

A Letter from Kerala**The Only Answer to the Challenge***(From A Correspondent)*

THE Communists have come to stay, this is the feeling one gets in Kerala and it is inescapable. They have the least intention to pick up any quarrel with the Central Government. They appear to be prepared to work within the Constitution. In their dealings with the Centre, the Communists show reasonableness. The signs are ominous for vested interests and opposition parties. The latter are a little panicky. They fear that when once Communists are allowed to establish themselves, the opposition parties will be liquidated and that the stage will be set for a 'totalitarian' regime. People, however, do not seem to understand the true meaning of the word 'totalitarian.' They ask, is the Catholic Church which spearheads the attack against the Communists 'totalitarian' or democratic? Is it the idea that after years of misrule, Congress should be voted back to power in order to maintain the democratic tradition? Who was responsible for ousting Pattom Thanu Pillai, the leader of the democratic movement in old Travancore, the largest of the three constituents of the present Kerala State, from Congress? Who put the Praja Socialist Party in power when it was only a minority in the legislature and who engineered its downfall later? Has the P S P leader any strong following in the State? You can hear questions like these from the intelligent people in Kerala. They are not Communists; nor are they very enthusiastic about Communist rule. But what is the alternative? This is what they do not know. The Communist Ministers at least are not corrupt, that is the unanimous verdict.

**Anti C P Agitation**

The best story about the situation in Kerala which I have heard so far is from a monarchist. The person who told me the story was an old man who had retired to his village farm. He had served his 'beloved' Maharaja for 31 years and 8 months and he was now getting ready to go to the other world. As a passport to the other world, he has an old copy of Bhagvadgita which he showed me. One has

to die some day, he said. I agreed. His wife gave me a cup of excellent south Indian coffee. The story he told me, I felt, showed some insight into the tangled politics of the State; I shall, therefore, try to recount it as faithfully as I can though I won't be able to convey the finer nuances and the rich flavour of his Malayalee.

It appears that in the thirties, Christian influence had reached its pinnacle in Travancore. The story goes that one of the directors of the powerful Travancore and Qullon Bank (later liquidated under political pressure) had the audacity to boast that in ten years' time, Travancore would have a Christian Maharaja. That was the time when Sir C P Ramaswamy Iyer was the Dewan of Travancore. He sized up the situation quickly and beginning with the temple-entry proclamation (his was the first State to throw open its temples to Harijans) took a series of steps to arrest the growing influence of the Catholic Church. The Church did not take it lying down. It started an anti-Dewan movement. To conceal its communal colour, a political tinge was given to the movement. At that time the policy of the Indian National Congress was not to foment any trouble in the native States. In spite of that, the Travancore State Congress under the leadership of Pattom Thanu Pillai, the present P S P leader, launched a Statewide movement for responsible government.

**Common Ground**

When the movement started getting out of their control, the sponsors withdrew and put the blame on Gandhiji. Some of the Communist Ministers of today are the products of that movement. At the same time, a mass movement was being organised in Malabar district under Socialist auspices for land reforms. But the Socialist Party of India failed to give it proper leadership and the Socialists in Malabar joined the Communist Party en bloc. During their underground days, the Communists began to migrate to Cochin and Travancore and the younger mem-

bers of the State Congress and the Communists from Malabar found a common ground.

The next stage in the development came when the leaders of the State Congress in Travancore and the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee in Malabar moved away from the masses. The Communists took full advantage of the situation, came nearer and nearer to the masses and launched a series of struggles, some of them violent, for the amelioration of the conditions of the peasantry and of the landless labourers. The Communist Party eventually became the party of the masses and the Congress that of the bourgeois class.

With the advent of independence in 1947, the Congress gained a new prestige in Kerala as elsewhere, not because of its local standing, but because of its all-India character. In Travancore, Pa Mom became the first Congress Chief Minister. He, however, did not last long. The moment it became known that he would not remain the show-boy of the Christian clique, he was dubbed a monarchist and thrown out. Since then no Chief Minister has been able to survive for long. And in every ministerial crisis, the influence of the Christian clique has come out very clearly. Even the clever Panambilli, the Chief Minister from Cochin, had to bend before the Christian clique.

The old man had got quite excited by now. He suddenly stood up and asked me, why should the Church interfere in temporal affairs? Can't it confine its activities to spiritual affairs, like the Hindu temples? According to him, the Communists would be doing a significant service if they could establish a really secular State without any communal or religious affiliations. When communal and religious feelings sway politics, they sap the vitality of the nation.

**Agitation Against Education Bill**

My main interest was to find out the true position in regard to law and order in the State. Curiously enough, one hears more about it outside Kerala than inside it. Is it because people are afraid to express

their opinions freely? I did not get that impression. The Education Bill is the subject of discussion everywhere. Till now, people took very little interest in educational matters. They sent their children to school and paid their fees but parents paid very little attention to what the children were taught. They knew school teachers were underpaid and sympathised with them. Some had also heard that one had to pay 'donations' of Rs. 1000 to Rs 1500 for a teacher's job in a Government-aided school.

But they had not bothered much about such things. It was only after the Education Bill came that phrases like 'regimentation of thought' 'poisoning the young minds' and 'freedom to educate children' began to be heard for the first time. Huge processions and long speeches are the order of the day. People are wondering what is happening. They are with it, but not in it. One professor whom I met compared the situation now prevailing to that of the temple entry days, when many orthodox Hindus found it difficult to adjust themselves mentally to so radical a change. Similarly many orthodox Christians honestly believe today that their religion is in danger. Their reaction to the Bill is therefore purely emotional. The Bill as such is neither read nor discussed. What the opponents of the Bill try to point out is that the Communists in Kerala cannot be in any way different from their counterparts in Russia and China. They fail to understand the role of the Congress in this agitation. It is believed that the Bill as returned from the Select Committee has incorporated all the amendments suggested by the Centre. The Congress has not added to its prestige by its alignment with the 'Christophers'. And the P S P leader's opposition to the Bill has created a split in the ranks of the P S P also.

### Law and Order

Law and order, the main subject of this letter, are no better or no worse than they are in any other State. The people of Kerala are highly educated and civilized. They are habitually law abiding citizens. The Chief Minister knows it. His experience of conducting political and trade union agitation to vast and varied. He knows fully well that in the British days, in 99 cases out of 100, the police and agent provocateurs were responsible for insti-

gating mass violence which gave them a pretext to open fire on innocent people and thus quell any agitation. He is convinced that unnecessary police interference in political and trade union agitation increases the chances of violence, instead of stopping it. He has unequivocally stated that the prime responsibility of the police is to detect and to stop social crimes, and that police should keep away from political and trade union agitation, unless there is actual violence. This statement was sufficient to create fear in the minds of factory owners, landlords and other vested interests. The police had also to make mental adjustments to the new policy and the political parties could not realise at first that this would enable them to carry on peaceful agitation without police interference. The fact that huge processions and mass meetings organised against the Education Bill were held smoothly without any major incidents goes to prove that the present policy has not unleashed a fresh wave of violence.

### Minor Skirmishes

There have been minor skirmishes here and there, but any impartial observer will have to admit that the agitation against the Bill has been peaceful on the whole. The success of this policy would to a large extent depend on the attitude of the other parties. There is no doubt that the Communist party will strain every nerve to make this policy a success. Government has accepted non-violence as its policy in dealing with political and trade union agitations. Will the Congress and P S P respond? The situation will be watched with interest not only in the other States in the country, but elsewhere in the world also.

Much of the news coming about lawlessness is from the European controlled plantations. Such news travel fast outside the State, but the actual complaints made to Government are few and far between.

### Land Reform

The controversy about the Education Bill and the stories about lawlessness will all disappear when the land reform bills are announced. The land tenure in Kerala is complicated and there is not much land to go round also. Any comprehensive reform will react on the entire population of the State in one way

or other. The broad outlines of the policy for land reform has been talked about. But the concrete proposals have not yet been published. The discussions on land reform will be more concrete and people will understand them also as the bills will affect the people directly. In the case of Education Bill, controversies were more on the abstract plane, on things like thought control, regimentation and totalitarianism. They passed over the heads of the common people.

### President's Certificate

The President's impressions of the State are not far wrong. He must have been advised by the Congress Governor and the I C S Chief Secretary about the state of affairs in the State. The President had no hesitation to say that the Communist Government was "grappling with the State's problems with enthusiasm and in a spirit of service". In his address on the eve of Independence day, the President said:

"I hope I am correct when I say that you here do not feel any difference because two parties are ruling, one in the sphere of the State and another in the sphere of the whole country. I am sure, we in Delhi do not feel any thing like that". He also said: "I am happy that this great experiment which is being made in your State is going to serve as a great lesson not only to other States, but to the country as a whole, as an example of co-existence of living and working together in spite of differences, for the good of all".

### No Cause for Alarm

There is nothing to be alarmed about Kerala. They are only trying to establish good government; because they know very well that if they behave well and establish good government in Kerala, other States will follow them in quick succession. The conditions in other States are in most respects identical to the State of affairs in post-Communist Kerala; the only significant difference is that in other States, the Church is not a vital force in politics as in Kerala.

Democracy cannot be an excuse for bad government. The challenge from Kerala can be met only by good government in other States and in the Centre. There is no other way.