

EYE-WITNESS IN KERALA

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ON April 5, 1957, I was, I think, the sole European in a large gathering which watched eleven Ministers (mostly young, and all competent, sober and responsible, and reducing their own salaries to approximately £6 4s. per week in a country where the cost of living is not very different from ours), take the oath of office. The eleven (nine Communists and two Independents) were members of a Government formed by the Kerala State Communist Party after a clear victory at the polls which had brought 60 seats to the Party and five Independents fully pledged to support the Party, in a Legislative Assembly of 126 elected members.

Kerala, the southernmost state of India, consists of the old Princes' States of Travancore and Cochin, with some territories lopped off and some added in order to produce—in accordance with the prevalent 'linguistic' policy—a state in which the prevailing language is Malayalam. It is the smallest in India, the most densely populated—well over 1,000 to the square mile—and, with its very low standard of living is probably the poorest of them all. It is the most Christian of the states—something like one-third of the inhabitants are Christians, including three of the eleven members of the government. It is the most highly educated and in particular the most highly literate of the states; in this not yet lovely world, that adds to the general acute unemployment problem a particular problem of educated unemployment. With this oddly mixed composition, it has a good tradition of militancy and political consciousness.

Like many other states, it has a 'deficit budget': that is to say, it has to be subsidised from the centre out of taxes levied by the central government on the citizens of Kerala and of all other states. Like not a few other states it has a large food deficit, needing to import a great deal of foodstuffs, especially rice, to keep its population alive. Its fertile soil nevertheless produces many useful things. Tea, coffee, and rubber grow in plantations which are largely foreign owned and this gives a typical colonialist slant to the economy by the export of profits. Various rural industries—pepper, spices, coir, etc.—are carried on in the villages. Thus the balance of agriculture over industry does not look so bad in mere statistics, as in some states; but in reality industry is backward. One way to improve the standard of living would be to introduce new industries, for which there is ample scope; hydro-electricity, mining and fishing are all possi-

bilities. It is thus extremely interesting for a Communist government to take office in Kerala state. But the position has nothing 'black and white' in it.

If British students, accustomed to the simple outlines of unitary government, are to estimate it with any proper understanding, they need to remind themselves of the limitations of a federal constitution. Kerala is one of over a dozen states in the Union of India. The federal central government is of course a Congress government, and so is almost every other state government; the one or two exceptions are coalitions in which Congress predominates. Under a federal constitution, functions and powers of government are divided between the centre and the states. In India, the states, including Kerala, have nothing to do with defence, foreign affairs, railways, maritime shipping and navigation, most seaports, posts and telegraphs, foreign trade, and corporations, including banking and insurance but excepting co-operatives, oilfield development, certain mines, fishing beyond territorial waters, salt, law-courts, income tax (except on agriculture), customs duties, taxes on capital or capital value, estate and succession duties (except on agricultural land) and much other taxation; and they have only limited power over criminal law and procedure, preventive detention, economic and social planning, monopolies and combines, trade unions, labour disputes, social security, unemployment, labour welfare, price control and the press. The matters left to their exclusive control include agriculture, land, forests, most industries, salaries of ministers and land revenue.

It is, of course, quite possible to govern a state, and to govern a state well, within the framework (or fetters) of such provisions; but they are not well adapted to carrying through a revolution, and the outside observer should avoid both extravagant expectations and pessimism. The new government has power to govern well rather than to make great changes. But that power, in the particular circumstances of India and Kerala today, is of even greater importance than it would normally be. There are several reasons for this.

The constitution gives it power to introduce extensive land reforms (and it has already announced its intention to do so). This includes fixing fair rents, security of tenure and stay of eviction, maxima (or 'ceilings') for individual land-holdings, distribution of surplus lands, fixing wage minima, and the nationalisation of plantations.

Up to the very fifth of April, 1957, there has been a long period of 'President's Rule' in Kerala. This has made almost all sec-

tions of public opinion ready to welcome any government which shows reasonable prospects of stability. 'President's Rule', a device inherited from the British, consists in the taking over and operation by the President—in effect by the central government—of all the legislative and executive powers of the state government. It can be and has been used whenever the political set-up in the state is thought by the centre to produce instability. Such dictatorial rule, particularly in a Southern region as far from the seat of central government in Delhi as Moscow is from London, is generally extremely unpopular. It can scarcely be said that the Communists' absolute majority is directly due to resentment of this sort; but it is pretty certain that the general desire for stable and honest government brought over enough of the middle-class vote to 'top up' the solid worker and peasant support to the point of full victory.

So much of declared Congress policy is good and progressive that the Communist government can claim Congress authority for much of what it proposes to do. The old cynical Tory game of 'dishing the Whigs' is as it were available in reverse, in that the most progressive elements can introduce the most advanced legislation that is practicable in the circumstances, and point to programmatic declarations of its opponents as support for almost every item of that legislation. And, in sharp contrast to such declarations, so much of what Congress governments in the States (as well as at the centre) have actually been doing for years past has consisted in failing to live up to their policies and promises—and not least in allowing wholesale corruption to grow up—that the public is overjoyed to see any government that looks like doing no more than really carry out Congress policy, including honest administration.

Congress has three features which together present an odd picture. Firstly it has a right wing which represents all the big—the very big—money in the country, and is extremely reactionary. Secondly it has a left wing which secures excellent programmatic declarations in favour of 'a socialistic pattern of society'; far-reaching Five Year Plans (which corruption and the right wing contrive to frustrate) and a good foreign policy. Thirdly, thanks to the use of the British single-vote system and the divisions between opposition parties, it has such a grip on the central government and on nearly all the State governments that the normal checks of parliamentary democracy (in particular the existence of practicable alternative governments) do not really operate in it, and it becomes increasingly unpopular and out of touch with the people, in direct proportion to the increasing wealth of the rich and the increasing poverty—Oh!

Poverty!—of the poor which result from the grip of big money and the general corruption.

The vital and intensely interesting problem of the immediate future lies in the relation between the Communist government of Kerala State and the Congress government at the centre. A federal country like India can only run if there is a great measure of sincere co-operation between the centre and the state. The Kerala government has asserted that it will work with the centre within the Constitution, whilst seeking constitutionally to get the Constitution amended where that may be required. The centre asserts—and I was assured of this in Delhi—that it is determined not to obstruct the Communist government on any doctrinal grounds (one old friend adding—not unfairly—that he could think of very many governments in different parts of the world which could be relied on to do the exact opposite in like circumstances). In reality, of course, the centre has a good deal of control, by ‘the power of the purse’, over a deficit state, and indeed over any state that wants industrial development or encouragement. In reality the right wing of Congress will be seeking at all stages to frustrate—subtly or crudely—the government of Kerala, and will work harder in this direction in proportion as the Kerala government succeeds in demonstrating that it can govern, and is governing, well. This form of opposition will be particularly virulent if Kerala succeeds—as it must work hard to succeed—not merely in stopping corruption but in prosecuting the corrupt, who have many friends on the right.

In reality, again, an important element in this struggle will be public opinion. It will be strongly pro-government in Kerala; in the Union of India in general, there will be at least a large element in favour of giving Kerala every chance; much of the left wing will support it; and there are important figures in Delhi who will sincerely support it too. It will be a mighty and confused struggle; and I think that the friends of Kerala need not be too fearful, in spite of the strength of the big money and its press.

There are already signs of the coming conflict, eddies and swirls in the river telling of rapids ahead. The main agent and representative of the central government in any state, *de facto* and *de jure*, is the Governor of the State, who is appointed by the centre and has great powers. The present Governor of Kerala, Dr. B. R. Rao (Chief Minister of Hyderabad at the time of the trial of the Telegana peasants) was exercising up to the revocation of ‘President’s Rule’ on the fifth of April all the powers of government: after that

date he exercises all the normal (and substantial) powers of a State Governor. If attempts are made from the centre to frustrate the state government, his office will necessarily provide one of the main channels for the work. It is interesting to note three things he did in the last few days of his period under 'President's Rule'. Firstly, he used the powers he possessed as in effect the entire government of the state to raise the salaries of higher government servants. Secondly, after both the Communist leaders and the five Independent members who make up the absolute majority had publicly and unequivocally announced the unqualified support of these five Independents for the party, he insisted on seeing the Independents separately, to ask them in effect whether they and the Communist leaders, with whom he was going to have to work as governor, were telling the truth. Thirdly, being entrusted under the Constitution with the right, 'if he is of the opinion that the Anglo-Indian community needs representation in the Legislative Assembly of the State and is not adequately represented therein, (to) nominate such number of members of the community to the Assembly as he considers appropriate', and with the duty to seek the 'aid and advice' of the Council of Ministers in making the nomination (in reality, this means in India, as it would in Britain, that he would accept their advice as to the nomination) he chose deliberately *not* to wait until the fifth of April, when there would be a Council of Ministers for him to consult, but to nominate a person of his own choice a few days before, when—'President's Rule' still prevailing for another day or two—Pooh Bah had only to seek the aid and advice of Pooh Bah.

Thus did he show his teeth; but all these three steps antagonised public opinion and thus weakened his position. The third step, in addition, angered the Anglo-Indian Community, in whose eyes the Governor's nominee was quite unrepresentative of their interests, and created the suspicion that the Governor was using a provision designed to serve a particular community to further instead the anti-Communist interest by reducing a majority of four to a majority of three.

All in all, the fifth of April was a great day, the culmination of a long and often bloody struggle of oppressed workers and peasants, the inauguration of a period of important if limited opportunity to establish freedom, progress, prosperity, and honesty, if in fetters. Poor in goods, rich in experience and courage, the people of Kerala can now lay the basis of their own future, and bring great encouragement to their fellows in the rest of their country of great problems and great hopes.