CHAPTER VI

THE POLITICAL BASES OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN KERALA:

RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL AND COMMUNAL OVERTONES

The Educational Situation and the system of learning in a society will invariably remain influenced by the political set up or structure of that country. The policy decisions involving education will find it hardly possible to escape its political moorings also. The impact of politics in the field of education is not at all a new phenomenon since in ancient China, India, Greece or Egypt education was cleverly used by the respective rulers there as an effective tool to propagate the ideas or ideologies which they wanted to propagate in the society. Education was also utilised by many to make desired changes both in their political and social systems. But often, an attempt at reforming the existing educational frame or content might also have generated strong protests or even resistance. It may be because the system preserves, protects or promotes the interests of some privileged sections in the society.
'Challenge of Education Document' of 1985 strongly supports this idea and states:

Education, like all other systems, has a set of beneficiaries who would lose many of their special or unjustifiable privileges if the education system is changed and its functioning is revamped to secure greater efficiency, equity and objectivity.[1]

So any attempt to introduce a rigorous process of planning in education would bring in a situation of conflict with the varied interests represented by different shades. Kerala is no exception in this regard. In this chapter an attempt is made to examine the political bases of educational reforms in the state. It also tries to unfold the political, religious and communal overtones discernible in those reform attempts and the resistance they provoked from different sections in the Kerala society.

The educational policies followed by the various governments in the state, before and after the independence, have brought much tension in the field. As stated earlier, the Christians had made a pioneering effort in the field of education in Kerala. But in course

of time, the overdominance of the Christian community in this particular sphere created a number of socio-economic and socio-political problems. The Christian community had practically monopolised the education field as such and used this medium as a vehicle for the promotion of their political and religious interests. This naturally provoked the other sections of the population, because the educational facilities and employment opportunities were more open to the Christian community. This activated the other communities also to enter into the educational field. The communal shade which permeated the educational sector and the predominance of one community over the rest in the field not only led to some political repercussions but also caused the growth of pressure groups in the state.

In the social dimension Kerala has three religious groups -- the Hindus, the Christians and the Muslims. Another striking feature about Kerala society is the presence of rather well organised communities. These communities have organised and formed themselves into compact and well defined sectarian organisations such as the NSS, the SNDP and the Christian organisations and the MES. These organisations may not always be acting political, but they often address themselves to political questions and issues as well. Unlike political parties,
they have strong and stable leadership. This stability in leadership has given them prominence in all fields and helped them to gain its present position of strength in Kerala. These communal organisations are disciplined pressure groups looking after the political, educational and economic interests of their respective communities.²

No political party, whatever be its policies and ideologies, can ever ignore these organisations because they can effectively influence a considerable number of voters. In a state like Kerala a very small percentage of votes can decide the electoral fortune of a political party or front. So every political party whenever it takes a decision involving issues concerned with these organisations, particularly in the field of education, has to take into account all these factors and more. Those who dared do otherwise had to face very bitter consequences also.

The religio-communal nature of politics in Kerala has been responsible in a major way for the instability of the ministries in Kerala. The decline and fall of almost every ministry in Kerala has been due to the manoeuvring

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of one community or another. They have always been trying
to put their weight on successive governments and were
dictating terms to them. These major communities indeed
dominate the cultural and educational fields and operate
most of the schools and colleges in the state. The
political influence of most of these communities gives a
rather negative expression, i.e., preventing government
from formulating a policy or pursuing some course of
action than promoting a new or progressive piece of
legislation. These communal groups, having stakes of
their own in education, have sought to counteract
policies aimed at curtailing the rights of private
managements. If there had ever been an attempt to change
the existing educational system in Kerala, there had
inevitably been resistance to stall these changes at every
point on the part of the private agencies or private
educational administrators, teachers, the general public
or by the student community. This led to some undesirable
political consequences either immediately or in the
long run.

The state's attempts at control and regulation of the
private educational enterprise and the latter's resistance

3. N. Jose Chander, "The Legislative Process in Kerala
of Kerala, Trivandrum, p.56.
of such government moves reached a particularly accentuated form after the 1930's. This was rather a culmination of historical processes which started as early as 1817 when the Maharani of Travancore issued the Royal Rescript and declared that the supervision of education is the legitimate function of the state.

After a hundred years or more when Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer mooted the idea of nationalisation of private schools in the mid forties, education as such became a very burning issue in Kerala. The attempt of the Dewan was characterised as an attempt by the government to seize the private sector in education. The Christian community was deemed the most affected, even though the other communities had also been brought into the field to resist the attempts of the government. The resistance offered by the church, however, made the government relent and eventually drop the policy by exempting schools controlled by the church from nationalisation. Though the church tried its best to rally round other agencies in the field too to have a common front against the government, the NSS surprisingly supported the idea of nationalisation and voluntarily agreed to convert a number of NSS schools.

as government schools to outwit the Christian community's show of strength in the field of education. The organised church assumed for the time being the role of an interest group by winning over Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer himself. The political forces in the state were also against his efforts to implement the policy in question.

The dawn of freedom opened up many new opportunities for the religio-communal organisations in Kerala to involve themselves in the politics of the state. It was in this context that the first popular election took place in Travancore in 1948. In its efforts to secure the maximum unity, the State Congress gave representation to all communal groups in the state. The very choice of candidates for the first elections and the formation of the ministry was an admission of the power of the communities and the result was that the members both of the cabinet and that of the legislature remained more loyal to their communal moorings and masters. This was one of the root causes that remained a destabilising factor all through in Kerala politics.

The close identification of the Christian community with the Indian National Congress in the first two decades

of the post-independence period made it easy for the church leaders to have a say in the higher echelons of politics and administration in the country. But soon this situation had undergone a change when the Congress government renewed its efforts to control the private agencies and thus give better conditions of service to the teachers. The Christian community, this time too, vehemently resisted the idea. They organised their protest meetings and there was dissension in the ruling party also. But the Nairs supported the move of the Chief Minister. Nairs were of the view that the Christians were trying to oust the Nair Chief Minister who was then considered safe in the saddle.

There was an apparent clash of interests between the two influential communities. The clash ultimately led to the removal of Pattom A. Thanupillai from the post of Chief Minister in 1948 by a Christian-Ezhava combination in the Congress Legislative Party. After 1948, with the emergence of new political forces, the different communities in Kerala realigned themselves more on political convenience than on ideological convictions.

Thus the four major communities in Kerala had been throwing their lot behind different political parties for preserving their interests.

The integration of Travancore-Cochin enhanced the strength of the Christian population. Consequently the Christian community and the church became a very powerful factor in the politics of the state.\(^7\) It was at this time that the famous Private Secondary School Scheme (PSS) was announced with an intention of controlling the private managements, especially those of the Catholic denominations were affected more and they found in the new scheme a serious challenge to their traditional interests and thus became very agitated and sore against the government. Their main opposition to the Scheme was the government's decision to guarantee security of service to the teachers in private management schools. This would lead to a great loss of monetary benefit to the private managements, because the appointments to the teachers' posts were made by some of the agencies against monetary contributions to those managements. The Christian hierarchy and the community raised their voice against the Scheme of the government.

\(^7\) Ibid., p.328.
The Scheme also announced the proportional representation to the various communities and a special reservation to backward classes. This move of the government also irritated the high castes, especially the Nairs. Their organisations, though supported the PSS scheme, could not agree with the reservation policy of the government.

Finally, the government had to yield before the pressure of the communal organisations and once more they proved to be a power to be reckoned with in the things of higher education in Kerala.

There have always been some kind of jealousy, spite or rivalry among the various communities, particularly the Nairs and the Christians. The Ezhavas and the Nairs were at loggerheads with the issue of special representation to the backward communities. The Ezhavas, the bulk of whom were considered supporting the communists, had become antipathetic to Christians who were basically deemed anti-communists. It may be assumed

from this that there had been shift in the communal equilibrium of forces which determined the main political alignments in Kerala and the electoral fortunes of political parties or political fronts.

In the elections of 1957, consequent to the formation of the Kerala state, the Congress party was reduced to the position of an opposition group and the Communists were able to form the government with the help of independents. The ten years of Congress rule could not give a stable government and every time a ministry fell it was either due to the communal bickerings or group rivalries. Moreover, the private managements were too strong and any move mooted by the government to restrain them was effectively scotched by the Catholic section within the Congress. They remained a powerful interest group in the educational field and naturally the private managements considered themselves very powerful.

The Communist government which came into power in 1957 was well aware of the political difficulties and its own limitations to make reforms in the field of education. But the party had many reasons to take up the issue because of its sympathy towards the educationally backward Ezhavas, with whose support the party came into power and
the support enjoyed by the party among the teachers and
the importance of shaping the minds of the young.\textsuperscript{10} The
draft bill aimed to provide for better organisation and
development for the educational institution in the state.

The Kerala Education Bill sponsored by the government
was opposed by the various communal, non-communal and
political parties. The major organised force which
opposed the Bill was the Christian community, especially
the Catholics. From the very beginning this community was
found opposing and agitating against the Bill.

Initially the bill was welcomed by the Ezhavas,
Nairs, the PSP and the Malabar wing of the Congress party,
in which the Christians had no influence. The communal
organisations like the NSS, SNDP, etc. came out in support
of the Bill. Mannathu Padmanabhan, the leader of the NSS,
even went to the extent of saying that the vested interest
of the Christians to sabotage the Communist regime and
their attempt to sow the seeds of unrest must be stopped
by all means.\textsuperscript{11} The SNDP leader K.R. Narayanan who too

\textsuperscript{10} T.J. Nossiter, \textit{Communism in Kerala: A Study in
Political Adaptation} (New Delhi: Oxford University

\textsuperscript{11} G.K. Lieten, \textit{The First Communist Ministry in Kerala
p.48.
applauded the views of the government found that there was no effort to introduce communist ideology in the educational system. 12

At a time when the anti-Education Bill agitation was in full swing, the government committed two mistakes in quick succession. This provoked the whole of upper class Hindus who were till then actively supporting the Bill.

The administrative reforms committee appointed by the government recommended that reservation of posts in government service and seats in educational institutions should be based on economic backwardness of the people concerned and not merely on the labels of caste and community. 13 With the publications of the two communities felt affected, one positively and the other negatively. Nairs welcomed the report but the Ezhava community, who would be badly affected by this report, expressed their reservations on it. Both pleaded for their stakes. This led the Ezhavas to turn against the government, the traditional supporter of the communists. The communist government, counting on the support of the Ezhava masses

12. Ibid., p.45.

and influential leaders of that community and their organisation SNDP, did not proceed to implement the recommendations. This naturally infuriated the NSS and the Nair community.

In the wake of this, the Kerala Land Reforms Bill introduced by the communist government, antagonised the landlords, especially the high caste Hindus. In short, on the questions of reservation policy and Land Reform Bill, the NSS and SNDP Yogam took diametrically opposite sides.

The Congress party played an important role in opposing the Bill inside and outside the assembly from the very beginning. Though the PSP leader Pattom A. Thanupillai supported the Bill, the Christian members in that party also opposed the Bill.\footnote{Lieten, n.11, p.48.}

The Catholic church's hostility to the educational reforms was so intense that the church leaders explored the possibilities of bringing equally powerful Nair community into an anti-Communist front. The Catholic church and the Christian community found support from the NSS for totally different reasons. The Nair community was
adversely affected by the Agrarian Bill. The NSS's request for an Engineering College at Palghat was rejected by Prof. Joseph Mundassery, the Minister for Education and he was said to have informed them that the money was needed for Ezhava education.\(^{15}\) The demand to do away with communal reservation, which implicitly ensured continuation of their dominant position in the learned professions was also turned down. Thus, the NSS, which kept away from the agitation for more than a year, after the introduction of the Bill, turned against the Bill and joined agitation against it. It so happened that, the Nairs were the major casualty of the land policy of the government as the Christians happened to be that of its educational policy.\(^{16}\)

Christian-Nair axis had no plan to launch a liberation struggle to overthrow the government. What they had in mind was to pressurise the government to drop such clauses which were detrimental to their vital interest. The Christians and the Nairs shared common platforms in their struggle against the government. Later the opposition parties in the Kerala Legislature also joined the struggle and thus it became a state wide

\(^{15}\) Nossiter, n.10., p.156.
\(^{16}\) Cyriac Thomas, n.6, p.113.
agitation against the government. Since then the agitation assumed political dimensions. The very complexion of the agitation had undergone a metamorphosis and the issue of the Education Bill ceased to be the focal point except for the purposes of non-compliance by the private managements.

The Kerala Education Bill 1957 was intended to make serious attempts to cleanse the educational system and thus bring it under the state control in order to initiate necessary and meaningful changes. But the religio-communal interest groups like those of the Christians and the other caste-based organisations opposed the Bill as it intended to undermine their traditional perks and privileges. As the government did not yield to the pressures of these interest groups, the latter joined hands with the opposition parties and finally brought about the fall of the ministry.

With the failure of the Education Bill of 1957, there was no break in the continuity of the communalisation trend in the educational policies of the successive governments. The Kerala University Act of 1969 was subject to changes at different stages of enactment.
because of the pressure exerted by teachers, students and managements. In the eyes of the management the bill was to undermine the autonomy of the University and for the ultimate nationalisation of private colleges. The Christian hierarchy brought the whole ecclesiastical pressure and the force of the community behind it in opposing the Bill. Later the Nair Service Society and the Sree Narayana Trust also joined the fray by declaring their opposition to the Bill.\textsuperscript{17} During the 1969 agitation, the managements were able to impress the government that they were powerful enough to extract concessions from it. Even though the leaders and students firmly stood behind the government, they were not able to get their demands realised in full measure.

From all these, it may be inferred that the emergence of a new interest group represented by the teachers and the students led to many new developments in later years in the sphere of higher education.

The successive Acts made by the government in 1972 and 1974, saw the new educational interest group establishing itself in enough strength and influence to

\textsuperscript{17} Malayala Manorama (Kottayam) 8th August 1968, p.1.
thwart the designs of the organised moves of the managers and making the government concede their demands by putting pressure on the government. They proved beyond doubt that they had sufficient organisational strength to influence the government in its policy formulations. The private managements complained in having lost many of their traditional privileges. The political influence of the communal interest groups in the state was deemed considerably reduced.

From 1947 to 1974 the church had to take a very firm stance on many occasions, on issues involving education. Other organisations like the NSS were not as assertive as the church in initiating agitation etc. against the government. But from 1959 to 1974, the NSS also joined hands with the church in consolidating their position in all spheres, especially in the area of education. Moreover other organisations also did play their part to obtain their demands from the government.

Alliances of these communities, especially in the field of education, could bring immense pressure upon the government.

It all took a different turn, when the government in 1985 announced its plan to bifurcate and delink the
Pre-degree course from the University. This time the occupational groups such as the Teachers' Union, Students' Union, non-teaching staff and the University employees turned against the government to prevent it from implementing the scheme. Party affiliations did not hold them back from fighting together for a common cause.

One of the important reasons why the politicised students' unions and teachers' unions did not like to delink the Pre-degree from the University was that they feared thinning of their ranks, even though this was not publicly admitted. It was through this agitation that the occupational interest groups in the field of education proved that they have enough strength to protect their own class interests.

Like any other government, the Kerala Government too is subject to group pressures. The four major communities in Kerala -- the Ezhavas, the Nairs, the Christians and the Muslims -- are numerically and politically too powerful to be ignored. All these groups control nearly 80% of the schools and colleges in the state through various organisations and agencies. All political parties whatever be their orientations had to recognise the political importance and clout of these organisations.
They are so powerful in the state and wield considerable influence on governments whenever the government makes an attempt of reform in the sphere of education. Compared to the religio-communal organisations, the occupational groups are normally less powerful, but proving very strong in protecting their own class interests whenever they are at stake, consequent to any political or policy decision by the government. Though their role in the policy making processes may not be apparently recognizable, the very presence of such organisations and their articulations on issues of importance invariably put a restraining influence on the policy formulations of any government, right or left. These new 'masters' viz., the organised groups of employees, teachers or students have practically become forceful enough to dictate terms to a government even if it commands a comfortable majority in the legislature. In Kerala, in the electoral politics too, the organised groups retain a decisive say as their lot is enough to tilt the balance in many a constituency either in favour of or against parties or fronts of different shades.