CHAPTER III

KERALA: A PROFILE

I

Kerala is known for its continuous political instability. Any discussion on instability in Kerala politics is not meaningful without looking at its geographical location and historical evolution of the state. For history has an important bearing on the social and political behaviour of the people. Here an attempt is made to trace the historical roots of instability and the influences of the other geographical factors on this political phenomenon.

HISTORY

Kerala as Kerala was first mentioned on a rock inscription of the third century B.C. left by Emperor Ashoka. It then became an independent Kingdom of Keralaputra and was ruled by the Chera dynasty until the fifth century. The Chera kingdom disintegrated into innumerable petty principalities during the eleventh century after the Hundred Years war with the Chola empire. Ravi Varma during the 14th century established a kingdom spanning almost the whole of southern India. But after his death in 1314, the kingdom once again broke up into a number of warrying chieftaincies, the most important being Calicut in the north and Travancore in the south.
The entry of foreigners to Kerala began with Vasco da Gama who landed in Calicut in 1498. The Portuguese and Dutch tried to establish their supremacy over the territories but were thwarted in their attempts by Zamorin of Calicut and Marthanda Varma of Travancore. It was the British who succeeded in establishing their presence in Kerala. They were helped by the frequent invasions by Hyder Ali and later by Tippu Sultan between 1741 and 1766. In order to ward off the attacks from Tippu Sultan, Cochin and Travancore kingdoms had to take help of the British. In return, the British imposed their suzerainty over these kingdoms in 1791 and 1795 respectively. After the defeat of Tippu Sultan, the Zamorin's territories were annexed by British and was made a part of the Madras Presidency.

In 1949, the two princely states were integrated together resulting in Travancore-Cochin state. In 1956 when the states were reorganised on a linguistic basis, the state of Kerala was formed by integrating Travancore-Cochin and Malabar. But within the broad unity of Kerala there are significant social, cultural and economic differences between the three regions which have had an impact on the political process. The peculiarity of evolution of the three regions resulted in each region showing a different and distinct trends as far as the political process is concerned.
MALABAR

After the defeat of Tippu Sultan, Malabar was annexed by the East India Company in 1792 and was made a part of the Bombay Presidency and later of the Madras Presidency. Under British rule, Malabar was a neglected region. The British hardly spent any amount except meeting the requirements of law and order. They did little to develop the area though the returns they got from land in terms of revenue were very high. They changed the land settlement completely and established one which was beneficial to the Hindu Jenmis. The Jenmi became the absolute proprietor with a contractual title and could evict the tenant at will.

Another notable feature was the presence of intermediaries (Kanomdars) between landlords and peasants and were given the responsibility of collection of revenue. The net result of all these changes was that the cultivator/peasant began to live at the mercy of landlord/intermediary because he was allowed to retain only a third or less of the net produce. As Manu Bhaskar observes "the exorbitant rent rates, frequent evictions and accumulation of debt were the key factors responsible for the worsening of general economic condition of the peasantry. Relations between the Jenmis and tenants went on deteriorating and the unrest ultimately broke out into a full
fledged battle between the two called the 'Moplah Outbreaks'".

Among the three regions, Malabar is the poorest with incidence of highest unemployment and the lowest level of literacy. It is the only area where one finds the nucleated type of settlement pattern. Together with the distinctive role of the mosque as a communal gathering place, this has served to reinforce the hold of the Muslim League on the Moplah population.

COCHIN

Cochin, the smallest of the units had also to face a long series of invaders starting with the Portugese and later by the Dutch. But unlike the Portugese, the Dutch took no interest in the development of the area as their sole interest was trade. Consequently their policies were less forceful and less impetuous than those of the Portugese... The rivalry between Travancore and Cochin finally erupted in the form of a clash in 1754. Travancore's Marthanda Varma defeated the chieftains of Cochin though they had forged a united front to face Travancore. The victory was followed by a treaty of friendship in 1757 between the two princely states and which marked the beginning of an unbroken peace between Travancore and Cochin.
TRAVANCORE

The history of Travancore unlike the other two regions was quite different. The kingdom of Venad established in the twelfth century lasted till the end of the eighteenth century. During this phase, the kingdom got extended from Cochin to Cape Comorin. Unlike what was prevalent in Malabar, the land was appropriated by the state by subjugating the traditional landed gentry. During the end of the eighteenth century, Travancore entered into a treaty with the East India Company and in 1805 became a protectorate state with the imposition of British suzerainty.

Under British suzerainty, the Princely state of Travancore began to imbibe many of the features of the British system: codified law, British-style courts and (missionary-led) education. The Maharaja of Travancore was helped by Chief Ministers called Dewans, who were mostly non-Malayali Brahmins. The most progressive of the Chief Ministers was T. Madhava Rao who introduced far reaching reforms: the fundamental reorganisation of education; creation of a Public Works Department; the encouragement of the cash economy and the enfranchisement of tenant cultivators.

All these developments made the people more conscious of their political rights as never before. They began to resent
the dominance of the alien Brahmins in administration. Their protest against this outside domination resulted in the Malayali Memorial, a petition signed by thousands of people asking for more opportunities for the natives. This was submitted to the Dewan. This move, though symbolic, was initiated by the Nairs backed by the Christians and Ezhavas.

II

GEOGRAPHY

Kerala, the southern state of the Indian Union lies sandwiched between the Arabian Sea in the west and the Western Ghats in the east. It has an area of 15,005 square miles (38,863 sq. km.), about one per cent of the total area of India. The state can broadly be divided into three natural sub-divisions: the coastal lowlands, midlands and highlands. Among the three, the coastal lowlands is the most densely populated region.

The state of Kerala is a land of contradictions in a nation of contrasts. Though Kerala is one of the smallest states in terms of area, it is very densely populated with a density of 654 persons per sq.km. This is in contrast to the all India average of 221 persons per sq.km. Kerala like rest of the country is overwhelmingly rural in character. But unlike the rest of the country, Kerala lacks the nucleated
village which is a characteristic feature of the settlement pattern. As a result of this, it is difficult to find villages in the strict sense of the term. Some writers describe Kerala as one continuous village. Nossiter maintained that the peculiar settlement pattern contributed to the strain of individualism found in modern Malayali culture. He also adds that absence of nucleared villages is a significant factor in the development of the communist movement. During the underground era, party workers were in a better position to escape detection since police resources could not be concentrated. Conversely, the cadre has itself been stretched when operating as a legal party by reason of the dispersal of the population. This indicates how the settlement pattern is important to the study of political culture.

Kerala has the highest literacy rate and the only state where females outnumber males (Table 1). It abounds in natural and agricultural wealth but still has to depend on centre and other states for a regular supply of foodgrains. It was once a bastion of orthodox Hinduism with an elaborate system of caste ranking but at the same time a region which has been deeply affected by the process of social mobilisation and change. As Menon observes, "the caste rules operated at one time in the most irrational

Entire state has since been declared as cent per cent literate
manner. The triple social evil of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability were observed by people at all the levels of Hindu society. The concept of purity and pollution assumed serious dimensions and came to be applied not only in relation between different castes in Hindu society but also in the relation between Hindus and non-Hindus.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Density of people per sq.km</th>
<th>Decadal growth rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>21347375</td>
<td>1058785</td>
<td>10759524</td>
<td>549</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>25453680</td>
<td>12527767</td>
<td>12925913</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>19.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 1981.

THE ECONOMY

AGRICULTURE

Though agriculture still remains the mainstay of Kerala’s economy the per capita distribution of land shows a declining trend over the years. The high pressure of population on land is compounded by extreme fragmentation of landholdings and their uneven distribution among the different classes of society. The average size of marginal holding is as low as 0.18 hectares as against the all-India
average of 0.38 hectares. This abysmally small average size is an obvious reflection of the preponderance of sub-marginal holdings in Kerala. In the 1981 census, 13.07 per cent of the total population were classified as cultivators and 28.13 per cent as agricultural labourers as against the all India figures of 41.56 and 21.91 per cent respectively.

Another characteristic feature of the agriculture scene in Kerala is the diversity of the crops grown. While about 70 per cent of the cropped area in the country as a whole is under food crops, the corresponding figure in Kerala is only about 30 per cent. Though the major food crop grown in the state has been paddy, the area under paddy has shown a downward trend over the years. As against this, the area under cash crops such as coconut, rubber, coffee, tea etc. has registered a substantial increase. As a result of this lopsided development the state became more and more dependent on the centre for a regular supply of foodgrains. Any cut in the supplies led to acute shortage of foodgrains in the state. Sometimes shortage of foodgrains became a focal issue during the Assembly elections.

Among the cash crops, coconut is important to the Kerala economy in a number of ways: one, the outer husk is used as a raw material for the most important cottage industry in the state i.e., coir industry; two, the kernel is used for edible purpose and it is the mainstay of a number of oil
mills in the state; three, the oil extracted from it is used as a raw material for making soaps; four, the leaves are used for providing shelter and the tree itself is used for fuel purposes. This, in a way, is a crop which generates employment at multiple levels.

INDUSTRY

Although Kerala is endowed with certain basic requirements of industrial growth, the picture on the industrial front is not very encouraging. Kerala does not possess any industrial fuel like coal, gas etc. and it imports all these basic raw materials from other states. Apart from this, the militancy of labour has slowed down the industrial growth in the state. The various governments that ruled the state made no determined effort to bring about industrialisation of the state. This is reflected in the outlays fixed for the industries during the five year plans. The major chunk of the allocation went to agriculture and social service sectors like education, health etc., and thereby relegating industries to a secondary position in the development process.

III

THE PEOPLE

The people of the state broadly belong to one of the three religions: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism (Table 2).
TABLE 2: DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Hindus</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
<th>Christians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25,453,680</td>
<td>14,801,347</td>
<td>5,409,687</td>
<td>5,233,835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>20,682,405</td>
<td>12,022,163</td>
<td>4,361,469</td>
<td>4,284,063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>4,771,275</td>
<td>2,779,183</td>
<td>1,048,218</td>
<td>939,802</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 1981

It is one of those states of India where Hindus are not as predominant in number as elsewhere. Here the Hindus constitute 58.1 per cent of the total population while rest of the population is either Muslims (21.3%) or Christians (20.5%).

CHRISTIANS

The origin of Christians can be traced to St. Thomas who is said to have landed at the Kerala port of Merzeris (Crananore) in 52 A.D. and converted the Namboodiris into Christianity. The church slowly grew through conversion of local Hindus and through immigration of Persians and Mesopotomians. These links with Persia and Mesopotomia shaped the liturgy and also the doctrines of the church in India. The Christians assimilated a part of the dominant system and even underwent the process of Hinduisation. They adopted many of the customs of the Hindus like tying of sacred thread at the time of marriage and lighting of lamps in churches.
The Christians constitute 20.5 per cent (1981) of the total population in Kerala. They are concentrated in central and northern part of Travancore and southern Cochin. They are strongly represented in business, banking, government service and plantations like coffee, rubber and spices. The single largest group among the Christians is the Syrian Christians who trace their ancestry to Syria. They are broadly divided into Roman Catholics, Jacobites and Mar Thomites. The second largest group are the Latin Catholics who practice Latin rites in their worship service. They form the backward group within the Christian fold and are concentrated mostly in the coastal areas. Socially and economically they are a "backward group" officially listed thus for purposes of education and job reservation.

Politically, the Christians have been strong supporters of the undivided Congress party. After the birth of Kerala Congress in 1967, Christians especially the Catholics shifted their allegiance to it. The church on its part quite often dabbled in politics. The bishops played an important role during the 'Liberation Struggle' against the CPI government in 1959 when they felt that the educational reforms proposed by the government were against the church interests. Through pastoral letters, the Bishops were able to whip up communal feelings against the proposed bill of the government.
MUSLIMS

The Muslims who constitute 21.3 per cent (1981) of the total population are concentrated in the northern part of Kerala. Their origin can be traced to the Arab traders who carried on trade with the Malabar coast. In course of time, the Muslim community grew through proselytisation and by natural increase.

The annexation of Malabar by the British after the defeat of Tippu Sultan had an adverse impact on the general condition of the Muslims in the area. The British rule placed them in a state of economic and cultural subjugation. A majority of them lived in a state of poverty because most of them belonged to the category of landless labourers, poor fishermen and petty traders. The land relations were such that they hardly got anything from their land if at all they possessed any and they had to depend on landlords who mostly were Hindus. Literacy did make some progress in the group, but was much more slower than in the case of other groups. For the cultural resistance to change was much stronger among them. The mass of people continued to stagnate both socially and economically while minority quickly integrated into the rising middle often Anglicanised class. The under-currents of continued repression against the British rule and exploitation at the hands of rich Hindu landlords and
moneylenders resulted in the Moplah Rebellion between 1921 and 1922.

Politically, the Muslims took a line different from the other communities. They generally tended to vote for the Muslim League from the beginning. This may be because their religious loyalty arising out of a sense of insecurity far outweighed other factors like personality of the contesting candidate, economic factors etc. This is true as far as Malabar region is concerned. In other places the Muslims tended to support other parties. Since the Muslims are concentrated in some specific regions, like Malappuram, Calicut etc. the yields for the Muslim League from this region has been quite significant. It was the undivided Communist party that actually brought the Muslim League into the forefront of politics in Kerala. It entered into an alliance with it during the 1967 elections and Malappuram district was formed as a concession to the Muslims for their support to EMS ministry. This is in contrast to the position taken by Congress party which refused to align with the communal Muslim League. This stand was diluted later and Muslim League became a partner of the congress led alliance.

The Muslim League also suffered a split in its ranks and two parties were carved out of it - The Indian Union Muslim League and the All India Muslim League. The former supported the Congress led front while the latter joined the Communist
led front. Both of them merged with each other during the 1987 elections after the Communist Party of India (Marxist) refused to include AIML in the Left Democratic Front.

HINDUS

Christians and Muslims have greater religious identity than the Hindus. This may be because of their feeling of insecurity arising out of their minority character. The Hindus on the other hand are not religiously disposed to each other, because people are divided horizontally and vertically on the basis of caste. In the case of Hinduism, the concept of untouchability was broadened to include unseeability and unapproachability. Within the Hindu fold the important castes are the Namboodiris, Nairs, Ezhavas and Scheduled castes.

At the top of the caste system are the Namboodiris who form about 2-3 per cent of the total population. They trace their descent from the Brahmins who had settled on the land gifted to them by the mythological Parasurama. This attitude and their simple life style enabled them to super impose their power on the people. They formed the priestly class and had set up temples in different parts of the state. They monopolised the educational field and prevented any one from entering the field. Their patrilineal and primogenital customs are such that under those customs the eldest son of
the Namboodiri was allowed to marry within his own community. This prevented fragmentation of the property. After independence, the Namboodiris lost much of their powers and prestige. Legislation was passed to permit the break up of joint family and to reform marriage customs. Politically they began to play less important role and they generally tended to keep aloof from the thick of politics.

Below the Brahmins in caste hierarchy are the Nairs who along with the Namboodiris formed the land-owning class. They form 16 per cent of the total population of the state. Historically they were the militia of the land and were recruited by various chieftains of the land. They were the typical knights - errant of the middle ages who scorned 'the toils of culture and of art' as well as riches and lived by rendering military service to their overlord...

Unlike Namboodiris, the Nairs followed the matrilineal system of family structure called Maremakkathayen. It was a loosely arranged system where the focus was centered on the Tarwad, the Nair family unit which consisted of all the descendants of a common ancestress in the family line. The family property was administered by the eldest male member of the tarwad, who was called the Karanavar; he had absolute powers of decision so far as management of the estate was concerned.
Politically, the Nairs have not wielded the same influence they once had over the economic affairs of the land. But surprisingly in the political field, they provided the leadership to almost all the major political parties. They were not consistent in their support to any political party and their voting behaviour varied from election to election, though Congress and Kerala Congress parties secured a majority of their votes. According to Fic, it was the voting pattern of the Nair community that accounted for the victory of Communist party in 1957.

The Nair Service Society (NSS), founded by Mannath Padmanabha Pillai and others in 1914, runs a number of educational institutions and hospitals. They also function as an interest group for safeguarding the interests of Nairs. Its political arm is the National Democratic Party. But NSS has been plagued by fissures and division and it could not play that effective role in Kerala politics. As Nossiter observes "this powerful interest group, though still important, no longer commands the unswerving political allegiance of the majority of Nairs nor commands the influence in government which once it had".

The lowest of the castes, the Ezhavas form 26 per cent of the total population. They are spread throughout the state and are known by different names in different parts of the state. In Malabar, they are known as Theeyas while in
Central Travancore, they are known as Ezhavas or Iravas. In the Varna system, they were the Sudras and were denied temple entry by the Namboodiris. Most of the Ezhavas are small agricultural labourers. There are also a few small cultivators.

With economic and social changes taking place, Ezhavas had no choice but to join the mainstream of these changes. They began to avail the facilities of education provided by the British. Before long, these educated Ezhavas began to demand an end to their caste discrimination and admission to educational institutions and entry into government service. It was the Ezhavas who first established a caste association in 1903 called the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP). The leading light of this movement was Sree Narayana Guru whose slogan of unifying people was, 'one caste, one religion, one God'.

Sree Narayana Guru's social and religious reforms have had an impact on the conditions and life of the Ezhavas who till then had led a life of 'untouchables'. According to Thomas Issac et. al., "the Ezhava caste movements that emerged had two dimensions. One was reform outmoded social customs and rituals within their caste and two, challenging social and political determinants of their low caste status".

The SNDP quickly had spread throughout the state uniting Ezhavas of all hues and colour. Though social in origin, it
quickly began to seek political ends. The SNDP itself came under the influence of political personalities. It formed its own party called the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRP) in 1972 and aligned itself with the United Democratic Front. Though SNDP leadership favoured the Congress and its allies, the Ezhavas at large voted for the communists. R. Shankar, an Ezhava rose to become Chief Minister of Kerala though he could not last long in office because of the combined onslaught of Christians and Nairs against his rule. Though SNDP digressed into the political field, its emphasis continued to be on education. For they consider education as a means of emancipating the Ezhavas from social evils in which they were entangled for too long a period.

Scheduled Castes and Tribes form 11 per cent of the total population. The scheduled castes are concentrated in Peermade, Palghat, Trichur and Trivandrum-Quilon while the Tribes are found in the taluks of North and South Wynad in the Malabar region. The Harijans who form the lowest rung of the caste ladder had to face continued exploitation at the hands of the higher castes. But with growing literacy levels and government support, the Harijans have been able to slowly make an upward swing. They still remain predominantly agricultural landless labourers who are employed on the most arduous agricultural tasks and against whom social discrimination is still practiced.
IV

SUMMING UP

Though Kerala occupies only one per cent of the total area of India, it is very thickly populated with a density of 650 persons per sq. km. as against the all India figure of 221 persons per sq. km (1981 census). It abounds in natural resources but does not have enough of industries to exploit it. On the agricultural front, the position is no better. It is characterised by high pressure of population and chronic food deficit owing to the emphasis on cash crops. As a result, there has been the phenomenon of migration.

The history of Kerala has been characterised by the incessant squabbles and differences among the various chieftains. This feature continued to influence the state and its political processes even after independence but under a different label. This time the fight was between the four major communities - Nairs, Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims over the spoils of power. In terms of religion, Muslims and Christians play the religious card to mobilise their people while in the case of Hindus, they could not use the religious weapon because of the endemic caste distinctions. The socio-religious groups though highly developed operate on a relatively underdeveloped material base. The agricultural and the industrial fronts are not very encouraging. This
unstable economic base coupled with the community identity have led to a situation of instability. No government seem to be in a position to complete its normal tenure of office. The state has a record number of ministries after its formation in 1956. The average life span of the ministry was about two and half years. This phenomenon of political instability is sought to be examined in the subsequent chapter.
References


5. Ibid.


10. Manu Bhaskar, op.cit., p. 86.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 265.


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