

# LEFTIST MOVEMENTS AND THE MAPPILA MUSLIMS

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The Mappilas, who constitute about one fourth of the population of Malabar, had not taken any active part in politics till the onset of the Khilafat Movement. The Malabar District Political Conference held at Manjeri (1920) and the first Kerala Provincial Congress Conference held at Ottapalam (1921) were important turning points with regard to large scale enrollment of Mappilas to the Congress Party. The keen interest shown by the Congress towards issues related to the Mappilas such as the Khilafat question, the tenancy problem etc. and the overwhelming influence exerted by Muhammad Abdurahiman and others over the community had actually motivated the Mappilas to join the Congress and the nationalist movement.<sup>1</sup>

The Malabar District Congress Committee in the beginning was controlled by upper caste Hindus, who were mostly lawyers by profession.<sup>2</sup> The Mappilas and other backward communities politicians felt that they were marginalized. In the elections held to the local bodies, the Madras Legislative Assembly and even to the Central Legislative Assembly, the Rightist Faction of the party, it was alleged, had worked against the candidates belonging to the other group or fielded them in such constituencies where there was least chances of victory. It must be noted that in those days only landlords who paid tax to the Government had the right to vote. The majority of the nationalist Muslims and the Leftists had shown great enthusiasm, but had no right to vote.<sup>3</sup> In 1937 when Rajaji formed the ministry; there was a strong rumour that a member from Malabar area would be included. Two delegations met Rajaji requesting to take Muhammad Abdurahiman in the cabinet. But due to strong opposition from the Rightist Wing, that move failed.<sup>4</sup> This type of hostile attitude maintained by the rival group compelled the nationalist Muslims to join hands with the Leftists in the party. In the elections to the Pradesh Congress Committee held in 1938, they fought jointly and captured the leadership of the party. Thus Muhammad Abdurahiman of the nationalist Muslim's Group became the President and E.M.S. Namboodiripad of the Leftist's Group became the Secretary.<sup>5</sup> That set up continued till 1940, *i.e.*, when Muhammad Abdurahiman and the Leftist leaders were arrested following the outbreak of the Second World War. In their absence once again the leadership of the party went in favour of the Rightists.

Though the Rightists ridiculed the move of the rival group as 'Mecca- Moscow Pact',<sup>6</sup> it was a wonderful period as far as the history of the Congress movement was concerned. For, the party witnessed a tremendous growth with regard to its membership. Unions of the labourers, peasants, students and teachers were formed and within a short span of time the Congress had become a massive and powerful movement.<sup>7</sup>

The friendship between the Leftists and the Muslim Group also caused the revival of the activities of the Congress in the riot hit areas of Ernad and Walluvanad Taluks. For the Mappila community, which was the majority community of the region, had been keeping away from the national movement and political activities on account of the sad situation created by the Malabar Rebellion of 1921, which resulted in the alienation between the Hindus and the Muslims. The visit of Leftist Muslim leaders such as Sayyid Barelvi, editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*, Yusuf Mehrali, an Executive Member of the All Societies' Party and Ameer Hydar Khan, a young revolutionary from Andhra Pradesh in the Malabar region had created great enthusiasm among the Mappilas and their speeches had left a deep impression in the minds of Mappilas towards the Socialist ideology.<sup>8</sup>

### **Communist Party in Malabar**

A unit of the Communist Party was formed in Malabar in 1937. In 1939 the cadres of the Congress Socialist Party met at Pinarayi and resolved to dissolve it and merge it with the Communist Party. Among the Mappilas Muhammad Ishaq, E.K. Imbichi Bava, Sadhhu P. Ahamad Kutty and K. Kunhali had been at the forefront of the Communist Movement in Malabar.

Muhammad Kutty alias Muhammad Ishaq was born in a noble family and while a high school student he was attracted to the freedom struggle and became a follower of Muhammad Abdurahiman. While he was at Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, pursuing higher studies, he came in touch with the leadership of the Communist Party. Then he was appointed as the Secretary of the Delhi Provincial Committee of the Student's Federation.<sup>9</sup> Later the leaders entrusted to him the task of building up the party in Malabar especially among the Mappilas. He had earnestly undertaken the task and could win over a lot of common people to Communism through his humorous but effective style of oratory. In 1946, the party fielded him in the election to the Madras Assembly from the Malappuram Muslim Reserved Constituency. It is to be noted that he was the first Muslim candidate fielded by the party

under its own banner in an Assembly election from Malabar. In the election though he was defeated he secured 5,234 votes.

Ishaq attended the famous Calcutta Congress of the Communist party in 1948 and supported the moderate stand of P.C. Joshi. When the party was banned after the Calcutta Thesis in 1948, like other leaders of the party, he also went underground. At that time during his stay in concealment; he planned an attack on a Muslim moneylender's house. But the plan failed in its execution and the culprits were arrested.<sup>10</sup> When the party severely criticized him on account of this, he left the party and went to Delhi to take up some job there. In the rest of his life, though he was not in active politics, he continued as a sympathizer of the C.P.I.

E.K. Imbichi Bava in the same manner, while a student at Calicut, became a follower of Muhammad Abdurahiman and was attracted to the national movement. In the Congress Party, he showed inclination towards the Leftist Group and consequently joined the Congress Socialist Party. By organizing the beedi workers and fisherman of Ponnani, he entered the Communist Movement. In 1952 he was elected to the Rajya Sabha and in 1962 to the Lok Sabha from the Ponnani constituency. In 1967 he was elected to the Kerala Assembly and became a cabinet minister.

K. Kunhali, one of the founder leaders of the Communist movement in South Malabar, was born in a middle class family in Kondotty. The party had assigned him the task of organizing the beedi workers of sixty two companies in Mysore and plantation labourers of Nilambur area. From 1953 to 1957 he led a 'Surplus Land Agitation' against the excess lands owned by the *janmies*. The excess lands captured from the *janmies* were distributed among the peasants and the labourers.<sup>11</sup> In the first election to the Parliament in 1952 the party fielded him in the Malappuram constituency. Though he was defeated he was able to secure 52,000 votes. In 1967 he contested in the election to the Kerala Assembly from Nilambur constituency and he got elected. Unfortunately he was shot dead by his rivals in 1969.

Sadhu P. Ahamad Kutty, Edakkad Muhammad, Koya Kunhi Naha, Nadukandi Muhammad Koya, K.P. Muhammad Koya, Appa Koya, P.K. Muhammad Kunhi, Paloli Muhammad Kutty *et. al.*, were the other prominent Mappila Muslim leaders who strove hard to bring the community to the fold of Communism.

In North Malabar also, the Mappilas, especially beedi workers, fishermen and other weaker sections of the society were attracted to the Communist ideology and participated in the strikes and agitations

sponsored by the party. When the party decided to observe 15<sup>th</sup> September 1940 as 'Anti Repression Day', at Tellicherry the agitation turned violent and in the police firing that followed, two comrades lost their lives. They were said to be the first martyrs in the cause of the Communist Movement in Kerala.<sup>12</sup> One among them O. Abu Master was a primary school teacher belonging to the Mappila community. He was an activist of the Leftist teacher's union and also of the Peasant Movement. Likewise in the Morazha agitation, of the thirty eighty convicted three of them belonged to the Mappila community. In the Kayyur struggle (1941), among the four convicted with capital punishment, a Mappila named Pallikkal Abu Baker was also included.

### **Mappila Attraction Towards Communist Ideology**

The following factors may be attributed for the enrollment of the Mappilas in the Communist Movement in Malabar.

1. The systematic and disciplined style of functioning of the party, their critical approach, demand for change, exciting call for the creation of a new world order etc. attracted many Mappilas to Communism.
2. Students and educated Mappilas turned Communists by reading books and articles. At Calicut, the Communist leader P. Krishna Pillai had made good contacts with the students and conducted study classes to the students. As a result of this, the Calicut Student's Union, which was the only students' organization at Calicut at that time decided to merge it with the All India Student's Federation controlled by the Communists.
3. The Communists won over the Mappilas by promising a quick relief from the predicaments such as price hike, exploitation, poverty, unemployment problem etc. They also promised creation of more job opportunities, wage rise, redistribution of land etc.
4. The peasants and labourers came in to the fold of Communism through the peasant organizations and trade unions. Most of the labour unions were controlled by the Communist leaders and in due course they were affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress of the Communist Party. By becoming members of trade unions, the Mappila beedi workers of Tellicherry, Ponnani, Kondotty etc. and the plantation workers of Nilambur were turned to Communism.
5. Like the popular Kerala People's Arts Club (K.P.A.C.) of Kayamkulam, which had promoted the communist movement in a

bigger way by staging many revolutionary dramas, the Yuvajana kala Samithi (Nilambur), Yuvajana Sanghom (Areacode), M.S.A. Dramatic Association (Kozhikode) etc. had promoted the cause of the Leftist Movements. Nilambur Balan, Nilambur Ayisha, Dr. M. Usman, E.K. Ayamu *et.al.* deserve special mention with this regard. Dramas staged by them like '*Ijju Nalloru Manisanakan Nokku*', '*Ee Duniyavil Nhan Ottakkanu*' etc. were well appreciated by the people and left deep marks in the minds of the viewers, especially the Mappilas.

6. With a view to wooing the Mappilas towards Communism, at one stage, the party had even supported the Muslim League's demand for 'Pakistan' and 'Mappilastan'. While on his tour in Malabar, P.C. Joshi, the General Secretary of the party had expressed his views supporting the stand of the League. Like wise, E.M.S. Namboodiripad had even brought out a leaflet inciting the Mappilas for a revolt for the same cause. The British Government took serious note of it and had taken action against the *Deshabhimani*, the organ of the Communist Party for publishing such a call.<sup>13</sup> The decision of the party to its members to creep into the communal organizations including the Muslim League, with the intention of widening the mass base of the party, also had brought about positive results.

In spite of the earnest efforts of the party, they could win over only a small section of the Mappilas into its fold. The following reasons are ascribed to it.

1. Most of the Muslim religious scholars viewed the Communist ideology as anti-religious and regarded the communists as atheists or infidels and ordered the Muslims not to have matrimonial alliances with them.
2. The Muslim landlords and wealthy men strongly stood against the Communist Movement as they knew it very well that its growth would impede their vested interests in future. Hence they supported the political ideology of the League.
3. The presence of Muslim League itself was a hindrance against Muslims joining other movements including the Communist Party. In other words if the Muslim League was not there a good number of Mappilas would have joined the Leftist Movements. The formation of a separate trade union for the Muslim league called The Muslim Labour Union acted as a check against Mappila working class joining the Left controlled trade unions and thereby preventing them from joining the Communist Movement.

4. The Malayalam book entitled '*The wealth Distribution System In Islam*' written by C.N. Ahamad Maulavi served to dissuade the educated Mappilas from joining the Communist Movements as it led many of them to think that their religion also has a better economic system than the one claimed by the Socialists or the Communists.

### **Trade Union Movements and the Muslims**

The news papers and periodicals with progressive outlook such as *Mathrubhumi*, *Swadesabhimani*, *Sahodaran*, *Mitavadi*, *Yuktivadi*, *Kesari*, *Karshaka Tozhilali* etc., published news and articles supporting the Socialist ideology and the Russian experiments. It tended to promote thinking along socialist lines among the educated people of Kerala. The industrial and agricultural labourers also began to organize themselves with a view to promoting the interests of working class in different sectors with the result various trade unions and peasant movements germinated.

The first known trade union in Kerala was constituted on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1922, in the industrial belt of Alleppey, known as the Travancore Labour Union, which later changed its name into Travancore Labour Association. It was founded by a young Muslim called Vadappuram P.K. Bava who was the Yard Superintendent of the Empire Coir Works of Alleppey.<sup>14</sup> Another Muslim social activist, P.S. Muhammad was the founder President of the Association. He held this post till 1935. Then another Muslim politician and socialist leader P.K. Kunju became the President of the Association. P.S. Muhammad then left the association and formed another organization of the working class called the Alleppey Labour Union. The Labour Association published a weekly journal for the benefit of the labour class called *the Thozhilali* at a fairly early period of 1925. They even thought of developing it into a full fledged daily newspaper.<sup>15</sup> The idea did not bear fruit. However *the Thozhilali* emerged as an important organ of the working class of south Kerala.

In Cochin, V.K. Kutty, C.P. Ummar, T.M. Abu, A.A. Kochunni and other Muslims were connected with the leadership of various trade union movements. V.K. Kutty was the first nominated member to represent the labourers in the Cochin Assembly.

### **The Peasant Movements and the Muslims**

The conditions of the peasants and labourers were miserable throughout the world in the early thirties on account of the world wide economic

depression. Due to the Great Depression of 1930 prices of agricultural commodities like coconut and paddy fell which affected the farmers adversely. Those who had taken loan from money-lenders found it very difficult to repay the money, which resulted in the confiscation of their properties. A large number of cultivators who fell in debt lost their lands. In Eriyad-Kodungallur area, the majority of the farmers belonged to the Muslim community while most of the money-lenders were Tamil Brahmins. This situation prompted K.M. Ibrahim, his brother K.M. Kunhi Moideen and others to start an organization to work for the cause of the peasants called *the Karshaka Thozhilali Prasthanam* in 1932. The movements soon spread to other parts of Kodungallur Taluk and to Mukundapuram and Kanayannur Taluks.<sup>16</sup> They published a periodical called *the Karshaka Thozhilali* from Mattancherry. C. Achyuta Menon, a prominent Communist leader, referring to the Debt Relief Act enacted by the Rajaji Ministry in 1937 observed that the peasant movement led by K.M. Ibrahim had got it passed years before in the Cochin Assembly from an autocratic Maharaja without the backing of any all India organization like the Congress.<sup>17</sup>

### **Developments after the Formation of Kerala State**

In the first Assembly election (1957), both the Congress and the Communist Party contested the election separately, whereas the Praja Socialist Party and the Muslim League faced the election jointly. The Communist Party which secured a slight majority, captured power with the help of independents. Two years later when the 'Liberation Struggle' started under the leadership of Nairs and Christians against the Communist Ministry, at a later stage the Muslim League also joined the agitation. The Communists retaliated by creating a pro-Communist Group who formed a new party called the Progressive Muslim League.<sup>18</sup> In the next elections they fielded candidates with the backing of the Communist Party, but failed to attract more followers or win the elections.

Ten years later every thing went upside down as both the League as well as the Communist Party changed their policy and political stand which resulted in the formation of a coalition against the Congress. On account of the alliance with the League, the Left parties could improve their seats in Malabar region. As far as the League was concerned they could not only increase their strength in the Assembly but could come to power in a state for the first time after independence.<sup>19</sup> However, the ministry did not last long due to differences of opinion among the coalition partners. After the resignation of E.M.S. Namboodiripad Ministry, under the leadership of the Communist Party of India another

ministry was formed headed by C. Achyuta Menon. The League was a partner in it along with the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Indian Socialist Party.

### **Attitude of the League towards the Left Parties**

There had been two strong lines of thinking in the Muslim League from sixties onwards with regard to the political stand of the party. While one group suggested that it was better for both the community and the party to be with the Left as they are the true protectors of the community; the other section held the view that it was better to be with the side of the Congress Party otherwise the minority communities would be left to the mercy of the fascist forces. On the basis of this notion on two occasions schism broke out in the party which resulted in the emergence of two new political parties called the All India Muslim League in 1974 and the Indian National League in 1994. Since the creation of the party the A.I.M.L. faced three Assembly elections in 1977, 1980 and 1982. On all these occasions they travelled with the C.P.I (M) led Front and in 1980-81 period they represented the cabinet also. They remained with the Left Front till 1985, when they were persuaded to quit the Front and merge with the Indian Union Muslim League on account of certain remarks made by E.M.S. Namboodiripad on Islamic *Shariat*.<sup>20</sup> The demolition of the Babari Masjid and the inert attitude of the Congress Party prompted a section of the Muslim League to leave the organization and to form the Indian National League. Though they are not included in the Left Front, they are with them and are getting all supports from them.

### **Muslim Religious Groups and their Attitude**

Generally speaking, the Muslims of Malabar are divided into three sections, viz., the *Sunnis*, the *Mujahids* and the *Jam'at-e-Islami* Group. The *Sunnis* are further divided into two groups, viz., the E.K. Abu Baker Musliar group or the *Samastha* Group and the A.P. Abu Baker Musliar Group. The E.K. Group maintains a pro-League attitude while the A.P. faction maintains a pro-Left line. Though both of them are not contesting in the elections directly, they are working as a vote bank and demanding concessions in return for their help from the concerned political parties. The two *Mujahid* factions have not yet declared their political stance. The *Jam'at-e-Islami Hind* is an all India organization and have connections with similar organizations working in the Indian sub-continent as well as with other Islamist organizations of Afro-Asian countries. They envisage things on a wider Islamic angle. Hence they



usually take an anti-American stance which is identical with the stand of the Leftist parties. The mouth piece of the *Jam 'at* namely the *Madhyamam* daily, is one of the leading newspapers of Kerala and the most circulated daily amongst the Muslims. The role of that paper in creating public opinion on issues related to the Muslims has been recognized by the political observers. The youth wing of the *Jam 'at* called the Solidarity Youth Movement has begun to intervene in socio-political and environmental issues like other secular youth organizations. Besides the aforesaid organizations, the People's Democratic Party, a Muslim dominated hard line party emerged after the demolition of the Babari Masjid, which has got some strong pockets in south Kerala as well as in the coastal belt of north Kerala, also is backing the Left Front. All these developments have created an adverse effect on the Congress led United Democratic Front in the Muslim pockets which have been described by certain media as 'red wave in Malappuram District'. At the national level the only thing that prompts the Mappilas to support the Congress is that, the Left Front has not grown up to take up the Central Government single handed and if the Congress weakens the fascist forces would capture power. That frightens them as a nightmare.

In the C.P.I (M) also there is a group who advocate the inclusion of the League in the Left Front. They prefer the moderate League to the extremist Indian National League or the People's Democratic Party. What they suggest is that with the help of the League the Left could capture the whole of Malabar and hence they can perpetuate a Left led coalition Government in Kerala on the model of Bengal. But the defendants argue that the Muslim League is a communal party and any truck with it would be detrimental to the Leftist credentials and it would help the fascist forces to increase their strength. Any way at the Panchayat level, where only regional issues do matter, both the parties are having adjustments or even alliances.

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