

April 5 of 1957 was a red letter day not only in the history of the state of Kerala but also in the Indian union as a whole. It is on that day the first popular ministry of the united Kerala state was sworn in under the leadership of comrade EMS Namboothiripad. The state legislature consisted of 126 members plus a nominated Anglo Indian. The Communist party of India had a total of 65 members including 5 independents who subscribed to the party's electoral program and fought on its behalf. Before calling upon Namboothiripad to form the ministry the Governor took the unusual step to invite each one of the independents on the pretext of ascertaining their loyalty to the Communist party of India – but actually it was an attempt to wean them away from CPI alliance. But he failed and the ministry was formed with 11 members including 3 independents

Though none of the 65 member's waiver in their loyalty till the end, the union government under the leadership of famed democrat Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru swooped down on it and dismissed it under the article 356 of the constitution of India and tarnished his famous democratic image. Thus the first ministry of the united Kerala state which was formed only on 1st November 1956 could rule only for 28 months for no fault of its own. How such a short lived ministry in a small state of Kerala comprising about four percent of the population of India with only limited powers of a federal unit came to attract the wrath of the vested interest and great admiration of the people at large and dispassionate observers in India and abroad? Even mighty imperialist

countries like the USA were incensed by the Kerala phenomenon that they gave not only verbal support to the reactionary attempt of anti-communist forces in Kerala to oust the ministry but also material support. The outstanding American statesman senator Patrick Moynihan who served as an ambassador for a term to India was only conforming the general perception when he admitted in his memoirs that the CIA had generously financed the so called “Liberation Struggle” (Vimochana Samaram) against the first EMS ministry.

Why this world wide interest in and opposition to an apparently short lived political experiment in a comparatively minor state of Indian Union?

Began with a Bang

The Composition of the ministry was itself a remarkable achievement. The eight communist ministers and the three communist supported independent ministers were all without a single exception well known for their efficiency, incorruptibility and long tradition of sacrifice and service to the people. The chief minister EMS though only forty-eight was well known for his services to the social reform and freedom movement and was both an activist and intellectual of eminence. The next in line was C Achutha Menon who proved to be a meticulous administrator and later made history as chief minister for a record period of seven years (of course in alliance with the congress after the split in the party). The labor minister TV Thomas who functioned as the leader of opposition in the erstwhile Travancore-Cochin was an

able parliamentarian and outstanding trade unionist. His wife KR Gouramma who handled the revenue portfolio and so was entrusted with the piloting of the famous agrarian bill proved her worth by her hand and studious performance. VR Krishna Aiyer who was later to rise in the judicial hierarchy to the position of a Supreme Court judge and a great judicial activist and advocate of human rights was a rigorous and an innovative administrator too. Professor Joseph Mundassery who handled the education portfolio created history by his education bill which drew the admiration of students and teachers and the fierce hostility of private school managements who were deprived of their illegal prerogatives. The health minister Dr AR Menon who was among the pioneers of the freedom movement in the state was also a competent physician who laid the foundations of the present public health policies which marks Kerala as the healthiest state in India. The food minister KC George was almost a sage among freedom fighters and communists. The speaker Sankara Naryanan Thampi was a militant freedom fighter and a professional lawyer. He proved his mettle as an efficient speaker in a turbulent house.

Land to the Tiller, Power to the People

Though the election manifesto of the communist party had promised all round reforms touching all aspects of social economic and political life the first item on its agenda was land reforms. From 1938 onwards when he was a young member of the legislative assembly of Madras province EMS had written many articles and books on Kerala's Land system

which taken together look like a blue print of the future course of action when party comes to power. After the freedom struggle. In Travancore Cochin and Malabar district party members in legislatures had presented a number of bills to stop all types of eviction and fix fair rent for peasants of various types of tenures. Though many of them echoed the promises given by the congress in its Faizpur resolution of 1936, they never cared to implement them during the previous 10 years of their power. As a matter of fact almost the same neglect of the peasant rights persist even after 60 years of freedom in states ruled by the congress and the groups and sections that broke away from them and formed regional or communal parties. In contrast to this stark neglect of the toiling peasantry the first Kerala ministry within a week of its installation promulgated an ordinance (11 April 1957) which banned all types of evictions, even evictions by the court judgments. This was to prevent the land lords from preemptive the land reform measures to come by evicting the peasants and making the reform a futile exercise.

There was another hurdle to land reforms. CPI and Kisan Sabha were for the abolition of land lordism without compensation. But the constitution did not permit that. To overcome this, fair rent was fixed as one sixth of the annual produce and it was stipulated that if fair rent is paid in six years or the same amount in a lump sum it would be considered compensation. Peoples committees with panchayat and mass organizations representatives were formed to supervise the operation and fulfillment of land reform measures. 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 roused the ire of vested interest. They added grist to the mill of the anti – government sabotage.

The next most important step which drew fierce opposition from the church and commercial education management was the 'Education Bill'. The bill itself was not a revolutionary attempt to transform the entire education system to suite the modern requirements. The limited aim of the bill was to guarantee the payment of salaries in full to the teachers and protect them from arbitrary retrenchment. Till then the grants paid by the government for teachers salaries were collected by the managers and they pocketed the lion share of that and paid the teachers a pittance and made them to sign a false receipt for full payment. The new bill authorized the teachers to collect their full salaries directly from the treasury as the governments school teachers do. 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 cast 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 unconstitutional 'Liberation Struggle'.

Police and the People

One of the first pronouncements of the Chief Minister contained the line of police reforms to be pursued. It is a well known fact and

experience in India that the administration of law and order has not changed very much from the colonial days. Though by the letter of law all citizens are equal, in experience of the class society, the law and order machinery is heavily loaded in favour of the upper classes. In courts and police stations the weaker sections of the people are always discriminated against. It is during the workers and peasants struggles that this discrimination came out in its full fury. The chief minister declared that his government will put an end to this practice though the police will try to keep law and order within the strict stipulation of the law and would request the workers and peasants to act within the bounce in law the police will never intervene on behalf of the capitalists and landlords and help them suppress the struggle.

During his second term as the chief minister from 1967 to 1969 EMS went even further. He as chief minister refused to use the law and order machinery to suppress the central government employees strike in 1969, which was declared illegal by the central government. Even after being reminded by the central home ministry EMS openly declared himself against the use of law and order machinery against the striking employees.

The policy declaration against police intervention in mass and class struggles was strongly opposed by the congress and other 'liberation strugglewalas'. They charge that the law and order machinery has completely broken-down and that the police force was demoralized by this policy. They also charged that the communists were taking law into

their own hands. Later when the liberation struggle took violent forms and street clashes the police was forced to restrain them. This led to the opposite charge that the police now was suppressing 'peoples aspirations'. Thus they contradicted themselves and proved themselves on slippery ground regarding the police policy of EMS ministry.

The Two Lessons

The first lesson taught by the first Kerala ministry led by the communist was that, inspite of the serious limitations of the bourgeois landlord constitution in general and a federal unit in particular. A working class revolutionary party had certainly make use of the parliamentary opportunities for the sake of the dispossessed and oppressed classes. The communist ministry in Kerala also showed that what ever the democratic pretenses and professions of the bourgeois land lord rulers. They never tolerate a change in the class structure of the state. Even if that intolerance lead to the demolition of the parliamentary structure itself. These two lessons confirms the correctness of the party's perspective on bourgeois parliamentary system. The party has always warned against relying solely on parliamentary methods and at the same time totally refusing to make use of it to the extent possible. So both the revisionist moderation like that of many social democratic parties as well as the extremist refusal to make use of parliamentary opportunities as is done by naxalites and both unacceptable.

The second lesson is that there is an alternate path of development different from the one proposed and practiced by the advocates of globalization, privatization and liberalization. The Kerala model of development emphasizes that the economic growth need not be at the expense of equity and social justice. The new wave of leftwing victories in many parts of the world and the popular struggles for livelihood and freedom are based on the policy of growth with equity. The success and the experience of the first communist ministry in Kerala has thus national and international relevance as comrade Jyothi Basu who headed the West Bengal left front ministry for two and a half decades, was eminently correct, when he said that the first Kerala Ministry blazed a new trail for India as a whole and Bengal and Tripura in particular.