The Marxist, XXX 1, January–March 2014

Pinarayi Vijayan

Muslims of Malabar and the Left

This article is an attempt to explain the stand taken by the Left, in contributing to advancing the Muslim masses in Malabar, in the background of the prolonged anti-colonial struggle and the tradition of renaissance. There is a conscious attempt from some circles to raise a campaign that the Left never intervenes to solve the issues of Muslim masses. It is in this context that an inquiry as to the steps adopted by the Left in the growth and progress of Muslim masses becomes relevant. The Communist Party has been ready to view in a proper perspective all the distinguishing features of Islam since its formation and the role played by them in history. The founders of Communist Party have shown no hesitation in highlighting the contributions made by the Arab people to the world. The From the inception of it, Communist movement in Kerala is also following the same tradition. In future also it will go ahead holding the very same position.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF ARABS

Since agriculture was not possible in Arabia due to its geographical distinctiveness Arabs tried to bring food articles from other regions and tried to earn their livelihood through commerce. Marx and Engels

have highlighted the role played by Arabs in propagating all over the world the knowledge they had acquired by traveling all over the world and assimilating knowledge available in all such places.

Engels explains the renaissance in the world in the preface of the book *Dilectics of Nature*. Here he acknowledges the fact that the basis of many European innovations and inventions where based on the knowledge disseminated by the Arabs which they gained from different parts of the world. It has now emerged from recent studies that even from Kerala they had acquired such knowledge which they have disseminated in other parts of the world. Communists are those who honour such contributions of Arab people.

MARXIST APPROACH AND FORMATION OF ISLAM

Marx and Engels have made detailed studies of religions formed in the world and functions generally performed by them during those times. They studied about the founding of Islam and changes meted out by it in the society. According to them Islam was formed as a religion well suited to the urban people engaged in trade and industry on one side, and the nomadic Bedouins on the other side. Engels put forward the view that formation of Islam was from the contradiction of the wealthy urban people and the poor Bedouins. He further states that formation of Islam was on the basis of interventions for the demands of Arab national consciousness and of the basic class of people there. It was also observed that it was the awakening of Arab national consciousness, to liberate Arabian Peninsula from *Abyssinia* and to regain the trade routes.

THE WAY ISLAM CAME TO KERALA

The position of Kerala on the coast of the Arabian sea led to the establishment of relations at an early stage with Arabia. Kerala had trade relations with the Arabs even before the advent of Islam. Hence when Islam took shape in Arabia, the message reached our country through the Arab traders.

In the specific social context existing in Kerala this ideology got propagated. Particularly in areas connected with ports. It was in Muziris (the present day Kodungalloor) which was an important centre of trade in Kerala that the first mosque was established.

In the arena of trade, especially in Malabar, Arabs had supremacy. But Arabs did not try to establish power in the country or to expand trade under this guise. This is clear from the works of those who visited Kerala at that time.

With the arrival of Portuguese in Kerala in 1498 competition between them started to dominate the field of foreign trade. The then Zamorin did not accept the Portuguese demand that Arabs be eased out of the monopoly of trade. Portuguese made moves to establish power by utilizing the conflicts among the local princes here. This created conflicts along the coastal areas of Kerala. This led to the intensification of conflicts between Portuguese and Arabs and their intervention against Muslim masses. Strength of Portuguese was in the field of naval activities. At that time since fighting in the sea was considered a taboo by the Nair soldiers, Zamorin had to depend on other sections of the society. He rallied Muslim sections who were connected with the sea and commerce against the Portuguese. A situation emerged in Malabar where Islamic religion was encouraged as part of the fight against foreign powers. The Nair army assured responsibility to fight in the land and Muslims led by Kunhali Marakkar took up the fight in the seas. It was by unifying these two forces that the anti-imperialist movement in Malabar took shape. Establishment of a strong naval force by the Arakkal dynasty was the result of these factors.

When Portuguese attempted convert people in the coastal regions the Muslims resisted and fought against it. Such resistance prevented the Portuguese from establishing their dominance in Kerala. At Kannur which was the main centre of domination, the local people fought against the wrong policies of Portuguese. Since it was Muslims who largely inhabited around Portuguese Fort at Kannur, there were incessant conflicts with them at Kannur. The British who established their domination after the Portuguese, strengthened the then existing feudal system. Since Islam was free from caste hierarchy, sections of people who were considered as untouchables embraced Islam religion.

MUSLIM MASSES AND AGRARIAN STRUGGLES

At that time Islamic society consisted of people from the lower strata of the society. They lived under the feet of the then existing feudal system. Resistance against this feudal oppression came up from these

sections and these struggles were termed as Mappila rebellions of Malabar by the British.

Even before the agrarian rebellion of Malabar in 1921, several other struggles had arisen here. Malabar has the history that the British expelled Mamparam Fazal Pookkoya Thangal from the country for having played the leadership role in such uprisings. William Logan who was deputed by the British to study issues in Malabar had made it clear that issues behind all these struggles were fundamentally agrarian.

MUHAMMED ABDURAHMAN AND COMMUNISTS

The rebellion which Britishers denounced by terming it as Mappila Rebellion took place as a sequel to rebellions which occurred before it. Britishers suppressed this rebellion brutally. Leaders like Ali Musaliar were hanged to death. Variamkunnath Kunhahammed Haji and Chembasseri Thangal were shot dead. About a thousand people were murdered in the rebellion. About 14000 people were imprisoned. The fierce incident in this episode was the wagon tragedy which occurred on November 17, 1921. It was Muhammed Abdurahman who adopted a strong stand against the British attempt to stamp as a mad frenzy of Mappilas along communal lines. It was he who identified the national trait in its character and gave the name 'Malabar Rebellion' to this struggle. At that time Muslim League and later the Congress denounced this rebellion. Then it was Muhammed Abdurahman who came to the scene to support those who rebelled. When the rich among Muslims opposed the rebellion, it was the poor people who rallied behind the rebellion. The League which protected the interests of the rich, denounced the rebellion for the elite. The Left adopted an attitude of supporting the stand of Muhammed Abdurahman. It was in this background that a Leftist KPCC was formed with Muhammed Abdurahman as President and EMS as Secretary against the rightist forces in the Congress.

MALABAR REBELLION

The combined meeting of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar committees of the Communist Party which met at Kozhikode on 18, 19 August, 1946 on the occasion of 25th anniversary of Malabar

Rebellion adopted a resolution titled '1921: The Call and Warning'. Explaining the same thing further EMS wrote a pamphlet with the same title. The British decided to ban Deshabhimani for publishing this. The newspaper was banned for analyzing Malabar rebellion in its true sense. When League and Congress denounced the Malabar Rebellion, its true nature was put forward by the Communists. Some communal elements interpret the Rebellion as a mad frenzy of Mappilas as was done by the British. But the approach of the leaders of the Rebellion at the time it took place was to see that it did not assume a communal character. The approach of Variamkunnath Kunhahammed Haji reveals this. Kunhahammed Haji rejected the contention that this was a rebellion of Muslims. In the article written by Sardar Chandroth in Deshabhimani on 25 August, 1946 contents of Kunhahammed Haji's speech were quoted as follows: *"I came to know of an information yesterday. That it is being said in other countries that this is a war between Hindus and Muslims. We have no hatred towards Hindus. But those who help the government and those who betrayed us to the government will be punished mercilessly. If it is known that somebody harms Hindus unnecessarily, I will punish them. Hindus are our fellow country men. We have no wish to make this a Muslim country."*

All these make it clear that the perspective that the essence of the Malabar Rebellion is religious conflict is wrong. It can be seen that the rebels killed not only those who tried to betray the rebellion but also Muslim officials who tried to suppress the rebellion by joining hands with police and army. The rebels killed police officials Aamu Sahib and Moideen Inspector. Even Chekkutty Adhikari of Anakkayam was murdered by them for betraying rebels to the Britishers. What this proves is that the general method of the rebellion was not simply religious. The Communist Party did not fail to note that at some places there were tendencies to divert the rebellion along communal lines.

It was in this context that the Party took note of the call as well as the "warning ". It was pointing to the fact that some such factors were also at work where party saw in it not only a call but also a warning.

Communists had intervened to study Malabar Rebellion at the international level and to formulate policies on that basis. The rebellion caught the attention of Lenin. Lenin had recorded the importance of Hindu-Muslim unity that developed during that

period. In the background of Malabar Rebellion, Lenin had instructed Abani Mukherji, an Indian Communist of that period to prepare a pamphlet after collecting all available facts regarding the agrarian issue in India and peasant struggles. Abani Mukherji who was also an economist prepared the pamphlet and published it in Russian and English from Moscow. It was a Russian named Kutowski who first conducted research on 'Malabar Rebellion' and received a doctorate. A British Communist, Conrad Woods conducted research on Malabar Rebellion. In short, when Congress and Muslim League went ahead after denouncing Malabar Rebellion, it was Communists who highlighted its importance at international level.

The Rebellion of Pazhassi, struggles led by Veluthampi (of Tavancore) and Paliathachan (of Cochin) all of which happened in the early 1800's, has an anti British character. Their patriotic content imparts strength to our fights at all times. Struggles which occurred here at the next stage can be seen to have had anti-landlord character as well. Malabar Rebellion is important among them. When such rebellions took place at the beginning of 19th century, the dialectical materialist or Leftist political movements were not in vogue in Kerala. Hence it was natural that some weaknesses appeared within it. Chesneau, an authority on agrarian struggles in China, has gone on record that as long as political ideas and movement do not provide clear goal and leadership, religious ideas and thought will give inspiration to agrarian struggles. The tradition of such anti-imperialist and anti-feudal rebellions was in fact taken over and carried forward in later years by Communists. It is well known that the fighters of Kayyoor went to the gallows chanting slogan against imperialism and feudal landlordism. What Communists did was to advance, correcting some weaknesses apparent in Malabar Agrarian Rebellion, and carrying forward its positive aspects.

MALABAR REBELLION AND MEMORIALS

It was during the period of LDF government that memorials were erected for the worshipful leaders of Malabar Rebellion, Ali Musaliar and Madhavan Nair. The foundation stone for the memorial of Ali Musaliar was laid by T. Sivadasa Menon and that for the memorial of Madhavan Nair by Paloli Muhammedkutty. It was after LDF came to

power in Tirur Municipality that a memorial for Wagon Tragedy was erected. It was LDF government which removed the memorial for Hitchcock at Vallumpuram. As a sequel to Malabar Rebellion Muslims were denied entry into MSP (Malabar Special Police). It was the Leftist government of 1957 which amended the order and lifted the ban. There was no control over building shrines for other sections of people. The ban was only on Muslims. The government removed that hindrance also.

SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS

With the crystallization of modern ideas in society the thought that there has to be a shift from traditional ways grew among Muslims as among other sections of society. Renaissance movements rose in the Muslim community as well. Sayed Sanaulla Makti Thangal is the chief patron who gave leadership to renaissance advance. He was well versed in Malayalam, Arab, English, Urdu and Persian languages. Though he got a job under British government, he resigned from it for activities of religious renaissance. He fought against superstition and evil rites. He called upon Muslims to receive modern education and get reformed. He organised educational institutions. He published books and pamphlets in Arabic, Malayalam and Arab-Malayalam. He did not succumb to the opposition of conservatives. Chaliyath Kunhahammed Haji is a name to be highlighted. As a teacher he liberated Islamic religious studies and general education from the traditional style. He tried to lead them to modernity. He took special interest in girls' education. Shaik Muhammed Hamadani Thangal is another personality who worked in educational sphere. Vakkom Moulavi who played a major role in Islamic renaissance formed United Muslim Group (Aikya Muslim Sangham) to carry new developments in the world into Muslim community. While indulging in modernization of his community he tried also to intervene in political affairs. Articles of Swadeshabhimani (patriot) Ramakrishna Pilla were published in the newspaper owned by Vakkom Moulavi.

In organising tenants in Eranad and Valluvanad Kattilasseri Muhammed Musaliar had an important role. Many such individuals mainly attempted to bring Muslim believers into contact with

modernity and modern ways of education Koyakkunju Sahib who was a teacher imparting education to members of Arakkal royal family belongs to this group. C.I. Ahammed Moulavi who translated Quran into Malayalam is a personality worth mentioning. At that time an opinion was raised that even translating Quran to Malayalam was wrong. He went ahead confronting that view. It was Muhammed Abdurahman who gave inspiration to Ahammed Moulavi for his translation of Quran. He paid attention in maintaining relations with streams of renaissance while actively indulging in politics. Thoughts of Chekannoor Moulavi belong to this group.

MOVEMENTS AMONG MUSLIMS

Strong division that exists in Muslim community in the world is as Shia and Sunni. In Kerala presence of Shia is almost non-existent. The Sunni community is the main one. Sunnis generally maintain the stand that secular stand is not a hindrance to Islam to function under a secular government which allows observation of religious beliefs and rites. Mujahid movement came into being in the name of religious reform. They put forward some positive outlook like entry of women into the mosque. They raised progressive perspectives within religion. It is to be reviewed whether the new period is able to put forward such perspectives. Jamaat-e-Islami is an organisation which does not distinguish between religion and state as separate, which desires to establish an Islamic state and oppose secularism and work towards that end. They adopt the stand that Islam religious belief can be carried forward only within an Islamic state. The communal agenda of Jamaat-e-Islami which puts forward the idea of an Islamic state like the idea of Hindu state of RSS has to be strongly opposed. They now try to implement their agenda wearing the mask of Welfare Party. Now NDF is working as SDPI. Their way is to propagate fiercely extremist ideas and to communalise the society. They insist that members of Muslim community should not come in contact with other believers, that they should live in a particular manner and be dressed in a particular way. What turns out in this manner is the method of keeping Muslim minority out of the common society.

CURRENT WORLD POLITICS AND MUSLIM MASSES

Hegemonistic methods adopted by U.S imperialism in world politics cause deep anxiety in Muslim sections in Kerala as elsewhere. Particularly since lakhs from Kerala are employed in Gulf sector. The fact is that if stoves in Kerala are to burn this money is needed. U.S is attempting to catch hold of power in Gulf sector with the aim of capturing oil fields. After establishing hegemony in Iraq and Afghanistan, they attempt to cause disruption in Iran and Syria. Terrorists are encouraged to disrupt Syria which is the remaining secular state in Arab sector. Such interventions of US have caused protest among Muslim masses. It is a serious issue that countries like India are not prepared to resist such undemocratic actions of the US. USSR was a close friend of nations in Arab sector. Even at that time the US had tried to intervene as it is doing now. It was USSR which resisted it. When the US tried to directly intervene in Egypt, it could not do it since USSR came publicly on the scene against that move. Various Arab countries including Iraq was then having good relations with USSR. It was with the collapse of USSR that a situation was created wherein US interests could be thrust up on others.

NATIONAL STATE AND MUSLIM MASSES

Sangh Parivar forces are trying to implement Hindutva agenda in India. By destructing Babri Masjid they cut down secularism and democracy at their roots. Congress which claims to be a secular party could not prevent such moves of Sangh Parivar. Though parties including the Left had declared support for any action, Congress was not prepared to prevent Sangh Parivar. The state often fail in bringing before the law those who give lead to communal attacks. This also creates a background for a small section of minorities to march on to terrorism. Terrorism is not a phenomenon emanating from any particular religion. The explosions carried out under the leadership of Sangh Parivar in places like Malegaon, Goa and Mecca Masjid, points the finger to this reality. It should be possible to discern that it is important in the present national context to bring the political force alternate to Congress and BJP to power. Congress and BJP represent US partisanship in matters including foreign policy and the economic policy they put forward.

PRESENT SITUATION

Muslims in Kerala have been able to be far ahead of their people in any other part of India. Total number of all minorities in Kerala is almost half of the population. Religious discrimination or suppression is not felt here as in other States. A sizeable section of Muslim community has become rich. The leadership of the community is with them. In the name of minority rights what is protected is the interest of the elite of the community. They utilise the support of the community to intervene in power politics. These community elite have no qualms in allying even with BJP to share power. The approach adopted by Muslim League, which claims that it stands for the rights of Muslims, is to highlight the interests of such richer sections. RSS tries to propagate a communal agenda pointing its finger to this richer section and the League which protect their interests. In that way they try to foment feelings against Muslim masses.

COMPROMISE WITH COMMUNALISMS

Political policies of the Right are intended to lead to communal polarization. They got prepared to ally with casteist and religious forces to confront Communist movement. Such forces started to grow under the shade of the Right. Beypore-Vadakara alliances in earlier elections proved that it is possible for them to ally even with BJP. The tie up which UDF had in the last Lok Sabha elections with NDF belongs to this pattern. When the Left rules there are no communal clashes in our State. That is not the position when UDF rules. This is the result of using religion for political ends. A change is necessary in this.

In the history of Muslims in Malabar one cannot perceive the agenda of establishing political power. The path they have generally adopted is to live with all sections of people. Communal forces working among Muslims are going ahead with the political agenda of smashing it. This will isolate Muslims from the general stream and prepare the ground for majority communal forces to grow. It can be seen that all communal forces are targeting the working class movements. What majority-minority communalisms are doing is to destruct the interests of basic sections of people.

SOCIAL LIFE HAS TO BE MORE HARMONIOUS

If the Agenda of communal forces which make people fight each other are to be resisted, there has to be intervention to further strengthen the common space. Strengthening public education is important in this context. Such institutions where children who are believers and non-believers mix together will function as strong foundations of secularism. Many unaided educational institutions are run by casteist-religious forces where children only from the respective section study. There are instances where this becomes a hindrance to develop secular bases in the minds of students. In the society where secularism and democracy exist it must be possible to develop a perspective which is congenial to it and befitting the modern times. It must also be possible to speak against leading members of the community to more retrograde positions. The retrograde policy approaches adopted now in the matter of age of marriage will cause only to lead life of women further background. It must be possible to stand up against such moves. It is necessary to expand the style of members of various religions coming together at the time of festivals and important occasions in life. Particular attention is to be paid for the occasions of marriage and death. Religious believers must take initiative to isolate those who propagate communalism and extremism in every religion. The model put forward by freedom fighters including Gandhiji and Maulana Abulkalam Azad must be propagated. Progressive minded people must be able to intervene to strengthen the advance of renaissance within religion.

Whichever be the religion one believes in, issues of life are common. Only when they are taken up and gone ahead, unity in common issues can be assured at. It is such united stand that is essential for secular society. The CPI(M) is a party which functions organising them on the basis of their issues of life. Communists work advancing people on the basis of class unity while intervening to solve social backwardness. The party follows the way put forth by EMS to this end. Party is committed to bestow special attention to the issues of suffering sections of people. In Kerala SC-ST, women, minorities, OBCs and economically backward sections of forward communities – all these confront issues. It must be possible to view them specially. Party has always taken care to handle issues of Muslim sections with care on that basis.

INTERVENTIONS FOR WELFARE OF MINORITIES

It was the Communist movement which continuously intervened taking up the difficulties of the minority section of people. It was the government of 1957 which for the first time in India introduced reservation for Muslims. Muslim tenants got ownership of land as a result of land reforms. Their financial position got improved for which it was the Left government which intervened. It was the government in 1967 which formed Malappuram district in a way helpful to overcome the backwardness of Muslim minority and gave leadership to establish a University in Malappuram itself. Interventions to improve general education and general health maintenance contributed positive results as far as Muslim masses are concerned. Sachar Committee appointed to study problems of minorities assessed the prevailing general backwardness of minorities in India. It was the LDF government which on that basis examined the issues in the State and adopted remedial measures. Activities of CPI (M) which takes up issues of people, whatever be the caste or religion they belong to, or they may not belong to any of them, do away with interventions of reactionaries who try to rake up conflicts in the name of caste or religion. Activity of the party itself becomes the main pillar of secularism. The Leftist movement has to get strengthened in order to firm up secular society. It has to be discerned that the growth of the Left is essential for the protection of minority sections as well.

A secular society is most important as far as minorities are concerned. Instead of strengthening such a society communal extremist organisations are trying to get the Muslim masses move away from the mainstream. It must be possible to resist their agenda. The stand of Muslim League is one of compromising with such forces. It must be distinguished that their intervention to protect interests of the rich in the community is against the interests of the poor.

[*Translated from Malayalam*]