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Ideology and Destiny: The Impact of the Calcutta Thesis on the Communists in Malabar

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Abstract- The Communist Party of India's decision in 1948 to launch an armed insurrection in India, known as Calcutta Thesis, with the aim of establishing a proletarian dictatorship was an action that failed to account for the prevailing circumstances of the period. The masses of India had not been politically indoctrinated to support an armed uprising. The peasantry of Malabar, in accordance with Thesis, also rose against their landlords, yet they encountered an ignominious failure. The politically immature decision resulted in the killing of a large number of communists, and the Party suffered a severe setback on a national scale. Consequently, it found itself on the verge of extinction in Malabar district of Madras. It was only upon the Party's adoption of the democratic path to revolution that it got a new lease of life.

(Key words- communism, armed revolt, peasantry, congress, ban)

Introduction

Upon India's attainment of independence in 1947, the Communist Party of India did not acknowledge this freedom and instead resolved to initiate an armed insurrection to seize power and establish a proletarian dictatorship. The Congress-led governments at both the central and state levels were resolute in suppressing this revolt, culminating in the deaths of numerous communists in Malabar and inflicting a severe setback upon the party nationwide. There ensued a period in Kerala during which the Communist Party's activities were entirely suspended due to the imposition of a ban on the Party. When the armed insurrection was declared in 1948, the party failed to comprehend the reality of the Indian masses, who were insufficiently politically indoctrinated to support a communist uprising. The peasant struggles in the villages of Malabar, conducted under the party's banner, failed to achieve their objectives. The police, in collaboration with the Congress party workers, unleashed a reign of terror by arresting Communists and intimidating sympathizers who aided absconding party members. For a brief period, the party teetered on the brink of extinction, as no one dared to engage in party activities. This paper examines the state of the Communist Party in Malabar district of Madras in the aftermath of the call for armed revolt in 1948.

By late 1947, a section of the Communist Party of India was arguing that the CPI was becoming an appendage of Congress, was neglecting the opportunity to lead a mass upsurge against

imperialism and feudalism, and was inviting repression by its very timidity[i].This leftist faction won control of the Party's higher counsels by December 1947. It was at this time that the second congress of the Communist Party met at Calcutta from 28 February to 6 March 1948[ii]. As part of its political thesis, the Party analysed the Indian situation and freedom. Such an analysis of the agrarian situation compelled it to formulate new tasks in the struggle for People's Democratic Revolution. The congress adopted the Calcutta or Ranadive (its main protagonist) Theses as party policy. For that purpose, it decided to build All India Kisan Sabha as the fighting central organisation of India's peasantry.

At the time of Calcutta Theses, prominent Communists in Malabar like A.K.Gopalan were kept in prison and some of the wanted, accused in several cases continued their life underground. In fact the Party organisation had been under ban although a legal ban was not imposed. When it followed the path of armed struggle, the Kerala committee also took steps to organise its machinery according to the new guidelines. E.M.S. Namboothirippad accepted the change in the party's line at the Calcutta congress and the Ranadive line was readily accepted, though some voiced against it, by the membership in Kerala. The new line of thought influenced considerably the agrarian struggles in Malabar especially north Malabar. To cope with the situation the existing Party branches in Kerala were dissolved and revolutionary groups and cells were organised in April 1948[iii]. In accordance with the programme the local leadership in Malabar and Kasargod decided to mobilize the peasantry which was reeling under famine triggered by the war.

As the peasant movement gathered strength in the wake of the Calcutta Thesis, the authorities stepped up vigil in the villages. Measures were taken to watch each and every movement of the communists with the help of the *janmi goons*. The situation got exacerbated when the Congress party-supported volunteer corps started to encounter the Communists in the name of restoring law and order. In many places Communists and the Congress volunteers encountered each other. Even though the security in the villages was stepped up by the police, the Communists did not leave any stone unturned to mobilise the peasantry. During the festival season of *Vishu* in April 1948, the starving peasants in north Malabar moved in procession demanding paddy from the landlords. They broke up the granaries and distributed the paddy among themselves or through cooperative stores. A similar development at Pullattu in Pazhassi led to the police firing in which 12 Communists died.

Secret meetings and activities continued unabated despite the surveillance of the police. Nearly forty leaders of the peasant struggles in north Malabar secretly assembled at a place called Munayan Kunnu under the leadership of K.C.Kunjappu Master on 1 May 1948[iv]. On hearing the assembly, a larger party of police moved silently to Munayan Kunnu and after surrounding the area the police fired continuously killing six Communists on the spot[v]. Similar incident reported at Onchiyam in Kurumbranadu *taluk*, where an underground meeting of the CPI was held on 29 April 1948. By the time the police arrived at the place, the leaders managed to flee[vi]. When the police took some of the Communists into custody, a big crowd gathered and resisted the onward march of the police demanding their release. Suddenly, the police started firing at the crowd and eight peasants killed on the spot.

In the wake of the Calcutta Thesis developments, most of the active Communists were arrested and kept in jails and law and order were maintained under "shoot at sight" orders in most of the districts. Besides, the armed conflicts which had taken place in different parts of Madras province constrained the government to take steps for declaring the party unlawful in the province and later in Malabar district[vii]. The government of Madras decided to ban the CPI and its feeder associations in this province with effect from 27 September 1949. But Government of India was not in favour of a total ban of the party. It explained that no advantage would be gained by declaring the party unlawful in one district of Madras province. The ban prevailed at that time only in Madras, Hyderabad, West Bengal and Travancore-Cochin. There was no unanimous opinion among the chief ministers regarding an all India ban of CPI when they met. The Congress leaders like K.Kelappan came forward and gave calls to suppress the Communists. The sympathisers of the Party were subjected to persecution by the police and Congress volunteers. Many a number of the Communists were imprisoned, killed and injured in the police action. The painful incident was the murder of Moyyarath Sankaran, an earlier nationalist activist, by the hands of Congress workers and later by the police, on 11 May 1948[viii].

The Calcutta thesis was a total failure. As a model of revolution it echoed Russian experience but in the Indian situation it overestimated the potential of the working class and underestimated the importance of the peasantry and landless labour and was un-Marxist in denying the national bourgeoisie and role at all in the revolutionary process[ix]. In any case the Party lacked the machinery, resources, or influence to implement such a policy. The result was a series of ill-considered and ill-coordinated actions, subsequently labelled 'adventurist' by the party, which led to deaths, detentions, the exposure of undercover comrades, loss of influence in the union movement, a split in the peasant organisation, widespread demoralisation and defection, and the accelerated growth of rival congress and socialist mass organisation. At the beginning of 1949, the party turned to terrorism, sabotage, and jail strikes which led to still more determined measures by the authorities. One of the most significant incidents as part of the inside struggle (jail) had taken place on 11 February 1950, in the central jail annexe of Salem. At the jail, Communists declined to wear white cap as put on by the criminal inmates. It led to a tension in the jail and consequent police firing. 22 persons were killed and 30 warders and 103 prisoners injured[x]. Communists call it "*Koje* Camp" (an island of Korea) of the Congress government which was then in power in Madras. Over 3000 party members and sympathisers 'from Kerala were imprisoned during 1948-50.

The volunteer corps known as *Desha Raksha* Sena was an organisation under the aegis of the Congress to contain the Communist activities in Malabar. Though it was formed earlier, it was very active in Malabar especially after the Calcutta Thesis in 1948. Those who were apparently suspected to be Communists or even Communist sympathisers were sketched and put behind bars by the police with the help of the *Desha Raksha Sena* activists[xi]. The *Sena* volunteers attired in blue trouser, *khadher* shirt and white cap with a wooden lathi-like stump in hands, wandered around the villages to gather information about the Communists and their works. The Communists' activities including their secret meetings and underground activities were spied on to the police.

The volunteers conducted door to door visits and advised people not to give asylum to the Communists. The Communists were hunted down and many of their heads were shaved off. Those sketched by the volunteers were nabbed and handed over to the police and many were caught and handled by the volunteers themselves. In this way the volunteer corps acted as a parallel police system in the post-Calcutta Thesis period. The Madras government and the police system in Malabar had given all possible help to the volunteers in suppressing the Communists. Consequent to these developments, no one dared to come forward to work for the Party or even to help the communist families in distress. Thus, the ban on the Party and related developments left it in the middle of the incensed ocean. All the public and party activities ceased to exist; in many areas no one dared to come forward with party programmes and even the fragments of red flag was not detectable in the stronghold of the Party.

At a time when party was put under ban following the Thesis, many workers started leaving the party[xii]. Some in fear of their lives left party and joined Congress; some even aided congress volunteers to nab absconding Communists. Notably, the Party lost many of its active functionaries and resulted in the erosion of its popularity. It was a time when the party machinery ceased to exist; red flag disappeared; party hymns and slogans whispered within the four walls; news readings and discussions and arguments at tea shops, *ayurveda* shops and *vayanasalas* (reading hall) died down. Martial law prevailed and no one dared to come forward to work or even to speak for the Party. In short, the CPI was, thus, facing an imminent extinction in Malabar.

The atrocities on the Communists continued unabated; Congress backed volunteers in support of the MSP (Malabar Special Police) roamed in the villages and even the sympathisers of the party were not spared. Gradually opposition began to surface within the Congress party itself against the brutalities on the Communists especially after the murder of Moyyarath Sankaran. Congress leaders including C.K.Govindan Nair and K.Kelappan, began to criticise the police atrocities. K.Kelappan who was the then editor of Mathrubhumi, wrote an editorial with a caption '*The Danger in Another Form*'[xiii]. He held the view that the blind hatred against communism had been responsible for the martyrdom of Moyyarath. Such developments, including the dissent voice against the atrocities on the Communists, subsequently created a rupture in the Congress organisation.

The year 1950 and 1951 were the years of struggle for the party to get its freedom restored. Amidst growing ideological struggle within the Party in the Post-Calcutta Thesis period, an editorial appeared in the *For a Lasting Peace, For People's Democracy*, the press organ of the Cominform. And, in the light of the editorial a central committee meeting was held in June 1950 to take stock of the existing situation[xiv].The committee took very crucial decisions in order to avoid an imminent extinction of the Party. The central committee and Politbureau were reorganised and most of the members of the Politbureau which functioned during 1948-50 were suspended. C.Rajeshwara Rao supplanted B.T.Ranadive as general secretary. Though a new leadership was installed on the top of the party, it was disbanded in December 1950 itself and a new leadership was constituted for the party which was interested in restoring unity in the party. It was only after the Party adopted Parliamentary path of revolution that the ban

on it was lifted. Consequent to this decision, the Party began to participate in assembly elections.

Conclusion

The Calcutta Theses was a total failure, as the Communist Party overestimated the revolutionary potential of the Indian peasantry, which manifested only in limited regions such as Malabar. The party lacked the requisite organizational machinery, resources, and influence to orchestrate an armed insurrection. Consequently, the ensuing revolts resulted in the deaths and imprisonment of thousands of communists, alongside widespread demoralization and defection among party cadres. During the period from 1948 to 1951, all political and cultural activities under the red flag were severely curtailed. The growth of the Congress party in Malabar during this time was achieved at the expense of the Communist Party. It was only subsequent to the party's adoption of a democratic revolutionary approach that it experienced growth across the nation, particularly in Malabar.

End notes

[i] T. J. Nossitter, *Communism in Kerala: A study of Political Adaptation*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1982. p.87.
[ii] K.K.N. Kurup, *Agrarian Struggles in Kerala*, CBH Publications, Nagercoil, 1989, p.53.
[iii] T.J. Nossitter, *op.cit*., p.89.

[iv] E.K. Nayanar, *My Struggles*, An Autobiography, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1982, p.79.
[v] *Ibid*.
[vi] K.K.N. Kurup, *op. cit*., p.62.

[vii] *Ibid*., p.56.

[viii] Moyyarath Sankaran, *Athmakatha* (Autobiography, Malayalam), Sahithya Pravarthaka Cooperative Society, Kottayam, 2021, p.208.
[ix] T.J. Nossitter, *op.cit*., p.87.

[x] *Ibid*.

[xi] P.P.Shaju, *Padanilangalil Poruthi Veenavar (*Malayalam), Chintha, Thiruvanandapuram, 2012, p.73.
[xii] Cherukadu, *Jeevithappatha,* (Autobiography, Malayalam), Current Books, Trissur, 2006, p.505.

[xiii] K.K.N. Kurup, *op.cit.*, p.67.
[xiv] C. Bhaskaran, *Communist Prasthanam Indiayil* (Malayalam), Chintha, Thiruvanandapuram, 2007, p.69.