

Communists Split in Tamil Nadu: Issues and Outcomes (1962 – 1964) A Historic Review

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Abstract

This study has been undertaken to trace the issues and outcomes which led to the Communist Party Split that took place in Tamil Nadu. The ideological differences that emerged between Communist Party of Soviet Union and Communist Party of China divided the Communist Movement in most part of the world where it spread. It echoed in Communist Party of India as Leftist and Rightist on “people democracy” and “national democracy” respectively that made decisive impact inside the Party in the state of Tamil Nadu. The two wings of the Communist Movement took critical view on some fundamental questions viz., India’s Independence, the policy on class rule and other political issues. There were notable leaders on either side played crucial role on road to Party Split that exists even today.

Key words: Communists Party of India, Battle of Programmes, Split, Leftists, Rightists, bourgeois, Chinese Aggression, Theekathir, By-election, S.A. Dange, P. Ramamurthi, Baladhandayutham.

Introduction

A battle of programmes inside the Communist Movement in India and in the state of Tamil Nadu for a period of more than ten years was climaxed in the period between 1962 and 1964. The policy divide between Leftist and Rightist on “people democracy” and “national democracy” respectively had a decisive impact in Communist party in Tamil Nadu. The two wings of the Communist Movement took critical view on some fundamental questions viz., India’s Independence, the policy on class rule and other political issues. There were notable leaders on either side played crucial role on road to Party Split that exists even today. The top leaders in Tamil Nadu who stood on this divide on Leftist view were P. Ramamurthi and

A.K. Gopalan and on Rightist view were Baladhandayutham and Manali Kandasamy. This Paper is a modest attempt to trace the issues and outcomes that led to the Communist Party Split in Tamil Nadu.

Methodology and Sources

The methodology adopted in this study is historical and the issues have been narrated chronologically. Both Primary and Secondary sources like Documents of Communist Movement of India, Fortnightly reports of Law and Administrative Department of Government of Madras, Communist Tamil Newspaper Theekathir, Party Souvenir and other sources are consulted.

Battle of Ideologies

The ideological differences between Communist Party of Soviet Union and the Communist Party of China which emerged in late 1950s, became very prominent and it practically divided the International Communist Movement, with all its negative consequences particularly in the Communist Party of India. The two different ideologies that emerged inside the Communist Movement termed the party cadres as Rightists and Leftists. They took critical views on some fundamental questions. The Rightists viewed the independence of India as “a historic event” that set country on the “path of economic independence”. The Leftist viewed independence as “a mere settlement” between British imperialism and the Congress. The CPI viewed the State as “the organ of the class rule of the national bourgeoisie as a whole, in which the big bourgeoisie hold powerful influence”. The Leftist CPI viewed the State as “the organ of the class rule of the bourgeois and the landlords, led by the big bourgeois” The Rightists holds view on forging the alliance between four classes – working class, toiling peasantry, petty bourgeoisie and the non big bourgeoisie, with the aim of ushering in a National Democratic State whereas the CPI Leftists were for forming the alliance of three classes – working class, toiling peasantry and petty bourgeoisie with the objective of ushering in a People Democratic State.

A sizable section of the leaders of the CPI, belonging to S.A Dange, the prominent leader of Rightist wing, went along with the Communist Party of Soviet Union while the other leaders of the CPI Leftists, representing the majority, were in favour of developing their ideological stand, consistent with

Indian situation and neither blindly following the Communist Party of Soviet Union nor the Communist Party of China.

Beginning of the Split

The Indo-China border dispute, which surfaced in 1959, took a virulent form in 1962 as armed conflict, beginning in October 20, 1962. The Chinese army gave a rude shock to India, by invading the north and the north east frontiers of the country. The simmering ideological differences inside the Communist Party burst as volcano. The ‘ Rightists’ condemn the Chinese aggression and declare their wholehearted support to the Indian Government headed by the Prime Minister Nehru and the “ Leftists” hesitant to condemn China as an aggressor, on the plea that a Socialist country cannot commit aggression.

As a result Chinese Aggression, differences within the CPI increased tremendously. The “Rightists” became more vocal supporters of the Soviet Line of Policy. They offered open support to Nehru’s Government and its policies. Eventually, in the by-elections for three Lok Sabha seats, the CPI supported the Congress candidates. On careful assessing the situation, the Nehru Government detained about 900 “Left” Communists for their pro-China leanings including their top leaders. But the “Right” leadership did not condemn its move and did not press for their release. In due course, Leftist leaders criticized the “Rightists” that the leaders of the S.A Dange group of the CPI tried to control the whole party organization when a large number of Communist leaders were in detention. As a consequence, the split in the Indian Communist Movement became unavoidable and it became practically unbridgeable in the later days.

In Tamil Nadu, as a matter of abundant caution, most of the top ranking Communist leaders in the State had been arrested and detained under the Defence of India Rules by the Government of Madras. In a report of *Jana Sakthi*, the Communist Party daily, 101 Communists had been kept under detention under the above said act till on 21 November 1962. There were several views among Communist Party cadres that these arrests came as a surprise and others had reconciled themselves to the reality, a few others considered these arrests to be unnecessary in view of the resolution passed by the Party National Council. Accordingly, Party High Command appealed to all its members to continue to give support to the various defence efforts

undertaken by the Government. It also emphasized that the arrests of Party cadres by the Government, should not in any way affect the co-operation and support that was being offered to the Government. Jeevanandam the stalwart leader of Communist Party in Tamil Nadu toured across Tamil Nadu and explained the people that Communists oppose the Chinese aggression and they would give full co-operation for defending the nation.

In due course, P. Ramamurthi, the staunch leader of Leftist with uncompromising Pro-Peking attitude triggered serious repercussions within the Party in Tamil Nadu. It was also learnt that P. Ramamurthi might create a separate faction within the Party, comprising followers who had subscribed to his views. Rightists accused the conduct of P. Ramamurthi who evaded arrest under the Defence of India Rules. Later P. Ramamurthi was taken into custody when he alighted from Bangalore Mail at Egmore Station in Madras and sent to Cuddalore Central jail in Madras on 18 December 1962.

Deepening of the Split

The inner party crises began to deep when S.A Dange took decision to support Congress whom was the arch political rival. The Provincial Secretariat of the Tamil Nadu Communist Party ratified the decision of Party's high command and decided to support the Congress candidate in the by-election in the State. In accordance with the decision, the Communist Party supported and also campaigned for the Congress Party in the Nanguneri constituency by-election. The Madurai District Communist Party also resolved to support Congress candidate in the by-election to be held at Bodinyakanur constituency and decided to expel R.K. Rajan, the Leftist, who filed nomination in violation of the Party's direction.

The sequel visit of A.K. Gopalan, (Member of Parliament) the Leftist of the Party to Madras made Rightists to react that his arrival was to attempt rally the Leftists of the State. In a private circulation, A.K Gopalan severely criticized the decision of the CPI Secretariat decision to participate in the by-election and to support Congress, on the issue of without demanding the lifting of the emergency first and the release of detention cadres.

The Leftist of Tamil Nadu brought out the new publication of the Tamilnadu Communist Party, “*Theekathir*” and published articles of A.K. Gopalan and E.M.S. Namboodripad the leaders of Leftist faction. The Rightist leaders of the Tamil Nadu Communist Party in the Madras District Council gave fierce opposition to the Leftists. The Rightist insisted Leftist that despite a directive from the State Secretariat, the new weekly journal “*Theekathir*” would not be published without the prior approval of the Central Secretariat. The Madras District Council meeting ended with a heated discussions on the ‘Support Congress’ Policy which resulted in severe opposition by some members. In due course of time, the victory of DMK at Tiruvannamalai by-election came as a rude shock to the Rightist Leadership of the Madras Communist Party of India that they had been advocating the “Support Congress Policy”. The militant Leftist section in the Party declared that Tiruvannamalai result was the “Waterloo” of the present policy towards the ruling party.

The conflict between the Rightist and leftist wings of the Party further deepened with the approach of Local body elections. The party had already supported the Congress candidate in the City Mayoral election against a Leftist-backed Trade Union leader. The Leftists were in favour of an electoral alliance with emerging party DMK while the Rightists favour an alliance with the Congress.

The Leftists in the party, continued to be active under the leadership of A.K. Gopalan M.P. There was a closed door meeting in Madras, attended by about 20 supporters of P. Ramamurthi and M.R. Venkatraman, in which electoral alliance with the Congress, during the Municipal elections, was criticized severely.ⁱ Consequently, P. Ramamurthi resigned from the Executive member of the Tamil Nadu Communist Party, to record the dissent against the decision of the Tamil Nadu unit to co-operate with the Congress party in the ensuing civic elections.ⁱⁱ Following the resignation, the Secretary of the CPI Tamil Nadu, Baladhandaytham issued a statement, charging P. Ramamurthi with setting up a bad example in the Party which would ultimately disrupt the party policy. Later, Central Executive Committee of CPI acknowledged the decision. At Tiruchirapalli, Leftists R. Umanath and K. Anandan Nambiar, along with others criticized the statement and in Kanyakumari and Salem, the dissenters decided to contest the civic elections independently against the Congress.

In Course of time, the result of the Municipal election came out in favour of Congress and DMK which blew death bell to Communists. Congress secured 40 and DMK secured 48 out of 99 seats. The CPI secured only one seat in the Corporation and on the whole, put up a poor performance in the Municipal elections. As a result, P. Ramamurthi demanded disciplinary action against K. Balathandayutham, Secretary of the Madras District branch, for having mismanaged party affairs.

End of the Split

The divergent views of both “Rightists” and “Leftists”, resulted in mud - slinging. On 3 February 1964, the State council of the CPI in West Bengal, dominated by the “Leftists” released to the newspaper, “The Current”, several letters allegedly written by S.A Dange in 1924, to the then Governor General of British India, seeking his release from jail in connection with the Kanpur Conspiracy Case (a case filed against S.A Dange charging a conspiracy against British rule) in return for a promise of co operation with the British rulers. The newspaper publication caused serious repercussion within the Party. On 11 April 1964, the National Council of the Communist Party met in Delhi to discuss the issue of those letters. The “Leftist” group asked S.A Dange to vacate the chair as his conduct was under discussion but he refused to oblige them. Upon this, thirty two of the ninety six members walked out from the National Council meet. The notable leaders among 32 members were Sundarrayya, Jyoti Basu, A.K Gopalan, Namboodripad, Bhubesh Gupta, Harkishan Singh Surjeeth, Pramod Das Gupta. The prominent Leaders of Tamil Nadu who walked out were four in number. They were P. Ramamurthi, M.R Venkatraman, N. Sankariah, and K. Ramani. The members who walked out were suspended from the Party by the party high command.

The suspension of the 32 top Leftist and Centerist leaders of the Party, at the all India level, gave the green signal for the rival groups in Tamil Nadu, to declare an open fight. While the Rightists intensified their efforts to send out the “splitters” in the interest of the party unit, the Leftists went all out to capture party units. The split in the Tamil Nadu Communist Party was exposed when the two groups held separate conferences simultaneously. The Rightist group, which carried a majority in the Provincial Council held a

conference at Coimbatore from 27 to 29 April 1964, while the Leftist group met on 28 and 29 April 1964, at a conference at Madurai attended by members from various districts. The latter passed a resolution, elucidating the Split and it was ratified by 52 representatives from various districts. The two groups started to engage in a trial of strength. The Leftists formed a Co-ordinating committee and an Executive Committee and also decided to hold Conferences of the lower committees during the next two months. Leftist claimed that the districts of South Arcot, Chingleput, Coimbatore, Madurai, Salem, Thanjavur and also Madras City in their favour. The Rightist, for their part, deputed prominent leaders to important centers in the State, for explaining their stand and for organizing the propaganda against the Leftists.

The Madras District Council of the Communist Party decided to suspend 10 members for their Leftist and dissident activities. On the contrary, P. Ramamurthi was given a rousing welcome on his arrival at Madras, after the recent National Council Meeting by the leftists. Addressing a meeting in Madras City A.K. Gopalan explained the stand of the dissident group and attacked the leadership of S.A. Dange, for his high-handed act in suspending important leaders of the party. E.M.S. Namboodripad, who visited the City, stated that the suspension of the members was arbitrary. He denied the existence of a “pro- China lobby” in the Party.

Permanency of the Split

In order to avert a complete rupture, Dange offered, on 29 May 1964, to rescind the suspension decision, on condition that the group of thirty two returned to the National Council and dissociated itself from all parallel party organizations. But these terms were rejected by the dissident group. From 7 to 12 July 1964, the “Leftist” group met at Tenali in Andhra Pradesh in a convention and called upon the CPI workers and supporters “to help us in reorganizing the Communist Party, making it a strong united party of the working class in the revolutionary traditions of the Indian people”. On 14 September, the National Council of CPI expelled all those who attended the Tenali Convention, including the “group of thirty two” who had earlier been suspended. After their expulsion, the thirty two “leftists” and their supporters convened the Seventh Congress of the Party at Calcutta from 31 October to 7 November, 1964 and adopted a new

programme. The Central Committee changed the name of the Party to Communist Party of India (Marxist). The split within the party was, thus, complete.

The process of split in Tamil Nadu Communist party, was almost complete when both “Rightists” and “Leftists” organized meetings in Coimbatore and Madurai respectively. During the period of three years from 1964 to 1967, the Communist Movement in Tamil Nadu had two different types of experiences. The Rightist CPI and Leftist CPI (M) had to face the task of maintaining the strength of the Party in state, district and village units and the other was the rapid growth of the DMK among the masses, which was a death blow to Communists. When each of the party concentrated most of their efforts in capturing and consolidating their strength in every unit of the Party, the DMK sidelined the Communists completely, surpassed the Congress and won the fourth general elections and came to power in Tamil Nadu in 1967.

Conclusion

The Communists had always been the selfless and tireless cadres of the Movement to achieve the goals of equality, freedom and economic security. They did render endless sacrifice for peasants, labourers and toiling mass. But the battle of programmes within the movement paid much for their uncompromising attitude. Moreover, the death of tall leaders Ajay Ghosh in the North and Jeevanandham in the South during the course of split averted the possibility of a compromise between the two wings. This uncompromising, ideological rigidity between the two wings spoiled their chances to emerge as an alternative force in the Tamil Nadu polity till now.

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