

KERALA'S SOCIALIST AND MARXIST TRADITION
AND ITS NATIONAL IMPACT

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INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Socialism is a wide-ranging term and concept which defies easy definition. Besides its socio-scientific meaning, it also has moral, religious, and even mystic connotations, if we care to consider its multifarious usages by all types of people.
- 1.2 Though some of the moral and social ideals associated with socialism and the related egalitarian concepts may be traced to hoary traditions of India, there is no doubt that the modern ideas of Socialism, Communism and Marxism are the offspring of Western Industrial revolution and democracy. How and when did Socialism and related ideals reach India?
- 1.3 As the Levellers in the English Revolution of 17th Century and Babeuvists in the French Revolution of the 18th Century prove, egalitarianism was almost a twin of democracy. But it was in no more than an embryonic stage. Socialism as an extension of political democracy into the economic field and as an agenda for action by the dispossessed and disinherited in society developed only from the second quarter of the 19th century.
- 1.4 As is generally recognised by social scientists there are two stages in the formative period of the socialist movement – the utopian and the scientific. The Latin epithet “Utopian” is derived from the famous book “UTOPIA”

(meaning no where) by Sir (Later Saint) Thomas Moore (1478 –1535). Deeply pained by the spectacle of widespread poverty and suffering in the midst of vulgar ostentation and luxury of a minority, Moore drew up vivid plan for the restructuring of society based on equality, co-operation and affection. There were other equally compassionate and talented thinkers and reformers like Comanella (Italy) Saint Simon (France) Robert Owen (England) who wrote extensively on such social reforms and fought for the amelioration of the poor and oppressed. Ofcourse Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Frederich Engles (1820-1895) respected the great worth of these pioneering thinkers and revolutionaries, but found their scheme and action weak and defective in certain crucial aspects. They absorbed the best in these Utopian schemes and revolutionalised the theory and practice of socialism. The historians of social sciences describe and evaluate Marx's and Engles's contribution as "transferring socialism from an utopia into science". Marx and Engles called their contribution "Scientific Socialism" as against the Utopian Socialism of their predecessors.

- 1.5 What is the basis for the claim that Marx and Engles transformed Socialism from Utopia into a science? The utopians, though gifted by deep insight into social situation and inspired by the compassionate concern for the suffering humanity, could not put forward a plan of action for the realization of their dreams. They put their faith in the nobility of their ideas and its capacity to convince and convert the cream of society to their views. These converts were expected to "scrap the sorry scheme of things entire and build it closed to their hearts desire" In this fond hope they forgot the stark fact of history

that those in power enjoying the benefits of the system will never voluntarily abdicate their power or a position of advantage. Marx designated the oppressed sections as their own liberators, and asked them to organise themselves together sufficient strength to storm the bastions of oppression and exploitation.

He also discovered the laws of evolution of society, which convinced him that social systems are historical and temporal, and change from time to time. The changes occur through internal contradictions and in social changes this contradictions express itself as Class struggle. In Marx's time and ours the main class struggle is between the Proletariat and Capitalists. Capitalism like its preceding system "feudalism" is a passing phase and it is to be followed by the socialist phase. Capitalism is based on private ownership of the means of production and socialism, which will replace capitalism, will be based on the collective ownership of the means of production. Abolition of private property and establishment of social ownership of means of production and planned economic development will pave for the egalitarian society where "each is for all and all is for each". There will be a perfect balance between the collective prosperity and endeavour on one side and individual freedom and initiative on the other.

II

- 2.1 When we examine the slow, halting and haphazard entry of socialist ideas into India, all these various stages and variety of concepts come to relief. The historians of ideas have by detailed researches discovered that socialist

ideas began to make themselves felt from the early 19th century itself along with the ideas of renaissance, nationality, science, democracy, equality etc. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) rightly considered the Father of Indian Renaissance was fascinated not only by the ideals of British democracy and liberalism, but also by the militant ideals of French Revolution and utopian Socialism. It is a record that during his last visit to England he took time to visit the great English Socialist and reformer Robert Owen.

2.2 The oldest document which shows some Indian awareness of Marxist and socialist movement is a letter written from Calcutta to International Working Men's Association (1864-1876) founded by Karl Marx and comrades, for permission to start a national unit of the same in India. Though the names of the writers are still unknown, an extract from their letter published in a contemporary English periodical, The Eastern Spectator (August 19, 1871) shows that they were quite aware of the general outlook and objectives of International. The letter has the following paragraph:

“Great discontent exists among the people and the British Government is thoroughly disliked. The taxation is excessive and the revenues are swallowed up in maintaining a costly system of officialdom. As in other places, the extravagances of the ruling class contrast in a painful manner with the wretched condition of the workers, whose labour creates the wealth, thus squandered. The principles of the International would bring the mass of the people into its organisation, if a section was started”

2.3 The first Indian public figure and man of letters to openly declare his support to socialism and communism was the great patriot, publicist and novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) A prolific writer and renaissance personality and fiery patriot, Chatterjee was a great admirer of French Revolution and Jean Jacques Rousseau, who was among its intellectual progenitors. Chatterjee wrote about socialism, Communism, international etc, on several occasions. To provide an insight into his wide reading and deep understanding of the contemporary world affair and thought, I quote a small passage, written probably towards the close of 1870'

“Land and capital, which produce other wealth, should be the common property of all in society. What is produced should be shared equally by all. Then there would be no distinction between the rich and poor. All would work equally. Everyone has a right to an equal share of property. This is communism in real sense.”

Next in this illustrations line follow the great poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and the great prophet Swami Vivekananda. Tagore understood very well the meaning of socialist programme and approved it thoroughly. But occasionally he doubted whether such a noble humane agenda like equal distribution of wealth was at all practical. He thought it too good to be possible. He would be really unhappy if his doubts were to prove correct. Way back in 1892, he wrote:

“Socialist want that production and distribution should be vested in the society in general and not in the hands of some powerful individuals. They

say that the production and distribution of wealth is a function of the entire society. At present, the common people are being deprived of the possibility of full development of their personality because it now depends on the whims and interests of the propertied men.... Freedom is impossible without material prosperity. Therefore, wealth should be distributed among the people; otherwise freedom can never spread to everyone.... Socialism seeks to distribute wealth equally among all and thereby reunify society. In this way, socialism grant maximum freedom to everyone. Its object is a reconciliation of community and freedom in human society.’’

Fortunately, unlike Bankim Chandra and Vivekananda the poet lived long enough to see for himself the beginning of socialist construction after the October Socialist Revolution (1917). His letters from Soviet Union, extolling the social experiment, though it was in its initial stages in 1926 were collected and published by his Viswabharati University.

III. VIVEKANANDA’S NATIONALISM & SOCIALISM

- 3.1 Among our great renaissance prophets and seers of the 19th century Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) occupies a special niche by himself. His vast erudition, built out skills of communication, intense patriotism and revolutionary fervour marks him out as one of the builders of modern India. His fierce struggle against superstition, casteism, colonisation and lethargy are too well-known to need any repetition. His deep sympathy for the poor and downtrodden led him to look beyond the limitations of liberal democracy. While in Europe he unlike many of his compatriots, learned

about and contacted various kinds of socialists, anarchists and syndicalists. Among them his meeting with the anarchist aristocrat Prince Kropotkin, is noted by many biographers.

3.2 Therefore though according to modern standards his understanding of Socialism may be considered elementary, there is no doubt that his conviction in this regard was well-founded. His following statement made as early as 1896 is justly famous:

“I am a socialist, not because I consider it a perfect system, but because half a loaf is better than no bread. The other systems have been tried and found wanting. Let this one be tried”

Recently some people apparently disturbed by this unequivocal declaration of the saint philosopher are heard trying pretty hard to play it down. But any one acquainted with the oft-repeated views of Vivekananda knows that poverty and oppression of the masses were his life long concerns as were his spiritual concerns.

3.3 That this declaration of credo was not outburst on the spure of the moment is proved by many related statements made by him at different occasions. He even conjured up a theory of evolution of human society by making use of some Indian traditional terms and concepts to prove that the future belonged to the poorest strata of present society – the Shudradon to use his terminology. He elaborates the concept to us:

“Yet a time will come when there will be the rising off the Shudra class, with their Shudrahood: that is to say, not like that as at present when the Shudras are becoming great by acquiring the characteristic qualities of the Vaishya or the Kshatriya, but a time will come when the Shudras of every country, with their inborn Shudras nature and habits – not becoming in essence Vaishya or Kshatriya, but remaining as Shudras – will gain absolute supremacy in every society. The first glow of the dawn of this new power has already begun to break slowly upon the western world and the thoughtful are at their wits end to reflect upon the final issue of this fresh phenomenon, Socialism, Anarchism, Nihilism and other like sects are the vanguard of the social revolution that is to follow.”

- 3.4 There are many other references like this which disprove the attempts of ill-informed distractor’s to establish that Vivekananda’s fascination for the socialist ideals was just a flash in the pan. A close and unprejudiced reading of the corpus of the sage’s works will convince anyone that Vivekananda was inexorably progressing to a more exhaustive socialist agenda, but was prevented by his premature demise at the early age of 49 in 1902. But the project was successfully taken up by his younger brother Bhupendranatha Dutta, who grew up under the penumbra of the great man and became a Marxist philosopher, writer and activist.

IV KERALA’S SOCIALIST DAWN

- 4.1 It is an old adage that what Bengal thinks today is take-up by the rest of India the next day. Like liberalism, democracy, rationalism, renaissance

ideals etc socialism too entered the main stream of India through the Bengal corridor. From the first decade of the 20th Century ideas like Socialism and Marxism began to take route in Kerala also. Just on the heels of democracy and liberalism. One man who may be described as pioneer in introducing socialist ideas in Kerala was Swadeshabhimani K Ramakrishna Pillai (1878-1916) a crusading editor and writer who was exiled by the Maharaja of the native state of Travancore in 1910 for his fearless struggle against autocracy and corruption. His book 'Karl Marx' published in 1912 was perhaps the first ever biography of Marx in any Indian languages.

4.2 There was another biography of Marx by Lala Hardayal, a Punjabi freedom fighter and some time secretary of the Gadhar Party. It was published in Modern Review of Calcutta, in March 1912. So it was certainly anterior to Ramakrishna Pillai's work. But it was in English. It is likely that Pillai had read Hardayal's work. But it is very clear from the contents of these works that Pillai. Though Hardayal respectfully titles his biography 'Karl Marx – A modern Rishi' it is riddled with inaccuracies and Hardayal basically disagrees with the socialist ideals of Marx. Ramakrishna Pillai's work also is not altogether free of blemishes, but basically he approves the Marxian project, and shows that he grasps his philosophy and politics much more than Hardayal does.

4.3 Besides this biography Ramakrishna Pillai and some of his contributors wrote several articles explaining the meaning and message of Socialism in the various journals he published like 'Keralam', 'Atmaposhini' etc. But all

these had only an academic value, since actual political movements in the state or the other part of present day Kerala were no in any way connected with these ideas. Such connections of socialist ideas with actual political movement and social reform activities began only after the First World War and regeneration of the national struggle under the Mahatma Gandhi in the post – war years.

4.4 We have seen that the ideas of Socialism began to penetrate Kerala's consciousness only by the close of the first decade in 20th century, where as they began their rounds in Bengal and perhaps other states in the last quarter of 19th century. This delayed birth is also applicable is the case of Kerala's renaissance. Though it is hazardous to fix any date birth for an amorphous and wide-ranging movement like renaissance, for the same of some convenient undertaking. We may fix as it in the year 1883. It is in 1883 that Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928) generally accepted by historians of all persuasions as the Father of Kerala renaissance, began his public mission after years of self-preparation. The symbolic act of that inauguration was defiance of the Brahmin prerogative by installing an idol of God Siva, at Aruvippuram (South Kerala) by an untouchable sanyasin, viz. Sree Narayana Guru. It was followed by a series of movements and activities including the registration of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, in 1903, the first and foremost organisation in Kerala for the propagations of renaissance ideals like abolition of untouchability, equal civil rights, right to education for all irrespective of caste etc. It is clear from this chronology that by the

time Kerala's renaissance got on its feet the two generations of Bengal's leadership passed into history.

- 4.5 This same delay can also be perceived in the case of national movement and communist and socialist movements. The first non-cooperation movement and mass satyagraha of Gandhi in 1920 did not make much of an impact in Kerala. Even the initial sprouts of the movement were sniffed out by the consequences of the Moplah or Malabar Rebellion of 1920, which had some Khilafat inspiration. It also was initially an expression of the peasant resistance to exploitation by landlords, mainly of Hindu origin. But from the time of salt satyagraha onwards in 1930, the movement caught up with the rest of the country, especially in Malabar district directly under the British rule. The native states of Kochi and Travancore were deliberately left out of the movement by the all-India leadership.
- 4.6 In this situation Travancore and to a certain extent Kochi became centres of Dalit and backward class struggles for equality and civil rights. Vaikom and Guruvayoor satyagraha and abstention movements (boycott of legislature and elections) replaced the national struggle for freedom and democracy. The 1920s also witnessed the rise of Trade Union movements in industrial belts of Travancore, Kochi and Malabar. Along with the struggle of the Dalits, backward classes the social reform movements of upper castes like Brahmins, Nairs etc also began to spread. All these social movements, which were only marginally political, were a fertile ground for socialist ideas and ideals.

- 4.7 Though the renaissance movement initiated by Narayana Guru was for a reform of the hierarchical Hindu society it gave rise to many new trends of thought like rationalism, Socialism, Communism. Therefore movement spread out from the dalits and backward classes to upper castes, with emphasis on reform of their oppression of women and superstitious customs. In due course even Christian and Muslim communities were affected by reform movements, and they also began reformatory activities in their own styles.
- 4.8 The Protagonists of these movements included a number of people who were influenced by the October Socialist Revolution and its ideals. Sahodaran Ayyappan, who was later to become a minister in post-freedom days, was a staunch follower of Narayana Guru and at the same time a rationalist and socialist, poet and a prolific journalist. He ran a press for continuous campaign to propagate the ideals of Lenin, revolutions and Socialism. 'Swathanthra Samudayam' by Madhavan, who was one of the secretaries of SNDP Yogam was banned for propagating scientific ideas, rationalism and Socialism.

V

SOCIALIST PARTY AND COMMUNIST PARTY IN KERALA

- 5.1 We have seen that Kerala was late in acquainting with and accepting ideas like renaissance, democracy, liberalism and socialism compared to other parts of India. But once the seeds were sown the sprouting and growth was

quicker and richer than those in other parts. Take renaissance for example. Though we have exceptions like Jyothibha Phule in Maharashtra and Periyar E V Ramaswamy Naiker in Tamil Nadu, renaissance in India was generally a movement from above led by farsighted and selfless leaders belonging to upper castes. Kerala was a major exception. It began from below and spread out to higher echelons in due course. Narayana Guru belonged to untouchable caste and Ayyankali and Poykayil Yohannan (Kumara Guru) belonged to the unapproachable castes. Upper Caste reformers took their lessons from the lower castes. This difference gave an unprecedented depth and sweep to the renaissance movement in Kerala.

5.2 Almost the same difference can be attributed to the communist and socialist movement in Kerala too. Communist party of India as a branch of Communist International was established in 1920 October 17 at a meeting in Tashkent in Russia under the leadership of M N Roy, Abani Mukherji and others. Almost simultaneously communist groups began to function in Kolkota, Mumbai, Chennai and other centres. The Peshawar Conspiracy Case of 1922 Kanpur Conspiracy Case of 1924 and Meerut Conspiracy Case of 1929 made the communist challenge felt all over India, but did not make any ripple in Kerala. It is from the 1930's on, and that too mainly in the second half that Communism and Socialism began to make a n impact in Kerala. The Congress Socialist Party in Kerala was formed in 1934 and the first unit of the communist party of India in 1937, with P Krishna Pillai as the Secretary and EMS Namboothiripad, K Damodaran and N C Sekhar as members. There was an abortive attempt at forming a Communist League in

1933 by a group of youngsters led by N P Kurukkal, a radical nationalist. But it did not have proper affiliation and ceased to exist after a while.

- 5.3 Then Ofcourse the growth of the Communist Party was spectacular and fast and at one time they controlled the Kerala Congress Committee itself. In 1939 the entire Congress Socialist Party merged with the Communist Party and it became a mass force that no one could deny. The Party absorbed all radical elements in Congress, Sree Narayana Movement and the cream of Trade Unions, Kisan and Youth Movements that sprang up in the 1930's, outside the State Congress in Travancore, Prajamandalam in Kochi and Indian National Congress in Malabar.

The unique and unequalled strength of the Communist Party that ultimately led to the formation of the first Communist led State Ministry in Kerala derives from these diverse streams of renaissance, nationalism, Dalit and backward class struggles.

VI

FIRST COMMUNIST STATE MINISTRY IN INDIA

- 6.1 Kerala and its Communist Party were catapulted to international fame when the Communist Party of India won a majority of seats in the legislature of the newly formed (November 1,1956) State of Kerala under the Chief Ministership of E M S Namboothiripad. As a matter of historical fact there was a dress rehearsal of this momentous event in 1954 when the Party

captured majority in the Malabar District Board, a local self governing body, with limited but very useful powers, like education, public health, revenue, taxation etc. The EMS Ministry took oath and assumed power on April 5, 1957 amid massive popular enthusiasm and consternation among opponents. In spite of its having absolute majority in the legislature the Ministry was dismissed by the Union government under Article 365 of the Constitution after a stage-managed agitation of communal and vested interests. The date of this unconstitutional highhandedness was July 30, 1959. So the ministry lasted only 28 months.

6.2 In many ways these 28 months of the first Kerala ministry was a landmark in the history of Independent India, both for its negative and positive aspects. Though the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi, who was leading the ruling Congress Party as its President were the main culprits in this sacrilege of democracy – as was a greed to later even by many of the supporters of this action – actually this also marked the starting point of the decline of Nehru era in Indian history. Nehru was forced to scuttle the far-reaching progressive aspects of Second Five Year Plan (1956-1961) led blindly to a conflict with China with humiliating results, his wings being clipped by being persuaded to dismiss his trusted colleagues like KD Malaviya and NK Krishnan Menon and physically ill. The years left for him till 1964 were perhaps the most painful and ineffective in his life. Though after an interval of internal struggle, Indira Gandhi was able to gather strength with unlimited power, the seeds of her later ignominious fall too can

be traced to 1959 dismissal for EMS Government and its unleashing of the Pandora's box destabilising and fissiparous forces.

- 6.3 The land reforms, educational reforms, the police reforms and initial steps in the decentralisation of power and empowerment of local bodies etc may look humdrum and common place to superficial observers. But a deeper look into its long term impact will convince any one of the twin consequences of these steps. One is their impact on Indian Polity and second is the impact on the theory and practice of the Communist Party, in a democratic set up. These twin impacts become even more relevant in the present day world, transformed by two factors. One is the collapse of European Socialism and the other is the new world wide drive of Globalisation and neo- liberalism.
- 6.4 While discussing these issues we must steer clear of certain hyperboles like Kerala being the 'Yenan of India' (Victor Hick) or that the Kerala model is paragon of all soil and political virtue. The Yen-an metaphor is now a days seldom heard but the 'Kerala model' is bandied about often. Both these metaphors or similies are useful if used with less hyperbole and more circumspection.

VII

COMMUNISM AND WORKING DEMOCRACY

VIII

EMPOWERMENT OF PEOPLE AND CENTRALISATION OF POWER

IX

GLOBALISATION AND SELF RELIANCE

X

UNIVERSAL TRUTH OF MARXISM AND
INDIAN PATH TO SOCIALISM

