

The Communists and The Consolidation of Workers' Movement in Travancore

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By the end of 1945 economy of Travancore was at its serious predicament. The impact of Second World War only resulted in further hardships to the working class. However, the Communists took this as a favourable situation. From the very beginning of 1946, there was an active wave of strikes in the State with the main demand for bonus. In the meantime, the All-Travancore Trade Union Congress was vigorously coordinating the labour unions in the State, resulting in the growth of the labour movement. The labour force, now, demanded a self-government for the State.

Organised strikes

Following the War, there was scarcity of food grains and a steep rise in the prices of foodstuffs and other essential commodities. The sea-borne trade with the United Kingdom and the neutral countries in coir products came to a standstill.¹ Tormented with poverty and penury, the working class was receptive to any ideology that could provide them means to get away from these acute economic distress. Thus the spirit of socialism and revolution inculcated by the leftist leaders had a wide appeal among the workers.²

After the War ended, the purchasers of coir goods especially from USA were showing a tendency to bargain for prices and insist on quality goods. This changed the trend of coir goods in the international markets. During the war they did not bargain for prices or insist on quality. Anything could be sold during the war. In America, whose ceiling prices were still operative, purchasers seemed to expect a fall in price due to the cessation of war hostilities. The result was that they seemed to watch for some time and to purchase only their immediate requirements. They therefore made counter offers for reduction in prices against the wishes of local manufacturers. These facts

seemed to be the causes of reduction in the value of orders received in Travancore.³ The Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers' Union, however, suggested to the government the recognition of the entire coir trade. The reduction in orders for coir goods seriously affected the local coir factories in Alleppy-Sherthalai area. In fact, when the War ended nearly fifty to sixty per cent of the labourers were unemployed.

Since the prices of foodstuffs and other essential commodities rose high, poverty and starvation became rampant. In Alleppy town, the cost of a standard meal became one rupee, which was only one and a half anna before the war.⁴ Thus the shortage of food that prevailed during the war did not abate even after the end of it. To make matters worse, there were irregularities in the ration system.

By 1940's labour strikes became a common feature in Travancore. The strike movement not only explained the solidarity of the working class but also the influence of leftist forces in them. In 1940 the labour force proposed to launch a general strike. The police, however, maintained that a general strike of the labourers would be a failure.⁵ But soon the administration exercised the powers

conferred by rule fifty six of the Defence of Travancore Rules and banned all public meeting and processions in any part of the State. The most remarkable feature was the number of workers involved in the strikes and their militant solidarity. By 1946 bonus became the major demand of the industrial workers.

The workers' strike movement had the support of the public bodies like the SNDP Yogam. Meanwhile the Kuttanad agricultural labourers had been organised for a state-wide agitation. In the industrial town of Alleppy labour meetings and processions became an everyday affair. On 31st January 1946, the Quilon Cashew nut Factory Workers' Union had struck work, led by its President M.N. Govindan Nair. The Union however, claimed that the labourers should be given three months wage as bonus. Soon the strike wave had spread to other industries in the state.

Militancy of the Labour Class

From the beginning of 1946, the labour leaders worked out their political strategy in more aggressive proportions than ever before. In the midst of these developments, Dewan C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer announced on 16 January 1946, a constitutional reform to be introduced shortly. The administration had claimed that this reform was modelled on that of the United States of America in the matter of relations between the Legislature, the executive and the Judiciary. In reality the reform made no significant departure from the constitution promulgated in 1932. The Communist Party appealed to the workers to rally under their banner to organise a struggle for terminating the Dewan rule for ever.⁶ It should be noted that the Travancore police had already cautioned the administration that 'all the labourers in Alleppy numbering about 40000 were Communists and that they were led by Communist leaders like E.M. Sankaran Namboodiripad and others. Consequently, the workers organized processions with the slogan of 'American Model in Arabian Sea.'⁷

By now the trade union activity in the state became active with labour strikes as a regular feature. In fact there was a move to organise strikes in every industry. On 26 January 1946, the All Travancore Trade Union Congress organised the strike of Alleppy workers to protest against the proposals of the government regarding constitutional reforms. Taking note of the emerging labour strikes, the Dewan had remarked that it became the habit of the labour to declare a state wide strike when the demands of the labourers even in a particular locality were not redressed.

The Government of Travancore through their gazette on 5th February 1945 had ordered under the Defence of Travancore Rules prohibiting strikes and lockouts without notice in connection with trade disputes. The Travancore Government had extended full support to the policy and magistracy in dealing with labour agitations and especially with communists. Amidst all precautions by the administration, the labour force went ahead with their weapon of strike. In fact the militancy of the workers and their eagerness to press the strike forward appeared to have outstripped even that of the leaders to close their ranks. However in a new turn of developments of trade unionism in the state, the factory managements have now agreed that they would recognise workers' trade unions if they were properly constituted and organised on trade basis.

The state's heavy handling of Communist activities force the workers to declare in April 1946, that they were determined to establish a national government.⁸ It was in April 1946, the Central committee of the Communist Party of India called on the provincial wing of the party to develop spontaneous struggles into local battles and to raise the question of state power. The administration retaliated by banning processions and the use of red flag by the workers in the state. In this circumstances, the general council of the All India Trade Union Congress at its Nagpur Session on 20 and 21 April 1946 emphatically protested such

measures of the Travancore Government and demanded the of all restrictions on trade union leaders and to allow free exercise of democratic rights and liberties of the workers.⁹

On 7 August 1946, there was a general strike of coir factory workers in Alleppy-Sherthalai area, on the alleged ground of unsatisfactory rations. the Government has summoned a joint meeting of labour Finally in pursuance of the settlement arrived at Alleppy, the was called off. When the workers resumed work on 10th August, they delighted to realise their stamina as a class.¹⁰ At Punnapra this excitement the fishermen to form the All Travancore Coastal Workers Union in 1946. Union was registered in accordance with the Trade Union Act in June 1946. Interestingly the coir factory owners of Alleppy and Sherthalai area had retaliated the labour strikes by lockouts. They had put up notices declaring their intention even to close down their factories.

The rapid growth of militant labour movement under the Communist leadership had its reaction. Influential businessmen organised rival trade unions or supported the administration in suppressing the labourers. At the request of factory owners, the Government posted military at the centres of labour unrest. Moreover the administration had demonstrated that they were definitely determined to deal against law-breakers with the aid of the armed police and the military. However, the administration did not realise a struggle was brewing.

Determined to put an end to the labour strikes, the Government ordered the arrest of prominent labour leaders. Public meetings were banned for three months with effect from 7th September 1946.¹¹ The police had tress passed into the trade union offices and threatened the labour leaders. The workers as a class raised the demand for the establishment of an interim government in Travancore and the election of a constituent assembly on adult franchise to decide the future constitution of the state. Meanwhile the Alleppy Coir Workers' Union had warned that the capitalists who

deny labour rights and try to trouble the labourers with the help of the police and the military should face strong labour revolt. The labour slogans had now demonstrated the confidence that official domination and the Dewan rule would terminate.

Tripartite Labour Conference

The militant move of the workers invited the serious attention of the Government on labour problems. The Sympathetic milieu which favoured the labour cause encouraged the workers to be bold. In spite of the threat from administration, the Travancore Trade Union Congress and the Communist Party jointly displayed their protest against the promulgation of the Act and threatened to observe a general strike. Noticing the turbulent stand of the labour, the Government felt the need for an effective and early settlement with the labour class.

The Government soon convened a Tripartite Labour Conference at the Legislative Chamber of the Government Secretariate, Trivandrum on 7th and 8th October 1946.¹² Inaugurating the Conference, Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer made a plea for labour and capital to cooperate in the task of putting the industrial house of the state in order.

The Dewan had maintained that the conference brought about a general agreement on all important labour questions. But fact was that the conference could not bring any settlement between the owners and workers. At the conference on 7 October a sub-committee was formed to go into details and to draw up definite proposals for the payment of bonus for the various industries.

The Dewan had made it clear that in respect of the government sponsored industries, bonus should be paid only on the availability of a surplus and that with respect to private concerns, the employers and employees should evolve a formula by putting their heads together. Under this provision, the owners refused bonus to workers. However C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer had agreed to pay

four per cent bonus on the condition that the working class would cut off their relations with political parties and should support the American Model Constitution of the Dewan. But the militant and class conscious workers had refused the offer. No wonder the Tripartite Labour Conference marked the breakdown of final efforts at a powerful settlement between the labour and the capital. The Dewan had insisted that so long as the present Government policy lasted, responsible government in the British sense was not going to be contemplated in Travancore. In this circumstance the Travancore Trade Union Congress met at Alleppy on 13 October 1946 and decided to observe a general strike with effect from 22 October 1946.¹³ The Trade Union Congress constituted a Council of Action of five members consisting of the Communists, socialists and trade unionists to formulate the future course of action. The determination of the labour force to counter the military power, at last, generated a violent confrontation at Punnapra and Vayalar.

A Violent Confrontation

Labour in Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha area had for the last few years come under the influence and control of the Communist Party. When the factory workers were getting ready for a direct confrontation, there occurred conflicts between workers and landlords. Consequently there was clash between the strikers and some pro-government workers. The tense situation was eased only after the arrival of military.

In retaliation to the military action, the workers formed six camps to the south of Alleppy town at Punnapra, Paravur, Vandanam, Vattayal, Vattakkal and Kalarkode. K.K. Kumaran was the supreme commander. However Vayalar was the headquarters of the volunteer training camps, which the workers called as their 'Moscow'. Each of these training centres consisted of not less than 2000 workers. Trenches were dug in Vayalar and weapons like stakes of arecanut trees and sharp granite pieces were collected

and got ready. The Communist leaders formed concentration camps in different places and armed themselves to attack the police and military. The workers were taught up lie flat during nerve any firing. The Sherthalai labour Coir Factory Workers Union office was the nerve centre of the organized labour movement. It was surprising that there were courts within the camps to try and let off relenting labourers on the promise that they would cooperate with the struggle.

The government had by now branded this as an 'organised insurrection' and ordered repressive measures to put down the brewing struggle. They have mobilised police and military to the taluks of Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha. The administration declared nearly sixty labour unions affiliated to the Communist Party as illegal.

A general strike was declared on 22 October 1946 which continued the next day too, the birthday of Sri Chithira Thirunal, the Maharaja of Travancore. An underground movement had also taken its direction mainly from the Malabar Communist Party leaders, before and during the riots that there was always the danger of their communist brethren from across the border participating in the movement directly. As a precautionary measure, the Travancore Police cut off communication by backwaters against the landing of Communists in the State.¹⁴ Only bonafide passengers were allowed to cross the backwaters. Armed police had patrolled the backwaters day and night.

On 24 October, there was a clash between the Reserve Police and the workers at Punnapra. A party of processionists, trained and equipped with wooden spears, axes and locally available weapon made a planned attack on a police party encamped in a house at Punnapra. On 25 October, the administration promulgated martial law in Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha taluks. The army under the command of Major General V.N. Parameswaran Pillai took charge of the situation. At the turn of events Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer took over the direct

command of the State Forces to coordinate the civil and military authorities. He adopted stern measures to put down the revolt.

In Sherthalai, there was a violent confrontation between the military and the rioting workers. In a bold confrontation, the mob of armed rioters numbering more than a thousand, daringly faced the military. In a fierce fighting the military resorted to firing which took many lives of the workers at the spot. The administration had maintained that from all information to them, only about 190 persons were killed through the struggle in the firing by the military and the police.

The punitive action taken by the Travancore Police and the declaration of martial law confined the movement to the Punnapra and Vayalar area and did not allow the struggle to spread to other centres of the State. The practically complete absence of agitation in other parts of the State enabled the Government to concentrate on the trouble spots and to quell the agitation within days.¹⁵ As a result of stern military action, most of the prominent Communist leaders went underground. The State Congress, however, did not support the agitation and a section of Congress leaders came out even openly against the uprising. With the rounding up of the Communist leaders and other strikers, the labourers resumed work. Now the administration maintained that the Communist menace in the State was halted. Since the situation was getting normal, the administration withdrew the martial law with effect from 10th November 1946.¹⁶ The Dewan, however, took full responsibility and blame for the military action which he said had been taken deliberately as he had seen no point in going piecemeal. He had described the incidents at Punnapra and Vayalar as an 'organised insurrection' by a section of the public, especially the younger generation, with the help of the State Communist Party.

It is a remarkable fact that while the General Strike of 1938 revealed the class solidarity of the workers, the Punnapra Vayalar Revolt has proved their militancy in

the class struggle. Indeed the revolt set an example to the India Working Class.¹⁷ As K.C. George had described, the revolt formed a significant scene in the long fight organised under the leadership of the Communist Party and the organised labourers for the achievement of responsible government and to end the Dewan rule. Yet in his report to the Dewan of Travancore, the Inspector General of Police had stated that it was the irresponsible and misled labour movement by the Communists that has committed the mishappenings and the consequent suppression. But Travancore State Congress took an altogether independent line. While the State Congress warned the Government against repression and the declaration of the martial law, it had deplored the violent methods adopted by a section of labour under the guidance of communist leadership. In fact the Communists had claimed their positive role in the struggle. The State Congress too expressed itself on the side of the labour to whom it appealed to free themselves from the communist leadership who were responsible for their troubles. The Dewan characterised the attitude of the State Congress as unhelpful and obstructive. Nevertheless George Woodcock is right in his remark that the memory of the battles at Punnapra and Vayalar still arises strong feelings in Travancore. The Travancore Working Class, making a common cause with the political leadership for the first time boldly confronted with the administrative machinery. However in order to end the communist power and to restore peace, the Government ruthlessly put down the labour force.

Endnotes

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4. Indian Labour Gazette, Jan – June 1953, Vol. X, p. 533.

5. The Statistics of Travancore, 1946 – '47, 1948, p. 184.
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16. Ranadive, B. T., 'The role played by Communists in the freedom struggle of India', Social Scientist, Vol. 12, No. 9, Sep. 1984, pp. 31 – 32.
17. The Hindu, 31 October 1946, p. 6.