

COMMUNAL POLITICS IN KERALA (1980-1995)

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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21 JULY, 1997

CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled "COMMUNAL POLITICS IN KERALA (1980-1995)," submitted by Mr. NISSIM MANNATHUKKAREN, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University. This is his own work.

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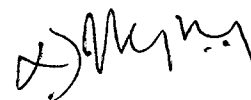
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Zoya Hasan whose advise and cooperation have been invaluable. I do not know how to thank Sowesh who did not let me know the rigours of getting this work out in it's final form. Thanks are due to Soumendra and Santosh for typing the manuscript.

Kanchan, Meena, Janardhan, Praveen, Anupam, Manash, Anil, Amitabh, Arnab, Anuj, Bhanu, Pradeep, Sujit, Sangeetha, Zafar, Sekar and Uma have – as always – been magnanimous in their love and support.

New Delhi
21 July, 1997



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Introduction

The society and politics of Kerala, the densely populated state on the South-western coast of India, is unique in many ways. Its uniqueness is evident from the demographic composition of the state in which the three major religious communities, Hindus, Christians and Muslims are roughly divided in the ratio of 60:20:20. Kerala, apart from Punjab and the north-eastern states is the least Hindu of the Indian states. Muslims constitute 23.3% and Christians 19.3%.¹ The two major castes within the Hindu fold, Ezhavas and Nairs constitute approximately 20% and 15% of the population respectively. All these four communities have dominated Kerala politics and society.

Kerala has seen no less than 10 elections and 15 ministries between 1956 and 1995. And communalism has also contributed to this political instability, through the shifting allegiance of the communal organisations and parties. In spite of this, the state has not witnessed any violent conflagration between the communities. T. J. Nossiter calls Kerala “a unique instance of communities of three major world religions living peaceably within one territory.”² According to Roland Miller,

¹ Census of India, 1991, Series-1-India, Paper 1 of 1995: Religion (Delhi), pp. xii-xiii.

² T. J. Nossiter, Communism in Kerala, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 21.

“Kerala represents a unique religious picture. Nowhere else do adherents of the three major world religions live side by side in such large numbers. Inter-religious living in Kerala is not only a possibility, it is an everyday fact of life. The relative success of that effort has symbolic value both for the nation and the world.”³ In contrast to this trend which prevailed for a major part of this century, a rapid rise in communal tension has been taking place since the late 1970s. This growth of fundamentalism among both Hindus and Muslims is a threat to the non-confrontational nature of communal politics practised in the state.

The uniqueness of Kerala in social development is too well known to need reiteration. The ‘Kerala model’ of development portrays the paradox of high levels of social development-matching the developed countries - in an economically backward state. The uniqueness of politics in the state is another paradox of the co-existence of a formidable left movement and all pervasive communal politics. Thus, political mobilization on the basis of class has matched the one on the basis of community and caste. Adding to this complexity is the fragmentation of the party system - probably a reflection of the highly differentiated social structure. The two major parties, the Congress-I and the CPI(M) are not in a position to manage even 50% of the votes between them. No party is

³ Roland E. Miller, Mappila Muslims in Kerala, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1976, p. 20.

in a position to win an absolute majority on its own and “successful alliances have perforce been motley affairs”.⁴ The strong sense of individualism in the people has led to the splintering of parties very frequently.

The different religious communities are not evenly distributed through the state. Christians are concentrated in south-central Kerala (more than 40% each in Ernakulam, Kottayam and Idukki districts). Muslims are strongest in the north, especially in the Malappuram district (roughly 66 percent).⁵ This distribution has significant political implications. First, it creates communal pocket boroughs and second, in constituencies of significant minorities, they can hold the electoral balance of power. As a result, small regional parties - mostly communal - like the Muslim League and various factions of the Christian backed Kerala Congress flourish.

The small parties in Kerala play an important role and enjoy strength and clout far disproportionate to their size. As a result, difference between pressure groups and parties is lost in the political landscape of Kerala. Most of the small parties promote sectional

⁴ T. J. Nossiter, Marxist State Governments in India: Politics, Economics and Society, London, Pinter Publishers, 1988, p. 189.

⁵ John Oommen, “Politics of Communalism in Kerala”, Economic and Political Weekly, 18 March, 1995, p. 547.

interests. Kerala has had a long history of communal politics. But, defining communalism is a difficult task as it takes different forms and manifestations. "Two subtle distinctions of communalism can be drawn up: (a) communalism as a political doctrine; and (b) communalism as a behaviour based on community sentiments."⁶ The first definition would mean the using of religio-cultural differences to mobilize people for narrow political ends. As Bipan Chandra puts it, "communalism is the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have as a result common social, political and economic interests."⁷ Communalism also can mean "a perversion of religion from a moral order to temporal arrangement of contemporary convenience, from a strategy of living into tactics of politics, from an end into a means."⁸ According to D. E. Smith, communalism is the "functioning of religious communities as organisations which claim to represent them in way which is considered detrimental to the interests of the other groups or of the nation as a whole."⁹

The second definition, on the contrast imply a certain identity being transferred to a sense of community feeling without any

⁶ George Mathew, Communal Road to Secular Kerala, New Delhi, Concept Publishing, 1989, p.11.

⁷ Bipan Chandra, Communalism in Modern India, New Delhi, Vikas, 1984, p. 15.

⁸ Rasheeduddin Khan, "Secularisation Process in India: Problems and Prospects, Iqbal Narain (ed.), Development, Politics and Social Theory, New Delhi, Sterling, 1989, p. 138.

⁹ D. E. Smith, India as a Secular State, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 106.

antagonism to other communities. Thus, we have here “a community with religious identities devoid of transcendent, ritual or spiritual significance and hostility or contempt towards other religious or caste groups, organising itself to bargain for larger or proportionate share in wealth and power commensurate to its numerical strength.”¹⁰ This definition applies to the type of communalism practised in Kerala, where it is “a feeling of group solidarity among different communities... (and asserts) its presence in the day-to-day functioning of society. It’s style of operation is peaceful co-existence carried out through milder social processes.”¹¹

It has been thus argued that Kerala has secularised through a communal path. This process of secularisation “began with communities organising and exerting themselves on the basis of religion and caste, when this ran its full course, communities or collectivities began to transcend their religious identities to increasingly reflect secular ideologies.”¹² In the early part of the twentieth century, the communal organisations came into existence primarily to promote secular objectives like health, education, civil rights of the community which in the long

¹⁰ George Mathew, “Communities and Community Politics in Kerala”, International Congress on Kerala Studies (ICKS) - Abstracts, vol. 1, Trivandrum, A. K. G Centre for Research and Studies, 1994, p. 102.

¹¹ E.J.Thomas, Coalition Game Politics in Kerala, New Delhi, Intellectual Publishing House, 1985, p. 15.

¹² Mathew, *op. cit.*, Communal Road to Secular Kerala, p. xi.

run benefited everyone. Thus, communal associations unwittingly contributed to secularization. Infact, the defining feature of the communal organisations in Kerala compared to those in the rest of the country was the emphasis on the secular goals and downplaying of the spiritual. As a result, there were frequent changes in communal alignments which led to the disappearance of permanent rivalries among communities and communal animosity. Further, the dabbling of caste-communal forces in politics led to the emergence of a multi-party system in the state in mid-fifties itself, "at least two decades before the other states even began to turn in that direction".¹³ This was due to the disgruntled communities leaving the major parties' fold and forming their own parties.

The communist movement too was instrumental in eliminating caste barriers and bringing about revolutionary changes in the society. The left was making strong inroads into community-based politics. The proliferation of parties in the 1960s which reduced the effectiveness of caste-communal forces made political commentators talk about the erosion of their sway in both the society and politics of Kerala.¹⁴ But, this has not proved to be true. Not only have caste-communal forces gained

¹³ Velayudhan Pillai, "Caste and Communal Forces in State Politics in Kerala: An Institutional Interpretation", Indian Political Science Review, December, 1977, p. 170.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

ascendance again, from the beginning of the 1980s, the non-confrontational nature of communal politics in Kerala has also suffered setbacks with the growth of fundamentalism, even though it has not reached alarming proportions yet.

In the early part of this century, there was a strong correlation between caste and class. In the last few decades, “with the development of a commodity economy, penetration of the market, the state policies indirectly aiming at co-opting the avenues of modern education and the like, the association between caste and class tended to become feeble. Thus, the caste organisations have become relatively weak and in their place, class organisations and movements have sprung up. Yet, the fact that even today caste organisations do come up and continue to function would indicate the weakness of the capitalistic growth on the one hand and the weakening of the revolutionary struggle on the other.”¹⁵ Thus, in the eighties and nineties, with economic stagnation and the collapse of the ‘Kerala model’ of economic development, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the competition based communal politics to maintain itself as a bulwark against rising forces of fundamentalism, and on the other hand, there is the stagnation of the left movement itself

¹⁵ Manu Bhaskar, “Social Economic and Political Factors of Communalism in Kerala”, Social Action, vol. 37, July-September, 1987, p. 260.

providing conducive conditions for the resurgence of caste and community as channels of political action.

Therefore, communal organisations dabbling in secular objectives have not necessarily weakened their influence. Politics in the state is still strongly influenced by communal or caste parties and organisations. Communal organisations who have played a progressive role in the beginning, like fighting against feudalistic tendencies, obscurantist religious customs and rituals, with the rise of socialism as an ideological and political factor, became inimical to the very ideas they stood for. The communal organisations then “served as a reactionary shortcut in the class struggle.”¹⁶ Further, there has been institutionalization of caste and communal segmentation. In the public sector, an elaborate system of job reservation has been evolved so that some 40% of all posts are filled in a complex rotation of communities which have been classed as ‘backward’. For example, Travancore has had communal reservation since 1937. Communalism also got a boost through the communal parties coming to power and holding important ministerial portfolios. From 1960 to 1996, there was only the Left Democratic Front government (1987-1991) which did not have a communal party as its constituent.

¹⁶ Georges Kristoffel Lieten, “Progressive State Governments: An Assessment of First Communist Ministry in Kerala”, Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), 6 January, 1979, p. 37.

So, the amount of clout and power which these parties have built up is tremendous and this has helped them to perpetuate their support base by dispensing patronage. But, the communal politics of Muslim League and Kerala Congress conform to the dominant trend of communal politics in Kerala, i.e. non-antagonistic bargaining between communities through peaceful means.

This dissertation is an attempt to study and analyze the dynamics of communal politics in Kerala in the period (1980-1995). The 1980s witnessed shifts in the style of communal politics as practised in the state till then. That is the reason why, the beginning of 1980s constitute the starting point of this study. But, since the impact of the momentous Kerala Agrarian Reforms Act (1970) was felt for the first time in 1977 elections, events from that moment are examined in detail. The dissertation tries to answer a few questions like, what are the historical factors which initiated Kerala into politics based on communities? What are the reasons for the revival of community and caste as channels of political action after a period of decline? What are the defining features of the Kerala model of peaceful communal politics? What are the reasons for the emergence of majority communalism in the eighties and nineties?

The methodology of research adopted here is analytical. The research is mostly based on secondary sources, but a few primary sources

like, census reports, election reports, and manifestos of parties have been studied.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is an overview of the history of communal politics in Kerala. It looks into the reasons why communal politics has become one of the defining features of Kerala. The second chapter is a study of the reemergence of communalism and casteism from the late 1970s. This looks into the reasons for the loss of hegemony of the communist movement - the greatest ideological opposition to communalism - and other socio-economic factors which provide the base for communalism. The third chapter is a study of the dominant trend of communal politics in Kerala. Here, various minority communal parties and caste parties, and communal decisions taken by the various governments come under scrutiny. The fourth chapter studies the emergence of majority communalism in the eighties. Breaks in the non-confrontational nature of communal politics also constitute a part of the study in this chapter.

Chapter I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF

COMMUNAL POLITICS

Communal Organisations and Secular Goals

An understanding of communal politics in Kerala from 1980-1995 would be difficult without understanding the history of communal politics since 1891. Kerala, in the 19th century could be divided into 3 areas - Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. The first two were princely states and the third a part of the Madras Presidency under British rule.

The society was feudal in the 19th century. Government jobs were few, but they had great power and status. Hindus, Muslims and Christians were the three major religious communities. The two castes within the Hindu fold, Nairs and Ezhavas came to be identified as two distinct communities. Nairs, even though are actually Sudras came to occupy the second position after the Brahmins since they performed a martial role. Actual cultivation was performed by the Ezhavas and therefore they should have been Sudras, but they were defined by the Brahmins as untouchables and so denied temple entry and temple approach. They were the most depressed of the communities. Christians were the strongest community outside the Hindu hierarchy and had

interests in agriculture, business and trade. Muslims were inferior economically and numerically to Nairs, Ezhavas and Christians.

The year 1891 is taken as the cut-off point since this year was the one in which Travancore for the first time witnessed a political agitation (called Malayali Memorial). The “significant difference between Kerala and the rest of India is the fact that the first form of political agitation, and the corresponding organisations for carrying on such agitations were based on particular castes, sub-castes and religious communities.”¹ This was also due to the fact that the Indian National Congress became active in Kerala only towards the end of the first World War and that too only in the British administered Malabar region as Congress followed the policy of “non-intervention in the internal affairs of the princely states.”

The key posts in government in Travancore were held by non-Malayali Brahmins. This was resented by the other communities. Travancore for Travancoreans became the slogan of the historic agitation in 1891 which demanded a fair share in the government for the Travancoreans. This agitation culminated in the presentation of Travancore Memorial (widely known as Malayali Memorial) to the Maharaja of Travancore and was led by the Nairs against Tamil

¹ E. M. S Nambudiripad, “Castes, Classes and Parties in Modern Political Development”, Social Scientist, vol. VI, November, 1977, p. 19.

Brahmins. The Nairs got the support of the Namboodiris (Malayali Brahmins), Christians and even Ezhavas. "All these agitations and movements led to the formation of caste organisations with definite political demands. None of them, however, can be considered an integral part of the modern democratic political movement, but of particular communities. Opportunities for educational advancement and share in government service for separate communities, rather than democratic rights for the people - such were the demands for which they fought."²

Thus the secular pursuits of communal and caste organizations were evident from the beginning. English education, conflict over land and access to government office were the three variables affecting the status and power of each community at that time. But land was not important in Travancore as it was in Malabar where there was an extreme concentration of agrarian rights. In Travancore, even though landlordism was present, rights were more diffused. "The central question was the democratic control of the executive but since communalism ran deep, the issue was transformed into one of communal control of the executive. Did citizenship extend to low-caste helots or to non-Hindus in a state dedicated to a Hindu God? On the answers turned not only jobs in

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

government service but the distribution of resources in a modernizing state.”³

The Malayali Memorial did not satisfy the Ezhavas whose cause was only taken up in passing. Therefore, in 1896, the Ezhava Memorial was submitted demanding a share in education and government jobs. But this awakening among the Ezhavas occurred only in the upper echelons of the community, the lower classes were involved only with the formation of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), a social reform organisation. SNDP, the first organisation of a depressed community in the state was led by the spiritual leader Sree Narayana Guru and had its own aim of securing rights of members by invoking their religious community sentiments.

The Christians had a well knit organizational set up with parishes. They benefited a lot from the activities of the British missionaries in the 19th century and were the front runners in acquiring English education. One of the crucial features which led the Kerala society to adopt secular objectives as their goal was the initiative given by the European Christian missionaries and the local Syrian Christians who followed it up. Christians became a strong reference group for the other communities. But within the Christians too, those who belonged to the

³ Nossiter, *op. cit.*, Marxist State Governments in India, p. 48.

British Anglican Church received preferential treatment while Catholics and other denominations could not gain access to government jobs. So, they took to entrepreneurial activities like plantation, agricultural and indigenous banking. The Keraliya Catholic Mahajana Sabha was formed in 1918.(called All Kerala Catholic Congress [AKCC] from 1930). The first newspaper in Kerala - Nazrani Deepika - was funded by the Christians way back in 1887. Syrian Christians who came into contact with the Europeans were initiated into a 'new ethics' - capitalism, individualism, etc. Family organisation and the system of inheritance of the Christians were more conducive to this new ethics than the other communities. Thus, a strong middle class emerged in Christians who began to assert their rights.

“The predominantly landowning caste of Nairs organised the Nair Service Society (NSS) in 1914 with the limited objectives of changing the matrilineal system of inheritance and to operate a few high schools.”⁴ But the fear of domination by Christians and the erosion of Nairs' economic and social power to the emerging force of Ezhavas brought the NSS to the forefront of Travancore politics long before independence. The amazing progress made by the Christians awoke the feudalistic

⁴ Pillai, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

matrilineal Nair community from its slumber. NSS began to fight the out-dated meaningless, religious observances and conspicuous consumption. They realized "that the new status symbol was to save more and build up tangible resources. They wanted a religious reformation to take the community forward."⁵ They imitated the Christians in their organizational setup and ownership of educational institutions. For the Christians and Ezhavas who utilized the new opportunities of commercialization and modernization better, and in whom a strong middle class developed, it was the assertion to make the social status coincide with their economic advances. Education became the watchword and acted as a ladder for social mobility for the lower castes and for self-preservation for the landed castes like Nairs. The first school was opened by NSS in 1915. Even though SNDP's activities made the government to open the schools to Ezhavas by 1910, exclusive schools run by SNDP came up only by 1945. Temple entry agitation were also carried forward both by the NSS and SNDP. But the negative consequence of all these activities by the communal organisations was the fostering of communal consciousness and a parochial culture instead of a national consciousness which was to have lasting effect on the shaping of politics in Kerala in the later decades The Indian National

⁵ George Mathew, *op. cit.*, "Communal Road to Secular Kerala", p. 63.

Congress' (INC) policy of non-involvement in princely states also contributed to this.

Meanwhile, Malabar saw in 1921 the worst communal riots of this century in Kerala. The agrarian structure prevalent was totally in favour of the Hindu Jenmis who "were the parasitic rent-receiving-landlords under whom there were three or four intermediaries between them and the actual tiller of the soil, all having different interests."⁶ The peasants and agricultural labourers who were mostly Muslims began to revolt against the system. First outbreak occurred in 1836 and the most serious one in 1921. The organised movement for tenancy reform which sprang up came to be integrated with the Non-cooperation Khilafat movement. This was the first upsurge of the masses in the British-ruled part of Kerala and combined within itself political, agrarian and communal aspects. The British government came down on the movement with a heavy hand. Heavy repression, along with the policy of non-violence by Congress gradually turned the Muslim community against the Hindus. "The obscurantism of the Islamic outlook which dominated the thinking of rebel leaders added to it. The rebellion became communal in its subsequent phases though in the beginning it had by and large a modern

⁶ Manu Bhaskar, Press and Working Class Consciousness in Developing Societies: A Case Study of an Indian State, Kerala, New Delhi, Gian Publishing House, 1989, p. 78.

secular democratic outlook.”⁷ INC which withdrew from the region due to the increasing militancy of the Muslims and thus the field was left open to the Muslim League. The alienation of the Muslims from the Hindus as well as the Britishers allowed the Muslim League to gain a foothold in the region. This too had lasting repercussion for communal politics in Kerala and even now Muslim League is a major player in state politics.

In 1925, NSS won a victory with the passing of the Nair Act in Travancore which amended the laws of inheritance. From 1922 to 1931, in the State Assembly of Travancore, Ezhavas and Muslims were underrepresented because only tax payers had voting rights.⁸ The later half of the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s saw two parallel movements. The first one was a modern secular political movement in the form of the State People’s Conference which started agitation for a responsible government. The second one was by the non-Hindu and the non-caste Hindu communities who began to voice their political demands not in the earlier form of a share in government employment, but in the general form of electoral rights and a share in the policy making sphere of the state’s political life. So, the transition from fighting

⁷ Namboodiripad, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁸ Sreedhara Menon, Aadhunika Keralam - Concise Political History from 1885-1957 (Malayalam), Kottayam, National Book Stall, p. 40.

for government jobs to a fight for civil rights was made in this period. In 1932, a communal alliance - the Joint Political Congress of Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims won their demand for communal representation in the legislature and civil services through the Abstention Movement.⁹ The Nairs threatened by these three communities now abandoned their anti-Brahmin stance and now became a protector of all caste Hindus. The frequent shifting of alliance of communal organisations to garner secular benefits is very evident here.

But soon, the inadequacy of communal organisations in achieving secular goals was being realized. So, the next stage of formation of political parties came about. In 1938, the Joint Political Congress which spearheaded the Abstention Movement was dissolved to make way for the Travancore State Congress which was to be an affiliate of the Indian National Congress. "This marked the redundant end of Christian support for the British rule in India and brought Christians, Muslims and Ezhavas of Kerala into the mainstream of freedom struggle."¹⁰

Meanwhile, class politics was also taking shape in the 1930s. The working class was becoming a force to reckon with. The Congress Socialist Party [CSP], founded in 1934 in Kerala was gradually

⁹ The Congress decided to abstain from taking part either in voting or in accepting nomination to the legislative bodies till its demands were met.

¹⁰ Pillai, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

transformed into the Communist party. An active role was also played by the CSP-communist cadre in the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) of Malabar, as well as in the Travancore State Congress and Cochin Congress and was a big turning point in political mobilization on the basis of class.

The Nairs, who felt that the Travancore State Congress was dominated by Christians, formed their own National Congress with the State government's blessing and even opposed the national independence movement. But when independence became a certainty, NSS had no other option but to abandon its policy and join the Travancore State Congress. So, by the time independence was near, all the communities were backing the Travancore State Congress.

Communal Politics After Independence

After independence, in the first Travancore elections held in 1948, the Congress had to make several compromises to satisfy caste and communal pressures even though it won the elections. "However, it is clear that the communal alignment of 1948 was not the result of communal associations' decision to back the Congress to power, or even lead the country to independence. On the contrary, they were aligning themselves in a manner that would ensure a voice for them in the

emerging power structure. The Congress overestimated the influence of caste-communal forces and while doing so, elevated the communal interest groups to hitherto unknown heights of prestige and influence.”¹¹ Caste and communalism were further exacerbated by the formation of the combined State of Travancore-Cochin in 1949 and as a consequence, the Christian presence increased. In the next seven years, Travancore-Cochin saw five different governments as one community or the other brought down ministries, alleging domination by rival communities. The first government headed by Pattom Thanu Pillai (a Nair), fell within seven months when Ezhava and Christian communities withdrew their support. Pillai formed the Praja Socialist Party (PSP). After the second ministry fell, there was even an anti-Congress front called Hindu Mahamandalam formed by NSS and SNDP to protest what they considered was the ‘Christian domination of Congress’. This alliance was meant to prevent any community from becoming dominant and NSS and SNDP came together inspite of there being no similarity of economic interests between Nairs and Ezhavas. This was the first time a joint Hindu front was formed (dissolved later) and both the Hindu castes were to come together again only in the 1980s.

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¹¹ Pillai, *op. cit.*, p. 68.



Thus, the influence of communal organisations was very strong in the two decades after independence. “The first generation of political leaders were none other than the leaders of their respective communities and commitment to the ideology of the party was of secondary importance. So the party had to lean heavily on the heads of various religious and communal organizations to continue in office. The continued influence that the communal parties had over major parties was the reason why ideology -oriented politics did not get a foothold in Kerala politics.”¹² Communal forces also unintentionally laid the foundation of multi-party system and coalition politics. In 1952, when a PSP minority government was formed (as a result of wrangling between the communities) for the first time, a non-Congress government was formed in the country. And by 1954, intense communal competition had made Kerala try even a coalition government. Further, along with the political education campaign of communist party and strong trade union movement, communal organisations too played major roles in politicization and mobilization. A. Aiyappan explains how the SNDP had contributed to the political awakening of the community by supplying

¹² T.C.Vergheese, Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences: Land Tenures in Kerala, 1850-1960, Calcutta, Allied Publishers, 1970, p. 25.

frames of reference within which people could relate to political events and politics.¹³

The formation of a unified Kerala by merging Malabar with Travancore-Cochin no way lessened the intensity of communalism. On the other hand, there was an intensification of communalism Muslims (being a majority in Malabar) became an important factor in state politics through their own party, the Muslim League. Henceforth, the contest between communities was going to be four cornered.

The year 1957 was a landmark in the political history of Kerala. For the first time anywhere in the world, an elected communist government came to power. Many scholars have stretched the communal analysis to attribute the communist victory to communal mobilisation made by the party. Victor M. Fic says “The major political parties in the state, the Congress party, and the Communist party of Kerala were deeply rooted in communal organisation. The Christians were the backbone of the Congress party while the Communist party’s strength was in the Ezhava community and partially among the scheduled castes. While the almost equal voting potential of these two major communities kept their political parties mostly balanced, it was the shift in voting pattern of the Nair community in favour of the latter which gave the

¹³ A. Aiyappan, Social Revolution in a Kerala Village, Bombay, 1965, p. 84, 166.

victory to the communists in 1957.”¹⁴ He does not find any significant correlation between the great poverty on the one hand and electoral victory of the communists and calls the Communist party the most communal in outlook.¹⁵ P. M. Mammen also toes the same line and explains that the Communist party adopted communal policies and became “traditionalized” in the antecedent communal culture of the transitional society.¹⁶

Even though E.M.S. Namboodiripad accepts that “it would be totally unrealistic to close one’s eyes to the fact that even those political parties which claim to be secular and above all considerations of caste and community have to take into consideration the caste and communal composition of particular constituencies when they select their candidates for elections”,¹⁷ it would be too farfetched to attribute the communist victory in 1957 to communal mobilization. “In the last resort, there is no denying that the communists won because there was a mass surge in their favour. Quiet simply, they deserved to win.”¹⁸ Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph note that “the period between 1957 and 1959, when the communists gained and lost power may have marked a

¹⁴ Victor M. Fic, Kerala, Yenan of India, Bombay, Nachiketa Publications Ltd., 1970, p. vi, vii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p viii, 102.

¹⁶ P.M. Mammen, Communalism vs Communism: A Study of the Socio-Religious Communities and Political Parties in Kerala, 1892-1970, Calcutta, Minerva Associates, 1981, p. 100.

¹⁷ Namboodiripad, *op. cit.*, p.3.

¹⁸ Nossiter, *op. cit.*, Marxist State Governments in India, p. 48.

watershed...The very success of the CPI in gaining power under the banner of class ideology and in governing for the most part in the interests of the poor and dispossessed, crystallized class tendencies within the various communities and helped their members for mobilization by party rather than community appeals.”¹⁹

So, the Communist party in Kerala played a historic role in taking a new path in political mobilization based on class rather than on community and caste appeals as it was the case till then. The party also played a major role in removing to a great extent the illusions about gaining higher social status through sanskritisation. So there was a deepening of class struggle and liberated the propertyless people from their old ties of subordination to communalism. “Wherever the Communist party was active, caste barriers declined.”²⁰

But this beginning of a shift in Kerala politics from community to class was obscured by the 1959 ‘liberation’ struggle against the communist government to overthrow it. It was led by the landlord interests along with the property owners, Nair Service Society, SNDP, and the Church against the organised peasants and agricultural labourers. The immediate cause was the introduction of the Agrarian Relations Bill

¹⁹ Lloyd Rudolph & Susanne Hoeber, The Modernity of Tradition-Political Development in India, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967, pp. 72-73.

²⁰ Lieten, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

(which would affect the landed interests), Education Act (which sought to control private educational institutions)²¹ and other radical measures. The struggle started by the NSS and Church was soon joined by the Congress, the PSP and the Muslim League. So, all the communal forces which had fought one another before joined together to fight the communists. The Catholic Church invoked religion for the 'liberation struggle'. The class interests of the communal organisations came to the fore in the liberation struggle.

“At their inception, the caste organisations, particularly the NSS and the SNDP played a progressive role; in the sense that they propagated ideals favourable to the spread of capitalism and of democratic structures. However, with the rise of socialism as an ideological and political factor, the caste leaders became inimical to the very ideas they stood for. The caste appeal – Ezhava bourgeoisie and agricultural labourers against Nair bourgeoisie and agricultural labourers - served as a reactionary shortcut in the class struggle...” And the caste leaders “started a frenzied appeal to the obscurantist forces of religion and caste from the moment their class interests were endangered.”²²

²¹ Catholics have the largest number of educational institutions in Kerala.

²² Lieten, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

The law and order situation worsened in the state and the Communist government was dismissed by federal intervention on July 31, 1959. In the ensuing elections of 1960, Christians, Nairs and Muslims got together behind a party coalition of Congress, Socialist and Muslim League parties to defeat the CPI; the communal forces had to forget their differences in order to protect their class interests and fight the “profound atheism and ridicule of religion”²³ which characterised the communist thinking. In the elections which saw virulent communal mobilization, “the Christian bishops in pastoral letters directed their followers not to support the communists.”²⁴

There was, however, a change in the policy of Congress leadership in 1962 when they decided to make “an effort to free itself from dependence on the leaders of the Nair, Christian and Muslim communities by giving greater scope to Ezhava leadership and support and by attempting to emphasize class mobilization from below rather than community mobilization from above.”²⁵ The coalition Chief Minister P. T. Pillai (a Nair and socialist) was replaced by R. Shanker, an Ezhava and the Muslim speaker was replaced by a Congressman. The

²³ Samuel Rayan, “The Left and the Church: Mutual Challenges”, International Congress on Kerala Studies (ICKS) - Abstracts, Trivandrum, A. K. G. Centre for Research and Studies, 1994, vol. 2, pp. 1135-36.

²⁴ V.K.S.Nair, “Communal Interest Groups in Kerala”, in D.E. Smith (ed.), South Asian Politics and Religion, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 189.

²⁵ Rudolph and Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

consequences of this in communal terms became evident in 1964 when Nairs and Christian members of the Congress crossed the side, brought down the Shanker government and formed the rebel Kerala Congress party, backed by powerful sections of the Syrian Christian community as well as by the NSS. With the formation of the Nair backed National Democratic Party in 1974, there are a few Nairs in Kerala Congress (and its various splinter groups) now. Kerala Congress is basically an economic interest group and “its interests are among Catholic settlers in forests, plantation owners, (and) agriculturists.”²⁶ Though, the party was born in accidental circumstances, the socialization of Kerala Congress to protect the interest of Christian plantation owners and middle class agriculturists opened a strong voting base. The party’s constant rivalry comes from the Marxists who organised the labour class in the field of agriculture and industry. With the formation of Kerala Congress, the direct influence of the Church in politics declined and the party became one of the important political players in the state, wielding clout which was far disproportionate to it’s size.

In the 1960 elections, inspite of the virulent anti-communism of the vested Nair and Christian communal interests, the Communist party

²⁶ G. Gopakumar, Regional Political Parties and State Politics, New Delhi, Deep and Deep, 1980, p. 90.

increased its popular vote from 40.7% to 43.3%. But this improvement in Communists' electoral performance can not be definitely attributed to its successful class mobilization as the electorate increased by 8% and turnout too increased by 18%.²⁷ It is still possible to conclude that the CPI government succeeded in extending its mass base "among the 'have nots' of the Hindu community, but a loss of support among the better off of all communities and little progress among the poor of the Christian community (threatened incidentally with excommunication if they dared to vote for the communists) and the Muslims."²⁸

The next elections in 1965 were to happen after the split in the Communist Party of India in 1964. CPI(Marxist) was formed out of the split. As noted, the Congress also split when Kerala Congress was formed. The CPI(M) emerged the largest party but the combined votes of the communists (who fought with each other in many constituencies) came down to 32 percent from 44 percent. Breaking of the party system took its toll. The Kerala Congress made its electoral debut in a brilliant fashion by securing 12.58% of the total votes polled and twenty-four seats compared to Congress's thirty-six seats. There was for the first time a failure of the Church hierarchy in influencing its members. While the

²⁷ Nossiter, *op. cit.*, Communism in Kerala, pp. 127-34.

²⁸ Nossiter, *op. cit.*, Marxist State Governments in India, p. 81.

bishops supported the Congress in order to save Kerala from communist rule, the priests and the laity supported the Kerala Congress.

The inability of any party or a coalition to form a government led to a two year President's rule in Kerala, until elections were next held in 1967. The problem of governance led to the need for a new united electoral front. And the CPI(M) decided to form one by incorporating the Muslim League too to make the broadest anti-Congress front possible. The question of aligning with a party like the Muslim League by the communists has raised many controversies. Many felt that the CPI(M) decision was a blow to its ideology (class) based politics and dragging the state back into the communal conundrum in which it was before. "In the altar of power politics, the Communist parties exchanged their secular ideology for the sake of power. By aligning with the left, communalism too became progressive."²⁹ Some political commentators looked at it differently. "The willingness to cooperate with the Muslim League also reflected a new posture which the CPI(M) had been developing on the entire communal question, the linguistic problem, the problem of minorities and tribal people, which soon became formalized by Namboodiripad into new and highly significant theories on the whole

²⁹ K. C. John, Kerala: The Melting Pot, New Delhi, Nunes Publishers, 1991, p.198.

national question in India.”³⁰ The Marxist policy of joining forces with the Muslim League need not be an entirely opportunistic one given the splintered party system emerging then and the atmosphere of virulent anti-Congressism which provided in the entire India in the turbulent mid-sixties. Another consideration which influenced the Marxist thinking was that the “younger Muslims were proving responsive to communist influence; and in time a communist Muslim constituency might be built up.”³¹ But the critics of the Marxist policy in 1967 may have been proved right in 1987 when the Marxists decided not to have any more truck with the communal parties.

The Marxist led United Front (consisting of CPI-M, SSP, Muslim League, RSP, KTP) swept the polls. CPI(M) secured 23.5% of votes and CPI 8.5%. Congress and Kerala Congress who failed to put up a joint front were reduced to 9 and 5 seats, respectively. “This debacle was associated with the Congress’ return to a strategy of community mobilization from above.”³² The Congress showing was considered a big blow to communal forces. “The political fickleness of the Nairs and Christian leaders not only proved the undoing of both the Congress and the Kerala Congress but also seems to have accelerated the decline of

³⁰ Fic, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

³¹ Nossiter, *op. cit.*, *Marxist State Governments in India*, p. 48.

³² Rudolph and Rudolph, *op. cit.*, pp.74-75.

political cohesiveness among Nairs and Christians” and on the other hand, “even though the political base of CPI(M) party remains in the poorer sections of the Ezhava community, it demonstrated in the 1967 election that it had enhanced it’s capacity to mobilize from below a wide spectrum of classes through electoral alliances and direct appeals to ideology and interest.”³³

All these developments were seen as a pointer to the decline of communal forces in politics. Many factors were responsible for this; first, most of the groups won their basic demands with general appeal such as social reforms and communal representation. Secondly, even though the communal interest groups paved the way for a multi-party system and in the beginning could reap benefits from the vulnerable political climate, eventually, the multitude of parties itself abated the effectiveness of caste-communal forces, as under the new setup changes in political fortunes of one or two parties could affect the political situation only marginally.

But it is not that communalism was totally wiped out. Though it’s influence declined, it was still pervasive among “the landlords, the industrialists, plantation managers and professional classes” and the ruling classes always try to build up and preserve political support

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

among their caste adherents and the ruling parties are coalitions of “ethnically-oriented capitalist vested interests.”³⁴

The United Front Ministry of Namboodiripad could rule only for two years as the ministry collapsed from within. The Muslim League, after getting the concessions it wanted - a new University at Calicut and a Muslim majority district at Malappuram, the latter one a tactical mistake by the CPI(M) which gave the Muslim League a perpetual hold on state politics, by being able to utilize the over 65% Muslim population of Malappuram to hold the electoral balance – abandoned the CPI(M). Muslim League, other than these also wrested permission to start many private schools, middle class positions in bureaucracy, plum ministerial portfolios, created employment opportunities for Mullahs and made Arabic compulsory in all Muslim-run schools. But, “all those benefits went to middle class and upper class members of the Muslim community and the leadership of the party remained in the hands of the mercantile class.”³⁵ When the Marxists started organizing landless labourers, Muslim League could no longer continue with the Marxists.

³⁴ Kathleen Gough, “Kerala Politics and the 1965 Elections”, International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 1967, p. 87.

³⁵ Robert Hardgrave L. (Jr.), “The Marxist Dilemma in Kerala: Administration and or Struggle”, Asian Survey, 10 November, 1970, p. 993.

After Namboodiripad resigned, a CPI-led ministry came to power implicitly supported by Congress which was later to culminate in the CPI's establishment of National Democratic Front including Congress and other progressive sections of the Congress. The Congress after the split in 1969 and under Mrs. Gandhi had also begun to take a left of centre approach. There were three fronts in the 1970 mid-term elections with CPI and new Congress entering into electoral understanding. The CPI got 16 seats, the Muslim League got 11, CPI(M) 28, the new Congress party (under Mrs. Gandhi) became the dominant wing of Congress in Kerala with 32 seats and the Kerala Congress 12 seats. CPI, Muslim League, RSP and PSP formed the ministry. The new Congress joined the ministry later. The definitive Kerala Land Reforms Bill which was the greatest achievement of the Namboodiripad ministry came in to effect only under the CPI government on 1 January, 1970 (before the elections). This legislation was a revolutionary one and had a lot of consequences for the shaping of politics later. A detailed study of this Act's effect on politics, economy and society will be taken up later in the course of this work.

The Muslim League was in the same ministry as the Congress and the latter tried to justify its stand by saying, "while in the rest of the country the Muslim League was communal and reactionary, in Kerala, it

was not so communal, besides, they asserted that this communal nature did not come in the way of the implementation of progressive policies.”³⁶

The Kerala Congress, on the other hand, was in the opposition with CPI(M) and also had to undergo its first split in 1974 on the issue of joining forces with CPI(M). The CPI-led government’s decision to control private colleges had actually alienated Kerala Congress from CPI and Congress. Thus the strong interest group oriented nature of this party is evident.

The Youth Congress in Kerala under A. K. Antony was very progressive and had done a lot to reinvigorate the Congress party in the 1970s. It waged a battle against the Congress leadership’s decision to align with parties like Muslim League and Kerala Congress which were considered communal. In March 1975, the Muslim League split on the issue of continuing the support to the government. The Muslim League Congress-relations had worsened over the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) passed in 1974 (according to which many Muslim League leaders were asserted), Shariat and Aligarh Muslim University Act, and in Kerala, the University Act of 1974 (curtailing private management) had affected the League. When the League split, the ministry lost technically its overall majority and only the imposition of

³⁶ Mohit Sen, “Behind the Alliance”, Economic and Political Weekly, 8 August, 1972, p. 1481.

national emergency in June 1975, saved the government. The rising opposition led by the CPI(M) had to be defeated and the only way was to bring the Kerala Congress into the government. And this was achieved on 26 December, 1975, when the Kerala Congress joined the ministry in spite of the reservations CPI had regarding the communal and reactionary nature of the party. From now on, this small party was to be an important part of almost all the governments in the future in spite of its innumerable splits. It not only garnered important ministerial portfolios like Finance, Transport, Education, but also many other concessions which would perpetuate its support base and power. Kerala Congress was to best epitomise the Kerala model of communal bargaining through democratic processes and institutionalized structures.

In 1974, the NSS decided to form a full fledged party and the National Democratic Party (NDP) was established to act as a lobby for job reservation on an economic test of backwardness instead of the existing social (caste) criterion. And the SNDP responded with the formation of the Socialist Republican Party (SRP) to defend the interests of the socially backward classes in 1976. Thus, all the communities in Kerala have a party of their own, further adding to political instability and maneuvering. This was the scenario when the proclamation of

emergency was annulled and elections were announced both for Lok Sabha and State Assembly in Kerala in 1977.

A study of the nearly ninety year period shows that the defining feature of communal politics in Kerala has been the peaceful; assertion of various communities to secure material interests. The communal organisations and communal parties thus never had any religious issue as their main programme of action. As a result, antagonism or animosity failed to develop between communities. For the maximisation of material interests, one community had to frequently align with any of the other communities. So, there was no permanent rivalry among communities and since no religious issue was taken up, there were no communal conflicts either. While the hold of religion, especially on the minority communities is very strong so as to oppose any atheistic ideology like communism, there was no hatred preached against other communities. Religious tolerance has been the hallmark of Kerala society.

How the material interests have taken precedence over the religious interests is shown by an alliance like that of the Muslim League and the Marxists. This emphasis on the secular interests by the communal organisations was primarily due to the lead given by the Christian community which (under the influence of European missionaries) had taken to setting up of educational institutions,

hospitals, etc. Soon, the other communities began to imitate the Christians. As initially, politics in Kerala developed through the communal organisations, communalism became an important feature of politics later on. After independence, many a government fell due to one community or the other withdrawing its support. Intense bargaining was carried out by the various communities to secure their material interests. Even though, communalism suffered a setback with the rise of communism, it did not disappear completely. Thus, communal politics in the period till the mid-seventies could be simply defined as non-antagonistic, peaceful competition between communities for secular goals.

Chapter II

LOSS OF HEGEMONY OF THE LEFT AND

REVIVAL OF COMMUNALISM

If the period from 1957 - when the first communist government was formed - was characterised by a shift from caste and communal based politics to class-based politics, the period from the mid-seventies has been characterised by a resurgence of casteist and communal influence in the socio-political life of Kerala. We have seen before how a host of factors were responsible for the decline of communal forces in politics and society. But it is not that this decline meant a total disappearance of communalism. It is just that political mobilization based on class which had shown signs of ascendance from the late 1950s began to stagnate from the mid-seventies.

The left parties have lost the hegemony which they enjoyed before. In spite of the fact that there is intra-caste-community class differentiation and increased occupational mobility, “the ability of the elite within various castes and communities to rally the masses around their sectarian slogans seems to have increased”¹ since mid-seventies. The

¹ T.M. Thomas Isaac, P.K. Michael Tharakan. “Kerala- The Emerging Perspectives: Overview of the International Congress on Kerala studies [ICKS]”, Social Scientist, vol. 23, nos. 1-3, January -March, 1995, p. 22.

reasons mainly lie in the loss of hegemony of the left, change in the agrarian relations which was a progressive measure but contributed to de-radicalization of politics and the morass into which the Kerala economy has fallen which has raised questions about the sustainability of the 'Kerala model' of development. All these factors have provided the adequate conditions for the revival of communal and casteist influence in socio-political life of Kerala since mid-1970s.

We have seen how the CPI(M) had entered into an alliance with the Muslim League in the 1965 mid-term elections in order to break the anti-Communist alliance in the special circumstances created by the split in the CPI and the anti-Communist hysteria generated by the Indo-China conflict. The CPI(M) shared power with the Muslim League in the 1967 United Front Government. In K. N. Panikkar's words, "the Muslim youth who were getting out of communal politics and joining progressive movements in the 1960s were now suddenly confronted with a dilemma when the CPI(M) aligned with the Muslim League. Thereafter, they did not feel the need to separate themselves from the League as it had gained legitimacy."² The Muslim League later joined an anti-CPI(M) front with

² K. N. Panikkar, Kalakaumudi, 20 November, 1994.

some of the left parties. The CPI(M) unable to affect any decisive shift in popular support despite the militant struggles entered into an alliance with a breakaway faction from the Muslim League in 1974. Similarly, a faction of the Kerala Congress was also brought into the left front. The political alliance with minority communal groups soon emerged as a major impediment to the efforts for the left to build up their independent strength in the minority communities. It isolated the left from the progressive forces in these communities, enabled the fundamentalists and narrow communal elements to consolidate their position as spokespersons of the community. The Muslim League influence which was largely confined to northern Kerala began to spread to the south also. The success of the Muslim League in bargaining with both the left and right fronts encouraged various Hindu caste groups to enter into politics. Thus, the Nairs formed the National Democratic Party (NDP) in 1974 and the Ezhavas formed the Socialist Republican Party (SRP) in 1976. The left was handicapped in fighting the casteisation and communalization due to its political alliance with a faction of the Muslim League which continued till 1985. All this led to an atmosphere of political cynicism gaining ground among the people and most

disconcertingly Hindu communalism began to gain support in the state riding on the crest of Hindu backlash against minority communalism.³

It was at this juncture that the CPI(M) took a bold decision to end its alliance with all communal groupings in the state. There was a vocal section in the party who demanded a radical shift away from short-term tactical alliances with communal parties. This would cause electoral losses especially in the Muslim strongholds of Malabar in the north. But the electorate was increasingly becoming sensitive about the ill-effects of communalism. In the mid-eighties, communal conflicts which were being fanned in the rest of the country were causing worrisome tensions in Kerala as well. "Effective leftist opposition demanded a reasonably clean record. Further communist compromise would probably cause more losses than gains, at least in the long run. After heated debates, splits, and the exclusion of some leading members, the CPI(M) (and its left front partners) finally took a much respected principled stand against communalism in politics which indicated an ability to take self-critical and painful action on behalf of reform."⁴

³ E. M. S. Namboodiripad, Bhranthalayathil Ninnu Mochanam Kittanamenkil (Malayalam), Chintha Publishers, Trivandrum, 1987.

⁴ Olle Tornquist, The Next Left? Democratisation and Attempts to Renew the Radical Political Development Project, The Case of Kerala, NIAS Reports, no. 24, NIAS Publications, Copenhagen, 1995, p. 37.

The rising tide of communalism was checked. But the unexpected defeat of the left in the 1991 elections due to the passions aroused by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi was a major setback for the secular forces and the Congress-I led government rule from 1991 saw again ascendancy of caste and communal forces.

The left movement had entered a phase of relative stagnation from around the mid-seventies with its electoral support still around the peak reached in the 1960s approximately 40%. “The Left Front found itself incapable of making any decisive breakthrough in the compartmentalization of political life and bring about a realignment of political forces. Its success in mass mobilization in numerous struggles for radical reforms, redistribution and democratic rights failed to get reflected in the electoral strength of the left.”⁵ A major hindrance in the advance of left in the seventies was the disunity among the left parties. The joining of the CPI with Congress in 1969 had dealt a death blow to the unity of left. The CPI and some other minor left parties formed an alternative government with Congress support from outside, subsequently a government with Congress participation and finally a

⁵ T.M. Thomas Isaac, S. Mohana Kumar, “Kerala Elections, 1991: Lessons and Non-Lessons”, EPW, 23 November, 1991, p. 2695.

government under Congress Chief Ministership after the 1977 assembly elections. The Congress gained a new respectability due to its alliance with minor left parties and enabled it to contain the growth of CPI(M). But this anti-CPI(M) front consisting of Congress and the minor left parties finally broke up in 1979 because of the pressures generated by the downfall of the Congress emergency regime at the centre. The left unity was established by the formation of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) in 1979. Thus, while the left parties' alliance with communal parties contributed to the revival of communal politics and the consolidation of minor communal parties, their alliance with a major party like Congress constituted to a blurring of the dividing lines between the two fronts in the perception of the masses and contributed to stagnation of the left movement.

If these factors in the political superstructure contributed to the stagnation of the left and the revival of communal politics, changes in the economic structure too led to the stagnation of radical politics and further recourse to communal and casteist solution to problems.

Changes in Agrarian Relations and Stagnation of the Left

The landmark Kerala Land Reforms Act came into effect on 1 January, 1970, under the first CPI-led Mini Front ministry and continued under the successive Achutha Menon government. This Act was to have widespread effects on the society and politics of Kerala. The Act had its impact on three aspects (i) hutment dwellers, (ii) tenancy and (iii) land ceilings. The success was more in the first two of the above mentioned aspects of the reform than in the third. "The period of early 1970s was one of most militant mobilization and struggles by CPI(M) in Kerala. The hutment dwellers' struggle for forcible occupation of 10 cents of hutment threw the countryside into a virtual turmoil and led to a mobilization of the rural poor unparalleled in the history of the party. This was followed by the peasant struggles on the surplus land issue."⁶

The Act gave to hutment dwellers (who were essentially agricultural labourers living in huts on pieces of landlord's land) rights to their dwelling houses and a few cents of adjacent land. Similarly, tenancy was completely abolished. About 2,43,000 hutment dwellers gained rights under the Act. But, with the abolition of tenancy, some new developments took place. Some former tenants who cultivated fairly big

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2695.

holdings now acquired ownership rights to these lands. “The reforms thus paved the way for the emergence of a new class of capitalist farmers especially in the northern region of the state in Malabar...”⁷ They became fairly substantial landowners employing agricultural workers. An important feature of the contemporary agrarian structure of Kerala is the relative absence of large landholders outside the plantation sector. Nearly 80 % of the landholders are small-scale landholders whose average size of landholding is 33 cents. Since, it is not possible for these small holders to meet their subsistence from agriculture, most of them are forced to seek outside wage or salary employment. This peculiar situation makes it necessary even for the small holders to employ wage labourers to cultivate the land. The Land Reform Act contributed a great deal to this further fracturing of landholdings. Thus, there is the coexistence of small holdings with high incidence of wage employment in agriculture. “Such a situation renders it difficult to build the unity of rural masses. The traditional Marxian agrarian class concepts lose much of their analytical meaning in the Kerala countryside. The wage question tends to divide landholders, whether small or large from the wage labourers. The situation has become precarious in the context of stagnant productivity.”⁸

⁷ N. Krishnaji, “Agrarian Relations and the Left movement in Kerala: A Note on Recent Trends”, *EPW*, 3 March, 1979, p. 517.

⁸ Thomas Isaac, Mohana Kumar, op. cit., Kerala Elections, 1991, p. 2694.

The trade unions and radical party factions saw to it that the Agricultural Workers Act was passed and strictly implemented. This Act strengthened the agricultural labourers' position regarding wages, employment conditions, social security arrangements etc. With the implementation of land reforms, the land question ceased to be an important issue of mass mobilization. As soon as the tenants and workers got rid of their common enemy (landlords) they were at odds with each other over wages and employment conditions and mechanization. The fundamental social basis of the left was thus divided and began to deteriorate. Extreme fragmentation of land prevented rational cultivation. The labour problem and the increasing non-productivity of agriculture makes farmers turn to cultivation practices that were easier or left the land fallow or leased it out illegally to poor tillers.⁹

Thus, the land reforms which were a progressive measure along with the strengthening of the position of labour in themselves generated new problems including contributing to the stagnation of production and to a kind of petty embourgeoisement in the rural areas. De-radicalization also took place due to availability of semi-skilled work in Gulf from the mid-seventies. Inflow of money from Keralites working in

⁹ K. K. Easwaran, "Reemergence of Land Leasing in Kerala: The Case of Kuttanad", Social Scientist, vol. 18, nos. 11-12, November-December, 1990.

Gulf has brought affluence to hitherto under privileged families.

Unable to cope with these new problems, the traditional left had begun to stagnate. “Nobody denied that it’s popular pressure and top-down politics of democratization had proved fruitful in getting parliamentary democracy settled, in implementing India’s most consistent land reforms and in strengthening the position of labour.”¹⁰ But these measures gave rise to new problems like opening up complicated new relations of exploitation and subordination, labour market segmentation, lot of stoppages which impeded structural changes and more efficient production and administration. Further, “the very popular pressure and top-down politics of democratization had given birth to centralization, compartmentalization, factionalism, vested interests and locked political conflicts....In addition, new and party rival groups and movements emerged. On the one hand, communal identities social networks, and rigid organizing got a new lease of life. All of the factors, that had previously forced narrow communalism into retreat were now losing ground - socio-religious reform efforts, public welfare measures and fairly clear-cut class conflicts and class organisations.”¹¹

¹⁰ Tornquist, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

The effect of the changed agrarian relations were seen by the 1977 Assembly and Lok Sabha elections. The CPI(M)'s strength was reduced from 28 to 17 in the Assembly. In Palghat, in the past a Marxist citadel, CPI(M) lost its existing Lok Sabha seat and surrendered seven Assembly seats. In another traditional stronghold, Alleppey district, it failed to win a single seat. In the 1980 Lok Sabha and Assembly elections too inspite of leading the newly formed Left Democratic Front, the CPI(M) failed to win the Palghat Lok Sabha seat, and its margins of victory in the Assembly elections were diminished indicating that the party's support among the peasantry was being slowly eroded. Some observers have attributed this to the middle and rich peasants' alienation from the party as a consequence of its support for agricultural labourers in their fight for higher wages.¹²

Thus, in the post-land reform era, the left support has been dwindling in those areas where it had been traditionally very strong i.e. where agrarian tension has been acute and the percentage of agricultural labourers has been very high. The stagnation of the left put a brake to the shift towards the emergence of class consciousness from narrow communal and parochial identities which was visible from the late fifties.

¹² Krishnaji, *op. cit.*, p. 520.

The loss of hegemony of the left played a vital role in reviving the dormant communal and caste networks from the mid-seventies.

Crisis in the Economy

Economic stagnation which has set in since the later half of seventies is another major factor which has indirectly helped consolidate communal and casteist forces. The fissures in the 'Kerala model' of economic development have had serious repercussions on the non-confrontational nature of communal politics. What has been observed is that with stagnation in production and spiraling of commerce, with less clear-cut material interests of broad classes of people, in the post-land reform era, people have fallen back upon "individualistic survival strategies, clientilism, group-specific organization and mobilization in the basis of religious and cultural identities."¹³

The crisis in the Kerala model of development has been manifest in the severe stagnation in spheres of material production, soaring unemployment, acute fiscal crises and erosion of sustainability of the social welfare expenditures. Kerala is one of the few states whose economy did not show signs of acceleration from the late seventies.

¹³ Tornquist, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

Infact, the SDP growth rate was not only markedly lower than the national average but also significantly lower than the SDP growth rates achieved during the previous decade.¹⁴

Agricultural stagnation has been compounded by the shift in cropping pattern to commercial crops like coconut and rubber which has been taking place since mid-seventies.¹⁵ Similarly, the industrial performance too has been dismal. In the same period from 1990, the sector has been facing a severe recession with output declining at -1.14% per annum. As a result, the share of manufacturing sector in the state domestic product has tended to decline.¹⁶ With the stagnation in agricultural and industrial sectors, the unemployment situation in the state has worsened. The unemployment rate is around three times the national average.¹⁷ The percentage of educated unemployed is also very high as the pursuit of higher qualification has become an adjustment mechanism during the waiting period for formal sector employment.

The crisis in the Kerala economy has been camouflaged by the remittances from the Gulf region which began from the mid-seventies,

¹⁴ C.T.Kurien, "Kerala's Development Experience: Random Comments About the Past and Some Considerations for the Future", Social Scientist, vol. 23, nos. 1-3 January-March, 1995.

¹⁵ K.P.Kannan, K. Pushpangadan, "Dissecting Agricultural Stagnation in Kerala", EPW, 8 September, 1990, pp. 1991-2004.

¹⁶ K.K.Subramaniam, "Industrial Strategy for Kerala: A Perspective", ICKS-A, vol. 2, Trivandrum, A.K.G. Centre for Research And Studies, 1994, pp. 19-20.

¹⁷ Mridul Eapen, "Employment and Unemployment in Kerala: An Analysis of Recent Trends", ICKS-A, vol. 2, Trivandrum, A.K.G. Centre for Research and Studies, 1994, pp. 65-66.

the same period in which the economy began too stagnate.¹⁸ These remittances constitute as much as 25% of the state domestic production. But these migrant family savings, were not invested properly in Kerala. Rather, they just contributed to the burgeoning of the tertiary sector, speculation and consumption. A new consumerist culture was heralded coupled with no increase in productivity. The state revenue and trade deficits reached alarming proportions. The much celebrated 'Kerala model' of development took a beating. What was compromised was the state's ability to sustain its much acclaimed social expenditure. Infact, Kerala has earned the dubious distinction of being the only state in India whose real social expenditure has decreased during 1985-86 to 1991-92 period compared to the decade 1974-75 to 1984-85.¹⁹

While such stagnation in the economic sector has provided the adequate setting for the thriving of communalism, the social sphere too has undergone changes. The left has lost its hegemony not only in the political field but also in the cultural sphere. "The progressive literature and theatre that once constituted the mainstream of cultural life in Kerala

¹⁸ P. R. Gopinathan Nair, "Broad Trends in Migration to the Middle East: A Note", ICKS-A, vol. 2, Trivandrum, A.K.G. Centre for Research and Studies, 1994, , pp. 75-76.

¹⁹ M. A. Oommen, "Kerala and the New World Order: Some Tentative Hypotheses", (Mimeo),ICKS, Trivandrum, A.K.G. Centre for Research and Studies, 1994.

is today only a shadow of its past. More important is the degeneration of the popular culture... the resultant cultural disarmament of the masses has been contributing to the political passivity.”²⁰ The degeneration of culture too has contributed in no small measure to furthering reactionary communal and casteist ideologies.

The economic stagnation caused an ideological backlash against the left. It was argued that equity in Kerala was achieved at the cost of future economic progress. Leftist politics of strengthening the trade unions, land reforms and social welfare expenditure were blamed for the economic retardation, agricultural stagnation, fiscal crisis, etc. The emerging rightist perspective demanded the dismantling of the welfare structure, removal of rigidities in the labour market caused by legislations and trade unions, elimination of land ceilings and privatization of social sector services. The economic stagnation has undermined the unity and the progress of people’s movements. For example, the scarcity of employment opportunities converted reservations for Dalits and backward castes into a controversial issue and a cause for communal and casteist mobilization. Frustrations of unemployment, lack of opportunities, etc. led people even to

²⁰ Thomas Isaac, Mohana Kumar, *op. cit.*, Kerala Elections, 1991, pp. 2695-96.

fundamentalism and the resultant communal conflicts in the eighties and nineties.

New Radical Development Project of the Left

The crippling economic stagnation, and the loss of hegemony of the left forced the left to review its policies in the light of changed conditions. As already noted, the view which advocated a radical shift away from short-term tactical alliances with communal parties got the upper hand which finally resulted in the break with the faction of the Muslim League and a policy of “no more truck with communal parties.” In spite of this, the Left Front managed to win the 1987 state elections (by a slender margin). The Left suffered losses in many of their old strongholds in the North - as a result of the break-up with the Muslim League - but they gained new support in the centre and the south, and in urban and more commercialized areas where unemployment was most serious.²¹ The victory enabled the left to take a new look at the policies pursued so far. The stagnation in production as a result of redistribution of land, undermining of the social and fiscal basis of the welfare state and the consequent resort to individual or family solutions and to

²¹ Election Analyses, The Frontline, 27 February, 1988, 18 April, 1988.

communal patronage by the people, the post land-reform conflict between farmers and agricultural labourers themselves were the problems countering the left. The new section within the left wanted to radically revise the existing policies and initiate a new popular development programme based on mass movements unlike the earlier top-down centralized democratization approach. They wanted to “undermine the devastating political horse trading by empowering backward communities and oppressed illiterates, who were particularly sensitive to patronage and communalism.”²² They realized that communalism, casteism and other reactionary ideas could survive inspite of their previous feudal like foundations had been eroded. So, they emphasized on meaningful democracy and also in addition to ideological struggle, extended and improved welfare policies, decentralization of government and administration and popular development alternatives in order to counter communal and casteist ideologies. They took a forceful stand against communalism in general and communal politics in particular since they undermined the most basic prerequisites of democracy.

The new Left government initiated a lot of programmes by involving the masses under the influence of the above mentioned group. Total literacy campaign, panchayat level people’s resource mapping,

²² Tornquist, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

group farming, decentralization, etc. were some of the programmes initiated. The literacy campaign was a massive effort involving 8 lakh volunteers and between 3 to 4 lakh instructors which made Kerala a totally literate state. But this spectacular campaign could not progress into the second stage, and thus the transformation of literacy centres into people's fora for wider developmental activities did not take place.²³ Similarly, the group farming initiative to overcome the post-land reform stagnation and to eliminate the differences between the farmers and agricultural labourers, and the panchayat level people's resource mapping programmes ended in failures as the leftists could not go beyond their old top-down centralized democratization approach. Democratic decentralization was itself delayed and the District Council Act was passed only in 1991, the last year of the left front government. Even the left was not genuinely enthusiastic towards decentralization, as it meant a whittling down of the power of all powerful centralized trade unions (which were very strong in the party) and also of the ministers and bureaucrats. There were also strong traditional leftist arguments against decentralization and for central leadership to guide the people, uphold discipline, prevent corruption, etc.

²³ S.Mohana Kumar, "Literacy Movement in Kerala, One Step Forward, Two Step Backwards", EPW, 9 October, 1993.

Thus, the left's efforts to counter communalism and casteism through genuine democracy popular movements etc., failed because of a fall back upon this old centralized approach. The change of government in 1991 also did not help matters. The Congress-I led government systematically proceeded against all the programmes initiated by the left front government. Literacy and decentralization programmes suffered the most due to the new government's apathy. The United Democratic Front (UDF)s rule from 1991 saw a further resurgence of communalism. All the communal parties were again back in the government after a four year interregnum when the left governed.

In the post 1991 era, the structural adjustment programme initiated by the central government has further linked the Kerala economy with the global economy. The resultant determination of prices of important Kerala crops like rice and rubber by the world market can have serious repercussions on the Kerala economy.²⁴

Thus, the loss of hegemony of the left in the post-land reform phase, the inability to overcome this through the radical political development project after 1987, the earlier left policy of aligning with communal parties, economic crisis of the state, etc., put together

²⁴ Kurien, *op. cit.*

provided the contingent conditions for the resurgence of communal and casteist influence in the socio-political life of Kerala. As a result, the non-confrontational nature of communal politics in Kerala faced serious threats in the eighties and nineties.

Chapter III

NON-ANTAGONISTIC COMMUNAL BARGAINING:

THE DOMINANT TREND

The dominant trend of communal politics in Kerala is marked by non-antagonistic bargaining between communities through democratic channels. People belonging to the three major world religions namely Hinduism, Islam and Christianity have peacefully coexisted for a major part of this century. Previous chapters have shown how the communal organisations and parties' emphasis on secular goals led to the evolution of non-antagonistic model of communal politics.¹ Signs of aberrations in this model of communal politics have occurred in the eighties and nineties and yet, they have not become the dominant trend.² Thus, even in the eighties and nineties, communal politics in Kerala has, by and large, been an assertion of a feeling of group solidarity among different communities in the day to day functioning of society, carried out through peaceful means.³ This chapter explores the continuance of this trend of communal politics in Kerala from the year 1977 onwards.

¹See the 1st chapter.

²See the 4th Chapter.

³ E.J. Thomas, *op. cit.*

Communal and Caste Salience in Politics

Christian and Muslim communities which constitute more than twenty percent of the population respectively, have a tendency to act cohesively in politics unlike the majority Hindu community which is riven by castes. The Kerala Congress and Muslim League parties representing these two communities inspite of their numerous splits, have maintained the hold on their constituencies. “Unlike in Hindu castes, where often the social reform movements developed into bourgeoisie radicalism challenging the institution of caste and religion itself or offering different interpretations thereof, those among minority communities were relatively weak and conservative in nature”.⁴ As a result, the hold of the religious hierarchy and institutions on the minority community masses is very strong. The religious establishment, especially the Christian Church has been virulently anti-Communist. One of the major weaknesses of the left in Kerala was it’s failure to make significant inroads into the minority communities. Further, the geographical concentration of Christians and Muslims in a few districts have created communal pocket boroughs which have perpetuated the hold of the Christian and Muslim parties. By being a part of all governments except one from 1967 to 1996, these parties have built an enormous amount of clout and patronage. The situation was such that no major party could come to

⁴Thomas Isaac, Mohana Kumar, *op.cit.*, Kerala Elections, 1991, p.1991.

power without aligning with either of these parties. The prospects of many a Kerala government have been made or marred according to the stance adopted by the Muslim League and the Kerala Congress.

If the two minority communities have their parties, the two major castes within the Hindu community, the Nairs and the Ezhavas, too have their own parties, the National Democratic Party (NDP) and the Socialist Republican Party (SRP), respectively. But, compared to the Christian and Muslim parties, these two caste parties are minor actors though still capable of wresting concessions from the major parties for their constituencies. Unlike the Muslims and Christians, the Nairs and Ezhavas are scattered through out the state and more importantly, members of these castes have allegiance by and large to the major parties like Congress and Communists thereby reducing the clout of parties representing them.

The inductment of the communal and caste factor into the polity has greatly fractured Kerala politics. Coalition politics has become irreversible and it has forced successive governments to take decisions which they should not have and which have resulted in the state's slide in many fields. The simmering caste and communal tendencies have nurtured a parochial political culture in the state. "Unlike the usual picture where smaller groups are dependent on the major groups, the regional and parochial groups in Kerala determine the type of role the

major groups are supposed to perform.”⁵ The analytical difference between pressure groups and political parties lose its relevance in the political landscape of Kerala. Most of the communal parties are in the nature of pressure groups representing sectional interests. These small communal parties have perfected the art of bargaining culture and agitational politics to wrest as many concessions as possible from the major parties. In one way this style of politics has helped diffuse violence between different communities. Further, the frequent defections of the communal parties from one front to the other inhibited the consolidation of antagonism among different communities. Interestingly, communal politics too has been subject to the structural imperatives of the coalition system. The communal and regional parties grew at the cost of the national parties and in the 1982 Assembly elections they had secured 39 seats (out of a total of 140) and 47.41% of the total votes as against 14 seats and 16.12% of votes in 1957.⁶

The Muslim League

The Muslim League had established its unit in Kerala in 1937. And after independence, the strength of this party of Mohammed Ali Jinnah was confined to the state of Kerala. The Muslim League in Kerala has conformed to the

⁵Gopakumar, *op. cit.*, p.26.

⁶K.Raman Pillai, "The Significance of 1987 Elections", The Indian Journal of Political Science, 48 (4), October-December, 1987.

dominant trend of non-antagonistic model of communal politics to the extent that the state unit's views are most of the time at divergence with those of the national leadership. To say that it is not a communal party would be too far fetched, but it can be easily said that the League in Kerala has not adopted fundamentalist postures like those outside the state and has by and large subscribed to the Kerala trend of using communal consciousness for the attainment of secular goals. And for this, the party has aligned with both the Communist and Congress led fronts. Infact, when the Congress for the first time aligned with the League, it justified it's position by emphasising that while in the rest of the country, the League was communal and reactionary, it was not so in Kerala.⁷

By being represented in the government consecutively for twenty years (from 1967 to 1987), the Muslim League grew very powerful, and it's influence spread from the north of Kerala to the south too. And after the creation of the Muslim majority district of Malappuram, the League has returned most of its representatives to the Assembly and two members to the Lok Sabha from here. Till the 1990's, the League inspite of splits was the sole representative of Muslims in the state. It was only in the 1990's, it's hegemony was threatened by fundamentalist streaks in the Muslim community.

⁷Mohit Sen, *op. cit.*

The Kerala Congress

The Kerala Congress (KC) is the second largest regional party in Kerala after the Muslim League. “The birth of the Kerala Congress was the direct result of inter-community wrangle in the Indian National Congress (INC) after the 1960 mid-term elections. The problem was unimaginatively handled by the Congress high command at the centre and consequently a part of a major community (the Christians) was permanently alienated from INC in Kerala”.⁸ KC’s manifesto calls for liberalism and democracy at the outset. “It’s interests are among Catholic settlers in forests, plantation owners, agriculturists.”⁹ Though KC was not born of economic interest, the socialisation of the party to protect interests of Christian plantation owners and middle class agriculturists opened a strong voting base. Supported by Nair lobby in the beginning, with the formation of National Democratic Party of the Nairs, there are few Nairs left in KC. KC is not a communal party in the conventional sense. It has no Christian ideology or outlook on politics or a set of religious tenets as its foundation. But, it is not averse to emphasising the fact of Christian support. It has spoken against church desecration, curtailment of religious freedom and infringement of minority rights etc. With the strengthening of the party, direct involvement of the Church in

⁸Lakshmana Rao and Leonard Cane, "Religious Parties in Kerala: A Multiple Regression Analysis", Political Scientist, vol. 8-11, Ranchi, 1974, p. 83.

⁹Gopakumar, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

politics was reduced. But, the Church has taken active interest in the affairs of the party especially in uniting the various factions of the party. The party's main rivalry comes from the Marxists who organised the labour class in the field of agriculture and industry. But, this has not prevented alliance with the Marxists owing to coalitional compulsions.

Interestingly, KC alternatively functions as a regional party too. It is always opposed to devices like President's rule and protested against neglect by the centre, disparity of income between states etc. "Kerala Congress is to a great extent regional party in the sense that it represents the regional bourgeoisie and gives vent to their complaints against over-centralisation. However, this regional bourgeoisie that it represents is largely Christian- with the Christian land-owning class being it's major supporters - the Kerala Congress obviously believes in status quo, democratic liberalism and a conservative class structure".¹⁰ But, in terms of representation to legislature, civic bodies, popular votes and commanding public corporations and offices, Kerala Congress inspite of it's various splits has been a powerful force in Kerala politics.

¹⁰Krishna Menon, Minority Politics in Kerala: The Christian Community, 1978-85, Dissertation Submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1988, p. 119.

Hindu Caste Parties

The National Democratic Party (NDP) of the Nair community was formed in 1974. “The NDP is the political arm of the Nair Service Society, an unabashedly communal anti-Communist organisation. The party's main plank is the discontinuance of the existing scheme of reservation in jobs and provision of educational concessions on communal basis and it’s replacement by a system of protective discrimination on the basis of economic backwardness”.¹¹ In 1976, SNDP responded with the Socialist Republican Party (SRP) to defend the interests of the socially backward classes. It is almost non-existent now with no representation in the last two Assembly elections. While, majority of the Nair community rallies around the Congress, majority of the Ezhavas back the communists. If in 1957 and 1960, at least four-fifths of all Ezhavas probably voted communist, by 1982 the figure was nearer 55% as a result of the impact of education in SNDP run colleges, land reform, job reservation, communal organisation and government action.¹² The SRP is for the continuance of the present reservation system in which the Ezhavas have reservation. Both NDP and SRP have not in any way managed to match the importance and clout of the Kerala Congress and Muslim League. The social arms, NSS and SNDP are

¹¹“Political Background to Trivandrum Riots”, *EPW*, 12 February, 1983, p. 210.

¹²Nossiter, *op. cit.*, Marxist State Government in India, p. 191.

stronger than their parties. The existence of these caste parties have hindered the growth of a common Hindu consciousness and thus the B.J.P.¹³

1977-1982 - Communal Parties and Governmental Participation

The elections in 1977 were held after the revocation of emergency. Assembly elections were held simultaneously in Kerala. The Kerala Congress which had split¹⁴ had thus two factions each, while the Kerala Congress and Muslim League (ML) were in the ruling United Front comprising of Congress and CPI, the Kerala Congress (Pillai) (KCP) and Muslim League Opposition (ML [O]) were in the CPI-M led opposition alliance. Thus, inspite of the strong antipathy towards the Marxists, two factions of the minority communal parties were in alliance with the Marxists. Inspite of the emergency, Congress led ruling front won easily with 53% of the votes and 111 of the 140 Assembly seats. Before the elections, NDP and SRP were wooed by giving the maximum concessions as the candidates of these parties standing as independents could upset the calculations of the ruling front.¹⁵ KC won 20 seats and 8.59% of the votes, ML won 13 seats and 6.65% of the votes. KC (P) and ML (O) in the opposition won 2 seats with 4.60% of the votes and 3 seats with 4.44% of the

¹³See the 4th Chapter.

¹⁴See the 1st Chapter.

¹⁵K.C. John, "Muslim, Christian Vote Split: Factions in Kerala", The Times of India, New Delhi, 21 February, 1977,

votes, respectively. NDP in the ruling front won 5 seats and 2.27% of the votes.¹⁶ One of the reasons for the victory was the fact that the “ruling front constituted the most powerful combination of communal and sectional interests ever put together in Kerala.”¹⁷

Kerala Congress which was in a very strong position after the elections demonstrated its clout by securing the three important portfolios of industries, finance and revenue. Muslim League was given two portfolios and the speakership. The strong interest oriented nature of the Kerala Congress party was evident from the statement that it had no enemies in the state as its socio-economic policy had been so framed that it could join any front.¹⁸ The first 18 months of the new government saw the resignation of two Congress chief ministers, K. Karunakaran and A.K. Antony. Thus, the CPI came to head the coalition under the chief ministership of P.K. Vasudevan Nair. One of the Bills which the CPI government introduced at the behest of the Kerala Congress and Muslim League was the Land Reforms Amendment Bill or the Gift Deeds Validation Bill.

The Bill was a retrograde step and was undertaken by the CPI under the influence of the communal and sectarian forces. The Bill “sought to validate

¹⁶The Hindu, Madras, 21,23 March, 1977.

¹⁷Nossiter, *op. cit.*, Marxist State Governments in India, p.101.

¹⁸The Hindu, Madras, 14 September, 1978.

voluntary transfers of land holdings above the ceiling prescribed by the Land Reforms Act that the Marxist government had passed in 1969. The validation of such gift deeds effected up to November 5, 1974, was found necessary to offset the advantage enjoyed by the Hindu community because of their personal succession law and do justice to Christians and Muslims who did not enjoy similar protection".¹⁹

The CPI government later realised the mistake of pandering to communal pressures and dropped the Bill. The government soon fell when CPI withdrew from the ruling front (following the party's national reappraisal of Mrs. Gandhi). But, expectations of fresh elections being held were belied when C.H. Mohammed Koya of the Muslim League accepted the Governor's invitation to form a ministry on 12 October, 1979. For the first time in independent India, a ministry headed by Muslim League came to power. The League was supported by Congress from outside, Congress Urs(U) headed by A.K. Antony and Kerala Congress factions. Muslim League ministry had only two other parties in it - one being the NDP. This massive consolidation of communal forces in favour of the Koya ministry was a setback to the communists. But, after hectic political manoeuvring, Koya ministry had to finally resign on 1 December, 1979, and Kerala came under Presidential rule for over a month.²⁰

¹⁹"New Kerala Ministry", Editorial, The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 13 October, 1979.

²⁰Nossiter, *op. cit.*, Communism in Kerala, p. 236.

Meanwhile, a Left Democratic Front (LDF) was formed under the leadership of CPI (M). The Kerala Congress had split again in 1979 owing to personality clashes and had 3 factions: KC-Mani (M), KC- Joseph (J) and KC-Pillai (P). KCM and KCP joined the LDF along with ML(O) now known as All India Muslim League (AIML). Thus, the LDF included such parties which hardly qualified for the labels 'democratic' or 'left' in communist terms. Congress(U) was also in LDF. CPI(M)'s strategy of isolating Indira Congress and building a winning coalition cost the party in terms of doctrinal purity. Thus, the CPI(M) in spite of its opposition to the Land Bill wooed KCM by promising to compensate the communities affected by land reforms. In fact, an understanding had developed between KCM and CPI(M) when the latter even argued to support a ministry headed by KCM after the League ministry fell. The clout that is welded by communal parties like KCM is demonstrated here. "For KCM the LDF was primarily a means for electoral gains and participation in the government in Kerala."²¹

The other faction, KCJ was in the United Democratic Front (UDF) led by Congress-I along with Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), NDP and SRP. Before the elections, there was intense bargaining by the communal parties. KCJ even threatened to leave the front and only Mrs. Gandhi's intervention made it stay in the front. The Church was appalled at the fact that KCM was with the

²¹Krishna Menon, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

Marxists. The Council of Catholic Bishops gave a call to its adherents that “on no account should a situation be allowed to develop in which the atheists were enthroned in the government”.²² The Bishop Council tried hard to bring the two factions of Kerala Congress together, but failed.

The LDF won an easy victory by winning 93 seats and 50% of the votes. KCM 8 seats with 5.24% of the votes, KCJ 6 seats with 4.94% of the votes, KCP 0.8% of the votes and 1 seat, IUML 7.2% of the votes and 14 seats, AIML 3.5% of the votes and 5 seats, and NDP 2.7% of the votes and 3 seats.²³ SRP won no seats. Thus, again the communal parties won about 25% of the votes. In spite of the exhortations of the Church, the Christian laity voted in large numbers for KCM aligned with the communists. For the first time, the Bishops and the Christian community were divided (at the institutional level) publicly over the alliance with Marxists.²⁴ This is not to suggest that the Christian community had broken off from the domineering influence of the Church, but it chose that faction which could represent their secular interests best irrespective of the alliances. This conforms to the dominant trend of communal politics in Kerala. Infact, KCM and KCJ in spite of being in two different fronts had the same kind of demands. The Kerala Congress manifestos called for top priority to

²²The Hindu, Madras, 18 October, 1979.

²³The Hindu, Madras, 23 January, 1980.

²⁴Krishna Menon, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

programmes for working class, relief to hill settlers, pension for agricultural workers, insurance to fishermen, etc. and asked for inclusion of small income groups, small farmers and small scale industrialists in the category of working class. They pleaded for exemption of plantations and religious institutions in the state from provision of land ceiling and opposed class antagonism.²⁵ These are the areas in which there is a strong Christian presence.

The KC factions got the transport, finance and electricity ministries, which were very important portfolios. AIML got two ministries. The presence of KCM in LDF was problematic. "In the left and democratic front, the community nature of KCM could not be doubted, though they assured they would pursue their own independent path of service to the people."²⁶ But this path of service to the people meant service to the Christian constituency it represents. The Budget of 1980-81 presented by the KCM finance minister gave special concessions from agricultural tax for paddy, tapioca, ginger, plantain cultivation, small business, coir, cashew, handloom, fishing etc. The electricity minister gave 10 units of power free of charge to farmers.²⁷ All these were meant to cater to Christian interests. KCM even tried to get the Silent Valley Project passed so as to benefit

²⁵T.Varghese, *The Kerala Congress: A Study*, Unpublished Thesis Submitted to the University of Kerala, Tivandrum, 1982, p.152.

²⁶T.C. Zacharias, "New Alignment", *EPW*, 25 August, 1979.

²⁷T. Varghese, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

Christian contractors. In spite of being in the LDF, KCM managed to get private colleges sanctioned, in the ownership of which the Church has a monopoly.

Thus, the intense pressure generated by the Christian interest group represented by KC was causing problems for the left. “Very soon, the differences especially, on economic issues like taxation policies, subsidies, hill settlers and Silent Valley Project were making it difficult for the existing coalitional set up to continue.”²⁸ The deterioration of law and order under the LDF government caused an uproar against the CPI(M) home minister. KCM even demanded home ministry from the CPI(M). The irreversible differences soon led to the withdrawal of the KCM along with Congress(U) from the LDF leading to the resignation of E.K. Nayanar on 26 October, 1981. KC’s ideology, though not well constructed has its base still in Church led anti-Marxism. So, any alliance with the Marxists was going to prove problematic especially in economic issues. KC is better off in aligning with Congress whose interests are more or less common. The militancy of Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) had also turned the Christian middle class farmers against the Marxists. E.M.S Namboodiripad analysed the problem by saying that “the real weakness of the LDF that was formed at the end of 1979 was that it represented a combination of

²⁸Krishna Menon, *op. cit.*, p.100.

leaders in the area of parliamentary action, rather than the unity in struggle of the masses following the parties whose leaders came together.”²⁹

1982-1987 - Consolidation of Communal Politics

After another period of political instability, Kerala went again for Assembly elections in 1982. With the formation of LDF, “a parallel growth of communal parties also took place. The NDP of the Nair community and SRP of the backward Ezhava community began spreading their influence. Secular democracy soon became entangled with communal democracy. UDF successfully wooed these communal parties.”³⁰ The UDF which went in to the 1982 election had rallied almost all the communal and caste parties under its banner. Thus KCM (KCP had merged with it before the elections), KCJ, IUML, NDP and SRP were in the UDF. Only AIML was with the LDF. The UDF in spite of this won only a narrow victory with 77 seats and just 1% of the votes separating it from the LDF. The UDF government of 1982-1987 had the worst communal track record. KCJ won 5.71% of the votes and 8 seats, KCM 4.28% of the votes and 6 seats, IUML 6.11% of the votes and 14 seats, AIML 3.34% of the

²⁹E.M.S. Namboodiripad, The Communist Party in Kerala: Six Decades of Struggle and Advance, New Delhi, National Book Centre, A.K.G. Bhawan, 1994, p. 281.

³⁰K.C. John, “Decline of Communism in Kerala”, The Newstime, Hyderabad, 30 January, 1985.

votes and 4 seats, NDP 2.86% of the votes and 4 seats, SRP 2.70% of the votes and 3 seats.³¹

The Kerala Congress factions got this time four ministries. It is interesting to see how the party inspite of the various splits grew over the years, thriving on the situation in Kerala in which the large parties are dependent upon the small parties for the formation of the government and thus leading to the disproportionate growth of the small parties. IUML gained two ministries and the Deputy Chief Ministership. NDP and SRP were represented by a minister each. Thus, all the communal parties were represented in the cabinet. After the formation of government, as usual, intense communal pressure began to trouble the Congress. The League began to show defiance over the induction of NDP into the UDF. IUML and NDP do not see eye to eye over the reservation system. Muslims have 12.5% reservation in government jobs. NDP wants to substitute this system with protective discrimination based on economic backwardness. The League Deputy Chief Minister, Mohammed Koya went so far as to say that it is the League which decides who should be the Chief Minister. The League also declared that it does not believe in the immutability of political relations and differences with the CPI(M) should not stand in the way of an alliance between

³¹Government of India, Election Commission: Report on the General Elections to Kerala Legislative Assembly-1982-Kerala, New Delhi, 1982.

them, if the need arises.³² Thus, bargaining with and threatening the major partner are ways which the small communal parties resort to protect their interests. Interestingly, SRP (which too is for the continuation of the prevailing reservation system) was in the UDF, along with NDP (who is opposed to the reservation system).

On the other side, Kerala Congress factions began pressurising the Congress to extract on important political or economic benefits. The party which represents the interests of a large body of Christian rubber planters took up cudgels against the central government's rubber import policy. The party began to show the regional colour too by asking for greater regional autonomy vis-à-vis centre. Note that the regional demands crop up only when they have a relation to the interest it represents. KCJ even launched an anti-centre agitation to win its demands.³³ After that, KCJ threatened to pull out of the UDF on the issue of providing title deeds to illegal encroachers (mainly Christians) on reserved forest lands. Mrs. Gandhi's intervention was sought and in spite of Congress(I) policy of forest preservation and eviction of encroachers, Mrs. Gandhi gave clearance for the legal ownership of 50,000 hectares of forest land illegally occupied.

The two Kerala Congress factions decided to merge before the 1984 Lok Sabha elections in order to gain an additional parliamentary seat to the two

³²Political Backdrop to Trivandrum Riots, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

³³Anita Pratap, "Will Joseph be a Judas", The Telegraph, Calcutta, 24 March, 1983.

already held by them. The Congress-I had been following a policy of supporting one faction against the other in order to ward off the strong communal presence generated by them.³⁴ To placate the League before the 1984 Lok Sabha elections, the government announced pension for Mullahs by sanctioning Rs 15 lakhs from the State Wakf Board. A special officer was appointed to study whether the Muslim community has been able to fill its legitimate quota of reservation.

In 1985, the CPI (M) took a decision to break with communal alliances and this forced AIML out of LDF. The beginning of this development can be traced to the hard stance the CPI (M) took against the Shariat and for the protection of the rights of Muslim women which foreclosed the possibility of continuing its alliance with AIML.³⁵ AIML had no option but to merge with IUML after a decade long hiatus to enter the UDF.³⁶

The UDF increasingly resorted to communalization of politics to stick to power with utter disregard for the long term implications of this for the state. Along with the communalization of budget by Kerala Congress, education too was communalized. "The Kerala Congress minister, T.M. Jacob made no secret of his objective of pushing privatisation at all levels of education by favouring his community with active support from the Church, perhaps the biggest

³⁴P.K.Menon, "Kerala Congress (Joseph) Unlikely to Quit UDF", The Telegraph, Calcutta, 28 May, 1987.

³⁵"Break with Communal Alliance", EPW, 13 April, 1985.

³⁶*Ibid.*

employer in the educational sector.... Jacob's doing was not confined to active support to the private sector but extended to active destruction of the public education system".³⁷ This resulted in the drain of pupils from public schools, rendering 8,000 government teachers surplus whose salaries were paid by the government while the newly sanctioned private schools were allowed full freedom in recruiting teachers at astonishingly high prices.

Under the influence of the League, the Congress-I allowed 2 banned Kuwaitis to enter Kerala without valid visas and were even made state guests. The League also forced UDF to persuade CBI to withdraw FERA violation case against it. The League, though disassociated itself from the All India Babri Masjid Conference's call for the boycott of Republic Day 1987, did not condemn the call, which caused consternation in the Congress-I. This shows how the League in Kerala works at cross purposes with the all-India leadership of the party on controversial issues.

With the announcement of 1987 Assembly elections, the state was witness to another round of communal bargaining of seats and concessions before the elections. NDP pulled out of the UDF over the non-implementation of 15% reservation in government jobs which was in the UDF manifesto of 1982. The government actually announced that there would be 15% reservation for the

³⁷"Kerala Says No to Communalization of Politics", EPW, 4 April, 1987.

economically backward among all the communities (not just the forward communities as NDP wanted) in addition to the existing 50% reservation based on caste and communal lines. IUML and SRP protested against this and the government backtracked to appease Muslims. SRP withdrew from the UDF on the charge of not being treated as an equal to the NDP. NDP was wooed back to the UDF by offering 9 seats in the elections and a promise that the reservation issue would be settled amicably by the next government. SRP too returned after concessions. Rajiv Gandhi wooed Latin Catholics of coastal belt by promising to make their leader Henry Austin, the Ambassador of India to Portugal.³⁸ He invited several Christian bishops to seek support for the UDF.³⁹

1987-1991 - The First Non-Communal Government

In the 1987 elections, the LDF won easily inspite of it's policy of not aligning with any communal party. The elections were a landmark in the political history of Kerala, for the first time a government without a communal party participating in it, came to power. It was hailed as a great victory for secular politics. LDF won 44.95% of the valid votes and 76 seats. Both the factions of KC put together won 6.68% of the votes and 9 seats, IUML won 7.90% of the votes and 15 seats, NDP 2.14% of the votes and 1 seat, SRP 1.13% of the votes

³⁸T.N. Nair, "Saffron Hues of Secularism", The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 11 April, 1987.

³⁹The Indian Express, New Delhi, 12 March, 1987.

and no seat.⁴⁰ The elections exploded the long held myth that Kerala Congress and Muslim League determine the victory or defeat of any front.

But the swing of only 1.2% of votes for the LDF is too narrow, to say that it was a victory for secular politics. Further, the CPI (M) using the slogan of 'Indianisation' and Vivekananda in its election campaign raised questions about the party catering to Hindu sentiments against minority communalism.⁴¹ There was definitely a Hindu backlash against the total surrender of UDF government to minority communalism and the BJP played a crucial role in the elections.⁴² The Nair community always aligned with the Christians but the militant economic communalism of the Christians (as for the privatisation of education) infuriated a section of the Nair community. While the SRP was wiped out in the elections (it was never a force to reckon with) and NDP's strength was decreased along with the Kerala Congress, Muslim League increased its influence marginally. Its hold especially in the Malappuram district remained as strong and entrenched as before. Further, the decline in Kerala Congress strength was only marginal mainly due to the split before the elections. Taking into account all these factors, it cannot be said definitely that the 1987 elections ensured the victory of secularism over communalism.

⁴⁰Raman Pillai, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

⁴¹The Indian Express, New Delhi, 4 March, 1987.

⁴²See the 4th Chapter.

But, the LDF government from 1987-1991 saw definitely a setback to the communal forces. For the first time, communal parties were divested of the power and pelf associated with participation in government. There was an institutionalisation of communalism all these years till 1987, especially in politics through association with governmental power. Now without this, communal parties found it difficult to promote their various constituencies through political power. So, what could be done at the best was to exert pressure on the government from outside.

On November 12, 1988, the NSS organised a mammoth demonstration which shook the capital of Kerala demanding reservation of 15% jobs to the economically backward and the rejection of Mandal Commission report.⁴³ KCJ agitated against the new export-import policy of the central government, while being still in the Congress-I led front. The party's grouse was that it would help the monopoly rubber dealers and tyre manufacturers and thus hurting the Christian middle farmers. The party wanted the Congress-I to accept demands of its farmers' manifesto. KCJ's running feud with KCM, losing of relevance as a result of playing second fiddle to Congress-I, and the denial of a Lok Sabha seat (Muvattupuzha) in 1989 parliamentary elections, all forced the party to leave the UDF in October 1989.⁴⁴ The party contested on it's own in the 1989

⁴³The Hindu, Madras, 13 November, 1988.

⁴⁴The Newstime, Hyderabad, 12 October, 1989.

parliamentary elections and received a drubbing, thus emphasising the inevitability of front politics in Kerala. KCJ had no option but to join either of the fronts. In 1990, the party openly declared that religion should be separated from politics.⁴⁵ But in actual practice, it has not been so. The CPI (M), in spite of its policy of not aligning with communal parties cleared the application of the Kerala Congress (Joseph) faction after keeping it in the abeyance for a while and declaring it anti-communal. The party was admitted to the National Front in 1991.

“The LDF’s rule proved to be a decisive break in the more than a decade long dynamics of communal politics and political degeneration in Kerala.”⁴⁶ It also checked the growth of majority communalism as minority communities were no longer as powerful as before. The District Council elections of 1991 saw the victory of LDF again and communal-casteist forces seemed no longer capable of swaying the electorate. Another loss in the elections would mean a wipeout of the communal parties. They began to look for greener pastures as the UDF was not proving to be one. League’s relationship with Congress-I had deteriorated from 1989, over the Ayodhya controversy and Mandal Commission recommendations which forced the party to leave the UDF, a momentous decision considering the fact that the League-Congress-I alliance had lasted for

⁴⁵The Blitz, Bombay, 19 February, 1990.

⁴⁶Thomas Isaac, Mohana Kumar, *op. cit.*, Kerala Elections, 1991, p. 2597.

over two decades. But after leaving the UDF, the League began to become an untouchable. The left stuck to its tactical line of having no link with any casteist or communal party.⁴⁷ The simultaneous announcement of Lok Sabha and Assembly elections forced the League to beat a hasty retreat. So, after just one and half months, League re-entered the UDF.⁴⁸ Here again the irreversibility of front politics is underscored. All the small parties have had to align with one front or the other.

The victory in the District Council elections had forced the Left to call for Assembly elections one year before its term ended. But, this election saw the open alliance of Congress-I and BJP.⁴⁹ This caused revulsion in the public regarding the cynical and immoral alliance. IUML and Christian community appeared that they will desert the UDF. Some of the Christian bishops asked the faithful to vote according to their conscience and underlined the threat of the BJP to minorities. Interestingly, even the League was taken in to confidence by the Congress-I regarding the tacit support to BJP in the Lok Sabha and one Assembly constituency in return for BJP support in 24 key Assembly constituencies.⁵⁰ The peculiar compulsions of coalition system in Kerala subject even the ideology of communalism to them. In spite of this, the UDF seemed set

⁴⁷The Hindu, Madras, 7 April, 1991.

⁴⁸"A Reunion of Convenience", Editorial, The Telegraph, Calcutta, 13 April, 1991.

⁴⁹ Thomas Isaac, Mohana Kumar, *op. cit.*, Kerala Elections, 1991, p. 2701.

⁵⁰A.V.Varghese, "Karunakaran Plays the Communal Card " The Deccan Herald, Bangalore, 6 March, 1995.

for another defeat. But, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi changed all this. The sympathy factor had a tremendous impact on the 5 districts in which there is a significant presence of Christian population, and a phenomenal 80% of the seats in these districts went to the UDF.⁵¹ The massive Nair-Syrian Christian communal consolidation in favour of the UDF in these districts and the three southern districts helped the UDF offset the good performance of the LDF in the northern districts. The UDF won an easy victory by getting 89 seats. KCM secured 9 seats, IUML 19seats, KCP and NDP 2 seats each.⁵² Thus, all the communal parties increased their strength. KCJ in LDF was the worst casualty of the elections because of the Christian consolidation in favour of the UDF. The party was reduced to 1 seat from the 5 held last time.

1991-1996 - Communal Parties Back to Power

The break in communal bargaining through participation in the government in the form of LDF government from 1987 to 1991 was again reversed through the return of UDF which included all the communal parties. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and the shift of BJP votes to UDF played a role in this. So, it was again back to another 5 years of communal parties serving their communities' interests by using the governmental machinery.

⁵¹Thomas Isaac, Mohana Kumar, *op. cit.*, Kerala Elections, 1991, pp. 2701-2702.

⁵²*Ibid.* p. 2702.

The UDF government in 1993 under pressure from IUML shifted weekly holiday in all Muslim majority schools from Sunday to Friday. After the demolition of Babri Masjid, the IUML in Kerala was in a dilemma regarding the continuation of the party in the Congress-I led alliance. The state League was opposed to the National President of the League, Ibrahim Sulaiman Sait's identification with the north Indian Muslims and his wanting to leave the UDF.⁵³ But, the state League knew that it would not be acceptable to the LDF and the best way to protect the interests of Muslims would be to continue in the government. But, Sait even voted for the no-confidence motion against the Narasimha Rao government against the wishes of the League in Kerala which wanted to abstain.⁵⁴

The League was facing a crisis after Babri Masjid demolition. There was also the threat of the growth of fundamentalism in the Muslim community epitomised by the Islamic Sevak Sangh.⁵⁵ In 1992, there was a split in the Sunni Ullema religious leadership of the dominant Islamic group in Kerala. A new group emerged in the Samastha Kerala Jamayyathul Ullema (backed by the IUML) which questioned the hold of IUML on the Muslim community. The leader of this group, Kanthapuram A.P. Abubacker Musaliar said, "the policy of

⁵³G.Prabhakaran, "IUML's Dilemma in Kerala", The Patriot, New Delhi, 25 January, 1993.

⁵⁴"Travails of League", Editorial, The Hindu, Madras, 25 October, 1993.

⁵⁵See the 4th Chapter.

forcing the entire community to support one political party was wrong in the Indian context where individuals have a right to choose which party to support".⁵⁶ Thus, the League in the post-1992 phase had to face erosion of some of its support.

Meanwhile, communal bargaining with the government continued. KCM forced the central government to regularise the illegal encroachment of Christian settlers in forest lands in Wynad and Idukki districts.⁵⁷ The revenue department handed over to the settlers all but a dozen or so varieties of trees covered by Kerala Preservation of Trees Act of 1986 which cost about Rs 25 to 30 crores for the government. KCM also continued to voice regional demands by criticising the policy of liberalisation of economy of the central government. KCM again split in 1994 due to personality feuds. So, the fourth faction, Kerala Congress (Jacob) was formed.

Sulaiman Sait's differences with the League in Kerala over the best way to accomplish the reconstruction of Babri Masjid persisted. Now the linking of a national question to the continuance of Muslim League in Kerala coalition caused problems.⁵⁸ And this finally led to the split caused by Sulaiman Sait forming a new party, the Indian National League (INL) in April 1994. It

⁵⁶ Quoted in N.P. Chekutty, "Ideological Tremors Split Sunni Ulema in Kerala", The Indian Express, New Delhi, 15 March, 1992.

⁵⁷ A.V.Varghese, "KCM is Sure of its Strength", The Deccan Herald, 25 October, 1994.

⁵⁸ V.K. Madhvankutty, "Muslim League and Secular Parties", Mainstream, 26 March, 1994.

announced that it will be a secular party and thus dropped 'Muslim' from its name.⁵⁹ But, the secular credentials were always in doubt as Sait had earlier supported the Islamic Sevak Sangh. INL claimed to represent all the depressed castes and classes. E.M.S. Namboodiripad even talked of more co-operation with INL in order to correct the fundamentalist elements in it. But the politburo of the CPI (M) immediately struck down the idea.⁶⁰

The reservation issue again became a bone of contention. The Kerala Government under Congress-I gave into communal pressures and refused to go according to the Supreme Court directive of identifying the creamy layer among the backward castes risking even a contempt of court. Finally, the government summoned an emergency session of the Assembly and enacted a law for protecting the reservation system in force in the state. All the parties including most in the Left Front were for the continuance of the system. Only the CPI(M) was for the identification of creamy layer.⁶¹

Before the 1996 elections, the UDF incurred the wrath of the Ezhavas and the Nairs. Ezhavas were angry over the Congress-I government's initiation of police action in the Sivagiri Mutt (samadhi of Sree Narayana Guru) to execute an High Court order to transfer power from one faction of swamis to another.⁶² The

⁵⁹E.M.S. Namboodiripad, The Frontline, July 29, 1994.

⁶⁰The Times of India, New Delhi, 14 January, 1996.

⁶¹The Hindu, New Delhi, 14 January, 1996.

⁶²A.V. Varghese, "Karunakaran Stirs Sivagiri Soup", The Deccan Herald, 20 October, 1995.

Nair community was angry over the shabby treatment meted out by the Congress-I to Nair Services Society (NSS). Besides this loss of traditional support, the splitting of Muslim votes because of new parties like INL and People's Democratic Party (PDP) all led to the defeat of UDF in the 1996 Assembly elections. The LDF won 80 seats, KCJ won 6 seats while Muslim League was reduced to 15 seats. The new government ignored the traditional norm of satisfying communal groups and regional aspirations while deciding the cabinet. Thus, the number of ministers was fixed at 14 and KCJ got only 1 ministerial berth.⁶³

A look at the twenty years from 1977 shows how the communal parties have built up their strength and clout by holding the balance of power. If the Muslim League held the balance in north Kerala, the Kerala Congress did so in the central districts. Because of the splintering of the party system, these small communal parties enjoyed strength far disproportionate to their size as they were wooed by the major parties. In the coalition system, chief minister's prerogative of picking his ministers was lost. The communal parties chose their own ministers with disastrous consequences for the state in many fields, for example, in education as we saw. Coconut cultivation which is the backbone of Kerala economy has been ravaged by disease. Parties like Kerala Congress have only

⁶³R. Krishnakumar, "The Comeback", The Frontline, 14 June, 1996.

catered to the cultivators of rubber or hill produce inspite of claiming to represent the interest of farmers.

While communal politics in this period conformed to the non-confrontational institutionalised bargaining model, almost all the secular benefits went to the minority communities leading to a backlash among the majority community and even showed signs of fundamentalism. Therefore, even communal politics based on the objective of securing secular benefits through peaceful processes led to the growth of fundamentalism as one community was left out and this was coupled with a stagnant economy which could not provide for the competitive model of communal politics. Thus, there were pointers towards the growth of an antagonistic communal politics based an religious goals in the eighties and nineties.

The left's vacillating politics regarding communal parties also gave communal politics further legitimacy. Thus, inspite of it's policy of not aligning with communal parties, the left admitted the not so secular Kerala Congress (Joseph) into it's fold and there were allegations that it had taken the help of INL in the last election.⁶⁴ Further, inspite of being strong critics of the government aided schools system, the left government has not done anything about it for the fear of private managements who have tremendous communal and monetary

⁶⁴K.M. Tampi. "The Hazards of Coalition Politics", The Hindu, New Delhi, 21 June, 1997.

clout. Even though coalition politics has seen the splintering of communal parties, since each splinter has been confident of a berth in the ministry and the protection of the interests it represents, there has not been a decline in the strength of splinter communal groups. It is to be seen to what extent the present left government will go in countering communalism and the Kerala model of competitive communal bargaining.

Chapter IV

EMERGENCE OF MAJORITY COMMUNALISM AND

BREAKS IN THE DOMINANT TREND

If the dominant trend in communal politics in Kerala has been the non-confrontational bargaining between communities for secular goods through peaceful processes, there arose on the fringes in the eighties and nineties a trend of confrontational communalism based on religious goals. Thus issues like, temple administration, cow slaughter, establishment of a Hindu nation, threat of Islam to Hinduism, building of mosques began to acquire importance. This began with the efforts of the majority community to forge a common Hindu consciousness through a militant ideology which resulted in the growth of fundamentalism in the Muslim community too by the nineties. Kerala, inspite of being a highly communalised society, did not witness any communal conflicts for a major part of this century. But from the late seventies, there has been a palpable increase in tension between communities and even a few incidents of communal violence. With important changes taking place in Kerala society like the impact of Gulf employment and expatriate remittances, there has been a resurgence of caste and community as channels of political action. As a result of the changes, "...Kerala has gone rapidly from a deeply traditional society to

a materialist one. The fact that the chief beneficiaries have been the formally disadvantaged castes and communities, coupled with the soaring rise in the price of land buildings and eligible husbands has fuelled communal jealousy, resentment and rivalry.”¹

Communalism which was dormant was now becoming overt raising questions about whether Kerala is entering a post-Marxist phase in history. The growth of fundamentalism among both Hindus and Muslims is dangerous for the communists. But as we have seen, the communists too through concessions made on their ideology have contributed to the situation. “In the teeming social political landscape of Kerala, politicians came to power pampering the communal feelings of minority religions leaving the Hindu majority a bitter receptacle of political hurt.”² The enormous growth of the minority communal parties and the clout they wield have seemingly caused a disenchantment among the majority community which has not been able to influence the socio-political life of Kerala as the minorities communities have. And this very discontent is what the Hindu militant ideology has tried to tap in the last decade and a half. The collapse of the ‘Kerala model’ of development not only revived communalism but also provided conducive conditions for the growth of fundamentalism.

¹Nossiter, *op. cit.*, Marxist State Governments in India, p. 192.

²Venu Menon, "Hindu Revival", The Illustrated Weekly, 5 June, 1986.

This chapter takes a look at the efforts of Hindu majority communalism to establish a foothold in Kerala, breaks in the dominant trend of peaceful communal politics, and growth of fundamentalism in the Islamic community.

Origins of Hindu Consciousness

The first attempt to bring all the Hindu castes of Kerala within a single umbrella came as far as in 1924 by the holding of a Hindu Maha Sammelan in south Malabar where resolutions were passed furthering temple entry, the stoppage of animal sacrifice and the abolition of untouchability.³ In the 1930s there was an attempt by the Travancore administration to foster a sense of Hindu consciousness that would paper over caste differences and counter State Congress opposition to the autocratic rule of Diwan Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, which failed to make any headway. But it was in 1949, for the first time idea of a united Hindu political forum was mooted. The emergence of Christian power in the state, especially in the State Congress was the immediate instigation for the formation of Hindu Mahamandalam.⁴ This was formed by R. Sankar and Mannathu Padmanabhan, the leaders of SNDP and NSS who founded a political party also - the Democratic National Congress. But soon, the fall of the Congress

³K. Jayaprasad, RSS and Hindu Nationalism: Inroads in a Leftist Stronghold, New Delhi, Deep and Deep, 1991, p. 130.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 139.

ministry in 1951 and differences between the two leaders led to the abandonment of the first attempt to form a united Hindu political form.⁵

RSS activity in Kerala began in 1942 itself with workers being dispatched to the main towns of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar but mainly concentrated in Malabar where the communists were very active and had a large percentage of Muslims.⁶ Communism was as alien as Islam to RSS ideology and had to be countered. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) had also begun its activities by 1952. But, it was hardly a force and in the 1967 Assembly elections had won under one percent of the total vote.⁷ RSS too in its first twenty-five years, remained just a marginal force as it failed to unite the Nair and Ezhava castes who not only had their powerful social associations but also were well linked with the major political parties. From the late sixties, the RSS began initiating organisations in various fields of activity like students, trade unionism, tribals, medical relief, women, intellectual culture etc. as a means of social penetration.⁸ In 1967, the Marxist government organised “Gopala Sena” (brainchild of the Marxist leader, A.K. Gopalan) to counter RSS. The decision of the government to provide pension to those (mainly Muslims) who participated in the Moplah rebellion

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

⁶V.R. Mani, "RSS Gained in Kerala After 1967", The Times of India, New Delhi, 5 September, 1988.

⁷Craig Baxter, Jana Sangh: A Biography of An Indian Political Party, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 323.

⁸Jayaprasad, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

drew the ire of RSS and made Marxists its main rival.⁹ RSS organised anti-Malappuram (Muslim majority) district agitation and the first major agitation in the form of Thali Temple restoration (it was destroyed by Tippu Sultan) in 1968 which enabled RSS to gain a lot of support among the Hindus. Only the restraint shown by the local Muslims helped defuse tensions following the agitation against the formation of Malappuram district.¹⁰ RSS was also suspected to be involved in the anti-Muslim riots of 1971 in Tellicherry.¹¹

1975-1982 - Non-Communal Factors and RSS Growth

The period of real growth of RSS in Kerala began from the year 1975. With the emergency, RSS was banned in the country. "They took part in many anti-government agitations during this period and this could be considered as a break through in its popular appeal in state politics."¹² 6,000 RSS men were arrested during the emergency. Interestingly, RSS found itself in the same camp as CPI(M) and keeping aside their rivalry, members of both worked together against the authoritarian regime of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The ban on RSS was lifted with the revocation of emergency. But, the co-operation with RSS had proved in a way suicidal for the Marxists whose cadres were exposed to a new

⁹Mani, *op. cit.*

¹⁰Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-84.

¹¹"RSS in Kerala", Editorial, People's Democracy, 19 April, 1981.

¹²Jayaprasad, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

philosophy and discipline. The spirit of sacrifice, courage and devotion to individual liberty shown by the sevaks made a strong impact on their Marxist co-workers. The RSS cadre thus attained respectability in the eyes of Marxists and ceased to be political untouchables.¹³ A string of problems began to crop up for the Marxists after this.

After the 1977 elections, BJS members could expand their scope of political activity as they now formed a part of the Janata coalition which came to power at the centre. RSS found the situation conducive for widening its influence. It continued to use religious symbols for whipping up communal passions. Thus, the Palukachi Mala Temple agitation in October, 1978 evoked protest in all parts of the state. The RSS received support from the NSS and SNDP too in this.¹⁴ Again, it tried to arouse Hindu sentiments in the predominantly Muslim district of Malappuram by organising collection of funds for providing "people's pension" for victims of Moplah rebellion of 1921. Because of the increased activities of the organisation, the government decided to prohibit weapons training and arms collection by the RSS in the state as such endangered peace and communal harmony and also prevented the renting of school buildings and premises for R.S.S. activities.¹⁵

¹³K.C. John, "RSS Erodes CPI(M) Base in Kerala", The Times of India, New Delhi, 2 June, 1981.

¹⁴Jayaprasad, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

¹⁵The Patriot, New Delhi, 5 November, 1978.

The five year period from 1977-1982 is a crucial period in the growth of RSS in the state of Kerala. The organisation which was a peripheral actor till the mid-seventies suddenly began to acquire a lot of importance in the politics of Kerala. Interestingly, and very significantly, this crucial phase of RSS growth was fuelled by non-religious reasons. And this factor was it's rivalry with the Marxists which had acquired epic proportions by the late seventies. From 1977-1980, there were an astonishing thousand political clashes between RSS and CPI(M) workers, resulting in the death of 35 persons.¹⁶ This intense rivalry stemmed from the fact the RSS had eroded CPI(M)'s ranks and made inroads into it's traditional strongholds. With the fall of the Janata government, the CPI(M) began to discern once again a revivalist Hindu force in RSS and bloody clashes resulted. RSS and it's ideology began to attract Marxist sympathisers from the backward castes and tribals in the Malabar region. RSS particularly emphasised on the equality of castes and the non-recognition of caste in it's functioning.¹⁷ The weaning away of Marxist sympathisers by RSS caused great concern in the CPI(M) about losing it's traditional strongholds.

The increasing militancy of trade unions attributed to the dominant Marxist Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) caused disenchantment among

¹⁶P. Aravindakshan, "RSS and CPI(M) Opt for Politics of Murder", The Indian Express, New Delhi, 11 November, 1980.

¹⁷James Chiriyankandath, "The Limits of Hindu Nationalism: The Kerala Experience", Paper Presented at the 14th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Copenhagen, 21-24 August, 1996, p. 8.

many wealthy businessmen including Christians who backed the RSS to counter the Marxists. They preferred the RSS sponsored labour federation, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh's emphasis on harmonious labour relations. If land owners took the help of RSS in protecting themselves against agricultural workers, petty traders and shop owners sought shelter under the RSS umbrella from the militancy of headload workers. The RSS was thought to be the only organisation with its physical training and discipline that could counter the Marxist militancy. In the beginning, it received patronage largely from among those deprived of their old privileges and properties. Later, the organisation began attracting a cross-section of the people mostly victims of Marxist high-handedness.¹⁸ RSS also began to gain a lot of sympathy. "An element of glamour and martyrdom came to be attached to the RSS when successive state governments began talk of suppressing the organisation."¹⁹

With the installation of a Marxist led government in 1980, there was an exacerbation of violence. There were 629 political cashes in the first three months of the LDF government.²⁰ RSS wanted to bring down the government led by its greatest enemy at any cost. The government could do nothing much regarding the deteriorating law and order. The Financial Express in its editorial

¹⁸Aravindakshan, *op. cit.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰The Indian Express, New Delhi, 9 April, 1980.

commented, “the dilemma facing the Marxists and it’s coalition partners is clear. After having accepted as a matter of policy, the right of the people to agitate, they can hardly deploy the police to deal with the situation.”²¹ The 1980-81 agitation by RSS against the LDF government gave it a political colour than a religious outlook. In 1981, the Kerala High Court quashed the government directive of 1978 which prevented the renting of school buildings and premises for RSS activities. This gave a fillip to the activities of RSS. After 1980, RSS-Marxist clashes spread from Cannanore in the north to the southern districts also. In the twenty-one months of LDF rule from January 1980 to October 1981, there were a total of 771 CPI(M)-RSS clashes in which 46 persons (23 each from RSS and CPI(M) died.²² Thus, the RSS thrived in Kerala mainly because of non-communal reasons in the period 1977 to 1982. The number of RSS shakhas increased from 1,500 in 1977 to 2,613 in 1982 while membership shot up from 35,000 to 45,900 in the same time.²³

1982-87 - Dynamic Period of Hindutva

The most dynamic period of the growth of Hindu communalism was to be in the five year period from 1982. “In Kerala, as elsewhere, the main thrust of RSS activity was the integration of the Hindus of the state into a united political

²¹“Violence in Kerala”, Editorial, The Financial Express, Bombay, 27 September, 1980.

²²The Indian Express, New Delhi, 26 March, 1980.

²³Jayaprasad, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

and social bloc. However, such an endeavour faced formidable obstacles. Of these, the most important were a regional tradition that to a significant extent transcended religious diversions; the presence of sizeable, and comparatively well integrated non-Hindu communities wielding considerable influence in public life; and the salience of both caste identities and class conscience in shaping politics.²⁴ The attempts made by RSS and other Hindu organisations in evolving a Hindu consciousness had not achieved much. It was in this light in April, 1982, RSS initiated a huge convention of Hindus called Vishal Hindu Sammelan in which lakhs of people participated and many Hindu organisations had come together.²⁵ The Sammelan tried to project an image of being not bound by any caste divisions.

The BJP which had started functioning in Kerala on April 16, 1980, meanwhile entered the electoral fray for the first time in the 1982 Assembly elections. But it received a drubbing, polling only 2.75% of the votes and losing deposit in all but two of the 68 constituencies contested.²⁶ The bad show was mainly because of the fact that the identification of RSS cadre with the BJP in Kerala was not strong and they also wanted to prevent their biggest enemy, the LDF from coming to power. So, when the equidistant theory towards the two

²⁴Chiriyankandath, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²⁵The Indian Express, New Delhi, 5 April, 1982.

²⁶Government of India, Election Commission-Report on the General Elections to Kerala Legislative Assembly - 1982-Kerala, New Delhi, 1982.

major political fronts began to appear futile, it was overcome by the last minute strategy of the rank and file to support the UDF against LDF. BJP also issued dictates regarding the withdrawal of its candidates from all the constituencies where the NDP (allied with UDF) had put up candidates. From 1980, NSS had been actively co-operating with and was also providing organisational facilities to the RSS. In the 1982 elections, there was even a clandestine alliance between RSS/BJP and the Congress.²⁷ Thus, in the splintered party system of Kerala, even the ideology of Hindu communalism had to make concessions. Interestingly, the Hindu forces were colluding with the same coalition of which the Muslim League and Kerala Congress were a part. At this point of time, for BJP/RSS, defeating the Marxists was the first priority.

In December, 1982, Trivandrum was rocked by unprecedented outbreak of Hindu-Muslim violence. This was a result of the Muslim League's ire over the inclusion of NDP in the UDF (ML and NDP did not see eye to eye on the reservation issue) and ML also began to feel that the Congress was veering towards the Hindu communalists.²⁸ The UDF government's hands were tied in taking immediate steps in countering the violence as it was directly or indirectly collaborating with the Muslim League, RSS and other communal elements.

²⁷Political Backdrop to Trivandrum Riots", *op. cit.*, p. 210.

²⁸*Ibid.*

As the 1982 Vishal Hindu Sammelan failed to bring about any kind of dramatic Hindu consolidation, there needed a new kind of activism to make further progress. In April, 1983, controversy erupted over the alleged discovery of an ancient cross at Nilakkal within the precincts of the Aiyappan temple at Sabarimala. The Christians under the leadership of the clergy pressed for the building of a church at the place. And the government under Christian political pressure allotted ten acres of land for the construction of the church. This evoked strong communal passions. RSS and other Hindu groups formed the Nilakkal Action Council.²⁹ For three months there were agitations and demonstrations led by the sanyasis. Communal peace in the state was gravely threatened. Finally, the situation was saved when the ecclesiastical heads of various Christian denominations decided not to proceed with the construction at the demanded site.³⁰

This marked the explosive point of relationship between the Hindu and Christian communities of Kerala. After this incident, RSS was emboldened. Many Christians began to perceive that the RSS was against them. In some places, Christians began to organise Christian Youth Movements (CYM) on the lines of RSS.³¹

²⁹Ayyappa Prasad, "A Mystery Cross Rocks Kerala", The Sunday Observer, Bombay, 5 May, 1983.

³⁰The Indian Express, New Delhi, 22 June, 1983.

³¹Ajith Pillai, Ayyappa Prasad, "Raising Battalions for the RSS and Muslim League", The Sunday Observer, New Delhi, 27 April, 1986.

Furthered by the success of the three month Nilakkal agitation, RSS decided to launch a political forum to fight the 1984 Lok Sabha elections called the Hindu Munnani (Hindu Front). Even though NSS and SNDP participated in the 1982 Vishal Hindu Sammelan, their political formations, NDP and SRP were against the RSS sponsored Nilakkal agitation as they were a part of the UDF government.³² Their opposition forced RSS to think of a political outfit. After 1984, RSS introduced a new idea of building up a united Hindu vote bank which could not only protect the interests of the Hindus, but also arrest the growing power of minority communalism.³³ Animosity between the Nairs and Ezhava leaders in the state had affected adversely the efforts of RSS to unify the Hindus. Further, the Hindu caste parties, NDP and SRP were big failures. With the entry of the Hindu Front (in partnership with BJP), there was further strengthening and polarisation of communal politics in the state.

From 1982, the question of temple administration in Kerala had acquired a lot of significance. The political administration and mismanagement of temples resulted in the dilapidation of many temples in the state. The Hindu Front manifesto not only demanded the non-political administration of temples, but also others like prevention of communalization and commercialisation of education, banning cow slaughter, reservation for the economically

³²The Week, Kottayam, 31 July, 1983.

³³Jayaprasad, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

disadvantaged, etc.³⁴ The Front was strongly opposed to the NDP and SRP which according to it could not represent Hindus or for that matter their own castes. The communal decisions taken by the government before the 1984 Lok Sabha elections to please the Muslim League³⁵ also acted as a strong platform for the Front in its fight against minority appeasement. The Front's main strategy was to make a breakthrough in southern and central Kerala where there was no legacy of Hindu-Muslim tension. But, nothing of this sort happened and the BJP-Hindu Front won only 3.9% of the votes in the 1984 Lok Sabha elections.³⁶ Thus, the consolidation of Hindu consciousness did not take place as the poll results showed. But, the Hindu Front candidate, Kerala Varma Raja received more than 1.1 lakh votes in Trivandrum. The government in order to appease Hindus declared its intention to start a Sanskrit university at Kalady and also announced grants for reconstruction of number of temples in Malabar.³⁷

The RSS and Hindu-Front continued its activities. They agitated against the state government spending money on what was a religious visit of the Pope to the state and also the building of a rostrum for the purpose on the beach where the Hindus hold one of their annual festival.³⁸ In 1986, the Hindu Sangamom

³⁴ Jayaprasad, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-47,

³⁵ See the 3rd Chapter

³⁶ General Elections to Lok Sabha, 1984, Details of Elections-Kerala State, Election Commission, Government of India, New Delhi, 1984.

³⁷ The Organiser, 8 March, 1987

³⁸ The Indian Express, New Delhi, 17 January, 1986

was held in Kerala on the sixtieth anniversary of the RSS which called for a Hindu renaissance.³⁹ RSS was particularly angry at the government not keeping a tab on the enormous amount of foreign funds which flow in for the Christian and Muslim religious institutions, the accounts of which were not open to the public. By 1986, the Church flush with foreign funds owned 2,500 schools, 70 colleges and 60 hospitals in the state.⁴⁰ Whenever the Church's institutional interests were threatened, it invoked minority rights and sought protection. All this caused consternation among the Hindus. Another issue which the RSS took up was the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee's plan to boycott the Republic Day celebrations. Even though the League in Kerala disassociated itself from the call, RSS tried to arouse communal passions in Kerala on the issue and organised state-wide demonstrations against the call.⁴¹

In the 1987 Assembly elections, for the first time RSS-BJP decided not to shift votes to the Congress to defeat the communists. The continued pro-minority stance of Congress had led to this stance of Hindu forces. Thus, the equidistant theory (from both the fronts) was put into practice in this elections. As a result, the BJP-HF combination significantly increased its share of votes from 2.75% in the 1982 elections to 6.75% in this elections.⁴² The presence of the BJP-Hindu

³⁹Venu Menon, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹The Indian Express, New Delhi, 1 February, 1987.

⁴²The Frontline, 18 April, 1987.

Front alliance was thus a major factor which influenced the poll outcome in at least fifty Assembly constituencies.⁴³ The Hindu disenchantment with the UDF government's minority appeasement policy resulted in some consolidation of votes for the BJP-HF combination. In seven Assembly constituencies, it secured about 19% of the votes. NDP's and SRP's fortunes were damaged by the increase in votes for BJP-HF. The alliance showed its strength in the districts of Kasergode, Kozhikode and Trivandrum. In Kerala, where 1-2% of votes separate the victor from the defeated, BJP-HF's improved show affected the outcome of the elections and led to the defeat of the Congress led UDF. Thus, the most dynamic period of the growth of Hindutva forces culminated in its best show at the polls.

Further Clashes with Marxists

After the 1987 elections, the Hindu Front was wound down and absorbed into the BJP and it shifted its activities to the social sphere. RSS no longer gave the importance which it gave to HF before, as the victory of the left demanded a strong ideological opposition which the HF with its regional limitations could not provide.⁴⁴ The emphasis shifted to the BJP, and Hindu forces in Kerala began to increasingly identify themselves with the VHP-led Ramjanambhoomi

⁴³The Indian Express, New Delhi, 26 March, 1987.

⁴⁴Jayaprasad, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

campaign. But, the installation of a left front government was a setback to the forces of majority communalism. With no minority communal party in the government, BJP's main complaint of minority appeasement was removed. It was again back to the phenomenon of violent clashes between RSS and Marxist cadres. In the first 6 months of LDF rule, there were fifty incidents of violence, with 8 BJP/RSS workers being killed.⁴⁵ While the RSS blamed the CPI(M) for the violence, as a new RSS worker in Kerala means one member lost from CPI(M),⁴⁶ the CPI(M) blamed RSS for resorting to violence as its leaders became frustrated in their effort to become the driving force in an emerging national alternative to the Congress.⁴⁷ The toll in the violence went up to 90 lives in the first 18 months. E.M.S. Namboodiripads' statement asking party cadres to take up arms to fight RSS compounded the situation. Finally, truce was called for by the CPI(M).⁴⁸ The hard stance taken by the left against communalism forced all the communal forces to come together again. Thus, the RSS and VHP tried to launch a second liberation struggle against the left government and in this they were ironically supported by the hard-core of the Muslim League and other UDF

⁴⁵"RSS-Marxist Violence", Editorial, The Telegraph, Calcutta, 25 December, 1987.

⁴⁶G.Prabhakaran, "CPI(M)- RSS Clashes Cause Concern", The Patriot, New Delhi, 26 September, 1988.

⁴⁷E.M.S. Namboodiripad, "Facts versus Fables on RSS in Kerala", People's Democracy, 25 September, 1988.

⁴⁸"Trend Setting Truce", Editorial, The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 14 September, 1988.

constituents.⁴⁹ Protesting against the politicisation of temple administration, Temple Protection Councils were formed.

The threat of a greater enemy in the form of the left forced BJP to again clandestinely collude with the UDF. In the 1989 parliamentary elections, the BJP had switched its line of campaigning towards the end with appeals to defeat the LDF candidates. In fact, “the VHP went so far as to openly announce that Hindu votes be cast for the UDF where BJP candidates were not likely to win, which effectively meant all constituencies”.⁵⁰

The structural exigencies of the coalition system, presence of a strong ideology in the form of communism, all led now and then to the peculiar phenomenon of communal votes coalescing across communities forgetting their differences in Kerala. But, such an alliance is not stable and breaks up immediately when the threat to communalism is removed. Thus, the ideology of communalism is also subject to a variety of factors in Kerala.

In the 1991 District Council elections, the BJP did not shift its votes to the UDF and thus recorded 7.03% share of votes, the highest for the party so far.⁵¹ But in the 1991 Assembly and Lok Sabha elections, there was again an understanding between the UDF and BJP, leading to the transferring of BJP

⁴⁹G.Prabhakaran, "LDF Government Faces Communal Offensive", The Patriot, New Delhi, 5 July, 1988.

⁵⁰Anon, "Kerala: Temporary Communal Coalition", EPW, 9 December, 1989, pp. 2685-86.

⁵¹Chiriyankandath, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

votes. Thus, the BJP could poll only 4.7% of the votes compared to the 6.57% in 1987 elections. Such loss of support could not be but explained for the fact of committed BJP votes being switched over to UDF candidates to defeat the LDF,⁵² and to gain UDF support for an RSS-linked independent in an Assembly seat. It is ironic that BJP's policy helped Muslim League the most. "BJP, professedly the most inveterate enemy of the League has contributed most to its electoral success",⁵³ and thus the League won 19 Assembly seats, its highest in the electoral history. In spite of UDF support, the BJP could not win an Assembly seat and the new UDF government again had minority communal parties as its constituents thus providing ground for them to hold Congress-I to ransom on various issues. Thus the BJP policy of supporting UDF backfired.

Communal Violence

With the growth of majority communalism and the resultant backlash against it in the form of Islamic fundamentalism (characterised by the Islamic Sevak Sangh (ISS),⁵⁴ there was an unprecedented break in the non-confrontational model of communal politics. In October 1990, as BJP national president L.K. Advani's rathayatra was undertaken to Ayodhya, the state

⁵²Thomas Isaac, Mohana Kumar, *op. cit.*, Kerala Elections, 1991, p. 2703.

⁵³G.S, Bhargava, "BJP in Kerala", *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 16 July, 1991.

⁵⁴See Next Sub-section of this Chapter.

president, K. Raman Pillai conducted the 'Jana Sakthi' (People's power) procession through Kerala. There were riots following this, and two persons were killed in police firing.⁵⁵ On December 16, 1991, when Murli Manohar Joshi, the BJP president started the Ekta Yatra from Trivandrum, there were riots in Palghat between Hindus and Muslims. There was conflict between Christians and Hindus too on April 19, 1992, in Quilon district following a dispute over the use of mike in a church.⁵⁶ The most violent communal clashes occurred after the emergence of ISS. Six people died in Trivandrum in July, 1992, following the stoning of RSS volunteers and four died in Cochin in October, 1992, after the ISS chairman Abdul Nazar Madani was released from hospital (he had been injured in a bomb attack). After the destruction of Babri Masjid, twelve people were killed and both the RSS and ISS were banned.⁵⁷ Between October, 1990, and December, 1992, 30 people died in such communal conflicts compared to just five in previous three decades.⁵⁸ Even though, the figure is insignificant compared to the other states, yet for a state like Kerala having known no communal violence, this was exceptional.

This growth of fundamentalism is the result of long process of communalization along with various factors causing changes in the socio-

⁵⁵George Mathew, "Communal Fervour", The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 18 June, 1992.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷Chiriyankandath, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 11.

economic structure of Kerala. The influx of Gulf money has contributed to the enrichment of Muslims in particular and this has led to the spawning of mosques and Arabic institutions. Funds flowing in for religious institutions have exacerbated the ugly and virulent assertion of religious identities at the cost of placid traditional religiosity which has exaggerated the importance of fundamentalist organisations. The stagnation in the economy has meant that increasingly people are not able to meet their aspirations which are high because of the existence of a well developed social sphere. This has led to frustration and discontent and increasing recourse to communalism and fundamentalism. “All the three religions have departed in the recent times from their earlier emphasis of establishing schools, colleges, technical institutes, hospitals, etc. which were competing as centres of excellence for the entire community. Now the money flowing into religious hands is being utilised to erect structures and symbols which display each one’s wealth and glory to the envy and anger of others.”⁵⁹ But this growth of fundamentalism in Kerala has remained at the fringes and has not become the dominant trend. As a result, all the communal conflicts were localised and did not have state-wide repercussions.

By 1992-93, the number of RSS shakhas and swayam sevaks however increased to 4,300 and 70,000 from 95 and 1,200 in 1947.⁶⁰ Similarly, the

⁵⁹Mathew, *op. cit.*, Communal Fervour.

⁶⁰Chiriyankandath, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

membership of BJP increased to 4,15,434 in 1992-93 from 1,200 in 1967 which the BJS had.⁶¹ But, this strength has not been enough to be translated into major electoral gains in Kerala. In the Sivagiri Mutt controversy, RSS-BJP supported police action to transfer power from one faction of swamis to another. The RSS tried to bring the mutt under its control. This aroused communal passions in the state. Namboodiripad called BJP's role in Sivagiri as a part of the continuing attempt by Hindutva forces to take control of various Indian social movements.⁶²

The last months of 1995 and the early 1996 saw a series of attacks by the RSS on Christian Pentecostal workers and conventions. The provocative speeches by Pentecostal Evangelists, opposition of upper caste Hindus to Dalit Christian reservation campaign, conversion of Hindus attending Christian spiritual conventions, all led to these attacks.⁶³ RSS-BJP also wanted to defeat the UDF in the 1996 Assembly elections by driving a wedge between Christians and Hindus as in 1987. Thus, in the 1996 Assembly elections, the UDF was defeated and it did not get any help from the BJP. In spite of using the front of a Bharathiya Labour Party (BLP) to appeal to backward class votes, the BJP-BLP combine won only 5.7% of the votes in the elections, an increase from the 1991

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² T.N. Gopakumar, "Unfortunate Caste Divide", The Statesman, Calcutta, 12 January, 1996.

⁶³ A.V. Varghese, "Playing a Different Communal Card", The Deccan Herald, Bangalore, 9 February, 1996.

elections, but did not match the 1987 performance.⁶⁴ Needless to say, the party did not win any Assembly seat.

Limitations of Hindutva

The majority communalism of RSS-BJP has not been able to make any significant inroads in Kerala. While, the Hindutva forces have made significant strides in the eighties and nineties in Kerala compared to the earlier decades, this has not been enough to make them a strong force. And, as we have seen, the growth of RSS has not been entirely an exclusive result of its ideological acceptance or the impact of Hindu nationalism, but largely due to strong conflicts with Marxists and anti-minority communalism etc. Even though, the Hindu nationalist vote quadrupled between 1982 and the 1991 District Council elections, this increase in support has been thinly spread and mainly concentrated in districts like Kasergod and Trivandrum, where the Hindu forces' strength can be explained due to sub-regional factors.⁶⁵ Kasergod, bordering Karnataka, was a part of the South Canara district of Madras until 1956. In Kasergod taluk of the district, two-fifths of the population is constituted by non-Keralite Tulu, Kannada, Konkan and Marathi speakers, and this area has a grouse of being ignored by the state governments who did not do anything about the linguistic

⁶⁴Malayala Manorama, Kochi, 10 June, 1996.

⁶⁵Chiriyankandath, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

minorities' development.⁶⁶ BJP's strength is mainly among the non-Keralites in the area and even the RSS shakhas are controlled by the Karnataka State Committee. Karnataka is the only state in south India where the BJP has considerable strength. Similarly, Trivandrum was the capital of the erstwhile Hindu princely state of Travancore with a marked tradition of 'Hindu consciousness'. Also, the empowerment of Muslims and lower caste people at the cost of caste-Hindu families who in the pre-independence era depended on the princely state for their livelihood, caused frustration in the latter group. Not surprisingly, Trivandrum has been the main focus of RSS activity in south Kerala. BJP has done better than other areas in the state in the districts of Malappuram, Kozhikode (the two with highest proportion of Muslims) and Pathanamthitta, the site of the Sabarimala temple and centre of the Nilakkal controversy in 1983. Thus, the RSS-BJP support in Kerala has been too thinly spread out.

The Hindutva forces attempt to foster a 'Hindu consciousness' in Kerala has not succeeded to any significant extent. Strong opposition comes not only from the left, but also from minority Christian and Muslim communalism. While the latter has more or less conformed to the dominant trend of competitive communal bargaining, the former has even resorted to violence causing problems not seen in the state before. The attempt to build a community consciousness

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 14.

based on spiritual and religious values rather than on temporal and secular interests by the Hindutva ideologists has not succeeded in Kerala. Further, a united Hindu consciousness has met the strongest opposition from the Hindu castes, the Nairs and Ezhavas who are well-entrenched not only through their caste associations but also parties. Even though the RSS and BJP have striven hard to rise above caste identification and incorporate even the lower castes within their fold, the local RSS leadership remains predominantly upper caste in origin and the proximity of Sangh Parivar facilities to temples, projects their caste-Hindu orientation.⁶⁷

The fractured polity and the coalition system in Kerala has put the Hindu nationalists in a conundrum. In a state dominated by two fronts, the BJP has failed to emerge as a strong third force. At the most, it has some nuisance value becoming the deciding factor when the contest between the two fronts is very close. The coalition system has made the RSS-BJP to compromise on its 'Hindu' credentials as we have seen. Many a time, they are colluding with the same parties to which they are opposed. And they cannot align formally with any front without seriously compromising on the Hindutva ideology. Thus, in the near future the BJP may make its debut in Kerala Assembly, but there seems to be no significant shift towards majority communalism based on religious ideology.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 9.

Fundamentalism in the Muslim Community

The growth of majority communalism in the eighties and spreading of wings of RSS led to a backlash in the Islamic community in the form of fundamentalism. Thus, the militant Islamic Sevak Sangh (ISS) was formed in 1991 with the sole aim of protecting Muslims against the RSS.⁶⁸ The founder of ISS was Abdul Nazar Madani and the appeal of the organisation lay in the bold and fundamentalist approach and willingness of the leadership to resort to violence in critical situations.⁶⁹

Other than the growth of RSS, the factor which led to the strengthening of ISS was the Muslim League's soft stand on Ayodhya. The League, as we have seen, conforming to the dominant trend of communal politics in Kerala has always taken a moderate stand on religious issues and has emphasised on the secular interests of the community. But, even this securing of secular interests through participation in the government for almost thirty years did not benefit all sections of the Muslim community and were cornered away by the upper and middle class Muslims. Thus, these conditions were adequately exploited by the ISS. "The original support base of the ISS comprised the young, the unemployed

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶⁹The Deccan Herald, Bangalore, 26 July, 1992.

and those with fundamentalist leanings.”⁷⁰ Disgruntled Muslims who were convinced that the League had betrayed their interests for the sake of power flowed to the ISS, whose ranks burgeoned. Another weakness of the League was that it was always identified with the Muslims of north Kerala. Further, RSS was making strong inroads into south Kerala. Thus, the majority of ISS following was “among the youth from the southern districts of the state where Muslims live in pockets”.⁷¹

Madani betrayed the fundamentalist leanings of his organisation in no uncertain terms. He used to run an establishment called Jamia Anwar-ul-Islam which provided accommodation to poor Muslims pursuing higher studies and also had to undergo religious indoctrination at the same time. Madani’s speeches were very provocative intended to arouse communal passions. He promised that his outfit will prevent the “impregnation of Muslim wombs by Hindu seed”.⁷² In 1992, the ISS spread the rumour that the Babri Masjid had been demolished (actually it was a small mosque in Faizabad that had been destroyed). This led to spontaneous hartals and sporadic violence in Thrissur, Ernakulam, Kollam and Kottayam districts.⁷³ If in the past, issues like the status of Urdu, the fate of Aligarh Muslim University, the Kashmir situation, Ayodhya controversy rarely

⁷⁰Raj Chonker, "ISS Bomb Ticking Away", The Deccan Herald, Bangalore, 19 August, 1992.

⁷¹Benny Joseph, "Politics of Communalism: Lessons from Kerala", Mainstream, 17 October, 1992.

⁷²Quoted in The Deccan Herald, Bangalore, 26 July, 1992.

⁷³*Ibid.*

ever caused a ripple in Kerala, with the emergence of fundamentalist organisations like ISS and RSS, these began to dominate discussions on inter-communal relations. ISS was actively involved in the incidents of communal violence in 1992. Interestingly, in the beginning, leaders of Muslim League like Ibrahim Sulaiman Sait and even the Congress-I supported the ISS (to act as a counter to the League).⁷⁴ With the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the ISS along with the RSS were banned. The ISS was dissolved after this.

In 1994, the ISS resurrected itself in a politically correct fashion through a new party called the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Madani now wanted to make it a broad-based party of Muslims, Dalits and backward castes. Thus, the peaceful communal bargaining in Kerala does not allow fundamentalist organisations preaching violence to survive for long. Even though Madani has not abandoned his fundamentalist ideology, he has become more mellowed with the formation of PDP. It even backed the party formed by the expelled CPI(M) leader, K.R. Gowri for some time as a part of a third front.

PDP made its electoral debut in the Guruvayoor Assembly seat by-election and made a strong statement winning 14,000 votes and thus leading to the defeat of the League candidate.⁷⁵ The presence of PDP and the other Muslim party, INL has upset the chances of the League after 1994. PDP wanted the

⁷⁴The Times of India, New Delhi, 1 January, 1993.

⁷⁵"Fallout from Guruvayoor", Editorial, The Hindustan Times, 2 June, 1994.

League to join it as a third force.⁷⁶ Thus, it was willing to bury its' grouse against the League (for not protecting Muslim interests) because of electoral compulsions. In the Sivagiri mutt controversy too, the PDP intervened by supporting one faction and deploying it's men for protecting the mutt. Madani argued that "any Dalit or minority can interfere in Sivagiri to defend it's secular bent against upper caste fascists".⁷⁷ In the 1996 elections, the PDP tried to workout an arrangement with the Muslim League and INL, but this did not materialise. PDP, even though did not win any seat played a major part in the defeat of Muslim League candidates and the latter's tally was reduced to 15.

Fundamentalism in the Muslim community is again a secondary trend which is confined to a section of the community. The dominant trend as we saw is communal bargaining based on peaceful means. Even a fundamentalist outfit like PDP has become much mellowed compared to it's earlier version, the ISS. The PDP too has been constrained by the coalitional compulsions and has used it's 'blackmail potential' to bargain for concessions with either of the fronts. It has even tried to rise above the image of being a representative of Muslim interests alone and has talked of a broader coalition including Dalits and backward castes. Thus, even inspite of the growth of fundamentalism in the

⁷⁶A.V.Varghese, "Opportunism of Fronts Exposed", The Deccan Herald, Bangalore, 10 October, 1995.

⁷⁷Varghese, *op. cit.*, "Karunakaran Stirs Sivagiri Soup".

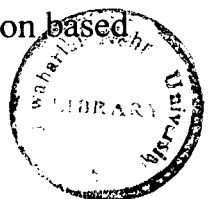
eighties and nineties, it has remained on the periphery and tactics like engineering communal violence has not resulted in electoral gains in Kerala as in other parts of the country.

Conclusion

Kerala has acted as the standard of reference in many spheres of activity for the rest of the country. Its model of economic development has aroused interest the world over. In politics too, the state has a number of firsts to its credit like the first non-Congress government in the country, the first elected communist government anywhere in the world, the first coalition government etc. Having initiated a multi-party system very early, the state has witnessed periods of instability very frequently. Communal politics too has been very different from that which has been practised in the rest of the country. As a result, in spite of being a highly communalised society, communal conflicts have been rare. While communalism in Kerala too works under the assumption that members of a community have the same social political and economic interests, and thus a conservative ideology, there has been no use of religious or spiritual symbols to virulently arouse the passions of the communities. The emphasis has been on the attainment of secular goals through the peaceful assertion of community consciousness. Thus, the distinguishing feature of communal politics in Kerala was the absence of communal conflicts. And in spite of the aberrations in the eighties and nineties, we can still safely conclude that non-antagonistic peaceful communal politics is still the norm in Kerala.

The existence of strong secular trends along with communalism is another interesting feature of Kerala. The communist movement in the beginning did a lot to break caste and community barriers and initiate political mobilisation based

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on class. But, the tactical alliances entered into with the communal parties in order to overcome the splintering of the party system not only dealt a blow to the left movement but also gave a new lease of life to communalism and casteism. Even progressive measures like land reforms unwittingly led to the desertion of the embourgeoisied farmers from the communist fold.

Initially, the politics of Kerala developed through the communal organisations. As discussed in the previous chapters, these communal organisations had the secular interests of the communities in mind which in the long run had begun to benefit everyone. With independence and establishment of a democratic government, there was a decline in the importance of communal organisations as people now had a government through which their aspirations could be satisfied. Further, with the growing economic differentiation within communities, it was becoming increasingly difficult to mobilise on the basis of communities. But, with the crisis in economy from the mid-seventies and fissures in the Kerala model of development, the ability of the state to fulfil its obligations have been seriously compromised. This has led to the revival of the importance of communal parties and organisations. Stagnation of the left has further provided scope for the deradicalization of politics. Unlike in the fifties and sixties, the eighties and nineties have seen a significant reduction in the number of mass movements for revolutionary changes in the society. Social changes like the economic remittances from Gulf migrants have had widespread repercussions on the society and polity of Kerala. The social and economic crises that Kerala has been going through has provided the adequate conditions for the

continuation of communal politics.

In the social sphere, there has been a growing degeneration of popular culture. The cultural industry churns out mountains of populist-soft-porno thriller literature, soap operas and films which cater to the lowest common denominator in contrast to the progressive literature and theatre movement which characterised the fifties and sixties. Gulf money was not invested in production but just contributed to a consumption boom. The resultant stagnation in economy has forced the people to go back to communal and caste channels for securing their interests.

The peculiar social structure of Kerala, in which all the communities have more or less equal strength and the minorities are concentrated in a few districts has contributed to the development of communal politics. The left has not at all been able to make inroads into the Christian and Muslim communities. The Christian Church and Muslim clergy have been virulently anti-Communist. The percentage of Christian and Muslim supporters of the Communist parties is very low. A large majority of the Christians and Muslims are supporters of the communal parties like Kerala Congress and Muslim League or the Congress. The strong interests which these minorities have developed in the owning of educational institutions, hospitals, etc. also militate against an alliance with the communists who are against privatisation. Even when such alliances have been entered into by the minority communal parties for the maximisation of secular interests, they have not been long-lasting because of class differences. Thus, it has been easy for the communal parties to align with the Congress rather than the

communists because of class similarities. Even though the hold of religion on these communities is very strong, political mobilisation is not based on religious. As we have seen, the minority communal parties do not have a religious agenda, although they take up religious issues sometimes. The communal parties have grown in strength using their position in the coalition structure to wrest concessions from the bigger parties.

The appeasement of the minority communal parties by the major parties led to majority communalism in the eighties. But, the growth of Hindutva forces was also aided by non-religious factors like the violent confrontation with the Marxists. Majority communalism has not been able to make any significant inroads in Kerala as the Hindu community is internally divided and the major castes, the Nairs and the Ezhavas have great economic differences . Further, communalism based on religious ideology too has failed to capture the imagination of the people of Kerala. Thus, communal politics based on orchestrated communal riots has not earned electoral dividends in Kerala. Historical factors also have a role in this, unlike in other parts of the country, Islam and Christianity made their first entry into Kerala through peaceful means and as a result, since centuries, people belonging to the three communities have lived peacefully. Thus, a sudden shift to an ideology of communal antagonism based on religious differences has not worked.

Communalism has been subject to the structural specificities of coalition system. Thus, we have seen various kinds of interesting alliances like the BJP and the UDF (which included the Muslim League). This is one of the reasons

why there are no permanent rivalries among the communities. Even the communal parties profess secularism, but in actual practice, it has not been so. Ideology has been given a short shrift forcing political commentators to say that “ideology has no relevance in Kerala politics”.¹ Thus, the polarised categorisation of secular and communal agents has been “not on the basis of ideological parameters but based on the structural alliance tradition”.² As noted, the dabbling of communal interests in politics itself gave to a very early rise of multi-party system in Kerala.

The argument that Kerala has become secularised through the communal organisations’ emphasis is not entirely true. Even though the communal organisations had the secular interests of the communities in mind, they played an important role in the ingraining of community consciousness in the society. As we have seen, the communal organisations after the initial period of fighting against obscurantist religious practices and other feudalistic tendencies, degenerated into conservative and reactionary forces which wanted to prevent a class struggle. So, what has happened is that an emphasis on secular interests by the communal organisations has led to peaceful competitive bargaining model of communal politics and not a transcendence of conservative communal interests to a more radical class-based politics. Such a transition has become even more difficult with a stagnation in the forces of production and exhaustion of the

¹ K.V. Varghese, " Party Ideology and Coalition Politics", N. Jose Chander (ed.), Dynamics of State Politics, Kerala, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers, 1986.

² P.J. Sajimon, Politics of Secularism: The Case of Kerala, Dissertation Submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1992, p. 29.

communist movement. Thus, the redeeming feature of communal politics in Kerala is that, it has by and large conformed to non-violent and non-antagonistic bargaining between communities for primarily secular goals. Only time can tell for how long such a model can sustain itself.

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