

'I TOO AM FROM KERALA'

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WILD tumbling hills of great beauty, their tops wreathed in mist in spite of the hot Southern sun. Elephants, a few bison, an occasional tiger, many monkeys, live there; and human beings too.

Tea plantations straggle their gay green bushes up and up the slopes; under the control of foreign planters, the plantation workers pluck the leaves. They own nothing but their strong arms—and, fortunately, something of a trade union. There is, of course, a government, 150 miles away, 5,000 feet below.

Little peasants, too, as poor as the plantation workers, have little patches of cultivation, and perhaps a few chickens. And a few thousand 'tribals' (aboriginals) try to keep a foothold.

Remote? Yes, in a way. Backward? Yes, in a way. Ignorant? Well, there are many things that we know, many things that the people in the capital below know, of which these folk have not heard; but what poor man who stands up and survives is really ignorant? Unimportant? No, no, nobody is unimportant.

But there seems to be something unusual afoot. What is it? A by-election! Should the remote, the backward, the ignorant, be interested? Or cynical? Well, they are interested; very interested. Here is a plantation worker who knows little or nothing of the legislative problems that are agitating his fellow-citizens in the capital, or of the challenges to the legislation which make their way to the Courts; but he says: 'Yes, I shall vote for this government. Before it came, the police used to fire on us; now, they are not allowed to do so; this government won't let them'. A peasant says: 'Yes, I shall vote for this government. Formerly the forest guards and the police used to harass me with complaints that I had damaged this or that, and threaten proceedings. And I had to kill off a couple of chickens that I could ill spare, to give them a feast, and buy off the prosecution. This government has stopped that, and I can get my own eggs and eat my own chickens'. And a 'tribal' says: 'Yes, I too shall vote for this government. It works hard for the special interests of the tribals.'

So, up and down the hills, they came and voted. Almost all the other parties had formed a combined opposition to defeat the

government candidate, but the government candidate won by many thousands.

I write of it because it was quite an important by-election. Three and a half hundred million people in the country watched it; indeed, most of the world watched it. It was a by-election in a State where the government that had been ruling for nearly fourteen months with a tiny majority in the legislature, and looking after the interests of these people and thirteen million others as well and as honestly as it could, was a government of the Communist Party. The by-election was to tell that government and the world around whether its people approved it or not. And the answer was, emphatically: 'Yes, the people are behind you. Go ahead and do your best for this poor and beautiful corner of our big country.'

Yes, this was Kerala, in May, 1958. Yes, it is a great victory. And when I telephoned in the evening of the counting to a big Press agency in Bombay to see if the result was yet through, I could not even formulate the first words of my enquiry before the telephonist said: 'The Communists have won, by thousands', and rang off to deal with the next enquiry. I went back to my table, and the waiter said quietly: 'Would you tell me the result? You see, I too am from Kerala.'