

Caste and the Kerala Elections

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The mid-term election in Kerala was fought by the Congress and the Communists to secure the support of the Ezhava community.

The fail toe of any party to secure a majority, however, only emphasises the fact that while the politics of Kerala may be caste-bound, no party can rule with the support of one community alone.

The crosion of the political solidarity of the Ezhava community by the Congress may reflect the initial stages of differentiation within that community. Under the impact of economic, change, as each community becomes increasingly heterogeneous, political interests within it will Ret differentiated and as this happens the polarity between the communities in terms of party support may be expected to decline.

PERPETUATING the political which tated the state since its creation the people of Kerala went again to the polls on March 4, to scatter their votes among fifteen parties and more than five hundred candidates. The campaign for the fifth major election since independence was lackluster, and the people responded with a bored indifference, but on election day more than 60 per cent turned out to register their political literacy by distinguishing between the Congress and the dissident Kerala Congress and between the Left and the Right Communist parties. While no party secured a majority, the largest slice of the votes was taken by the Left Communists. With 29 of their winning candidates imprisoned under the Defence of India Act, the Left CPI won 40 of the Assembly's 133 seats. 19 Moscow-backed Communist Party of India, ideological opponent of the allegedly pro-China Leftists, secured only 3 seats. The Congress Party won 36 seats, and the rebels, who has toppled the Congress Ministry only six months before, took 23. The elections, however, reflect not so much the strength of communism in India, much less support for China, as the peculiar pattern of communal rivalries which cut to the quick of Kerala society,

Kerala is a land of contradictions in a nation of contrasts'. As India's smallest state, Keala has the highest birthrate and the greatest pressure on the land, it abounds in agricultural wealth, yet imports half its food supply. Its international exports bring 25 per cent of India's dollar earnings, yet Kerala's per capita income is the lowest in India. It has the highest literacy rate and the highest rate of unemployment. "With the largest community of Christians, it has the highest Communist vote too. It is at once a bastion of orthodox Hinduism with the most elaborate system of caste ranking in India and a region deeply affected by the process of social mobilisation and change, With many of

the prerequisites of political modernization, Kerala is confronted with the omnipresent reality of caste in politics, a spectre of tradition decried by Nehru as a reversion to "tribalism".'

Caste Ranking

Traditionally the elaboration of the ritual hierarchy reflected the economic position of the constituent castes, with each caste associated with a particular occupation and sharing a common economic status. The caste system historically, however, was not rigid, for as a caste gained economic power, a commensurate ritual rank usually followed. Caste ranking in Kerala reflects such a process, but in the development of its linear elaboration, a digidity stifled the movement of castes in the hierarchy, freezing the lower cities in their positions of subservience. Only the Muslims and Christians, both being outside the hierarchy, were the to exploit new economic opportunities and in so doing to raise themselves in social status. The process of pauperization initiated by population growth and the divisions of lands accentuated the economic disparity between castes. Thus, in the high correlation between caste ranking and economic position, the socio-economic structure of Kerala came to reflect the highly elaborate hierarchy of ritual purity.

Coste ranking places the Namboodiri Brahmins at the peak of the hierarchy. Numbering only 8 per cent of the Hindu population, it remains primarily a landowning community. Despite the number of political leaders from the caste, such as the Left Communists' E M S Namboodiripad. the community has little political power. A far more potent political force is the Nair community, the traditional warriors of Kerala. As a landowning and mercantile community today, the Nairs, numbering 25 per cent of the Hindu population, are the pivotal force of Kerala politics. They have traditionally held the balance, making or breaking a Government with the shifts of its power. Economically sub-

servient to the Nairs are the Ezhava, or Tiyyar as they are called in Malabar. Traditional toddy-tappers, the community is considered the highest of the polluting castes, With nearly 15 per cent of the Hindu population, however, the economically depressed Ezhavas are perhaps the single most powerful community in Kerala.

In addition to the mutually antagonistic Nairs and Ezhavas, the Christian community ranks as a major political power in Kerala. Although the Christians, 24 per cent of the population, are divided among the Syrians (of whom there are two sects), the Protestants, and the Roman Catholic;; it is the Catholic community which numerically dominates and which holds the locus of political power through the organization of the Church. Through the Muslim League, the Muslims, 16 per cent of the population, are a major factor politically, particularly in the Malabar region of northern Kerala where they are the dominant community.

As the Muslims are concentrated in certain areas of Malabar, so each of the other communities dominates in particular regions of Kerala. The Christians are concentrated primarily in Ernakulam and Kottayam districts. The Nairs form the dominant community in the areas of Trivandrum District, and the Ezhavas are particularly strong in Palghat Each political party must thus seriously consider the dominant community, or as the Communists prefer, "the social base", in the selection of its candidate. That each party tends to choose its candidates from the dominant community, however, does not cancel out community as a factor. Although there are elements of each community in all parties (except for the Muslim Leagued the parties in Kerala have come to be associated with particular communities, and within each party, factionalism expresses the divisions of religion and caste. indeed, it is the politics of caste which forms the fundamental reality of political life in Kerala.

Kerala, as a linguistic state, was formed in 1956, combining the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin with the Malabar portion of Madras. Following independence, Travancore and Cochin, then separate, held their first elections in 1948. The Congress, at the height of its prestige, captured all the seats of the Travancore Assembly, save one Independent who later joined the Congress, Congress President Pattom Thanu Pillai, a leader of the Nair community, became the Chief Minister and was joined by two Congress leaders of the Christian and Ezhava communities T M Verghese and C Kesavan, in the formation of the first Travancore ministry. The Muslims, however, were dissatisfied by what they saw as their exclusion from the cabinet, and Pillai attempted to expand the Ministry to include a more communal representative body. In so doing, he only fortified Nair strength within the Government, and both Verghese and Kesavan threatened to resign if a new Nair minister was not dropped immediately from the cabinet. Pillai acceded to their demands only to be challenged again by the Christians, backing another Nair, T K Narayana Pillai, in opposition to the Chief Minister.

In October 1948, only a few months after the formation of the Government, P T Pillai resigned as Chief Minister and crossed the Assembly to join the ranks of the Socialist Party (later the Praja Socialist and now split into the Praja Socialist and the Samyuktha Socialist Parties), T K Narayana Pillai was elected party leader and became the Chief Minister of the new Government, but the greater portion of the Nair community followed P T Pillai into the opposition Socialists. With the new Chief Minister, the weight shifted in favour of the Christians, and although Kesavan remained within the Congress, the Ezhavas — threatened by Christian dominance — increasingly shifted their support from the Congress to the Communist Party. The Muslims, totally alienated from the Congress, rallied around a reactivated Muslim League. Thus, in the first year of independence the pattern of political instability in Kerala was set, shifting coalitions of caste and community, both within and among the various parties, have defeated each successive Government.

In 1949, Cochin was merged with Travancore to form the State of Tra-

vancore-Cochin. Narayana Pillai retained control of the new Assembly, but Congress strength was reduced to 44 of 108 seats. With charges of corruption and pressure from the Hindu and Muslim factions within the Congress, Narayana Pillai was forced to step down in 1950. A new "caretaker" Government was formed by C Kesavan, continuing in office until the 1951-52 General Elections. If the elections gave the Congress a weak victory, securing again only 44 seats, they strengthened the position of the Christian community within the party. With the support of the dissident Travancore Tamil Nad Congress (which in 1956 won its demand for the inclusion of the southern district of Travancore in Tamil-speaking Madras State), the Congress secured the necessary majority to form a Government, and in March 1952, A I John became Chief Minister. The Ministry, while now commanding a narrow majority, lived by the grace of the Tamil community; and in September 1953, the TTNC withdrew its support from the John Ministry, and a vote of no-confidence brought the Government down. The Assembly was dissolved, and the Ministry continued as "caretaker" until new elections could be held in February 1954.

Bole of Tamil Nadars

The 1954 elections in Travancore-Cochin brought a political polarization which was to severely test the prestige of the ruling Congress Party. The Praja Socialist Party, supported almost entirely by the Nair community and led by P T Pillai, allied itself with the Communist-backed United Front of Leftists, predominantly Ezhava. The electoral arrangement consisted of an agreement among the parties not to contest against each other, thus allowing for straight contests between the Congress on one hand and the UFL or PSP on the other. With the Nairs and Ezhavas joining together in opposition to the Christians, the campaign centred primarily on the communal relationship between the Catholic Church and the Congress Party. A K Gopalan Nair, leader of the CPI in Parliament, together with a colleague, wrote an open letter to Nehru complaining about the role of the Church in the elections. "Almost all churches in Travancore-Cochin", they wrote, "have been turned into election offices for the Congress Party."³

Congress won 45 of the Assembly's 118 seats, returning victorious candidates from the Christian constituencies of Kottayam, Ernakulam, and Trichur districts. The PSP secured 19 seats, mainly in the Nair-dominant constituencies of Trivandrum and southern Quilon. The United Front of Leftists won a total of 40 seats, 23 of which went to the communists. The greatest concentration of their support rested in the heavily Ezhava regions of Quilon and central Travancore-Cochin.

Without the support of the Tamils, the Congress was unable to form a Government, and the PSP, emphasizing that the electoral arrangement with the UFL in no way bound them, began to put out feelers for a possible coalition Ministry with either the Congress or the UFL. P T Pillai expressed support for a Leftist coalition, but the National Executive of the PSP was wholly opposed to cooperation with the Communists. Further, the Nairs themselves were fearful of political dependence upon the Ezhava. When the UFL offered to form a Government, the Congress immediately responded with support from the outside for a PSP Ministry. Pillai agreed to form a Government, and in March 1954, the PSP with only 19 members in the Assembly, took control of Travancore-Cochin.

The PSP Government, however, was to last only nine months, defeated in a vote of no-confidence moved by the TTNC. The Tamil's antagonism toward the Government reflected more the traditional enmity between the economically depressed Tamil Nadars and the landowning Nairs than it did the Tamil's aspiration for union with Madras State. Indeed, it was the support of the TTNC which enabled the creation of another short-lived Congress Ministry. Charges of corruption and nepotism were soon levelled at the new Ministry, however, and, with the defection of a "rebel"¹ contingent from the Congress, the Government fell after one year. Last minute efforts were made by Pillai to form another PSP Ministry with Congress support but political instability had reached such a crisis that the Governor was forced to advise the President of the conditions in Kerala. In March 1956, the President, under Article 256 of the Constitution, assumed the powers and functions of the Government of Travancore-Cochin, abolishing the Assembly until

the General Elections of 1957 would give it a new lease on life.

States Reorganisation Helped Communists

Before the elections, however, in 1956, the States of India were reorganized on a linguistic basis. The Malayalam district of Malabar in Madras was added to the State of Travancore-Cochin to form the new State of Kerala, and the Tamil-speaking regions of southern Travancore were merged with Madras. With the heavy concentrations of Muslims in northern Malabar and the Ezhava strength in the southern portions of the district, particularly in Palghat, the acquisition of Malabar deeply affected the communal balance in Kerala, with grave consequences for the emerging pattern of political power.

In the campaign for the 1957 elections, the All-Kerala Catholic Christian Convention called on all Catholics to oppose Communist candidates and to support the Congress. Kottayam District went heavily for the Congress, as did the predominantly Christian constituencies of Ernakulam, but the force of the Church brought victory to only 43 candidates for the Assembly's 125 seats. The position of the Christian community within the party, however, was seen in that of the 43 Congress victors, 23 were Christian. The Nair-supported PSP varied even worse, securing only 9 seats. The strength of the Communist Party rested with the Ezhavas and the Scheduled Castes, and to a lesser extent, with the Muslim labourers of Kozhikode and Palghat. The addition of the Malabar constituencies tipped the scales toward the CPI. Securing 60 seats, the Communist Party, together with 5 Communist-supported independents, held a clear majority and was called upon to form a Government Party chief E M S Namboodiripad became the Chief Minister.

legislation under the new Government soon heightened old communal rivalries. The agrarian reform bills were attacked bitterly by the land-owning elements of the Christian and Nair communities, but mass agitation against the Government was aroused by the Education Bill. The Act sought to attain greater Government control over the 7,000 private schools receiving State assistance. Most of the schools lay in the hands of the Christians who saw the bill as an attempt to take over their schools and to dic-

tate the content of the teaching programme. Particularly at issue was Clause 11, which stipulated that teachers be appointed from approved lists and that in the appointment of teachers, communal representation would be observed. The provision would reserve 50 per cent of teaching positions to "backward" classes, that is, the Ezhavas—the Communists' major supporters.

The Communists appealed to the poverty-stricken Muslims of Kozhikode District, the Muslim League stronghold, emphasizing that the Muslim community would benefit through the reserved seats. The League, however, feared Communist encroachments among its community members and joined hands with the Christians against the Government. The Nairs resentful of the Christians' virtual monopoly of education and fearful of their ascendancy in the Congress Party, realized nevertheless that the Christians' loss at the hands of the Education Bill would be of no gain to the Nairs, for their community association, the Nair Service Society, too maintained private schools.

"Liberation" Struggle

Many members of the so-called "backward" communities, having had the benefits of special reservation in government for more than 60 years, were often far more prosperous than some of their "advanced" neighbours. To remedy this anomaly and placate the growing opposition to the Education Bill, the Administrative Reforms Committee of the Communist Ministry suggested that a new definition of "backwardness" be determined on an economic rather than a caste basis. Under pressure from the Ezhavas, however, the recommendation was withdrawn. This action so antagonized the Christians, Nairs, and Muslims that they announced "direct action" against the Government. Mannath Padmanabhan, leader of the Nair Service Society, and leaders of the Catholic clergy, together with the Muslims, joined in the formation of the Vimochana Samara Samiti for the "Liberation Struggle" to free Kerala from Communist rule.

In the six-week agitation by the Samiti and the allied Anti-Communist Front of Father Vadakkan, more than 80,000 arrests were made, some 10,000 were jailed, and 15 people were shot dead in police firings. On July 31, 1959, the President of India, on the advice of the Cabinet, intervened

in Kerala and imposed President's Rule after twenty-eight months of Communist control.

The united front which had ousted the CPI from power now provided the base for an electoral alliance and the establishment of a coalition Ministry of the Congress, the PSP, and the Muslim League. In the elections of 1960, following five months of President's Rule, the Alliance secured 94 of the 125 seats. The Communists won 26. With victory, however, the Congress would have nothing to do with the "communal" Muslim League, and the PSP, which had been in alliance with the League since 1954, refused to be party to a coalition which excluded the Muslims. The impasse was resolved through the intervention of the General Secretary of the League, who urged the PSP to form a coalition with the Congress, assuring "the fullest co-operation and support of the Muslim League to a cabinet that might thus be formed". So it was that another Government in Kerala was formed, with P T Pillai as Chief Minister for the third time. The Speakership went to the League.

Within the Congress Party itself communal dissension was crystalizing around the Christian Home Minister, P T Chacko, and the Ezhava Deputy Chief Minister, R Sankar. Sankar aimed the guns of the Congress organization at the open communalism of the PSP and the Muslim League. Chacko, as the leader of the Legislative party, stood by the Alliance. Under pressures from the All-India Congress Committee in New Delhi, Chacko gave away, and the Muslim League was pushed out of the Alliance. New Delhi then reached down to "promote" P T Pillai out of Kerala politics and into the Governorship of Punjab. Sankar stepped in as the Chief Minister of an all Congress Ministry.

The Split in Congress

With the departure of Pillai from the arena of politics in Kerala, the Nair community felt its interests threatened by the ascendancy of the Ezhavas in the Congress. Chacko himself was none too happy about the prospects of the Ezhavas supplanting Christian influence in the Congress and became increasingly antagonistic toward the Chief Minister. With the Government's attempt to evict Catholic peasants from certain temple lands, Chacko threw his support to the peasants in opposition to the Govern-

ment of which he was Home Minister. With the backing of the AICC in New Delhi, Sankar forced Chacko's resignation.

From within the Congress, Chacko attacked the privileged position of the Ezhavas as a "backward" class and accused Sankar of persecuting the Church. Chacko found a ready ally in the leader of the Nair Service Society, Mannath Padmanabhan. The Muslim League, long on the firing line of Sankar, could hardly be considered unsympathetic. Thus, in opposition to the Sankar Ministry, there again emerged the same communal contingent which had brought the collapse of the Communist Ministry four years before. It represented an alignment of the Nairs, Christians, and Muslims, against the Ezhavas. This time, however, the Ezhavas were in the Congress.

With the death of Chacko, Sankar purged the Kerala Congress Committee of the Chacko supporters, for the most part Christians. The issue was forced, and under the leadership of K M George, 16 Congress Assembly members withdrew their support from the Government. Under charges of corruption, totally discredited in the eyes of the people, in September 1964, the Sankar Government fell. Governor's Rule was for the third time imposed, perhaps this time to the relief of a politically weary population.

Kamaraj's Miscalculation

On the defeat of the Ministry, the Congress rebels formed the Kerala Congress as an opposition party. The Church, however, was reluctant to oppose the Congress. Many Christians continued to support the Congress, and the dissidents informally put out feelers for negotiations. The price for their support to Congress would be the ouster of Sankar from party leadership. Although the people had lost confidence in the Sankar Government, the President of the All-India Congress Committee, K Kamaraj, backed the former Chief Minister and said that no "deal would be made with the Nair and Christian communalists who had brought the Congress Government down.

Kamaraj's unwillingness to compromise with the rebels only strengthened the fears that the Congress President was attempting to engineer a shift in the social base of the Congress Party in Kerala from the Christians to the numerically more powerful Ezhava

community. Kamaraj was in an awkward position, for if he compromised with the rebels, he would immediately lose the Ezhava support to the Communists. His refusal to compromise, however, would inevitably mean the loss of support from sections of the Christians and Nair communities which had traditionally supported the Congress. Kamaraj, in a major political defeat was caught on both horns of the dilemma, for he underestimated the strength of the rebels and overcalculated the power of Sankar in the Ezhava community.

Congress Defeat

The stronghold of the rebel Kerala Congress was in the districts of Kottayam, Ernakulam, and Alleppey — the areas which had formerly been the bastion of Congress strength. Kamaraj's attempt to salvage support of the Christian community by setting up Chacko's brother as a Congress candidate ended in defeat at the hands of the rebels. The Church, while remaining officially neutral and only calling upon its members to support democratic forces, had given informal sanction to the Kerala Congress dissidents. The Christian constituencies which had before always gone Congress now voted solidly for the rebels. In Kottayam District itself, of 14 seats the Congress secured only 1. The defeat of the Congress came at the hand of two inter-locking, but mutually antagonistic, alliances. Mannath Padmanabhan solidly supported the Kerala Congress, drawing a large portion of the Nair community into the rebel fold. The Kerala Congress had also entered into an electoral understanding with the Nair-backed SSP and the Muslim League, both of which had separately made arrangements with the Left Communists.

While the ideological and personality dispute within the Communist Party of India had ended in a formal split into the right and left factions, the Moscow-recognized CPT or Right Communists in Kerala remained but a handful of leaders without followers. E M S Namboodiripad, the former Chief Minister of Kerala, was the leader of the Left faction and commanded the support of the people. Despite the rise of Sankar in the Congress, the greater portion of the Ezhava community, as before, remained solidly united behind Communist Party. Indeed, in the very constituency Sankar had cultivated, Attingal, the Congress

leader was defeated by his Left Communist opponent. Although imprisoned throughout the campaign, Sankar's opponent, an Ezhava himself, commanded the support of the dominant Ezhava community.

Thus, in the elections as the communities polarized, Congress was squeezed out. It was not so much a debacle as a gross miscalculation. Had the two parties, the Congress and the Kerala Congress, been able to unite, it would have received approximately 45% of the vote — more than in any previous election since 1954. Further, the combined vote of the Left and Right CPI was less than 28 per cent — a decline of nearly 10 per cent since 1960. Percentages must be taken cautiously as they must be matched with the number of seats contested. In any case, however, an actual decline in support for the Communists was recorded — a decline represented perhaps in the Congress' partial success in weaning away sections of the Ezhava community from the Communists.

The campaign was in large part fought by the Congress and the Communists to secure the affections of the low caste Ezhavas. The failure of any party to secure a majority, however, only emphasizes the fact that while the politics of Kerala may be caste-bound, no party can rule with the support of one community alone. That the Congress' has eroded the political solidarity of the Ezhavas may reflect the initial stages of differentiation within the community. Under the impact of economic change, as each community becomes increasingly heterogeneous, so their political interests will begin to differentiate, and as they do so, the polarity between communities in terms of party support may be expected to decline. Until then, perhaps the only alternative to prolonged chaos was expressed on the anonymous posters seen near Trivandrum's secretariat buildings: "We want President's Rule".

Notes

- 1 See Robert L Hardgrave, Jr. "Caste in Kerala: a Preface to the Elections". *The Economic Weekly*, November 23, 1964,
- 2 Margaret Fisher and Joan Bondurant, "Indian Experience with Democratic Elections", Berkeley: Indian Press Digests, No 3, University of California, 1956; p 65.
- 3 *The Hindustan Times*, February 22, 1960.