

E.M.S. Namboodiripad And the Practice of Communism in Kerala*

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Abstract

The contribution of Indian communists towards broadening the theoretical vision of Marxism was negligible when compared to USSR, China, Cuba or Vietnam. But the Indian communist experiment has significant practical achievements. An examination of the communist politics in Kerala and the role of E.M.S. Namboodiripad as a practical visionary in guiding it, gain momentum in this context. Namboodiripad had exerted significant influence on every programme laid down by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) until his death. In this paper, the attempt is to trace the history and political culture of the communist movement in Kerala and their plan of Communism focusing on CPI (M) and Namboodiripad's writings. In this process, the making and transformation of Namboodiripad as leader and theoretician, the rapidly varying political scenario before and after Indian Independence and the role played by communist parties of Russia and China form crucial variables. Finally, my intent is to present an understanding of Namboodiripad's line of thought to parliamentary communism which forms the crux of the present communist movement in Kerala.

Keywords: Kerala, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Congress, Congress Socialist Party, Communism, CPI, CPI (M).

Introduction

The communist theory and practice in India when compared with that of USSR, China, Cuba or Vietnam, appear to have relatively little theoretical contribution to the broader vision of Marxism. At the same time, the Indian communist experiments have been significant in practice, particularly in the state of Kerala where one of the first

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democratically elected communist governments in the world emerged. An analysis of the praxis of the communist movement in Kerala will force one into an interface between the Marxist theory-analysis and the socio-political dynamics in Kerala. The sixty years of parliamentary communism had its own impact on the socio-economic structure of Kerala society, aiding the state to be in the forefront of various human development indicators like literacy, primary education, health, and democratic decentralisation. An examination of the communist politics in Kerala and the role of E.M.S. Namboodiripad as a practical visionary in guiding it, need an examination in this context.

Namboodiripad had exerted significant influence on every programme laid down by the Communist Party of India-Marxist, the CPI (M) in Kerala from its official establishment in 1967 up to his death in 1998. Even many years after his death, the CPI (M) leaders in Kerala used to refer to Namboodiripad and whenever any political crisis happen they would say “if E.M.S.¹ had been here he would have sorted out these problems easily”. The communist leaders like A.K. Gopalan who were crucial to CPI (M) in Kerala from the beginning, wrote the following words (1973:76) to show his commitment to Namboodiripad’s capabilities in building the communist movement in Kerala:

I am not at all sorry if people feel that I am a blind follower of E.M.S. I learned much from him. The strength of the bond that unites me to him stems from the realization that he has so completely understood my character, my strengths and weaknesses. A good leader should be able to understand his followers. Failure to do this so often resulted in disastrous consequences. He always assigned me tasks best suited to my abilities and taught me Marxism through them.

The point made is not that CPI (M) in Kerala was a party solely dependent on a particular individual. Instead, I consider him as a line of thought which gained the support of other communist leaders and lead to the foundation and popularisation of communism as a mass movement in Kerala. To study Namboodiripad’s line of thought, an in-depth understanding of the process of evolution of Namboodiripad as a leader is crucial. He began as an Namboodiri community reform activist before becoming a Nationalist- Gandhian, then to Congress Socialist and finally into an authority in the moulding of CPI (M) in Kerala. An analysis of Namboodiripad’s ideology through his writings and, speeches and that of his contemporaries will help one to trace the history, political culture and adaptations taken by the communist movement in Kerala.

Independence struggles and beginning of CPI

If one goes through the history of the struggles in Malayalam-speaking regions of pre-independent India, it could be noted that the politically conscious Malayali youth had actively participated in the different socio-political activities in this region which later became Kerala.² During my archival data analysis to identify the genesis of the left and communist movement in Kerala, I had to go through five stages of the history of political movements in Kerala between 1900 and 1998 as follows:

1. Social reform movements against caste practices and for more access to education among Dalit, upper caste and other religious communities from 1900 onwards.
2. National Movement for independence led by Congress: broadly, the period from 1921, when Gandhi's views became dominant in National Movement and the Non-cooperation-Khilafat movements started to gain support among the educated masses..
3. Congress Socialist Party Phase: The period between 1934 -1939
4. Communist Party of India Phase or CPI Phase: The period between 1939 to 1964
5. Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M) Phase: 1967 Onwards

The origin and development of the ideologies of Namboodiripad are from this motley of transformations and syntheses. Born in an upper caste Namboodiri Brahmin community in 1909, Namboodiripad began his social activism as early as 1920-23 by joining the movement to reform the Namboodiri community called Yogakshema Sabha.

The social movement in Kerala soon gave a way for Gandhi's announcement of a civil disobedience movement and the salt satyagraha, made an impact in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. Deeply inspired by the ideas of Gandhi-led national movement, many politically conscious Malayali youth joined the National Congress and followed Gandhism as their ideology.

At the same time, but far apart from the milieu of political movements of Kerala, the Communist party of India was officially formed in Tashkent in Russia on October 17, 1920. The members of the party formed in Russia were M.N. Roy, Evelyn Roy, Abani Mukherji, Rosa Fitingova, Muhammad Ali, Mohammed Shafiq Siddiqi and M.P.B.T. Acharya. But the party could not function in India due to restrictions under the British regime (Govinda Pillai 2007:105-122). Namboodiripad (1986: 182) observed:

The formation of the Communist Party of India in Tashkent led to the beginning of a process of separating the wheat from the chaff in the freedom struggle. Because it was not formed on “Indian soil”, the Communist Party of India had to face opposition from a considerable section of socialists and communist sympathizers in India. But the contribution of this organization to the growth of the communist movement in India was more valuable than that made by many who were working from “Indian soil” itself.

About the same event, Namboodiripad (1994:8-9) stated:

The existence of that group and its activities helped to attract Indian revolutionaries to communism, and they, in turn, formed more communist groups in India. The articles published, the letters written and other forms of communication established by the Tashkent group (which styled itself as the Communist Party of India) helped in radicalizing the Congress.

But when CPI was operating from Tashkent, the future founders of CPI in Kerala, like P. Krishna Pillai, E.M.S. Namboodiripad and A.K. Gopalan were actively participating in the national movement for independence inspired by Gandhism. They took part in many struggles initiated by Gandhi and were arrested and jailed in different places with British jails in South India (Fic 1970:8-30).

Jails and Socialist ideas

The second radical shift occurred when the leaders embraced socialist ideas by becoming part of the Congress Socialist Party, which represented the left tendency within the national movement (Namboodiripad 1967:162-194). According to Namboodiripad,³ the jails were the birth places of ‘socialist/communist ideas’ in the Malayali mind:

Two weeks in Kozhikode sub-jail, one month in Kannur Central Jail, more than two years in Vellore Central Jail- this was how I completed my imprisonment days. It was a great experience as far as my intellectual developments were considered. It also helped me in deciding the direction of my political stance. The prison inmates I had interacted with, include famous Gandhians and revolutionary leaders from Bengal and Punjab. I strongly believe that the seeds of the Left, initially through the Congress and the Congress Socialist movements, were sown at different jails.

If we follow Namboodiripad’s opinion, the entry of socialist/communist ideas into the Malayali mind was made possible in jails where many North Indian socialist leaders were also imprisoned. Young Ma-

Malayali men had the opportunity to meet, interact and live with these intellectuals. They made Malayali youth read books and pamphlets which they used in their political activities. This sort of political atmosphere of deep philosophical thinking and intensive reading in the jails could be considered as the initial spark for socialist/communist thinking in Kerala. It was the period during which socialist elements were becoming strong within the Congress-led national movement (Fic 1970: 14-16). Kannur jail in Malabar and Vellore jail in Madras State were famous for activities that spread the ideas of a new political ideology like communism. The Malayali youth were imprisoned there for participating in Gandhian struggles, but they left the jails inspired by socialist/ communist ideas.

Gradually the people, who were inspired by 'socialist ideas', the stories from the Soviet Union and Bolshevik revolution, began to realize the need of a new platform in order to carry forward their political activities. The Congress-led national movement gradually became less attractive to socialists for several reasons. Gandhi's decision to withdraw the civil disobedience movement fuelled their anger. Many of them developed disagreements with Gandhian mode of struggle and the birth of the communist party became a hope for them (Gopalan, 1973: 52).

Later, the development and formation of the Congress Socialist Party at an all-India level under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan in 1934, created a positive wave in the minds of communists in India (Rao 2003: 58). The communist party members and sympathizers chose to be a part of Congress Socialist Party (CSP) to resist the British government's legal charges against them. P. Sundariah who played a pivotal role in the formation of the Congress Socialist Party in Malabar was actually in charge of the South Indian region of the Communist Party of India (Rao 2003:115). The young Malayali communist leaders, such as P. Krishna Pillai, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, A.K. Gopalan and K. Damodaran, who were initially inspired by socialist ideas, were present at the formation of Kerala branch of Congress Socialist Party in 1935 (Rao 2003: 115). On that occasion, P. Krishna Pillai was assigned to explain the party mission and objectives to other attendees.

The communists used the Congress Socialist Party as an effective platform to carry out their work by forming local and regional-level associations of industrial workers, plantation workers, peasants, tenants and landless agricultural labourers (Rao 2003: 86-87). Slowly they strengthened their organizational base and began to consolidate

working-class movements. A number of strikes and agitations that took place in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore under the leadership of communist sympathizers between the 1930s and the 1950s were part of this consolidation.

Theory and practice during socialist phase

The communists in the initial stage of the development of the movement in Kerala had meager theoretical understanding of the fundamentals of Marxism. They had a general idea of the Soviet Union, an iconic nation which has achieved progressive growth in the social and economic aspects of their people, just by following the socialist line. Namboodiripad⁴ explained the initial dilemmas of the communist movement in Kerala as follows:

Our understandings about socialist ideas were incomplete and hazy. But we tried to spread among the people what we knew, using the propaganda machinery then available. No substantial knowledge on basic tenets of socialism was there. But we knew that the Soviet Union was a living symbol of all of that. It was a time that a big and all-pervading economic crisis was raging in the capitalist world. At the same time, the Soviet Union was successfully implementing its first five-year plan. Their economic progress was taking place at a pace not achieved by any other country so far. Is there anything more needed to have a good impression of socialism and the bad impression of capitalism? During that period, we never had any opportunity to make a theoretical study of the fundamental tenets of socialism; it was a fact which was helpful to develop one's own opinion favouring socialism and to convey it to the people.

The Socialist party leaders in Kerala had great enthusiasm about the progress made by Soviet Russian society. But the Malayali leaders' knowledge of the theory of Marxism/ Leninism was very limited because of lack of materials to understand the theory. The only thing they could do was to follow what they had heard about Soviet Russian line of action and Russian Communist's success story to mobilize people. They knew the idea of class struggle and they thought they were supposed to organize oppressed people to facilitate class struggle.

The leaders were aware that the practical concern of the socialist view was to organize peasants and workers by making them aware of the possibilities of collective protest against the atrocities and inequalities they had been suffering for many years. This was the area where the socialists had done some groundwork in the initial stage. They established different cells for their peasant and workers' organizations. As a result, different layers of organizational work were car-

ried out, from primary village level to the central committees, to make the movement more effective.

The party functioning based on the vague understanding of Soviet class movement made a departure only with the formation of the first Communist Party unit in Kerala in 1937. It was established during a secret meeting held at Kozhikode, participated by four active leaders of the Congress Socialist Party - E.M.S. Namboodiripad, P. Krishna Pillai, N.C. Sekhar and K. Damodaran. P. Krishna Pillai was nominated and elected as the first secretary of the Communist Party of Kerala branch in that meeting (Namboodiripad 1994:6). Among the people involved in socialist/communist activities in Kerala, P. Krishna Pillai is generally known as the founder of the Communist Party in Kerala (Namboodiripad 1976:69). Following this, in 1939, during a meeting that took place in Pinarayi-Parappuram, a small village in Northern Kerala, a movement was triggered to recruit unhappy Congress Socialist Party members to the Kerala branch of the Communist Party.

The conversion of Congress Socialist party into Communist party was accompanied by a strong emphasis on developing theoretical understanding. On this Namboodiripad⁵ notes:

When preparations were being made to convert Congress Socialist Party as a whole into Communist Party, during the weeks just after the beginning of the war, a syllabus on Marxist theory was implemented. During the two and half years of underground work, this activity continued.

In this process, the focus was to educate the leaders of the party in authoritative works like 'Socialism, Utopian and Scientific' by Engels, 'What is to be done' by Lenin and 'Fundamental Principles of Leninism' by Stalin. The works like 'CPSU (B) History' by Stalin was translated into Malayalam for wider circulation among party members.

The emphasis to learn theory became stronger when the party came out of the underground. When the leaders understood the theoretical aspects of Marxist/ Socialist ideas in a detailed way, it made an impact on the organizational strategies of the party. Once they had the opportunity to gain better theoretical knowledge and relate this to practical concerns of society, the leaders realized the futility of organizing workers and peasants without offering 'party classes'. The leaders realized that the need for generating political consciousness among the people was essential. Based on that vision, the leaders organized 'party classes' to educate masses into a political consciousness. They also took initiatives to establish reading rooms, and libraries in villages.

And they also organized cultural activities like drama portraying the existing social and economic conditions.

The question of why Namboodiripad emphasized on the theory is also relevant. This was the specificity of the communist movement in Kerala as the leaders made effort to teach the cadres theories of Marxism and educate the masses by methodically explaining the party programme and ideology.

CPI and mass movement: Before Independence

The people's movement for independence in India became more powerful after Second World War. The Communist Party was legally allowed to function in the country as part of the consensus and alliance made between Soviet Russia and Britain in the Second World War. Immediately after the war, the British called for an election to various British Indian provincial constituencies as promised to the nationalists before the war. Two major political groups of pre-independent India, Congress and Muslim League, faced the election and tried to mobilize people on two different agendas (Namboodiripad 1999:67-69). Congress raised the slogan for 'United India' and Muslim league demanded a 'Separate Nation' called Pakistan for Muslims in India (Chandra et al.2007:487-504). But the communists claim that they demanded a 'Federal India' based on the reorganization of existing British provincial states on a linguistic basis with autonomous powers. They demanded an economic and socio-political system where land would be handed over to the original tiller, and better wages and labour conditions would be provided to industrial workers. The communists claimed that they participated in the election with this aim.

Namboodiripad (1999:74) observed provincial elections of 1946 as a landmark in the history of the communist movement in India as it was for the first time that the CPI contested in an election as an independent political force. However, the Congress and Muslim League enjoyed a dominant victory in the elections. The communists failed in a majority of constituencies except in eight reserved legislatures which were kept solely as the labour reserved constituencies (ibid: 69).

Namboodiripad was of the opinion that the advantages of this particular election were taken off completely by the British in the initial stage and later by both the Congress and the Muslim League to mobilize people in favour of their cause. The communists claimed that the willpower of the working class and the class character of the national movement were completely hijacked by other issues of religious

and communal flavour. They felt that the high margin of seats won in the labour reserved constituencies and thousands of votes secured by the communist candidates in some general constituencies provided a sensation of new hope and signaled changes favourable for the communist movement in India's new political conditions. To stimulate this cause, the communists called for struggles by lining up different sections of the working class in different parts of the country. They organised struggles in their strong pockets like Telangana of Hyderabad state, Malabar, Punnapra-Vayalar of Travancore region and Tebhaga of Bengal (ibid 69).

CPI and mass movement: After Independence

Different leaders of Communist Party analyzed the Indian independence and the transfer of power as a contract made between the British imperialists and native bourgeoisie, to prevent a people's democratic movement which was quite expected during the later independent days (Chandra et al.2007: 487; Namboodiripad 1999:78). Under the influence of the radical communists, the second Party Congress of the communist party held at Calcutta in February-March 1948 took the decision to go forward with struggles against the Congress-led government at the centre. Slogans like 'Telangana way is our way' and 'Land to the Tiller and Power to the People' were raised at the Calcutta conference hall (Namboodiripad 1999:78). This came to be known as the famous 'Calcutta thesis' of the communist movement in which the Communist Party of India adopted a line of advocating armed struggle against the Congress-led government at New Delhi. A struggle like the Malabar communist revolt of 1948 was organized to materialize the vision of the party. Radhakrishnan (1980:2100) who has extensively studied the agrarian issues in Malabar locates the revolt in the following words:

This revolt was mainly aimed at preventing 'janmis' (landlords) from hoarding and black marketing paddy. Batches of peasants and communist volunteers, armed with all available weapons went from place to place and seized the granaries of the janmis. The communists argued that it could not be treated as looting as they offered a fair price to the janmi, but many of the recalcitrant janmis registered their protest by not accepting it. The grain so taken was distributed among the poor villagers at (a) fair price.

Further, the radicals argued that the armed line of struggle should continue as mere change in government did not make any difference in the element of oppression and the exploitative nature of the State remained

the same even after independence, as pointed out by Radhkrishnan (1980) as follows:

[...] Police attacks on these groups in different places resulted in the death of twenty-two persons during April-May 1948. The revolt was however quelled by pressing army into action. The attack launched by the Congress, the janmis and the police even after the revolt was quelled, solely with the object of liquidating the communist movement. [This] resulted in the death of many more peasant and communist activists in different parts of Malabar. Particularly notable in this connection is the death of twenty-two persons in a firing incident in the Salem jail on February 11, 1950, of whom nineteen had been arrested earlier from Malabar.

Thus, it can be seen that the movements led by communists against the state did not stop suddenly on 15th August 1947. Mass movements that began before 1947 continued through the period of independence, because they thought that the ground realities of inequality and exploitation remained the same even after formal independence to the country. Here an important point to remember is that the stand against the 'Congress led parliamentary state' was not the result of a homogenous voice within the Communist Party. There were internal disagreements between people within the CPI regarding the position of the party like 'whether the party should support the Nehru government or not'.

Parliamentary communism and the question of support to Nehru

In 1951, the Communist Party of India withdrew from the armed line of struggle and took the decision to participate in the parliamentary democracy by taking part in the first Indian general elections. In this juncture, people like Namboodiripad took the position that the party should continue their struggles against the 'bourgeois-democratic system'. Simultaneously, he suggested to form communist-led governments at places where the party had dominance. Here the idea of communist led governments was a mechanism to follow all possible steps in favour of the poor and the working class. By taking this step, Namboodiripad(1999:85) claimed that the party mission was to prevent the transformation of the existing bourgeois democracy into bourgeois autocracy and instead, effectively transform it into a working class democracy.

By following a parliamentary line of action, CPI was to continue extra-parliamentary activities to protect the revolutionary potential of the party. So the party had to follow its cadre character, secrecy in the

organization and extra-parliamentary struggles in order to preserve its revolutionary content and carry forward the fight for the wider dream of socialism. On the other side, it took the decision to take part in the democratic election process, both at the regional, state and national level. Theoretically, the idea was good enough to address the changing socio-political dynamics of the country at that point of time. But at the practical level, the idea was not easy to follow. So the new strategic position intensified the differences among people in the party. In the 1951-52 Lok Sabha elections, the CPI won only 16 out of 489 seats but it became the largest group of opposition MPs. This led to senior leader A. K. Gopalan becoming the de facto leader of the opposition in the First Indian Lok Sabha.

Following the parliamentary line, CPI also took part in the first state legislative assembly election following the formation of Kerala state in 1957. It won the election and formed the government under the leadership of Namboodiripad. Namboodiripad government carried out revolutionary steps by bringing out Land Reform Ordinance and Education bill. But in 1959, the Namboodiripad government was dismissed by Nehru's central government following congress lead protests in the state called the Liberation struggle. This added to the debate on whether CPI should support Nehru lead Congress government.

Further, during India-China war in 1962, the nationalist 'CPI right' and Nehru government accused 'CPI left' as Chinese spies and many of them were imprisoned (Namboodiripad 2008:12-13). All these long-running clashes and conflicts added fuel to the crisis situation when Dange's letters were revealed. The letters of CPI Chairman Shripad Amrit Dange to the British government asked for his release from their custody in return for his services, during his jail tenure in the late 1940s. The letters were revealed to the other leaders only in 1964 and it immediately led to a split in the CPI. In response, a section of communist leaders walked out of the CPI's National Council meeting. Later, they were suspended from CPI and in Calcutta they formed a new party named the CPI (Marxist) or the 'CPI left'. They saw Dange's act as a betrayal of the revolutionary spirit of the movement and the communist morality (Ray 2011:114).

As most of the suspended members of the CPI were from Kerala, communist activities in Kerala came to a temporary standstill. In order to overcome this crisis, the so-called 'CPI left' organized an all-Kerala campaign to explain the factors and circumstances leading to the split. Namboodiripad and A.K. Gopalan were assigned to lead the campaign

to convince the masses, who were confused by the split. In Namboodiripad's (1994:211) words:

It was clear that a substantial section of Party members was in sympathy with the left; the mass of the people too gave their enthusiastic support to the struggle launched by the left. At the same time, within the State Committee, district and lower committees, there were bitter conflicts on which group, left or right, would control the organization. Where one group secured a majority, the others formed a separate party. Within a few weeks of the suspension from the National Council, the entire Party came to be divided into what were then known as the "CPI right" and "CPI left".

The seventh party congress was organized by both 'CPI left' and 'CPI right' separately. At the congress, the 'CPI left' decided to form a new party with a different programme- a new strategy for Indian revolution and a different tactical line (Namboodiripad 1994:231). The essence of the tactical line of the new party [the CPI (M)] was that of following a mass line to prepare Indian society for revolution. But Namboodiripad (1994:231) observed: " the seventh party congress of 'CPI left' [held at Calcutta 1964 from October 31 to November 7] was remarkable for what it said and for what it failed to say." He (1994:232) also observed that:

[.....] the Party Congress deferred the discussion on the ideological questions that were being debated in the International Communist Movement. This act was taken as a refusal to toe the Chinese line as the left in the CPI had been expected to do.

Thus, at the same conference, an ideological division within the CPI (M) took place as it seemed to follow a mass line which resembled the parliamentary line of action with some exceptions. This was unacceptable to a group of people (who later became Naxalites) in the party who considered the Chinese line as the best suited revolutionary strategy for India. Namboodiripad(1994:231) justified the CPI (M) party programme by saying:

[Even though] most delegates were, of course, inclined to accept the Chinese positions, but, considering the sharp division on ideological questions, and in view of the complete unity achieved on the strategic objective and the tactics of the Indian revolution, the leadership did not consider it advisable to divide the [Seventh] Congress on international ideological questions.

All these events forced the Chinese Communist Party and the people who supported the Chinese line to view the position of the CPI (M) as a betrayal and 'revisionist'. The second phase of the split hap-

pened in the CPI (M) in 1967 and the Naxalite group⁶ detached from the CPI (M) forming a new organisation, CPI (Marxist-Leninist) in 1969. This anti-parliamentary line in Indian communism had its genesis in the Tebhaga Movement of 1946 in Bengal and the Telangana Movement (1946-52) in the Andhra region of former Hyderabad princely state (Dasgupta 1974:16). The second phase of split marked a clear cut divide in the Indian communist movement into two streams: one of parliamentary line and another of anti-parliamentary/anti-state line. Scholars like Rabindra Ray (2011:76) see this as:

[...] in both the split of the CPI(M) cadre from the CPI and the subsequent split of some of the CPI(M) cadre from it, the urgency of the matter brought home by the example of the Chinese success was summed up in the question, 'Why is it that the Indian revolution has not yet succeeded?' It led the CPI (M) to accuse the CPI of 'revisionism' and, subsequently, radicals within the CPI (M) to accuse itself of revisionism.

There was an opposition, in the line of action and thought, regarding the method of revolution between Charu Mazumdar, the founder of Naxal movement and E.M.S. Namboodiripad. The radical communists like the Naxalites and others in Kerala, however, accused the CPI (M) of supporting the very structure of the state that promotes the ideology of the dominant class. Here they accused (Rabindra Ray 2011:84):

E.M.S. Namboodiripad as a bourgeois agent and as No.1 revisionist in league with the revisionists of the CPI who fondly believed that communism could be achieved by the ballot box and democratic means.

But a notable question raised at this particular period was if both CPI and CPI (M) follow parliamentary line then what would be the ideological demarcation between these two parties. Here it is very important to note that influence and involvement of both Communist Party of Soviet Union (B) and Communist Party of China had a wider impact in the different splits and developments of the Indian communist movement, which necessitates a detailed analysis.

Influence of Soviet Union

During the 1950s, the Soviet Union became closer to India and formed a strategic alliance. The Soviet Union was impressed by the fact that the Nehru led Indian government was following a 'mixed economy' pattern. They saw India as a transitional economy which might under Nehru's leadership transform into a socialist economy. Also, India's history of colonial oppression also prompted Soviet Union to partner with India in their efforts to build an anti-imperialist front against the U.S. and European forces. Considering all these pos-

sibilities, the Communist Party of Soviet Union advised CPI to support the Nehru government.

The ‘CPI left’ had an antagonistic take on the Communist Party of Soviet Union’s direction and they argued that Nehru’s policies were semi-feudal in nature. But this was an irony, since initially they had argued within the undivided CPI not to give up the plan of class struggle just to protect Communist Party of Soviet Union’s interest. Those who were with the ‘CPI right’ accepted the Communist Party of Soviet Union’s direction and thus their attitude towards the Nehru government became a crucial point in deciding the CPI- CPI (M) split of 1964.

The Prime Minister Nehru’s recommendation to the President of India for the dismissal of the first communist government in Kerala in 1959 also became a crucial reason for the split. It occurred as the communist supporters across the country were viewing the radical policy initiatives of the communist government, like the Land Reform Bill, the Educational Bill and the Police Neutralization policy as progressive steps for preparing a fertile ground for Namboodiripad’s plan of Socialism.

Influence of China

Like the Communist Party of Soviet Union, in the early 1950s, the Communist Party of China also perceived the Nehru government as progressive and anti-imperialist in nature. But by the end of the decade, when China had territorial issues with India, the Communist Party of China changed its stand. Namboodiripad (1999:233) explains the shift in Chinese position in the following words:

At that time, the Chinese party itself was moving rapidly leftward, organizing “the Great Leap Forward” first and then the Cultural Revolution. The ideology of these movements was based on, among other things, the negation of bourgeois parliamentary institutions. As the Chinese leadership told the delegation of the CPI (M) that visited China in 1983, they had no experience of working in bourgeois parliamentary institutions, and they thought that the line of working in bourgeois parliamentary institutions was right- revisionist and opportunist. It was the CPI (M)’s subsequent record that the Chinese understood that bourgeois parliamentary institutions could be used in a revolutionary way, to the extent of forming governments as in Kerala and West Bengal.

He (1999:233) also observed that:

[...] the Chinese went to the other extreme, equating the Nehru government in India with the Chiang Kai-shek government in China. As a corollary, they [Chinese Communist Party] held that the governments

of socialist countries as well as revolutionary parties in India should do everything to bring down the Congress government.

The CPI (M), however, viewed the shift in the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC) directive with criticism. Soon, therefore, the CPC called the CPI (M) as revisionists and extended their support to the radical elements within the CPI (M). About this Namboodiripad (1994:234) opined that:

[...] the Chinese comrades noted that there was a revolt inside the CPI (M) against its 'revisionist' line. Those who were dissatisfied with the strategic and tactical approach of the Party formed the Naxal group, which called for total support to the ideological-political positions of the CPC. This group began to organize against the Party leadership in general and in the two states where the Party was in power in particular.[...] Beijing Radio and other organs of the Chinese media hailed the emergence of this group, which they called a genuine Marxist- Leninist Party. The leadership of the CPI (M) was denounced as revisionist in the Chinese media. The Naxalites publicly declared their loyalty to the Chinese Party and its Chairman and the Chinese media called the Naxalites India's genuine Marxist- Leninists.

Namboodiripad (1994:233-234) explained that the CPI (M) had an independent line of thought in assessing the Nehru government at the centre:

The CPI (M) analyzed soberly the class character of the Nehru government and its political role, and the Party formulated the political-tactical line of uniting the broadest sections of the people against the Nehru government. This did not mean, as the Chinese Party suggested, that the revolutionary forces in India were to work towards the immediate overthrow of the government. The line of the CPI (M) was to strengthen the mass democratic opposition to the Nehru government and thus to strengthen revolutionary forces led by the working class. In order to realize this objective, the Party Programme envisaged the formation of non-Congress governments in some states.

Namboodiripad also pointed out that in a way, the CPI (M) position was not aligned with either the CPSU (B) or the CPC directives. Due to this, the CPI (M) had to face questions from both CPSU (B) and CPC. He (1994: 234) justifies the CPI (M) line by saying that:

The practical implications of this line [CPI (M) line] became clear when the Party became a significant force in the electoral struggle to defeat the Congress in more than half a dozen states, and was also able to form governments under its leadership in two states. In the opinion of the Chinese Party, these events were clear indication that the CPI (M) had become an ordinary bourgeois party.

Post-Split: Support to Congress in Centre and Intelligentsia in States

In the centre, especially following new political developments in India after 1990's, CPI(M) stated that their support to the Congress at the centre was only to prevent the BJP and other communal parties from coming to power. It was part of the CPI (M)'s plan, resting on the idea that Indian communist revolution could be achieved only through democratic means. The CPI (M)'s attempt to build a third front in national politics by combining all the like-minded people had to be seen in this light. For this, an argument of Namboodiripad (1994: 232) was employed:

The programme (7th Party Congress) steered clear of the right opportunist dependence on parliamentary activities at the expense of mass actions and left sectarian negativism towards parliamentary activity.

At the same time in the state, CPI (M) followed a twin approach of preparing a mass base as well as influencing the support of intelligentsia, more like Namboodiripad's line of thought of focusing on theory as well as parliamentary communism. CPI (M)'s plan of socialism through democratic means was intended to prepare the people for a revolution in the long run. Nonetheless, the CPI (M), particularly under the leadership of Namboodiripad, had a clear vision that the unfolding of Kerala history and society had a lot to do with the development of intelligentsia among various layers of people from the Malayali community. So the CPI (M), very specifically in Namboodiripad's time, was very keen on establishing organic links with the emerging intelligentsia of people from different communities. Owing to their efforts, a majority of intellectuals, particularly the youth, became part of or affiliated with the communist movement.

In this way, the communists provided a direction to the development of the intelligentsia and also to the youth in modern Kerala. The CPI (M) under Namboodiripad's time succeeded in guiding and aligning the intelligentsia to their cause while other political parties had shown no interest in doing so or had failed to win the support of the evolving intelligentsia and the majority of youth.

The Democratic Decentralization Campaign

While analysing the Namboodiripad's line of communist theory, practice and praxis; the democratic decentralization campaign requires some attention. The idea of decentralisation was a major boost for the communists of Kerala in countering the bureaucratic and detached governance of the modern nation-state. It was implemented as a mass

campaign called People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning (Isaac and Franke 2000:13). In 1996 almost 40% of the Kerala state government budget was handed over to the local Panchayat Raj Institutions (ibid.13). This transfer of economic power to local self-governing bodies was actually aimed at devolving economic power of the state government to empower people from below. The idea was to get people into the decision making process of developmental activities.

The communists perceived the decentralisation movement as an opportunity to sensitise people about their rights thereby expand the struggle for socialism in the long term. With democratic decentralisation they sought to create a federated state government and governance which was efficient through its very characteristic of incorporating the 'voices from below' – voices which may have been obscured in the top-down dispensation that existed previously in the bureaucratic mode of governance. They also claimed that this is different from the capitalist welfare-state form of governance where rule occurs according to the wishes of a specific section of the population, i.e. the bourgeoisie. The movement was claimed to be different even from the top-down form of Stalinist administration which ultimately contributed to its downfall.⁷

The decentralization movement in Kerala was part of Namboodiripad's parliamentary line. Namboodiripad had the plan of decentralised governance when the communists gained power in governing bodies of Malabar during 1950's but it failed due to lack of majority. Even though Namboodiripad had started his work for a decentralised idea of governance much earlier, he had to wait till 1996 to implement it (Govindapillai 2007:349).

In 1996, the CPI (M) led government came into power with a considerable majority. At the same time, the central government took the decision to implement the Balwant Rai Mehta Commission's suggestion to amend the Constitution to make local self-government institutions mandatory across the country. Because of these two possibilities, Namboodiripad realised that this was the appropriate time for implementing his project.

P. Govinda Pillai, a biographer of Namboodiripad observed that even Namboodiripad initially had to face many criticisms and doubts within CPI (M) regarding his democratic decentralization plans. But even those who criticized it accepted the theoretical background of the project and raised concerns only about its practical implementation. Finally Namboodiripad, as the topmost leader of CPI (M) took strong position that the newly formed CPI (M) led government should take up

this project immediately. In this sense, the plan of decentralisation in Kerala has to be considered as one of the best examples of Namboodiripad's vision of using 'bourgeois parliamentary institutions' for revolutionary ideas. The project of decentralisation became the last, but certainly not the least, in the pillar of his plan of preparing the ground for a more egalitarian society in Kerala.

Thomas Issac (1997), a communist economist who had played a crucial role in implementing decentralisation project in Kerala, analyzes Namboodiripad's contribution in the decentralisation project as below:

If anyone can be titled as the progenitor of People's Plan Campaign, it is comrade EMS. He had a clear cut vision that the newly elected left-wing government should have power decentralisation as one of its prominent agendas. The draft of the People's Plan Campaign has been prepared by his active contribution. Comrade EMS presented the draft on People's Plan Campaign in the State Party Committee. Also, in the three regional party meetings which followed this, EMS briefed on the political importance of this new enterprise.

Namboodiripad⁸ himself analysed the decision to implement the decentralisation project in the following words:

After Independence [of India] and the united Kerala [federal state] formation, the most remarkable revolutionary movement happened in Kerala has been 'the campaign for people's planning'. The reasons for this judgement was, we considers 'as if now the leadership of planning which was so far centralized in Delhi and Trivandrum'. Only because of the implementation of this project 'the decision making power' has not only shifted to panchayats and municipality councils but also to the lakhs of people who participated in the discussions at grama sabhas and ward sabhas at the grass root level'.

In the federal system of governance, as was inaugurated in India through its Constitution, the central government was given pre-eminence in a number of areas. The working of the Planning Commission which formulated the five-year plans with the aim of development (which was being imagined in a top-down manner) and the control of funds by the Centre increased the dependence of federal states on the central government and greatly hampered the implementation of policies envisaged by the communists for Kerala. Namboodiripad said that they were fully aware that they would have to work within these constraints. It is interesting to analyse how they got through these dilemmas. Kerala has a progressive history of communist intervention

through the party, through people's mobilisations and also through democratically government reform initiatives.

Conclusion

As against the viewpoint of the hardcore critics, the CPI (M), since the very beginning, worked for both democracy and socialism simultaneously. They did not abandon the idea of socialism or communism but their position was that the 'time is not ripe for the revolution.' They assumed that the specificity Indian social and economic structure has a scope for a revolutionary future. But they also realized that the society in India has many issues like caste centric inequalities, religious polarisations, communalism etc. which prevents the crystal clear solidification of working class unity against the bourgeoisie. By focusing on the futuristic categories of society like the youth and the evolving intelligentsia among various layers of Malayali community, the CPI (M) in Namboodiripad's time had a plan of preparing a base suitable for their imagined idea of society. And for me, the CPI (M)'s organic link with the intelligentsia and the youth, as well as its continued experimentation with Parliamentary politics are few of the noted factors that still power them. These help them to overcome the hassles and turbulences that challenge the very existence and future of the Left movement in Kerala.

Notes

1. E.M.S. Namboodiripad is popularly known as EMS in Kerala.
2. The Kerala State was formed only in 1956 November 1 by coalescing the Malabar, which was under the direct rule of the British government, into Travancore and Cochin which were princely states; and separating two Tamil speaking regions from Travancore and Cochin state and its addition to Madras state.
3. <https://www.cpimkerala.org/eng/party-formation-15.php?l=1>
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Those people who initiate Maoism as their revolutionary strategy are known as Naxalites and they are also called as Maoists.
7. In the Soviet Union the lack of parliamentary democracy and electoral accountability may have been a major cause for its losing touch with the grassroots which ultimately brought down the State itself. The idea of 'revolution from above' under Stalinism has to be considered in this direction.
8. Preface written by E.M.S. Namboodiripad to Dr. T.M. Thomas Isaac's book *Janakeeya Aassoathanam: Sindhandavum Prayogavum* [People's Planning: theory and Praxis], Trivandrum: Chintha Publishers.

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