

kerala after independence

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The story of Kerala (that is, the Travancore-Cochin part thereof) from 1947 to 1957 is a sorry tale of a succession of toppling Congress ministries, of small-minded men losing their heads on ascending the seats of power and of unending and ever-changing factional alliances between Congressmen to pull down those who happen to be in power. No wonder the Malayalee people most emphatically declare today: 'If Namboodiripad goes, let us have president's rule for the rest of the electoral term. But God save us from the old Congress gang.' ('Report on Kerala,' *Current*, 18 December 1957.)

The story of Kerala in this decade is also the story of an ineffective central Congress leadership which repeatedly and miserably failed to stop the galloping rot in the State Congress organisation, advised as they were by those whose own public life has been 'painted in shades of grey merging into jet black.'

Thus, the Congress president, U.N. Dhebar, in his letter to the Mysore Pradesh Congress chief, S. Channiah, in connection with the no-confidence move against the then chief minister, S. Nijalingappa, warned the partymen that 'they do not understand that it is an approach of that character that has been responsible for the debacle in Kerala.' Dhebar added: 'There, every third year, the Congressmen pulled down the ministerial structure and set up a new one to be pulled down again after the lapse of couple of years. I have not yet found a single leader in Kerala who has not been responsible for pulling down on one occasion or the other the ministerial structure and all the advantages

of this negative destructive attitude went to the Communists.' (The *Hindu*, 31 March 1958.)

The first general elections for the legislative assembly of the State of Travancore was held in February 1948. So high was the prestige of the Congress in those days that it had just a walk-over in the election, securing all but one seat, and the solitary independent who was elected, joined the Congress party soon after. Indeed, at no other time and in no other State has Congress triumph been as complete as in Travancore.

In March 1948, Pattom Thanu Pillai, who held the post of the president of the State Congress, was sworn in as the first Congress prime minister (the term 'chief minister' came in vogue later) of Travancore. It was a small cabinet of three ministers, the other two being C. Kesavan and T. M. Verghese, veteran Congressmen of the State, both of whom have today retired from public life. Pattom continued to be the president of the organisation also.

Pattom certainly had peculiar notions of his own. In April 1948, this future leader of the Praja Socialist Party, marched, clad only in his *mandu* with a naked sword in his hand, in front of the Maharaja in the traditional *arat* (ceremonial dip in the sea of the deity) procession. Being a Christian, T. M. Verghese could not join and C. Kesavan, a social reform leader of the SNDP school, refused to join saying he was a servant of the people and not of the Maharaja.

Within a few weeks after his assumption of office, Pattom Thanu Pillai let loose a wave of repression against the Communists, arresting and jailing them. He also clashed with demonstrating students in Trivandrum, who once surrounded his car and were lathi-charged.

Within four months troubles started. Kesavan and Verghese having joined hands, Pattom quietly got four new ministers sworn in without consulting his colleagues. These were : K. M. Korah, A. Achuthan, G. Ramachandran (now chief of the Gandhigram) and P. S. Nataraja Pillai. Verghese and Kesavan threatened resignation, but some sort of a reconciliation was arrived at the cost of P. S. Nataraja Pillai, who was dropped from the cabinet within forty-eight hours.

The internal dissensions and factions nevertheless persisted, as they have always in the State Congress and

continue to this day. The downfall of ministries in Kerala, however, has always been the work of hidden hands, who have always made and unmade ministries whenever there seemed to exist even a shadow of danger to their vested interests; and whenever it was time to act, the factional, power-hungry and mediocre Congressmen of Kerala have proved only too willing tools.

The fall of Pattom Thanu Pillai's first ministry in September 1948, that is, a bare six months after it came into existence, is associated in the minds of the people of Kerala with an event which they have humorously characterised as the '*oppian prasthanam*,' that is, 'signature campaign.' The hidden hand had decided to act because of the report of a cabinet committee for agrarian reforms, which was headed by C. Kesavan. The Kesavan committee report has never been published, but its land reform proposals are believed to have been generally of a mild character. The Catholic reaction of the State, headed by the clergy and financed by the Christian planters, who are aided and abetted by the foreigners presiding over huge plantations of Kerala, decided to strike. A car is believed to have started from a plantation in Kottayam which went about collecting signatures of MLAs against Pattom's leadership. Ironically enough, the leader of this '*oppian prasthanam*,' Sanku Pillai, has very recently joined the State PSP under the same Pattom's leadership, in overthrowing whose cabinet he played such a key role, ably assisted by others, among whom was P. T. Chacko, the present leader of the Congress opposition in Kerala assembly.

The opposition to Pattom within the Congress party was led by T. K. Narayana Pillai and his assistant K. A. Gangadhara Menon. They put forward the argument that the same person should not hold the offices of the president of the State Congress and also the prime ministership of the State. Pattom's majority had been reduced, and it was reported that in a fit of fury at the Congress party meeting he tore off all papers, announced his resignation from all positions and walked out proclaiming that he will come back when his people call him again.

T. K. Narayana Pillai was sworn in as the new chief minister and continued in office till the integration of Travancore and Cochin on 1 July 1949. The late A. J. John was also a member of his cabinet. He rewarded the services

of his assistant K. A. Gangadhara Menon in a unique way. Even when Menon continued as MLA, he was made the Attorney-General of Travancore, an unheard of procedure. When the hue and cry against this wholly unconstitutional and high-handed act increased, the post of Attorney-General of Travancore was abolished, and Gangadhara Menon was made a high court judge!

T. K. Narayana Pillai was re-elected the leader of the Congress party of the new Travancore-Cochin State. His new cabinet contained most of the former ministers of Travancore and Cochin, including Panampally Govinda Menon, who, as a minister in the four-man Cochin cabinet of E. Ikkanda Warriar, had to bear the brunt of public criticism in what subsequently became famous as the 'cocoanut oil fraud,' in which a sum of five-and-a-half lakhs of rupees was involved. In fact, ever since then, the words *anchara laksham* (five-and-a-half lakhs) have come to mean, in Kerala, the personality of Panampally Govinda Menon.

As a result of the integration of Travancore and Cochin, to the already existing unending factional quarrels of Kerala Congressmen were added the disputes arising out of the traditional rivalry between Travancore and Cochin. Some trouble or other was always there making the ministry unstable. And soon after, in 1950, T. K. Narayana Pillai had to step down and continue as just a minister in the new cabinet constituted by C. Kesavan, who was elected the new leader of the Congress party. Kesavan's cabinet continued in office till the general elections of 1951-52.

During the post-independence years, the all-India Congress organization itself was not free of internal dissensions and squabbles. In 1948-49, the Congress Socialist Party broke away from the parent body and founded the Indian Socialist Party. Pattom Thanu Pillai, who ever since his fall from power in September 1948 was looking for an opportunity to reassert himself, joined the Socialist Party and fought the 1951-52 general elections under its flag.

Also, before the 1951-52 general elections, Acharya Kripalani broke away from the Congress and formed the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP). The veteran Gandhian of Kerala, K. Kelappan, and K. A. Damodara Menon (now back in Congress and currently president of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee) joined the KMPP and fought the 1951-52 general election under its platform.

The Communists and other leftists in the State (viz. the Kerala Socialist Party and the Revolutionary Socialist Party) formed a united front of leftists (UFL) to fight the 1951-52 elections in the Travancore-Cochin area. In Malabar, the Communists formed a united front with the KMPP. It may also be mentioned that a group of Congressmen in southern Travancore, who wanted the four southern predominantly Tamil taluks to be merged with Tamil Nad, had broken away from the Congress and fought the elections as the Travancore Tamil Nad Congress (TTNC).

The general elections of 1951-52 revealed the shocking position to which the unchallenged and supreme Congress of 1948 had been reduced in hardly four years' time. In a house of 108 (including one nominated) it won only 44 seats and was thus in a minority. The TTNC won all the 10 seats in southern Travancore.

Pattom's socialist group secured 12 seats, half of them with the support of the T-C united front of leftists. The united front of leftists secured 38 seats, out of which 31 were Communist or Communist-supported independents, 6 of the Revolutionary Socialist Party and 1 of the Kerala Socialist Party. Four Catholics were elected as independents.

The Congress secured no absolute majority, but its leader, the late A. J. John, was invited to form the ministry as the leader of the largest single group in the assembly, a procedure which was stubbornly rejected two years later in another Indian State, viz., Andhra, because the biggest single group was composed of the Communists.

A.J. John was sworn in on 14 March 1952. He negotiated with the TTNC and arrived at an agreement by including one of them in the cabinet. The Congress party was further strengthened by the defection of two from Pattom's socialist group, who joined the Congress. Including the nominated member, the Congress thus commanded 57 votes in a house of 108. A PSP man, K. P. Nilakanta Pillai, was elected speaker. He later joined the Congress.

The John ministry continued in office till September 1953. At about this time, the TTNC group precipitated a crisis by breaking off their association with the Congress party since it was not willing to support their demand for secession of the four southern taluks from the T-C State to Tamil Nad. They moved a no-confidence motion which was carried and the ministry fell. It was, however, asked to

continue as a caretaker government till the fresh general elections fixed for January-February 1954.

As a result of a re-demarcation of constituencies the State assembly now had a total of 118 members (including one nominated). The united front of leftists (UFL) was again forged consisting of the Communist Party, Kerala Socialist Party (KSP) and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and it also arrived at an alliance with Pattom Thanu Pillai, who now led the State PSP which had emerged after the merger of Acharya Kripalani's KMPP group and the erstwhile Congress Socialists on an all-India scale. The TTNC also contested the elections with its slogan of secession of the Tamil area and its merger with Madras.

The Congress again failed in the 1954 general elections, securing only 45 seats. The PSP, actively supported by the Communists, secured 19 seats, and the TTNC 12 seats. The united front of leftists won 40 seats, out of which the Communists numbered 28, RSP 9 and KSP 2. The reduction of Communist strength was a result of the utmost lengths to which the Communist Party went in order to secure unity among the leftists and alliance with the PSP, for which it sacrificed many of its sure constituencies. Only one independent was elected.

Panampally Govinda Menon was elected leader of the Congress party, but all his efforts to muster a majority failed. On the other hand there emerged the possibility of a PSP-UFL combination which together made up 59 members in a house of 118. This would have meant a leftist ministry with Communist participation, a prospect which the highest quarters could hardly view with equanimity. Under direction from top, therefore, Congress agreed to support a PSP ministry without actually joining it. And so Kerala witnessed the paradox of Pattom Thanu Pillai with only 19 partymen in a house of 118 forming a ministry.

In March 1954, Pattom Thanu Pillai's PSP ministry was sworn in and remained in office for eleven months, resigning in February 1955. During Pattom's regime, the leader of the Congress party was Panampally, constantly on watch for an opportunity to step into the ministerial office.

The TTNC agitation for separation of the four Tamil taluks of southern Travancore flared up all of a sudden, leading to firing by Pattom's ministry, and resulting in some deaths.

In the meantime, P. S. Nataraja Pillai, who was also the minister for agriculture and revenue, and stood for progressive agrarian policies, brought forth an Agrarian Bill which, among other things, sought to impose a ceiling on landholdings. Furthermore, under pressure from the PSP rank-and-file, and also the Communists, Pattom's ministry gradually veered round to a policy of supporting working-class and trade-union demands. This raised the ire of the reactionary Christian planters, the veritable king-makers of Kerala, who now decreed the end of the PSP ministry.

Playing his cards well, Panampally succeeded in getting two PSP legislators to defect to the Congress party and also secured the support of the only nominated member. And it is significant that just as under Communist rule in Kerala the ministry's pro-labour policies led to a cry of 'lawlessness' by the Congress in order to serve the vested interests, so also, under Pattom's socialist ministry, the adoption of pro-labour attitudes resulted in a similar cry. Pattom's government was accused of having failed to maintain 'law and order.'

Thus Panampally's plans to step on the chief ministerial *gadi* and vested interests' decision to throw out the socialist ministry coincided, proving once again how Kerala Congress is the hand-maiden of the privileged, exploiting classes. Significant also is the fact that to fight 'lawlessness' the Congress then gave the call for organising Seva Dal squads. And soon after, these Seva Dal squads, almost like the Christophers of today, were available for breaking strikes. In some plantation strikes, certain people, regarded by some as hailing from this Seva Dal squad and by others as hirelings of a Congress leader, P. C. Cherian, indulged in reckless and high-handed acts to break the struggles of the workers. Indeed, these strike-breaking activities reached dangerous proportions, and at one place a Communist worker, Thangappan, was murdered.

In such a situation, Panampally, having secured the support of two PSP legislators, arrived at a behind-the-scenes agreement with the 12-member TTNC, which combination gave him the support of 60 in a house of 118. The TTNC, otherwise also chagrined against Pattom because of the police firings, moved a vote of no-confidence against him. The Communists negotiated with Pattom in order to save the PSP ministry. The agreement finally arrived at provided

for the release of Punnapra-Vayalar prisoners* and introduction of an anti-eviction bill. While ordering the release of the prisoners, the PSP ministry fumbled on the second item and the agreement broke off.

In the no-confidence motion the Congress supported the TTNC and the Communists remained neutral. Even if the Communists had extended their support to Pattom, there was no chance of saving his ministry because of the defection of two PSP legislators to the Congress. Thus Pattom Thanu Pillai's ministry fell a second time after a brief span, turning him into an even more frustrated politician. Commenting recently on this Congress performance, 'Witness' remarked as follows in the *Indian Express* (7 January 1958):

'As for the Congress, equally prone to depend on even Beelzebub for votes, the public in Kerala cannot have so easily forgotten its callous self-interestedness which brought about the defeat of the PSP ministry. Not only that: it was powerless to curb the mutiny of its own crew, the Travancore Tamil Nad Congress, which led to the defeat of the Congress ministry.'

And so office again in March, a fateful month for Kerala's Congress-PSP ministries, Panampally Govinda Menon was sworn in as chief minister of T-C after a year's most cautious scheming and manoeuvring. But he remained in office only for a year, until March 1956.

Under the Panampally administration corruption, nepotism and jobbery became the rule. The excesses of the administration led to an open revolt by six veteran Congress legislators, among them Dr. A. R. Menon, T. M. Verghese, K. M. Korah. They seceded from the Congress party and constituted a 'rebel Congress.' This reduced Panampally's support from 60 to 54, and he had to resign. Dr. A. R. Menon, at present health minister in Namboodiripad's cabinet, and highly reputed for his spotless integrity, said recently while addressing the Kerala Association of Oorgaum 'that he had quit the Congress after 32 years of association as the party had neither allowed him to prove certain charges of corruption he had levelled against some highly placed persons

* The prisoners in question are actually the heroic workers and peasants of the coastal areas of Punnapra and Vayalar who fought against the autocratic regime of the former Devan of Travancore, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer.

in the Congress government, nor had it disproved the charges itself.' (*Indian Express*, 12 January 1958.)

Even as it was going out, this Congress ministry shocked public opinion by its behaviour. There was an all round desire in the State that Kerala should not go under president's rule. With this end in view, the PSP and the UFL arrived at an agreement. With the support of two of the 'rebel Congressmen' they enjoyed the support of 59 members in the assembly which gave them a clear one-vote majority. At the crucial moment, however, an RSP member of the UFL, Narayanan Potti, disappeared, and it was widely alleged that he had been kidnapped. In fact, some persons represented to the Rajpramukh that he was being detained in the Cliff House, not yet vacated by the previous chief minister and even a search was ordered. The police returned empty-handed having found no one of Potti's description. And the impatient Rajpramukh, without waiting for things to clear up, informed the president of his inability to get a ministry constituted, and president's rule was clamped on the State soon after.

The question may be asked: What advance, if any, was registered in the State during the ten years of Congress rule? Hardly a single achievement worth the name can be pointed out. Shocking and nauseating tales of corruption and bribery, of distribution of licences and permits in lieu of monetary gains, of questionable forest contracts and purchase of buses, and a host of other stories constitute the legacy of Congress rule in Kerala.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that problems of State planning and development, as also the pressing problems of administrative reform and efficiency received only indifferent attention. The Congress leaders were more interested in having a road or a school in their area and cared little about practical schemes for securing agricultural and industrial advancement of the State as a whole. In fact, when the Communist ministry, on assumption of office in April 1957, complained to the Planning Commission about faulty allocations of the Second Five Year Plan for Kerala, laying more emphasis on unproductive sectors, it was told that 'the Commission did, on more than one occasion, point out' to Kerala's representatives (who could only be the State Congressmen) 'that they were giving undue importance to unproductive activities and less importance to production.'

(E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *Kerala : Problems and Possibilities*, p. 16.)

The administration became more and more inefficient and corroded by rival pulls. The *Christian Science Monitor* of the United States published in its issue of 4 January 1958, a despatch from its staff correspondent, Takashi Oka, datelined Trivandrum. Oka reported: 'A Roman Catholic Archbishop said, "leaders of the Congress party (the majority party in all States of India but Kerala) here lost their popularity because when they were in office they were corrupt."' Oka further reported: 'A central government officer here said that there had been so much maladministration under previous regimes that even if the Communists did nothing more than conduct the normal functions of government, they would be an improvement on their predecessors.'