

civil war or coexistence ?

(X)

The December session of the State legislature was on the whole a tame affair. It witnessed none of the usual opposition fireworks. The bribery plot stood thoroughly exposed and the humiliating retreat from Kattampally had spiked the opposition guns. They remained subdued and sometimes even respectful.

The December session, and all that had gone before under Communist rule had nevertheless given great cause for anxiety. Kerala had been brought to the threshold of some very important and progressive changes. Ban on evictions, ending of *jenmikkaram*, fixation of minimum wages for agricultural labourers, the fundamental changes visualised in the agrarian relations bill, etc., most definitely heralded a change in the social and economic climate of Kerala. The down-trodden had begun to look up. And with each move, and each day that passed, the Communist ministry was slowly but surely winning ever wider sections of the people.

For the first time in Kerala's history, reaction found that its writ no more runs large over Kerala's destiny, that the coercive arm of the State is no more at their beck and call. What is more, policies and actions of the State, one after another, in quick succession, were making increasing encroachments upon their traditional possessions and prerogatives. And it was being done with impunity. All that was being done to thwart the Communist moves, either through the Church and the 'Christopher' arm, or through the yet more respectable arm in the Congress, was proving just a damp squib.

The situation was indeed unbearable. This could not just be permitted to go on. And it is not without significance that it was now that a Congress M.P., Mathew Maniyangadan, uttered the grim forecast: 'the story of Spain will be repeated in Kerala!'

The guns had to be mounted once again. A highlight of the recovered morale was the song 'Bhagwan macaroni.' Vulgar and disgustingly obscene, it ridiculed the Communist ministry's efforts to popularise the tapioca product macaroni as a substitute food, a plan suggested and supported by the centre, and also endorsed by a 12-point resolution of the Gauhati Congress, the ninth point of which says: 'Organised attempts should be made to develop substitute foods and to encourage balanced diets.'

Not a day passed without one slander or another striking the headlines. If on a day it was the cry about a minister utilising his position to retain his landed property, on another day it was a concocted story about government purchase of paper for the text books, and on yet another day a row was kicked up about the Trivandrum medical association. As Kerala's health minister, Dr A. R. Menon, a veteran Congressman and highly respected for his spotless honesty and incorruptibility, said at a reception at Kozhikode in December last: 'What, sir! You manufacture lies in the day, write it in the night and publish it in the morning and call it a newspaper.'

Communist cell court 'atrocities' were, of course, innumerable and unending. Any one who knows Kerala only from the daily press, could not but have the feeling that he would run into a Communist cell court the moment he stepped out into the open, and there could be no guarantee for his safety and honour.

The vigilant and alert ministry promptly denied the slanders and convincingly proved through facts the baseless nature of the allegations. The slanders nevertheless persisted, for none can make a person see when he does not want to. But to their bitterest regret they failed to cut any ice in Kerala, for the Malayalee people were sure of one thing—that they have for the first time got a ministry which is incorruptible.

As for the 'cell court' danger and absence of security, union deputy home minister, Mrs Violet Alva's visit to the State provided an interesting commentary. When asked by

pressmen at Trivandrum whether she found insecurity and lawlessness anywhere, a surprised Mrs Alva replied with refreshing candour that she had motored all the way down in Kerala to Trivandrum, and the pressmen could see that she was there before them just quite herself, quite safe and well.

On 26 January 1958 was celebrated the first Republic Day in the integrated State of Kerala. Trivandrum that day bore a festive appearance. The Republic Day pageantry organised that evening was unique and the first of its kind in Kerala. There was tremendous mass enthusiasm. A crowded sports stadium saw the chief minister honour the memory of late Ramakrishna Pillai. Chief minister Nambudiripad gave a Republic Day message to the people of Kerala, breathing confidence and faith. Said EMS :

'We are celebrating the 28th anniversary of the firm resolution we took under the leadership of the Indian National Congress to wrest complete independence from British rule as well as the 8th anniversary of the implementation of a constitution based on democratic principles after having successfully achieved complete independence.

'It is natural therefore, that on this occasion we bow to the memory of the great masses of people who fought for complete independence and for evolving a democratic Constitution; we also pay our homage to the heroic martyrs who laid down their lives in the struggle for freedom and democracy.

'We take a solemn pledge to uphold and safeguard our republican constitution secured by us through the selfless efforts of innumerable heroic patriots and under its aegis to evolve a new social order based on socialism.

'While thus recalling on the occasion of this Republic Day celebrations our past endeavour for the achievement of national freedom, democracy and a socialistic order of society let me extend my warm greetings to the people of Kerala and call upon them to make more sustained and vigorous efforts towards this goal in the days ahead.'

Thus the caravan of the Communist government moved on, and slanders not proving effective enough to halt its march, there was free recourse to subversion. Strikes and satyagrahas became almost a daily feature. Someone or the other hunger-striking to death could almost always be seen at the gate of the Trivandrum secretariat. And even

violence was resorted to. Arson, loot and murder were organised. The goondas and the 'Christophers' were called to create troubles. In all these conflicts, it is no doubt true that sometimes when the Communists resolutely defended themselves, some opposition people also suffered. But, by and large, Communists and their supporters suffered heavily. Indeed, as the exasperated secretary of the Kerala State Committee of the Communist Party, M. N. Govindan Nair, remarked later : 'In fact some of us have felt sometimes that as far as we are concerned it was quite unfortunate to have assumed power, for during the last one year so numerous were the attacks resulting even in murders against us and the toiling people who stand by us.'

While the Communist cadres were thus being subjected to attacks, simultaneously a concerted attempt was made to create the impression that the Communists had let loose violence throughout the State by spreading falsehoods and half-truths.

The second budget session of the State assembly commenced on 24 February 1958, with the governor's address summing up the work of the Kerala government during the last year and indicating the general direction of government work for the coming year. Now this itself was an unusual thing—for a Kerala ministry to survive to present its second budget. During the last ten years, probably only the ministry of late A. J. John got the chance to present a second budget.

This was unbearable to the leaders in the opposition. They had planned in advance to give it hot to the Communist rulers. Inspired by anti-Communists at top Congress levels, and dictated by the pressure of Kerala's vested interests, a facade of 'democratic unity' was built up by the Congress rump and the sinking PSP. The forthright policies of the ministry, and specially the agrarian relations bill, had unnerved the Muslim vested interests, which also lined up under the 'democratic' facade. And concerted efforts were set into motion to win over the only independent, a disgruntled Congressman from the Kannada area of Kerala in North Malabar, who was hitherto supporting the Communist ministry.

The opposition was thus prepared for ferocious onslaughts, which were no doubt made. Within a week of the budget session, on 1 March, came about the unfortunate

quarrel between bus conductors and students of Ernakulam. There were hartals and demonstrations and big noise was made in the assembly. The law minister, however, warned the students against falling a prey to the tactics of agent provocateurs, who, it was openly alleged, were active in Ernakulam and had fanned out to Trivandrum to stir up the students. Thanks, however, to government promptness and alacrity, the trouble was prevented from spreading and all Congress and PSP efforts to stir up further trouble among the students failed.

The fact of the matter is that the main objective of the opposition was not to function in a constructive way but to pull down the ministry by any means. Here are a few choice samples of speeches delivered in the State assembly by 'non-violent' Congressmen in the month of March. They are all taken from different issues of the *Kerala Mail*, edited by a top INTUC leader, an AICC member and one selected by the government of India to represent Indian labour at Geneva.

Gopinathan Pillai (Congress) said: 'There are 11 ministers disfiguring the country... What use can we have of this useless crowd? Communist vagabonds and street criminals are orbiting around their putrifying carcasses like vultures.... We know the strategy of these traitors. The Russian bears think they can run away with our votes. These fools and criminals, they are living in a fool's paradise.' (23 March 1958.)

Here is another from M. M. Mathai, another Congress MLA :

'We have a law minister in this country. Eating his rice and curry he sees Christophers. Getting up after a very disturbed meal he sees Christophers again. There is something wrong with the brain of this man. Either a cooling plaster must be placed on his cranium or he must be, I say, removed to the lunatic asylum....' (30 March 1958.)

N. Narayana Pillai, another Congressman, forgetting that elections to the State assembly were conducted under president's rule and was free and fair, said that 'Communist path to power' was 'strewn with corpses.' He also said: 'Look, there sits a labour minister. Is it not under his department that dacoities and murders are rampant?' (30 March 1958.)

And now one from K. T. Thomas, yet another Congress MLA: 'I have also something to say about our police minister. In the wide world, is there one such minister, I ask, who mouths such a lot of stupidities and falsities....? An old hag chewing away for all she was worth even when there is nothing in her mouth, if she gets something delicious to chew, what luck would that be? It is the case of the old hag all over. I tell you, my friends, we must beware of these people.... They will all turn traitors....' (30 March 1958.)

Actually, by now the 'non-violent' followers of the Congress creed in Kerala had begun to openly threaten violence and 'retaliation.' One C. M. Stephen, a person noted for his unusually loud, long and empty speeches at AICC meetings and Congress sessions, and an INTUC leader, said in a statement issued in Quilon on 22 March: 'We have endured a lot. We have forgiven them seventy times seven. We are but human. Retaliation, if decided on, will be terrible.... The aggrieved and the long suffering also have feelings and sentiments. Out of a desire for their very lives and for their self-protection, they may also come to important decisions. The result will be then catastrophic.'

The threat outlined above was actually being put into practice. With the political and moral support of the Congress and the PSP, and sometimes actively aided by their men and the 'Christophers', the landowners organised a series of sorties against the Communists and their supporters among the toiling people. At Niranom, a fully armed 'self-defence squad' organised by the landlords, attacked striking agricultural workers' houses in the night, brutally wounding men, women and children. The operations were continued the next day and an agricultural labourer was killed. In a fishing dispute at Shertalai between fishermen and landowners, Congressmen and INTUC workers prevented a peaceful and just settlement by their intransigence and emboldened by it 700 armed goondas were summoned by the landowners and a very grave situation developed.

At Adoor, estate workers were attacked by the goondas. In a dispute at Vallikkunnam between Rajan, the notorious singer of 'Bhagwan macaroni' and obscene story teller at Congress meetings, and some local men unconnected with the Communist Party, Rajan was beaten up. As a reprisal, however, some people attempted to kidnap the 90-days' old

child of Thoppil Bhasi, Communist MLA. It was a sordid act. The child was sleeping with the mother at dead of night when the attempt was made. The cries of the child woke up the mother, she ran out, fainted and fell down. The cries woke up the villagers and the kidnappers ran away leaving the babe in a nearby field.

In Kottayam district, the 'Christopher'-stronghold, the 'Christophers' went into action. They went about in organised batches, drunk and armed, cutting spathes of palm trees and even palm trees themselves. It became a regular job of the 'Christophers' to help landlords to forcibly and illegally evict tenants from their lands. And the policies of Congress leaders at many places encouraged all this directly and indirectly.

Things, however, seemed to move in the last week of March. On 24 March, the government won a demand for grants in the State assembly by a five-vote majority, the lone independent, who was hitherto voting with the ministry generally, and the nominated member voting with the opposition. On 25 March, the ministry won a division in the assembly with a bare majority of three votes.

The climax, however, was reached on 28 March. On this day, the combined opposition mustered its maximum strength. On this day, following an interim stay by the supreme court on the award of the election tribunal invalidating his election from Chalakudy constituency, PSP MLA C. Janardanan, attended the assembly. Thus, there was an accretion to the opposition strength at a very appropriate time, and God was merciful. And the same day the high court was to pronounce its judgement on a pending election appeal challenging the election of C. Kannan, Communist MLA, from the Cannanore constituency. The high expectation was that C. Kannan's election will be invalidated.

And what great prospects had opened out on the strength of this expectation! The three opposition parties, the Congress, the PSP and the Muslim League had a combined strength of 60. With the solitary independent and the nominated member voting with the opposition, it could muster 62 votes in a house of 127. With Rosamma Punnose's election being invalidated, and with a Communist legislator acting as the speaker, Communist voting strength was reduced to 63. With Kannan out, as was the expectation, Communists could muster only 62, just as much as the

opposition. On ordinary divisions the speaker's casting vote could get the requisite majority for the ruling party. But the Constitution forbids this right of the speaker in the matter of budget demands.

The division on 28 March had to be one on a budget demand. It seemed that the Communist ministry was doomed on that fateful day. That explains the sudden jubilation among the opposition. That also explains the fleet of planters' limousines at a Trivandrum hotel. The expectations, indeed, were great.

God, however, failed the Congress and the 'democratic' façade and chose the side of the ungodly Communists. Kannan's election was upheld by the high court at Ernakulam. The news reached Trivandrum soon enough, and all hopes were shattered. The division was pressed but the Communist ministry survived by a single-vote majority. Chacko and Thanu Pillai were visibly sad and cut sorry figures. And the planters, too, were unhappy. The limousines were speeding back to the high plantation retreats even before the lunch hour.

Quite understandably, a rather angry Pattom Thanu Pillai spoke in the assembly on that day. Thundered the ageing leader of the sinking PSP: 'I deliberately charge the government with the gross offence of instigating violence. I take the responsibility to prove that the ministers are at the bottom of the mischief. They created conditions of violence before assuming office. The fact remains they stick to their old habits and make a show of working within the framework of the constitution.'

Raising once again the time-worn allegations of lawlessness, P. T. Chacko, leader of the Congress said: 'Time was when people were in jitters saying that Muslim hordes were standing at the gates. There was a time when the people stood in dread of the Pandyan armies desolating and desecrating the land. Today it is the turn of the Communists. The Communist armies in this State are on the march.... The Communists have knocked into shape a secret militia of armed men.'

The legislators listening to Chacko were wondering what all this melodrama was about, when at last he let the cat out of the bag. It was a clear threat of the type C. M. Stephen had uttered a few days earlier about 'retaliation', almost a call for rebellion, under the guise of that much

abused word 'self-protection.' Chacko said: 'Your bands of Communist terrorists are unleashing violence and atrocities upon a prepared pattern. Your private militia is being systematically used for that. Now I give you a fair warning that if these gentlemen are setting about in this fashion and that with this government's open encouragement and support, the oppressed people of this State will have no alternative, but to organise for their self-defence.' Referring contemptuously to the 'one-man majority' of the ministry, Chacko called upon it to resign and ominously added: 'If that is not done, please take a little note of this—the waves of popular reaction will overtake you. You will be engulfed and submerged by the force of its onsurge.'

Chacko's was a sensational and unusual performance. Tension ran high in the assembly. The speech choked with hatred and hostility. An ominous silence fell over the august body.

Next day, after question time, EMS rose to make a statement under rule 226. He was not present in the house when Chacko spoke on the previous day. The chief minister regretted Chacko's speech, specially his statement that a kind of 'guerilla war' was going on, and his exhortation to the people to take to arms in the name of self-defence. He said that it was not an allegation casually made. According to the leader of the opposition, the non-Communists were in a position to take to arms. He was, the chief minister said, hinting at a militia to meet the 'Communist Militia and the police who were backing the Communists.' Even if the words 'take to arms' may not have been used, the threat of organised violence was implicit in the opposition leader's speech. EMS flatly denied the existence of any Communist militia and any minister going to review it, adding that this was the first time the matter was mentioned. And he told the house that the government will take able steps to put down private militias, whoever might organise them. The government was determined to preserve peace, and he hoped that the leader of the opposition would retreat from the position he had taken.

Chacko, speaking under rule 80 for 'personal explanation,' again had 'Delhi' in mind. He contended that the chief minister's statement was aimed at Delhi. And while denying that he had incited violence, but apparently carried away by his excitement, he again repeated all that he had said

earlier, and called Communists 'goondas' in the bargain. He accepted that the nocturnal ministerial review of Communist militia was no doubt referred by him for the first time, but the extenuating circumstance was that he had just then known about it. Chacko's 'personal explanation', as reported by the daily press, was replete with calling Communists 'goondas' and breathed all the fire and fury of retaliation under the euphemism of 'self-defence.' Of course, he was careful to add, his 'self-defence' was as it could mean 'under the law'.

The chief minister's appeal fell on deaf years. The threat of violence was not withdrawn but reinforced.

This is how Kerala representatives of the ruling Congress party in India treat the only opposition party to have come to power in a State. Shorn of all verbiage, the objection apparently seems to be to the very existence of any ministry that is not of the ruling Congress party. Intolerance and hatred, not tolerance and coexistence, mark the attitude of Kerala Congress towards the Communist ministry.

The experience of the last fourteen months in Kerala of Communists in power and the Congress in opposition poses important questions pregnant with great meaning for the entire future development of Indian democracy.

The very first question is: How far is the role of the Kerala Congress consistent with the great traditions of tolerance, attempts at change of heart, mutual understanding, and good will of India's national movement and the Indian National Congress, an attitude of mind which was so persistently practised even towards the foreign rulers of our land, the British?

The second question is: In view of the likely growth of the multi-party system in the future, when different States are likely to have different political parties in power, and when central and State administrations are likely to belong to different political parties, what has to be the rôle of the opposition at respective levels, in order that the democratic process may grow and expand, and not be throttled and cramped?

Following from the above is the question: What has to be the rôle of the State in bringing about socio-economic changes as visualised in the objectives of the constitution, the directive principles of State policy and the unanimously accepted goal of socialist society?

And lastly, more or less as a corollary to the above, is the following question: Is the Communist Party to be permitted to live in India? Is it open to the Communists to exist and gain power through the democratic way, and bring about socio-economic changes by implicitly working within the four walls of the constitution? Or is it that our constitution is for everyone else but not the Communists who have to be ostracised and denied existence?

In short, is anti-Communism to be our creed and credo? Or shall we evolve an Indian way of mutual supervision and coexistence of parties?

There can be—and there, indeed, are—two approaches in answering these questions, both yes and no. But those who would want us to answer in the affirmative ignore an important quality of the Indian mind. Anti-Communism, why anti-anything, is alien to Indian traditions. We are a very positive people. None other than our president, the great and good Rajendra Prasad, gave expression to this uniquely Indian approach when he said on the occasion of the independence day, 1957, in Kerala: 'I hope I am correct when I say that you here do not feel any difference because two parties are ruling, one in the sphere of the State and another in the sphere of the whole country. I am sure we in Delhi do not feel anything like that.'

The president added: 'I am happy that this great experiment which is being made in your State is going to serve as a great lesson not only to other States but to the country as a whole as an example of coexistence, of living and working together, in spite of differences, for the good of all.'

When he said this, the president had before him the high ideals of *Panchasheel*, of coexistence of nations, which it has been the proud privilege of India to place before the strife-torn world threatened with atomic destruction. 'Example of coexistence' in Kerala, he said, would be an example to other countries, and an ideal worth living and working for. The president added that when Indians were in a position to say to the world that in spite of differences, they were one, and the country was united and would continue to be so, they could ask other nations to follow their example.