



Kerala: The communists face a tricky passage

Kerala's Marxists

The Communists are back in power in Kerala and the mood in this south Indian state is euphoric. Few, however, would like to predict how long this administration will survive.

Politics has always been volatile there: this is the fifteenth government in 30 years, and the fourth term for the marxists. To date, no Communist government has ever been able to complete five years of office!

With a literacy rate of 72% in a population of 26 million - the highest in the developing world - the Keralite has always been a political animal. Communism found its natural roots here. In 1957 the state created history with a democratically-elected left government. The Congress Party in central government, however, was not going to tolerate a left government in an Indian state and less than two years later that first Communist rule was toppled. The local Congress Party allied with established religious groups and ushered in a period of political instability with a see-saw of coalition governments, be they Congress Party led or Communist led. The religious bodies felt they ought to have a

stake in the political make-up of Kerala, and they logically became the natural allies of whoever aspired to power. It was, unfortunately, a game the Communists very quickly learnt to play.

All this came to a head with the last Congress rule (1982-1987), which was nothing but an umbrella of a dozen splinter groups. Communalism or religious fundamentalism had come to infect every aspect of life. This time, the Communists bravely rejected any alliance with communal groups and managed to create the belief that the dreams of 30 years ago were once again within reach.

But the tasks ahead are daunting. There is virtually no modern industry in Kerala. Its people depend almost entirely on the land and the sea. Beyond that, they have always looked outside the state for employment. In the last 15 years this has been the Middle East, where the oil boom meant that jobs were plentiful.

Only now, Filipinos and Bangladeshis have taken over from the Keralites as a source of cheap labour, and many have been forced to return to India. Thousands

still try each year to go Gulfwards; but all it leads to is unemployment and debt. Few in Kerala can come to terms with the harsh fact that the Gulf phase in their lives is over.

What the Gulf boom did do was to play havoc with the state's economy. In the good years almost every family had at least one member who remitted money from the Middle East. It was like an artificial artery that fed the state. As money poured in, it created a craze for consumer items. There was no investment to build up the economy. In the towns all the money went into shops crammed with imported goods, and in the countryside into ostentatious 'Gulf houses'. This sudden affluence also left a host of social problems.

What the marxists have to grapple with urgently is the paralysis that the state's industry has suffered from for the last three decades. Here they also have to come to terms with their own legacy. The state's reputation for a militant labour force has kept its plantation elite from investing in industry. Kerala produces 92% of India's rubber, but there is not a single tyre factory!

In addition to all these problems, the state is financially heavily dependent on an unfavourably-disposed central government. So what can the Communists do, when the necessary support is never forthcoming from an unsympathetic centre?

Chief Minister Nayanar has said that his government's aims must be limited: just a minimum socialist programme! His attitude is pragmatic. Big business houses have been wooed, even multinationals invited. And yet, there is tremendous good will for this government. People realise that if the Communists last five years, they have a strong future in Kerala. But if they don't they could well write their own epitaph. And if that happens, there is little hope for Kerala's desperate fishermen, coir and cashew workers, and its large, educated unemployed labour force.

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