

CASTE ORGANIZATIONS AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN KERALA: A CASE STUDY OF SNDP YOGAM IN ALAPPUZHA DISTRICT

Sarigama R. Nair
Research Scholar,

PG & Research Department of Political Science, Sree Narayana College, Kollam, Kerala.

Abstract

Caste has become an important factor, continues to be a major determinant of social and political life. Caste values and caste interest influence citizen's socialization, consequently, his political thinking, perceptions and participation. Caste voting, caste based candidatures, caste based riots, caste violence, caste conflicts and the issue of reservations versus non reservations have been major factors in the social and political realm of Kerala. This factor contribute major share for promoting caste organizations and they play big role in the social as well as political processes in Kerala. This study is an attempt to examine the role of SNDP Yogam, one of the communal organisations in electoral politics of Alappuzha district in the state of Kerala.

Key Words : Caste, Electoral behavior, Communal organizations, Vote bank

Introduction

Different caste organizations have their loyalties behind the political parties and they gave special weightage to the caste factor for selecting their candidates, in allocating constituencies, or even in canvassing support for their nominees in the elections. In Kerala, the society and polity stand sharply divided along Hindu, Christian and Muslim lines and they exert pressure in politics through communal organizations like, Nair Service Society(NSS) ,SNDPYogam, Christian Associations, Muslim League, etc. other upper caste organizations, YogakshemaSabha and other backward class organizations like DheevaraSabha, VishwakarmaSabha, Latin Catholic Association, and organization of converted Christians etc are not strong due to the lack of membership. This work mainly focuses on the role of major caste organizations in the electoral politics in Kerala especially, SNDP Yogam of Alappuzha district. The main objectives of this study are, to trace out the historical importance of caste organizations and their participation in electoral politics, to identify how far the caste organizations influence the electoral politics in Kerala and to find out the role of SNDP Yogam in the electoral process of Alappuzha district.

Alappuzha is the sixth largest city in Kerala with an urban population of 1, 77,029. According to 2011 census Alappuzha district has a population of 21,21,943 with 10,10,252 men and 11,11,691 women with population density of 1492 persons/km². Among them 68.63% are Hindus, 10.55% are Muslims and 20.44% are Christians. The literacy rate of Alappuzha stands at 96.26% out of which 8, 95,476 are males and 9,68,082 are females. Alappuzha has a decadel population growth of 0.61%. The population is predominantly Hindus and Christians and there are sizeable number of Muslims too. Alappuzha is a laboratory for political experiments and has made and marred the careers of titans. The agrarian district has witnessed several uprisings and incidents leaving a lasting imprint on people's movements and changing the history of the state. It may be called the nursery of communism, the seeds of which were sown by the redoubtable P. Krishna Pillai, but communist leaders too have tasted defeats, including K.R. Gouri, T.V. Thomas and V.S. Achuthanandan. The land of Punnapra-Vayalar revolt still remains a communist bastion, though its monopoly has been broken often.

There are 9 legislative assembly segments in Alappuzha district. They are Aroor, Cherthala, Alappuzha, Kuttanad, Harippad, Kayamkulam, Mavelikkara and Chengannur. There are two Loksabha constituency in Alappuzha, they are Alappuzha and Mavelikkara. Alappuzha consists of 72 Gramapanchayats, 12 Block Panchayaths and 6 Municipalities.

SNDP Yogam –Historical Perspective

SNDP is the influential organization of the Ezhava community in Kerala. It is the first organization which envisaged Kerala as a whole. SNDP Yogam formed on May, 15 1903 by the efforts of a group of people who worked hard for the upliftment of the socially backward classes. It go through many memorable and energetic fights which laid a milestone in the history of Kerala. SreeNarayana Guru Devan is the founder of SNDP and other leaders, who worked hard to strengthen the organization, were Dr. Palpu, KumaranAsan, MoorkonthKumaran, P. NarayanaPillai etc. The integrated union of SreeNarayana Guru, Dr, Palpu and KumaranAsan was a turning point in the Socio- cultural, political history of Kerala. Nowadays, SNDP is the most influential organization in the electoral process in Kerala and in various elections SNDP proves their role and make it as a powerful community organization.

The formation of SNDP yogam has created an awareness of the requirement of organization need among the backward people in the Kerala Society. The inspiration of the SNDP yogam led to the formation of Sadhujana Paripalanayogam under the leadership of Ayyankali for the pulaya community followed by the formation of PulayasamudhayaParishkaranaSabha, ValasevaSamithy and DheevaraSabha, YogaksharaSabha by Brahmins and Nair Service Society in 1914 for the Nair community.

SNDP Yogam In Alappuzha District

The SNDP started basically as an organisation of the toiling millions by and by, its leadership went to the bourgeoisie of the community. With in a decade of its inception, SNDP attained incredible success and then onwards it had been steadily growing and adapting itself to suit the changing socio-political conditions and consequent needs of the people.

Yogam has different aim in each phase of its growths. In the first phase, they raised its voice against the denial of civic and human rights to avarnas. Dr. Palpu and Kumaranasan were the leading figures during the phase. Second phase was started with the advent of T K Madhavan as the organisation secretary. Madhavan made a tremendous increase in the membership of the SNDP within a short period.

The third phase led by C Kesavan. He was a lawyer, Gandhian and a nationalist. During this phase SNDP joined hands with Muslims and Christians and decided to boycott the election of 1931. This is known as abstention movement. After this the Government agree to nominate representatives proportionate to the population of the Legislative Assemblies.

The fourth phase was started in the post independence period. It was under the leadership of R Sankar. He gave more importance to Education sector. He became the Chief Minister of Kerala for a few years.

The first four phases of SNDP were progressive one as a social and political organisation, completely focused on the issue of common people. But we look into a last few decades the picture was changed a lot. Today SNDP is growing as bigger as a business organisation rather than a social organisation.

Role of SNDP in the Political Scenario of Alappuzha District.

SNDP plays an important role in the politics of Alappuzha District since the district was came into force. The purpose of SNDP Yogam is to foster the social development. For that purpose they started schools and colleges in the district and also conducting the programme like 'Ayalkkoottam' to empower the women. SNDP exert a clear political influence in the district through their different social activities.

SNDP has a hierarchical administration system. Each SNDP branch has been functioning in a cadre system, the members have different political orientation. If we look into the politics of Alappuzha, the left has a consistent base in the district. The 40% of voters in Alappuzha is belonging to Ezhava community. The lower calsses among Ezhavas used to support left parties, especially CPM and CPI. The upper middle classes and upper calsses among Ezhvas used to support Congress and its alliance.

SNDP's political stand on each election shows their attitude towards power politics. SNDP hasn't been showing a clear inclination to any political parties since 2000. But recently SNDP started to incline towards BJP for protecting their personal interest. This interest of the Yogam was very clear from the words of the present secretary Sri. Vellappalli Natesan. He said that both left and right political outfits have cheated us for a long. They consider us an expendable commodity. We will not put up with this any longer. But this is the only opinion of the secretary, we couldn't take it's as the opinion of the community as a whole.

Today SNDP acts just like an MNC's. They completely focused on profit making. The present leadership of SNDP is taking advantages from the hardship of the forerunners. The favourable law or political condition is the only rawmaterial for making profit for their institution. Who will ready to arrange that favourable condition for them, they will support that group. One of the best examples for that is the recent BJP-SNDP alliance. SNDP has a clear political aim in that alliance. Their ultimate aim is to gain maximum from the Central Government and UGC for expanding their educational institutions and other organisations.

SNDP's Influence and 2015 LSG Election In Alappuzha

SNDP-BJP alliance was the most talkative issue in the 2015 LSG election. After the examination of elections, there are some factors existed as Truth. They are,

1. SNDP couldn't exert a big influence on this election. But SNDP could provide a good number of activist for BJP.
2. BJP takes a good advantage from this alliance as a political party. They made a marginal increase of their seats in Panchayats and Municipalities. And also increase the percentage of vote.

The following table shows the clear information regarding the 2015 LSG election in Alappuzha.

Table 1

Governing				
	G	B	D	M
LDF	33	9	1	2
UDF	14	3	0	4
BJP	0	0	0	0
Tie	25	0	0	0
Wards				
	G	B	D	M
LDF	566	93	16	70
UDF	429	61	7	101
BJP	105	1	0	23
Others	69	3	0	21

Municipality	LDF	UDF	BJP	Others
Cherthala	13	19	0	3
Alappuzha	19	26	4	3
Chengannur	3	12	3	9
Mavelikkara	12	6	8	2
Harippad	5	22	1	1
Kayamkulam	18	16	7	3

Block Panchayath	LDF	UDF	BJP	Others
Thaikkattuseri	11	2	0	0
Pattanakkadu	8	5	0	1
Kanjikkuzhi	7	6	0	0
Aryadu	9	4	0	0
Ambalappuzha	8	5	0	0
Chambakkulam	4	9	0	0
Veliyanadu	5	8	0	0
Chengannur	7	5	1	0
Harippad	5	7	0	1
Mavelikkara	11	2	0	0

Bharanikkavu	10	2	0	1
Muthukulam	8	6	0	0

LDF got more achievements in the district; they won 47 village panchayats out of 72, 9 block panchayat out of 12 and 2 municipalities out of 6. UDF made a good effect in municipalities. They bagged 4 municipalities out of 6. BJP performed well in the municipalities like Kayamkulam, Mavelikkara and Chengannur, but they didn't make any change in Cherthala with the strong support of SNDP. This shows negative image of SNDP in Cherthala.

Influence of SNDP and Assembly Election 2016

In 2016 election for the first time in Kerala's history, a social-religious organizations like SNDP Yogam decided to enter in the state politics by making electoral alliance with the BJP, and they formed a new political party BDJS (Bharath Dharma Jana Sena). The newly-formed BDJS though it failed to open its accounts in assembly but it bagged 3.9% votes beyond the expectation of both the fronts. The BJP led NDA, it was an opportunity to put an end to its 36 year old struggle to enter the state legislature, thus BJP rewrote the bipolar electoral history of the state, the BJP opened its account through O. Rajagopal from 'Nemam' constituency. The BJP emerged second in 7 other constituencies with K. Surendran lost by a mere 89 votes at Manjeswaram. All these facts reveal that the communal sentiments of Keralites towards BJP and BDJS. According to the Election Commission, the performance of BJP is very high as compared to both LDF and UDF.

BDJS could not open account in Alappuzha, but gained good number of votes. BDJS support helps NDA improve its vote share. The BJP could also improve their position in Alappuzha district with the support of BDJS. The support of the Bharath Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS), which represents the prominent Ezhava community, has helped the NDA improve its vote share in the state. The steep rise in the NDA's vote share in Alappuzha, Attingal, Thrissur and Wayanad constituencies, where the Ezhava community is a strong presence, points to the shift in its allegiance. The NDA, which had secured 90,528 votes in 2014, almost tripled the tally this time --- 2,46,502. In Varkala, Attingal, Chirayinkeezhu and Aruvikkara Assembly constituencies, the alliance polled 34,343, 42,389, 32,829 and 30,151 votes in that order.

In Alappuzha, where former Public Service Commission chairman K S Radhakrishnan contested, NDA increased its vote share from 43,051 to 1, 86,092. BJP leaders had lauded the campaigning by BDJS activists at Manalur, Nattika, Thrissur, Irinjalakkuda and Puthukkad. Though actor Suresh Gopi won sizable votes on his own, the role of BDJS cannot be ignored as the NDA's vote share increased from 1, 02,681 to 2,93,405.

Table 2

Performances of various alliances in the Kerala Assembly elections 2016 based on Vote percentage

YEAR	UDF	LDF	NDA
2006	42.98%	48.63%	4.67%
2011	45.89%	44.99%	6%
Shift	+2.91%	-3.64%	+1.33%
2011	45.89%	44.99%	6%
2016	38.8%	43.12%	14.65%
Shift	-7.9%	-1.57%	*8.58%

Source: CEO Kerala

The illustration given above shows the decrease in the vote share of the winning front as well as the rise of the NDA. Changes in the vote share in 2016 indicate that the NDA has eaten into the vote bank of UDF as well as that of LDF.

Based on preliminary research from secondary sources, a few hypotheses were formed for the proposed study.

- Caste/religion remained to be significant factors in the mobilization of votes in 2016
- There exists a high rate of political awareness among people
- LDF won because its vote base was largely undisturbed
- The NDA has gained a secure footing in Kerala's politics

Kerala Lok Sabha Election 2019

The Congress-led UDF coalition has registered a remarkable victory with wins in 19 out of the 20 parliamentary constituencies. Party president Rahul Gandhi had a lead of over 4 lakh votes in Wayanad. The UDF has also retained all its sitting MP seats like

Kozhikode, Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam, Kottayam and Mavelikkara. Kerala's political situation have proved to be unsuitable for the BJP brand of politics. Its candidate is set for second position in Thiruvananthapuram and third position in all other seats.

Bharat Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS) president Thushar Vellapally is fielding from Wayanad Lok Sabha constituency. He will be fighting against NDA to fight Rahul Gandhi. As per the seat sharing pact between the NDA parties, BDJS fight from five Lok Sabha constituencies in Kerala. These seats include Wayanad, Alathur, Idukki, Thrissur and Mavelikkara. BDJS was formed only in the year 2015. Hence that was the first Lok Sabha elections the party contested.

Conclusion

The recent trend shows that SNDP couldn't make much effect in Alappay's politics. SNDP grows bigger and aloof from the common people. Their aims and objectives are shrunk into the personal gains of organisation secretary and his family members. The total political scenario of Kerala is changing by the advent of social medias. People start to think beyond caste or caste politics. Today the political parties and caste organisation think only on the basis of caste politics or vote bank politics. So this shows a better sign of political modernisation in Kerala, it never be a farthest dream. Think about politics beyond caste and religion is the order of the day. SNDP and all other organisation should ready to change their attitudes, otherwise they will suffer definitely in the upcoming days. The caste and communities play a major role in the public life but not at the same level on the election front. A Malayalee voter cannot be easily won over as he has a rich and profound understanding on the political developments around him. The study shows voters are not easily amendable for a new front unless they are very much convinced for the political reasons and not for the religious reasons.

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