally a 'sovereign' monarch allied to the British. How sovereign the ruler is seen on a number of occasions in various Indian States. Cochin too saw it during the First World War when the then ruler of the State, suspected by the British to be conspiring with the Germans, was forced to abdicate. The fact is that, with all the paraphernalia of a ruling dynasty, the Cochin and Travancore families were mere cogs in the wheels of efficient administration, real authority resting not with these rulers but with the Resident or Political Agent and through him, the Viceroy of India.

These cogs in the wheels of administration were, however, maintained by the British because they could not risk the dissatisfaction that their elimination might cause in the feudal ruling circles. The main purpose for which the state system was reorganised by the British being the most efficient exploitation of the people, it was necessary for them to associate as wide sections of the former ruling circles as possible with the administration of the country. Nothing would have served this purpose more than the maintenance of the ruling dynasties of Cochin and Travancore in the full enjoyment of their former privileges, provided of course they were made harmless in the actual enjoyment of political authority. It may be mentioned in anticipation that this is the very policy that is being continued by the Congress after "the transfer of power to India": the policy of integration and merger of Indian States has not only maintained the privileges of the ruling families but also continued the artificial division of nationalities like Kerala, Tamilnad, Andhra, etc.

The establishment of British rule therefore meant that all that was progressive in the mediaeval social order of Kerala was suppressed and all that was reactionary was stabilised. The cherished desire of successive generations for the unity of Kerala was suppressed but the agents through which that desire was given expression to — the ruling families of Kerala — were maintained. The efforts at reforming and modernising the administrative system, made by successive rulers of various kingdoms, were carried forward not to lay the basis for reforming and modernising the entire social system, but to enable the British rulers to carry on their alien rule. The powers and privileges of the former ruling classes were curtailed not in order to introduce democracy but in order to establish a foreign imperialist grip over the country. It was to this establishment of imperialist rule that the former ruling classes willingly consented.