Chapter IX

TWO BONES OF CONTENTION
Achutha Menon’s period witnessed the emergence of Naxalite Movement in Kerala. The movement had its origins in the district of 24 Parganas of West Bengal. The extremist elements of the CPI(M) who were unsatisfied with the Parliamentary politics of the party gave birth to a political movement under the leadership of Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal. The followers of this movement believed in the annihilation of the opponents if there was an encounter with the enemy. They considered Mao Tse Tung, the chairman of the Communist Movement in China, as their leader and guide. They believed in his theory ‘power comes through the barrel of the gun’. In Kerala this movement had its origin in Wayanad region of North Malabar where the Adivasi workers were subjected to exploitation by the landlords. The workers were not properly paid and they were under the bondage of the land lords for generations. The Naxalite Movement had great followers among the Adivasis and labourers who were subjected to inhuman treatment by the land owners.

During the time of Achutha Menon the Naxalite Movement began to gain strength in the thick forests of Wayanad under the leadership of Varghese, a devoted leader who was able to get the support of the Adivasis. The murder of Varghese in the region of Wayanad by the police
was a tragic episode. Another important event connected with the extremist movement was the disappearance of Rajan, an engineering student from the Regional Engineering College, Kozhikode. K Karunakaran, the Congress Home Minister, was handling the Home Department as his exclusive empire without even consulting with the Chief Minister. The disappearance of the Engineering Student under the police custody became an unforgettable tragic incident in the history of Kerala. Though he was not directly involved in the events, Achutha Menon as the Chief Minister of Kerala could not wash his hands off from the responsibility of the events. Definitely the events had created a black mark on the otherwise flourishing image of the Chief Minister who had made significant contribution to the development of the state.

The Naxalite movement began to assume greater proportions and it became a threat to the internal peace of the state. The movement in Kerala began to emerge among the tribal and Adivasi regions of North Kerala and later spread to different parts of the state. The Naxalites emerged in the state due to the disappointment in the functioning of Marxist Party. Its leaders were hard core Marxists who were unsatisfied with the approach of the party towards the working class. The labourers
were subjected to exploitation and humiliation by the traditional landlords who were reluctant to accept the basic rights of the labourers. The workers were not properly paid, subjected to inhuman treatment and very often considered to be bonded labourers having no claims or rights for themselves. When the Marxist Party became part of the government it had to make some compromise with the landlords who happened to be the leaders of political parties with whom the party had to share power. This paved the way for the origin and growth of Naxalite movement in Kerala. When Achutha Menon became the Chief Minister Naxalite movement began to implement some of their programmes in the state. During this period C.H Muhammad Koya of the Muslim League and K.Karunakaran of the Congress were the Home Ministers. Both of them were committed to put an end to the Naxalite movement in Kerala.

The murder of Varghese, a Naxalite leader in Wayanad was an event carried out with the knowledge of high police officers. But the Home Minister C.H.Muhammed Koya stated in the Assembly that Varghese was killed in an encounter with the police. The same information was officially conveyed to the Chief Minister also. K.P.R.Gopalan, a Marxist MLA, raised the issue in the Assembly¹. He alleged that Varghese
was personally known to Achutha Menon when he was the State Secretary of the Communist Party. It was much later that he became a Naxalite. From the speech of K.P.R.Gopalan it was quite clear that Achutha Menon knew Varghese when he was an young man associated with the Communist Movement. In his letter to Thekkumbhagam Mohan, Achutha Menon denies the arguments of K.P.R.Gopalan. He could not remember the boy who might have carried his bag during one of his journeys from the Railway Station.

Achutha Menon came to know about the death of Varghese from the newspapers and later on from the Home minister. From this open hearted statement it was clear that the Chief Minister had no information regarding the arrest and murder of Varghese. Later he came to know about the events leading to the death of Varghese in the forest of Wayanad. P.V. Kunjiraman raised the issue in the State Council of Communist Party of India accusing the Home Minister for the events leading to the death of Varghese. He indirectly put the blame on the Chief Minister as he could not escape from his responsibilities as the head of the administration. Actually the responsibility of the development rested with the Home Minister, C.H.Muhammed Koya. If the Chief Minister wanted to take an
action against the Home Minister the Cabinet had to take a decision about it. Moreover, it was likely to be interpreted as interference in the power of a minister belonging to another party. If such an action was anticipated it would break the balance of the government and lead to the collapse of the coalition. Therefore, the Chief Minister was not in a position to take an action against the Home Minister.

Achutha Menon was personally unhappy in the way in which the Varghese issue was handled. But as the leader of the coalition government he had to keep all the partners in a balanced way so that the coalition did not break down. Moreover, Muslim League was the major partner of the coalition having sixteen members without whose support the coalition could not exist. Such a compromise was unavoidable in many issues of critical importance that affected the state. The interest of each and every party had to be taken into account if a decision was to be taken.

When the new government was formed in 1971 many problems came to the fore. Indian National Congress had more members in the Assembly and naturally the Chief Minister had to be selected from among the members of the party who had the largest number of members in the Assembly. K.Karunakaran was the leader of the Congress.
Legislative party and he should have been the natural choice. But Indira Gandhi wanted C.Achutha Menon to be the Chief Minister for another term. There was an expectation from the Congress circles that K.Karunakaran could be given the position of Deputy Chief Minister but Indira Gandhi did not give her green signal to the proposal. K.Karunakaran had to be satisfied with the Home portfolio.

When K.Karunakaran became the Home Minister he assumed the position of super Chief Minister due to two reasons. First, he was the leader of the party which had the largest number of MLA’s among other coalition parties. Secondly, he had the support of the Central government which was under his party. Therefore K.Karunakaran began to exercise his complete power over his portfolio as if he was in the independent charge of the ministry. His style of functioning was not liked by even some of the prominent Congress leaders like A.K Antony, Vakkom Purushothaman and Paul.P.Mani⁶. They used to complain to Achutha Menon about the ways in which Karunakaran was taking decisions without consulting with other leaders of the party. The situations became more favourable for Karunakaran with the declaration of Emergency which enabled him to concentrate all the powers of the Cabinet in his hands. Moreover the
police force became so powerful that nobody was able to question their activities. Karunakaran claimed to be the true representative of the Prime Minister in Kerala. The officials in the government began to consider Karunakaran as the centre of power in Kerala. This approach on the part of Karunakaran actually reduced the significance of the Chief Minister in the eyes of the public.

EMS Namboothiripad was not prepared to accept the arguments that Achutha Menon continued because of the policy of his party. He criticised Achutha Menon by saying that the pitiable situation at the time was due to the position adopted by Achutha Menon\textsuperscript{7}. According to him when the Chief Minister lost the control over the government he ceased to function as the Chief Minister. Either he should not have allowed Karunakaran to overshadow him or he should have resigned immediately.

The period of Emergency in India had great implications on the Government of Kerala consisting of Congress as its major partner. As a Chief Minister during this period Achutha Menon had to experience the most difficult days in his life because as the head of the government he was responsible and answerable to all the developments in the state. He used to keep silent when people began to raise the questions regarding the
atrocities which took place in the state during this period. Actually the emergency gave him some bitter experiences which he had to suffer till his last days.

During the time of Emergency K.Karunakaran was the Home Minister who with the help of Indira Gandhi began to utilise his power without any control. Very often Karunakaran misused his power for the benefit of his own men. He never listened to the demands made by people like A.K.Antony. A.K.Antony who wanted to utilise the good office of Achutha Menon too complained against the activities of K.Karunakaran to Indira Gandhi. Achutha Menon conveyed the message regarding the misuse of power by K.Karunakaran to Indira Gandhi. When Karunakaran came to know about it he was completely upset because the Chief Minister had complained against him to the Prime Minister without his knowledge. It strained the relationship between Achutha Menon and K.Karunakaran. Till the time Karunakaran used to discuss with Achutha Menon all the important affairs of the government and due weightage was given to his opinion. Karunakaran had great regard for Achutha Menon even though he did not like him to be the Chief Minister. But when he came to know that Achutha Menon had made such a complaint he had stopped his contact
with the Chief Minister for ever. During the last days of his administration Achutha Menon was quite unhappy with the situation that developed due to the Emergency. During the time of Emergency Achutha Menon had to face great opposition from the trade unions. This opposition was raised against him because of the strong steps he had taken against the interest of the trade unions. He implemented the decision taken by the Cabinet that 81/2 % of bonus should not be granted to the workers of the state owned industries which had failed to make any profits. When this decision was strongly implemented the trade union leaders could not tolerate it. When it was decided to give 11% of bonus to KSRTC employees, the trade unions under the leadership of people like R.Balakrishnan Pillai demanded 3% exgratia payments to the workers. When it was rejected the workers resorted to strike which lasted for nine days during Onam. It was a strong decision of the Chief Minister that money belonging to the public could not be distributed to the workers.

Another accusation against Achutha Menon was that he insisted on implementing *Dies non* on the workers who resorted to strike during working days. It was the common belief that Achutha Menon was the only man in the leadership of CPI who strongly insisted on the
implementation of *Dies Non* among the workers. The Communist Party which always worked for the working class people and encouraged them for conducting strikes was supporting the principle of *Dies Non* was something which the workers could not tolerate. But Achutha Menon was one of the firm opinion that public money could not be utilised for the workers who were not doing their work sincerely. He also denied that his party was against the *Dies Non*\(^{11}\).

The custodial death of Rajan, a student of Regional Engineering College was a dark spot in the personal and administrative life of Achutha Menon. P. Rajan a final year student of Regional Engineering College, Calicut was absent from classes from March 1\(^{st}\), 1976. The warden of the hostel where he was staying, Dr. Muraleedharan submitted a report to the Principal of the college stating that during the early morning hours of the day, the police had raided the hostel and took away three students namely P. Rajan, Joseph Charley and Murali\(^{12}\). When P. Rajan, an activist and artist by nature returned from Faroke College after participating in a zonal intercollegiate arts festival during the early hours of March 1\(^{st}\), a police van was waiting for him. The police caught hold of him and examined his room thoroughly with the intention of finding out
some proof against him. Though they failed to find out any evidence to prove his involvement in any terrorist activity Rajan was taken away by the police to an unknown destination.

As per the existing rules if the police wanted to enter the hostel or campus, they had to get the prior consent of the Principal. But since it was the period of Emergency police had the authority to do whatever they liked. The Principal of the college Professor K.M Bahavuddin made an enquiry in the local police station and found that the students were not there. He immediately wrote letters to the parents of the students informing that the police had arrested their wards without his permission. On further enquiry the Principal was able to find out that the students were detained in a Naval police camp at Kakkayam. The Principal personally reached the spot but was sent back by the police without giving any information. Another parent, an influential man could reach the spot in time and was able to rescue his son Joseph Charley from police custody. Though Professor Eachara Warrier, the father of Rajan also reached the police camp, he was too late as the police had already committed the crime. The police had murdered the boy and his dead body was burnt with petrol and sugar so that no evidence could be found.
The Principal contacted the police officers and they told him that they had not arrested Rajan from the hostel\(^1\). After one year when the Emergency was withdrawn the police repeated the same statement denying the arrest and detention of Rajan. The principal was not prepared to keep quite. He informed the matter to all the concerned authorities and made his own method of further investigation. It was the sincere efforts of the principal that became a strong evidence before the High Court. He was courageous to declare openly that the police was responsible for the demise of Rajan while he was under their custody\(^2\). Professor Eachara Warrier unable to believe that his son was killed, continued his efforts to find out his son. He approached all the authorities including the Chief Minister who was personally known to him. As the Chief Minister, Achutha Menon had to believe the report given to him by the police authorities and the Home Minister. Both of them denied the detention of the boy by the police. When the Eachera Warrier approached him, Achutha Menon told him that Rajan had escaped from police custody and no information was available with the police\(^3\). It appears that the Chief Minister also believed in the statements of the Home Minister and the police. Achutha Menon, being unsatisfied by the reports from the Home
Minister and the police, directly contacted the Inspector General of Police\textsuperscript{18}. His report was that there was nobody named Rajan under police custody\textsuperscript{19}. The Chief Minister wanted to get a confirmed answer from the I.G. but the answer was the same. The Chief Minister got angry with the I.G and asked him whether it was his responsibility to answer in such an indefinite way. The I.G realised the feeling of the Chief Minister and said that Rajan, the engineering student who was under custody had escaped from the prison. But that was also a false statement\textsuperscript{20}.

Achutha Menon further explains the reasons for the false statement of the I.G Mr. V.N.Rajan. The I.G was not in good terms with the Home Minister, K,Karunakaran and he was managing the affairs with his favourite officer, Jayaram Padickal who was in charge of the police camp at Kakkayam where the student was kept under custody and subjected to third degree treatment\textsuperscript{21}. Achutha Menon believed the statement of the I.G that the student was under custody but escaped from there without the knowledge of the police. He did not want to have a clarification for this from the Home Minister because he was confident that such an enquiry had no meaning\textsuperscript{22}. When the Chief Minister directly contacted Jaya Ram Padikkal, he told him that Rajan had escaped from
police and he was under escape\textsuperscript{23}. The government submitted an affidavit to the High Court that the accused had made arrangements for the Naxalites for their activities\textsuperscript{22}.

But still the Chief Minister did not believe that Rajan was killed purposefully by the police. He believed that during the process of questioning using third degree methods the student might have been killed. The matter was kept a secret with the knowledge of the Home Minister\textsuperscript{24}.

The Chief Minister was expected to know the developments from the Home Minister in time and there was no excuse for it under any circumstances. The Chief Minister could not wash his hands off from the responsibility. But the fact remained that the Chief Minister did not believe that the student was killed by the police till April 3, 1977 when he was out of his position as the Chief Minister. Professor Eachara Warrier was also not aware of the fact till then. The details regarding the events inside the lockup came into light only after that. Achutha Menon never wanted to escape from the moral responsibility of the case. He says in his letter “I do not know the role played by Mr. Karunakaran in the case. If somebody dies under police custody the Home Minister has to be responsible for it. The Chief Minister had the moral responsibility for it. I do not deny it till
now. More than that I have no direct responsibility in it. I was not informed about the developments. Eachera Warrier was also under the impression that Rajan was alive\textsuperscript{25}.

Whatever may be the facts, as Chief Minister of the state, the events leading to the death of Rajan was a dark spot in the political career of Achutha Menon. He was accused of inaction and was even described as a puppet in the hands of super Chief Minister K.Karunakaran during the time of Emergency\textsuperscript{26}. It was a failure on his part to give absolute power to the Home Minister. Since the Cabinet had a collective responsibility and each and every minister was answerable to the Cabinet for his actions; it was the responsibility of the Chief Minister to coordinate the activities of all the ministers. The Chief Minister had failed in it in the case of Rajan. The only justification that could be brought to the aid of the Chief Minister was that these events took place during the time of Emergency when the police was given extraordinary and unconstitutional powers. The democratic rights of the people were cancelled and anybody could be arrested without any reason and kept under custody in the name of terrorist activity. It was not necessary for the police to inform the Home Minister
about it\textsuperscript{27}. As a part of the extraordinary situation the Home Minister also utilized special powers with the help of the Central government.
Notes and References

1. PKLA April 17,1975.

2. Thekkumbhagam Mohan, op.cit, p.53

3. Ibid

4. Ibid, P.53

5. Ibid, p.54


7. Ibid, p.99


9. ThekkumBhagam Mohan, op.cit, p.87

10. Ibid, p.89

11. Ibid, p.91

12. File: office of Regional Engineering College, Calicut

13. College Records,R.C College,Calicut


15. Ibid


18. Thekkumbhagam Mohan, op.cit, p.52.

19. Ibid, p.52

20. Ibid, p.54

21. Ibid, p.56

22. Dr. R. Prasannan, *Niyama Sabhayil Nishabdanaye*

23. *Ibid*, p.57

24. Diary of Achutha Menon, 16 May, 1976

25. Thekkumbhagam Mohan, op.cit, p.58

26. Thekkumbhagam Mohan, op.cit, p.59