

A HANDBOOK ON KERALA

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
GOVERNMENT OF KERALA

EMERGENCE OF NATIONALISM

The last decades of the 19th century saw the emergence of nationalism in India. The Indian National Congress was established in 1885 and it soon became the spear-head of the Indian Nationalist Movement. These developments did not go unnoticed in Kerala. A conference was held at Calicut in 1904 under the auspices of the Congress, and in 1908 a District Congress Committee was formed in Malabar. Beyond this there was no political activity worth the name in Malabar until the outbreak of the First World War. The princely States of Travancore and Cochin had a little edge over Malabar in the beginning of organised political activity for the benefits of good Government. In 1839 and 1859 prominent citizens of Cochin petitioned the Governors of Madras for action against corrupt Dewans. On both occasions the requests were acceded to with removal of the officials concerned.

In Travancore political agitation began with the Nayars who found their dominance on the decline and resented the monopolisation of higher offices by the Tamil Brahmins inducted from outside. Their appetite for political participation was whetted with the formation of the Travancore Legislative Council in 1888—the first ever legislature started in an Indian State. A memorandum, the Malayali Memorial, bearing the signatures of over 10,000 people, including a sprinkling of Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims, was submitted to the Maharaja in 1891. It was really a Nayar plea for privileges and positions. This was soon followed by an Ezhava Memorial (1896), submitted with over 13,000 signatures, pleading for extension of civic rights, Government jobs etc., to the lower castes. Both the memoranda came

to naught. But in the historical perspective their impact was considerable as they laid the basic for the constitutional style of political agitation in Travancore.

Political activity in Kerala received a new impetus with the outbreak of the First World War and the spread of the Home Rule Movement. Home Rule leagues sprouted in different places in Malabar and the activities of Congressmen received enthusiastic encouragement from the people. In 1916 and 1917 the annual meetings of the District Congress Committee were held with great fanfare under the name of the Malabar District Political Conference. Resolutions were adopted at these conferences demanding self-Government for India and the release of political prisoners. In Travancore and Cochin also political activities were taken up under the aegis of the Congress. Congress Committees were started in Trivandrum, Trichur and Ernakulam.

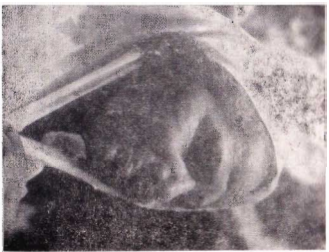
In 1920, following the resolutions adopted at the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress to organise provincial Congress Committees on a linguistic basis, a Kerala Provincial Congress Committee was formed integrating Congress activities in the three territorial divisions of Kerala. The first All-Kerala Political Conference held at Ottappalam in April 1921 was attended by delegates from Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. In a sense this was the harbinger of the movement for a united Kerala which became a reality 35 years later.

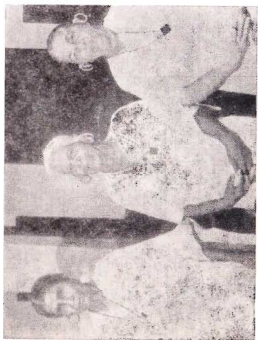
The non-co-operative movement was in full swing at this period of time. It was particularly strong in Malabar, where the Mopillas were agitated over the Khilafat issue. The Gandhian movement had a tremendous impact on Kerala, with large members joining the stayagraha campaign. Gandhiji visited Malabar in 1921, giving a further impetus to the movement. Khilafat Committees sprang up in large numbers and the fraternity section between the

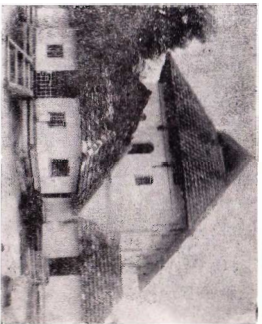
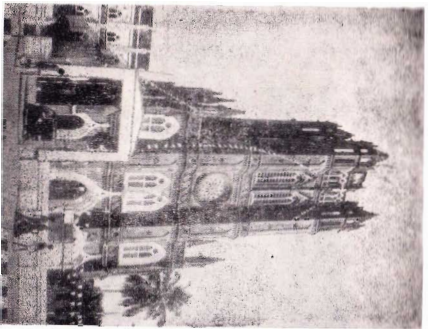




BUT WHAT NOW







CHERAMAN MOSQUE AT KODUNGALLOOR

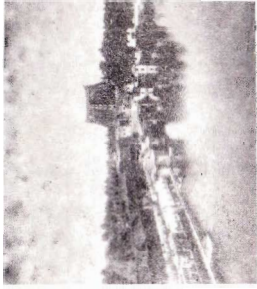




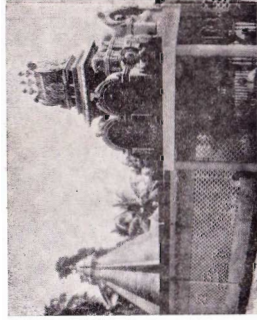
THE POET KUMARAN ASAN



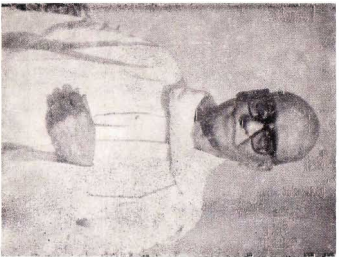
MAHAKAVI ULLOOR S. PARAMESWARA IYER



SREE PADMANABHA TEMPLE



**TEMPLE AT KALADY,
THE BIRTH PLACE OF SHRI SANKATA**



VALLATHOL NARAYANA MENON



KALAMEZHUTHU

Hindus and Muslims through the work in Congress-Khilafat Committees was a truly remarkable feature of the non-co operation movement in Kerala in its early stages.

The speed with which the Khilafat agitation spread, especially in the Ernad and Valluvanad taluks created alarm in official circles. A perplexed officialdom clamped down prohibitory orders in the two taluks. Meetings were banned and many people arrested in the name of law and order. A tragic episode then ensued, namely the Moppila Rebellion or the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. The police attempted to arrest the Secretary of the Khilafat Committee of Pukottur in Ernad on a charge of having stolen a pistol. A crowd of 2000 Moppilas from the neighbourhood foiled the attempt. The next day, a police party in their search for Khilafat rebels entered the famous Mambaram mosque at Tirurangadi. They seized some records and arrested a few Khilafat volunteers.

A rumour spread that the mosque was desecrated. Hundreds of rustic Moppilas converged on Tirurangadi and besieged the local police station. The police opened fire. The mob reacted in mad fury. Violence spread and convulsed Ernad and Valluvanad taluks and neighbouring areas for over two months. Congress leaders tried in vain to check the violence. Towards the later stages of the rebellion, may be owing to unfounded rumour of Hindus having helped the police or sought police help, there were instances of atrocities perpetrated on Hindus. This helped to mar the relations between the two communities. Meanwhile British and Gurkha regiments were rushed to the area. Martial law was declared. A series of repressive measures followed and by November the rebellion was practically crushed. Relief operations in the ravaged areas, undertaken mostly by voluntary agencies which received help and funds from Gandhiji, lasted for over six months.

The epilogue—in the sense that it came to be known only later—was the “Wagon Tragedy” in which 61 of the 70 Moppila prisoners packed in a closed railway goods wagon and carried to Coimbatore jails, died of suffocation on November 10, 1921.

In the wake of the suppression of the Malabar Rebellion and until almost the end of the decade, the purely political struggle for freedom was on a low key. This lull was largely made up by brisk activity on the social front. The emphasis was on constructive programmes in which all people could join together and work irrespective of political views or affiliation. The cry for social equality was particularly strong. This was the background of the famous stayagraha at Vaikom Temple (1924) to be followed up later at the Guruvayoor Temple in 1931. Both of them exemplified the immense potentialities of satyagraha as an instrument of social change and both were started with the blessings of Gandhiji.

At Vaikom the particular demand was only the grant of right of passage to the untouchables along the approach roads to the temple. After a 20-month struggle, during which there were innumerable instances of violence and suffering, the temple authorities agreed to open all the roads except the eastern one. At this point the satyagraha was withdrawn at the instance of Gandhiji. At Guruvayur, the satyagraha for temple entry was started under the auspices of the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee. After ten months during which period there were some instances of violence towards the volunteers, Shri K. Kelappan launched upon an indefinite fast. But this was given up on the advice of Gandhiji.

On both occasions, it must be conceded, the declared, immediate objective was not completely realized, and there was considerable disappointment for the Satyagrahis. But

these satyagrahas generalised a tremendous wave of moral sympathy and strength. That perhaps helped to avert violent social conflict on the issue in Kerala. It is significant that when the Temple Entry Proclamation was issued in Travancore in November 1936, not a gun was fired by the Government in order to implement it.

The second phase of the civil disobedience movement, led by Gandhiji with his famous Salt March in March 1930, found enthusiastic response from all parts in Kerala. In several places, particularly at Payyannur and Calicut, salt laws were broken and hundreds of agitators courted arrest. A Youth League was formed in Travancore. It was able to enlist the dedicated services of quite a good number of spiritual and radical minded young men who later became the prop of the Travancore State Congress.

In the wake of the Civil Disobedience Movement a parallel movement for responsible Government had begun in Travancore and Cochin. In Travancore, the *Nivartana* (Obtention) movement began as a protest against the inadequacy of the constitutional reforms of 1932. The Ezhavas, the Christians and the Muslims apprehended that the new reforms, owing to the provisions for restricted franchise on the basis of possession of property and other qualifications, would secure for them far less number of seats in the enlarged legislature than the Nayers. They therefore demanded that the seats should be apportioned on the basis of population strength. The Government, however, did not view their demands favourably.

The absentionists then organised a Joint Political Congress to exhort the voters to abstain from voting. Since the three communities together formed about 70 per cent of the population, their agitation had the characteristics of a mass movement. The Government at first adopted repression policy but later yielded to the demands of the

abstentionists to some extent. In the election held in 1937 most of the candidates fielded by the Joint Political Congress were elected.

The Haripura session of the Indian National Congress (1938) had resolved that the Congress as such would keep itself aloof from involvement in the affairs of the princely States. The struggle for responsible Government in the States would, therefore, be the responsibility of the people of the States themselves. It was in this context that the leaders of the Joint Political Congress decided to form a new organization; merging the identity of Joint Political Congress in St. Thomas, in February 1938, came into being the Travancore State Congress. It was pledged to the goal of achieving full responsible Government for the people of Travancore. In neighbouring Cochin the Cochin State Congress was formed.

An important feature of the freedom movement in Kerala in the 1920's and 1930's was the increasing involvement of peasants and workers. This was to release a tremendous mass force into the mainstream of the national movement, giving it a new momentum and social content. The peasant and labour movement of the 1930's was to a great extent the cause as well as the consequence of the emergence of a powerful left wing in politics. In 1934 the left nationalists joined together and organized the Congress Socialist Party. A powerful factor that helped the growth of the left movement was the support it received from the radical section of the nationalist Muslims in Malabar. Left groups started functioning in several parts of Malabar and soon the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee was dominated by them.

The lull in the political horizon had largely been made up. By 1938-39 Kerala was fully drawn into the national struggle for freedom as well as the struggle for responsible Government in the princely States.

The leftists preferred to remain organizationally within the Congress and call themselves socialists. Thus both the left and right groups joined together in order to ensure the success of the Congress candidates in the election of 1936 in Malabar. But the rift came into the open with the outbreak of the Second World War, the resignation of the Congress ministries in the provinces and the starting of individual satyagraha. The left-dominated KPCC, contrary to the directive of the Congress, observed September 15, 1939 as anti-imperialist day. The KPCC was suspended. The left met in secret conclave at Pinarayi and then in December 1939 was born the Communist Party.

In the meanwhile, the struggle for responsible Government had been launched in Travancore and in Cochin. The struggle in Cochin was far less in intensity than that in Travancore because the rulers of Cochin adopted on the whole a lenient policy of political concessions which averted violent clashes. In June 1938 a diarchical form of Government was established allowing popular ministers to control some departments. This did not work and the Cochin Praja Mandalam was founded in 1941 to spearhead the agitation for full responsibility in Government.

The Travancore State Congress launched a campaign seeking dismissal of the Dewan, C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer against whom they had levelled certain charges. The State Congress and the Youth League were banned. The State Congress then organised a civil disobedience movement. The rising tempo of the movement forced Government to withdraw the ban. The Dewan refused to open negotiation until the charges were withdrawn. The charges were finally withdrawn following Gandhiji's intervention. This created a split in the Congress. The members of the Youth League left the State Congress to form the Communist Party.

The end of the Quit India Movement saw Malabar returning to elections and constitutional Government. Administratively Malabar was a district of Madras Province at the time of independence. In Cochin diarchy was finally abolished and on the eve of independence the Dewanship ended. A popular ministry under Panampilly Govinda Menon was sworn into power.

Travancore, however, was not destined to have a peaceful transition to freedom and democracy. In October 1946, she had to face one of the most violent upheavals in her recent history—the Punnapra-Vayalar revolt. It developed as a reaction to the constitutional scheme proposed by the Dewan, C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer, early in January 1946. The scheme provided for adult franchise, but retained the Dewanship as an irremovable executive. The State Congress rejected the scheme. The Communists decided to launch a violent struggle to bring an end to the oppressive rule of the Dewan.

The coastal taluks of Alleppey and Shertallai were, in particular, strongholds of the Communist Party. By the middle of 1946 there were many camps of party workers at Punnapra in Alleppey and at Vayalar in Shertallai. Volunteers from the working class were recruited and given training. This increased the tension in the area. The Government deployed not only the police but the military also. This only worsened the situation. The All Travancore Trade Union Congress called for a general strike on October 20, 1946. Martial law was declared in the area and the Dewan himself assumed the functions of the Commander-in-Chief. The impassioned workers and volunteers preferred confrontation—stones, bamboo spikes, areca spears and swords confronting machine guns. What followed, from 24 to 27 October, was a tale of heroism and tragedy.

The revolt was suppressed. But this did not bring to an end the difficulties of the Dewan. A political crisis was again precipitated when the British announced their decision to leave India. The Dewan announced that Travancore would remain an independent State on the type of British paramountcy. This unleashed a fierce controversy. The Dewan let loose the forces of repression. In the midst of repression and confusion an unsuccessful attempt on his life was made. Better counsel prevailed and the Dewan made his exit from the State. With the advent of freedom, Travancore was part of the Indian Union. The first popular ministry under Pattom A. Thanu Pillai was installed.

The movement for a united—Aikya—Kerala gathered momentum with the attainment of independence. The first concrete step in this direction was taken on July 1, 1949. Following the national policy of integration, the State of Cochin and Travancore were merged into Travancore-Cochin State under a Rajpramukh. The next step came with the reorganisation of States on a linguistic basis in the light of the report of the States Reorganisation Commission. It was decided to add Malabar district and the Kasargod taluk of South Canara District to Travancore—Cochin and to separate the Tamil-speaking southern region of old Travancore from Travancore-Cochin for inclusion in Madras State. On November 1, 1956 the new State of Kerala was formally inaugurated. The hand of Parasurama thus regained its identity within the unity of the hand of Bharatha.