

communists assume office

(iii)

The eleven-man cabinet of chief minister E. M. S. Namboodiripad was sworn in on 5 April 1957.

Before the swearing-in-ceremony the ministers motored up to Punnapra, nearly 100 miles to the north of Trivandrum, where at a simple ceremony they laid wreaths at the temporary memorial at the place where P. Krishna Pillai, the great founder-leader of the Communist movement in Kerala was cremated after he had died of snake bite. All along the way were standing groups of peasants and fishermen cheering EMS and other ministers, shouting slogans, bursting crackers and flying innumerable red flags and banners.

The Communist triumph in Kerala was an event of historic importance, and its echoes reverberated all the world over. The *New York Times* reported : 'The Communist Party of India has declined to lie down and die, as predicted by Congress politicians.' The *Tribune*, British Labour left-wing weekly, pointed out : 'Kerala represents the first time that the Communist Party has come to power through democratic methods.' The *Tribune* also remarked : 'The Congress government at the centre cannot adopt an attitude of non-cooperation and try to thwart the Communists.... On the other hand if the Communists are allowed to do good work for the people by following entirely constitutional means and through cooperation with the Congress, both they and the amateurish admirers of the revolution through violence may be cured of their infantile attachments.'

Even the London *Economist* made a plea for cooperation between New Delhi and Trivandrum. Said the *Economist* :

'.... the Kerala Communists are bound to be on their best behaviour.... They know all India will be watching them.... They may well choose to make a reputation by such solid measures as land reform, and avoid clashes with Delhi....'

The *News Chronicle* (U.K.) commented: '...it (Communist Party) is approaching the novel situation—revolution by consent—with almost painful discretion.... Communists claim that even within the constitutional limits they have a few surprises up their sleeves. But their initial objectives are no secret; they have intended to bring their discipline and organisation into action to produce the first and only stable administration the State had ever had to demonstrate with a sort of spectacular purity that the State government can be both efficient and incorrupt in a country where the opposite becomes only too clearly the rule.'

While such were foreign comments, reactions in India's national press gave ample proof of the sound health of Indian democracy. Leading Indian dailies, even when not very confident of Communists' constitutional behaviour, were largely of the view that the verdict of the electorate must be respected and that the Communist government in Kerala and the Congress government at the centre must mutually behave and learn to coexist. The tone was set by the *Statesman*'s special correspondent at Trivandrum: 'Co-existence of the centre and a State with different political parties in power will be a novel experiment in India but one well worth trying in the cause of parliamentary democracy. But there will be need for restraint, tolerance and understanding on both sides.'

The *Hindu* said: 'The leaders of the Communist Party have recently been affirming their readiness to work within the framework of the Constitution.... In so far as the electors have returned them as the single biggest party in the assembly which, with the support of five of the independents, can command a majority in the legislature, their professions must be taken at their face value and an opportunity given to them to constitute their ministry.'

The political columnist of the *Times of India* called for 'a high degree of tact and diplomacy as well as firmness' on the part of New Delhi and said: 'If the Communists succeed in giving the State a truly efficient and uncorrupt

administration, they will have indeed endeared themselves to the people. But they will also be tested by the people on the score of the respect they show in practice to the democratic principles.'

The *Free Press Journal* said: 'The best reaction that the Communist victory in Kerala has produced in the Capital is that our democracy is no sham; that it is hundred per cent genuine and truly and faithfully reflects the will of the people.' And it added: 'For the Indian Communists, Kerala provides not only an opportunity but also a grim ordeal.'

Even the *Capital* of Calcutta, the weekly journal of British big business in India, though apprehensive that Kerala Communist victory will frighten foreign investors, remarked that 'Communism has changed in the last year or so, especially in India. We will now have a chance to find out how much.'

The only discordant note in this chorus of a healthy democracy was struck by the notoriously reactionary and anti-Nehru columnist of the pro-Congress Birla's *Hindustan Times*, 'Insaf.' Raising the bogey that central interests will not be safe in the hands of a Communist State government, he gave the call for a federal police to 'safeguard union interests' and to 'keep the centre constantly informed'—in other words to pry on State affairs. His was, indeed, a plea to the centre to 're-arrange relationship with State authorities,' and he even demanded that the central government should 'classify' confidential papers.

The utter panic and fear which had seized the capitalist interests of India by Kerala Communist triumph was unashamedly given expression to by Shriman Narayan. Reared by and then admitted into the Congressite Bajaj group of Marwari industrialists and financiers, he somehow climbed to the position of the general secretary of the Congress, though he has no past record worth the name of national service. He astonished even his nearest friends and advisers by charging the Communist ministry of letting loose 'lawlessness' and of attempting to subvert the Constitution by taking recourse to what he called 'totalitarianism,' though the Namboodiripad ministry had not been in office for full three days. He said at the meeting of Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee at Ernakulam on March 8: 'It is astounding that one of the very first acts of the new government

is to commute the death sentences of confirmed murderers and the release of the so-called political prisoners who were not under detention, but who were prosecuted and punished for serious acts of arson, violence and murder.'

Shriman Narayan conveniently forgot that the release of the Punnapra-Vayalar prisoners had been ordered earlier by Pattom Thanu Pillai's ministry. And when A. K. Gopalan pointed out in a statement that Punnapra-Vayalar was the place where the heroes had bared their chests against the sten-guns of Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, and that every Malayalee is proud of those martyrs just as every Indian is proud of Bhagat Singh, he hurled yet more insults upon Malayalees by comparing the Punnapra-Vayalar heroes to ordinary criminals and murderers.

The question is: What, after all, had the Communist ministry done during the three days as to call for such sniping and vilification? We will briefly review the events in the State preceding and following the swearing-in of the Namboodiripad cabinet.

In order to assure himself that the Communists commanded a majority, the Governor chose to call each of the five independents individually to get an assurance of their support to the Communists, even when they had publicly declared so, had participated in the meeting of legislators to elect Namboodiripad as the leader, and had informed the governor that they were members of the Communist assembly party. The secretariat of the State committee of the Communist Party, in a resolution characterised this behavior of the Governor as 'an insult to them and their leader' and recorded 'its protest against this undemocratic procedure.'

A sense of panic marked another move of the president before Communist assumption of office. Without consultations with the representative organisations of the Anglo-Indian community in Kerala, and without seeking advice of the leader of the party invited to form the government, the president nominated a person of his choice to the assembly. The State committee secretariat resolution regarded this hurry to be uncalled for. It said: 'On previous occasions the nomination was used to increase the strength of the Congress party. The excuse was that the Congress is in power. Now the refusal is to seek the advice of the Party going to assume power.'

A third instance of unseemly haste was the order of the governor increasing the pay scale of the higher officers in the State government service just on the eve of the ministry coming to power. The secretariat interpreted this action of the governor as 'yielding to certain interested parties to face the ministry with a *fait accompli*.'

The secretariat resolution said in conclusion: 'The secretariat of the Party is pointing out these facts because it is anxious to maintain democratic precedents. In Kerala the Communist Party has come to power. In future such developments are possible in other States. In the new situation, when different parties are in power in the State and centre, to maintain healthy relations between the centre and States, democratic precedents have to be strictly adhered to.'

It must again be said in favour of the basic strength of Indian democracy that just as Shriman Narayan's cacophony was overshadowed by the healthy chorus of democratic opinion in India, so also these unhealthy precedents, inspired, of course, by certain quarters in New Delhi, were overshadowed by the authoritative statement of a central government spokesman that 'the Communist government in Kerala will in no way be discriminated against.'

On assuming office, chief minister Namboodiripad issued a statement of policy of his government. It stressed the importance of popular cooperation, promised immediate action to stop evictions and enact land reform, assured peace in industry, promised steps for making Malayalam the State language, development of the organs of local self-government, etc. Of special importance was the assurance given a big obstacle in the way for the ministers: 'It will prove a big obstacle in the way of a good and decent administration if the impression is created that the relatives, friends, colleagues in public work, etc., of the ministers can exert a good deal of pressure upon them. Each of us will do our best to see that such an impression is not created.'

Soon after the State government commuted death sentences, released political prisoners and withdrew warrants in political cases to mark the end of president's rule and installation of the new government.

The Communist ministry also stayed the order passed on the eve of its assumption of office by the previous ad-

ministration increasing salaries of higher grade officers (the order had raised the salaries of officers from Rs. 1,100 to Rs. 1,600, and it involved an additional financial responsibility of Rs. 20 lakhs to the State's exchequer.)

Beyond this, by the time the third day was over, the ministers were only settling down in office—in fact workmen were still busy preparing the secretariat rooms for them—when the Congress general secretary conjured up the spectre of 'totalitarianism' swooping down on Kerala and of law and order being given the go by. The utter falsehood and untruth of the allegations would be clear to all fair-minded people.

The Communist ministry not only had the good wishes of the Kerala people but of the whole of India, which fact was proved by demonstrations and meetings held all over India on 5 April, the day EMS's cabinet was sworn in. And celebrations were held by the masses of Kerala also on that day. Huge demonstrations and mass meetings were held in all the nooks and corners of Kerala assuring the ministry the fullest support for the implementation of its popular policies. The cry of *Janadhipathyam Vijayikkatte! Kerala Sarkar Vijayikkatte!* (Long Live Democracy! Long Live Kerala Government!) rent the sky of Kerala on that evening.