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India's Working Class Revolt: Punnapra-Vayalar and the Communist "Conspiracy" of 1946

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When the boats carrying the soldiers reached the camp at Vayalar,

they met a fairly determined lot of young men armed with arecanut staves and . . . iron weapons of all sorts. They said that they (were) not afraid of this military and would not surrender. . . they lay down and started crawling. . . and as it was obvious they were manoeuvring for a hand to hand encounter, fire was opened and some persons were killed. . . .¹

So the police described the final encounter in what was probably the only time an organized working class in India has led an armed revolt against a government.

Indian working classes, to be sure, have conducted long, bitter strikes, and peasants have staged sustained revolts in the countryside.² But only once, it appears, have workers in an industry fashioned weapons, set up armed enclaves and fought the military in pitched, if one-sided, battles. That event, the so-called Punnapra-Vayalar revolt, named for two of the places involved, was led by the Communist Party of India (CPI) in October 1946 in the princely state of Travancore, the southern portion of what is today the state of Kerala.

Why should the workers of the town of Alleppey and its neighbourhood have taken up arms when no other proletariat in India had done so? A small provincial town in a remote corner of the country was not

¹H. Keene, Inspector General of Police, "Short Note on the Communist Activity and the Consequent Disturbances at Alleppey and Shertallai in October 1946," 9 Jan. 1947, Travancore Confidential Section [hereafter CS] 265/1948 (English Records, Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum [hereafter KS]).

²Richard Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay, 1918-29: A Study of Organization in the Cotton Mills*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1981, for example, recounts the great Bombay textile strike of 1928. See also A.R. Desai (ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1979.

Moscow or Petrograd; nor was it Bombay or Calcutta—the revolution was not going to be won, or even provoked, around Alleppey alone.

Three versions of the Punnapra-Vayalar rising are current. I shall sketch these briefly before going on to argue that none is sufficient to explain the rising. It was, in fact, the result of a peculiar conjunction of international, national and local events that for a short time appeared to offer Communists in Travancore the opportunity to be the vanguard of revolution in India. It was for very special reasons that the workers of Alleppey were encouraged to throw themselves into a rising that cost the lives of hundreds and added an important chapter to Communist martyrology.

1. *The Communist Version: "Immortal Punnapra-Vayalar."*³ According to this account, the rising represented "a glorious chapter in the freedom struggle not only of Travancore but of India as a whole."⁴ The government of the Maharaja of Travancore, hoping to make the State an independent nation once the British left India, saw the Communist Party and the organized working class as its most powerful foes, dedicated to keeping Travancore within a post-independence India. The Travancore government, therefore, set out to smash the workers and the Communist Party. Though bloodied, the working class emerged stronger than ever, its brave sacrifices having scotched forever the possibility of an independent, autocratic nation-state of Travancore.

2. *The Anti-Communist Version: A Shameful Betrayal.* According to this account, the Communists saw themselves losing their hold on the masses. They had achieved this hold, largely by default, during 1942-5 when "real" Nationalists, sympathetic to Gandhi and the Indian National Congress and opposed to the war, had had their activities curtailed by the Travancore government. With the war over, these Nationalists soon began to re-establish their influence. The Communists, as one exponent of this view wrote, "had gone down so low in public esteem that to regain the prestige they had lost. . . they decided to stage an insurrectionary movement." Though no first-rank Communist leader died, hundreds of ignorant workers were sent—not led, one should note—to the slaughter to prove the vitality of the Communist Party.⁵

3. *"A National Campaign of Insurrection."* The two preceding explanations are concerned with issues and circumstances in Travancore. A third version introduces all-India developments and points towards the "conspiracy" referred to in the title of this paper. According to this

³K.C. George, *Immortal Punnapra-Vayalar*, Communist Party Publication, New Delhi, 1975.

⁴*Ibid.*, C. Achutha Menon's foreword.

⁵*Janata*, 7 Nov. 1948, p. 10. K.C. George answered the question of why no leading Communists were killed with the remark that leaders always survive. "Was Nehru killed?" he asked. Interview, 4 April 1974.

account, Punnappa-Vayalar looked "so much like a rehearsal for the large-scale Hyderabad uprisings of 1948 that one is tempted to believe that it was planned by the Central Committee of the CPI as the beginnings of a national campaign of insurrection."⁶ By March 1948, indeed, the CPI was claiming that in July-August 1946 it had realized "the existence of the revolutionary upsurge" throughout India, the result of post-war dislocation and impending independence. The party therefore embarked on a course of "developing the partial struggles [taking place spontaneously throughout India] for the achievement of the democratic revolution and for the seizure of power by the people."⁷ According to this interpretation, the CPI was aiming by August 1946 to light sparks throughout a restless land that would come together in a national conflagration leading to the ultimate capture of power. Punnappa-Vayalar was therefore such a spark.

The last explanation has a surface logic and elements of accuracy. To be sure, India and Asia in 1946 were in turmoil. There was war in China, Vietnam and Indonesia. In India the results of the general elections held in the winter of 1945-6 showed the stark division between Hindus and Muslims. The Muslim League, increasingly aggressive in its demand for Pakistan, won nearly every seat reserved for Muslims. At the same time, inflation, strikes and shortages produced a raging discontent. In February, the Royal Indian Navy in Bombay mutinied. The trial of men from the Indian National Army, which had fought with the Japanese, generated outrage and protest throughout the country. In July, railway and post office workers went on strike, and peasants in the Telangana area of the Hyderabad princely state began their resistance to landlords and government that was to last five years. In July, too, the plan of the Cabinet Mission, sent from Britain to try to negotiate an independence agreement with the Muslim League and the Congress, collapsed completely. The Muslim League replied by declaring 16 August "direct action day"; in Calcutta, it ended with 4,000 dead after rioting between Muslims and Hindus. In September, the *tebhaga* movement among sharecroppers in Bengal began. In October came the rising at Punnappa-Vayalar. There were plenty of sparks in 1946.

The Communist Party's national leadership, however, was divided, as we shall see, over how to react to this turmoil. Generally, throughout 1946, it attempted to damp down agitations in various regions; it was local Communists who tried to push the Party forward when spontaneous unrest occurred. However, in August 1946, an ambivalent resolution of

⁶George Woodcock, *Kerala: A Portrait of the Malabar Coast*, Faber and Faber, London, 1967, p. 247.

⁷Review on the Second Congress of the Communist Party of India," March 1948, in M.B. Rao (ed.), *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India*, Vol. VII, 1948-50, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1976, p. 207.

the CPI central committee appeared to encourage local branches to take a far more aggressivestance whenever the opportunity was offered. This apparent approval provided the impulse for Punnapra-Vayalar. Some Travancore Communists were eager for conflict with the State's government, both to destroy independence plans and reassert the Party's strength. Alleppey's coir workers—literate, united and with nearly 20 years' agitational experience—were one of the truly mass bases of Communist strength in India. Given what [appeared to be encouragement from the central leadership, Travancore Communists were ready to challenge their government in a way that seemed in accord with the Bolshevik tradition that many of them had diligently imbibed. Workers willingly threw themselves into that challenge, both because of local conditions and their own acceptance of basic Marxist ideas.

COCONUTS AND CLASSES

The princely state of Travancore was a society in transition in 1946. On the one hand, the majority of the population (at least 75 per cent) was still wedded to the land, where land-controllers tended to be caste Hindus or high-status Syrian Christians. For hundreds of years, a rigid ideology of caste had reinforced their control and allowed them to extract subservience and obedience from their tenants and dependents. From the 1860s, however, an increasing international demand for Travancore's non-food crops—most importantly, coconut, because it was most widespread and affected the greatest number of people—led to the spread of a cash economy; to the growing of crops for sale, not for food, and to the settlement of dues and obligations in cash, not in kind.

The increase in the value of the coconut was to have profound effects. It came about as a result of both a growing demand for coconut oil, always an essential item of the South Indian household, but also for coir, the rot-resistant fibre extracted from the outer husk of the coconut. Ideal for ropes, nets and mattings, coir too had long been made, but only in small quantities to satisfy local needs. The outer husk of the coconut was more often burned for fuel or thrown away. In the later nineteenth century, however, coir matting became popular as a floor covering in the homes of the lower-middle classes of Europe and America, and its use for ropes and netting expanded with the rapid growth of the shipping industry. An American set up a rudimentary factory to weave mats in Alleppey in 1859, and other foreign firms followed in the next 30 years. Most, however, contented themselves with collecting the coir yarn at Alleppey and exporting it to factories in Europe and America. Even this had important consequences for it allowed enterprising Travancoreans to collect husks from distant points, organize the extraction of the fibre as a cottage-industry and bring the yarn to Alleppey for sale. A few Travas, the low caste traditionally

associated with the care of the coconut palm, were able to engage in this trade and profit from it. They became the nucleus of a low caste middle class whose newly acquired wealth did not square with the social disabilities traditionally enforced against their caste. Hesitantly from the 1890s, but far more aggressively from the time of the First World War, the Irava middle class demanded equal civic rights with other citizens.⁸

This low caste element of the emerging middle class was not large. It could have amounted to no more than a few hundred families and a few thousand people in the 1920s. But the growth of the coconut industry touched hundreds of thousands of people and hastened the collapse of the old society and caste Hindu domination. The collection of husks, and the placing of them in salt water to rot the pulp, was a task that even children could perform. The pounding of the rotted husk to separate the pulp from the tough yarn could be done at home by women and adolescents, as could the spinning of the yarn. The transporting of yarn or husks to Alleppey involved labourers, boatmen and middlemen with organizing ability and a little capital. The latter could rise from the ranks of the former once they perceived the possibilities. Such men began to emerge as the low caste middle class.

During the First World War, moreover, it became extremely profitable to manufacture mats and matting in Travancore. The war dislocated factory production in Europe and America, and the shortage of shipping made it more economical to transport compact, finished goods than bulky yarn. After the war, the popularity of the cheap coir mattings among an impoverished yet genteel European clientele created an intense demand. Scores of small matting factories grew up around Alleppey in the 1920s to compete with the larger European concerns in the town itself. In the ten years after the war, the value of manufactured coir exports quadrupled and reached Rs 90.41 lakhs in 1928.⁹

The rush of small entrepreneurs to set up "factories"—often merely a few rickety looms under a palm-frond roof—led to a *shortage* of skilled labour in the early 1920s. Remarkable as this seems in retrospect, men had to be lured to leave the land and take paying jobs in the coir industry. Freelance contractors, indeed, "had to go about and canvass workmen to whom the management paid advances." Once employed, however, the labourers—the majority of whom were Iravas but with significant numbers of Pulayas (Untouchables), Christians, Muslims and caste Hindus—were said to recognize the advantages of regular wages over the uncertain and depen-

⁸*Travancore Information and Listener* [hereafter *TIL*], Vol. VIII, No. 12, Aug. 1948, pp. 47-51. Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance*, Sussex University Press, London, 1976, pp. 139-41.

⁹*Report of the Board of Conciliation of Trade Disputes in the Mats and Matting Industry, 1939*, Government Press, Trivandrum, 1953, pp. 70-6 [hereafter *George Report* after its chairman K. George, a retired official].

dent life of an agricultural tenant or labourer.¹⁰ By 1930 when the effects of the depression began to be felt, the coir factories of the Alleppey area employed about 25,000 men, while an estimated 200,000 families in the taluks of Shertallai and Ambalayuzha drew at least part of their income from participation in the coir industry.¹¹

The hardcore working class of 25,000 shaded off into the tenantry and agricultural labourers of the countryside. It also turned over constantly as men dropped out of factory work and others took their place. A man might work in a remote, rudimentary factory then perhaps drift into the larger, more professional operations in Alleppey itself. Later, he might return to his village and go back to the land. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of people had tenuous links with the coir industry through the collection and preparation of the raw material, even though their more important occupations and ties connected them to the land and the families that controlled it. Thus the numbers whom the coir industry affected—and, indeed, the numbers who had experienced factory life—were far larger than 25,000, and their influence penetrated well beyond the areas near the factories.

The class-consciousness that spread among the workers in the industry from the 1930s was mediated through caste. According to one estimate, 80 per cent of the coir workers of Shertallai and Ambalapuzha taluks were Iravas. Their proportion of the total population of the two taluks indicates that this could easily have been so: Iravas were 20 per cent of Shertallai and 41 per cent of Ambalapuzha.¹² In the battle, which the small Irava middle class waged from the 1890s for the right to use roads close to temples and get government jobs, poorer, less educated Iravas provided the “troops”—the crowds for public meetings and marches, and the statistics invoked by Irava leaders to establish their own importance. By the 1920s, Iravas were tumultuously debating the advantages of religious conversion, atheism and the Russian revolution of 1917. Both the economic and ideological certainties of former times were undermined: the first, largely by the effects of the coir industry; the second, by constant denunciations of the old ideas about the superiority of one caste over another. The example of R. Sugathan (1902: 70), an Irava, who went to work in 1920 in a European-owned coir factory in Alleppey because a neighbour in his village was a foreman there, illustrates a process that thousands of others were experiencing. Sugathan had had seven years of primary education, a consequence of Travancore’s extensive government and private education system. He read widely, was attracted first to Buddhism,

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 81-2.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 185. *Hindu*, Madras, 21 Aug. 1941, p. 3.

¹²*Census of India, 1941*, Vol XXV, Travancore [hereafter *Census, 1941*], Part 3, p. 209. Nilkan Perumal, *The Truth about Travancore*, R.J. Ram and Co., Madras, 1939, p. 54.

then to atheism and finally joined the Communist Party, of which he became a leader.¹³

Class divisions, too, were more glaring in Shertallai and Ambalapuzha than elsewhere in Travancore. Once a man became conscious of such divisions, the two taluks gave him much to be conscious about. Though Travancore as a whole was noteworthy for its preponderance of small landholders, Shertallai and Ambalapuzha had an uncharacteristic concentration of large landlords who represented a tiny section of the population. The proportion of landless families was far higher than elsewhere in Travancore. Indeed, interviews of 100 families in Shertallai taluk in 1921 found that only 12 owned land, 19 were tenants and the remaining 69 were landless squatters living in palm-frond huts on the land of others.¹⁴ By the 1930s, landless families provided thousands of eager aspirants with jobs in the coir factories, while the fluctuations in the industry sent a regular stream of men back and forth between the factories and their villages. Economic conditions thus ensured that ideas travelled widely.

Remarkable levels of literacy also helped to spread the ideas of the Irava reformers and of the coir factories. As the example of Sugathan illustrated, even among the poor and low caste in Travancore, literacy was high. Male literacy among Iravas in 1941 was 61 per cent. In Ambalapuzha and Shertallai taluks, about 65 per cent of all men were literate. (20 years later the all-India rate of male literacy had reached only 34 per cent.)¹⁵ By the 1930s, thousands of poor people, particularly Iravas, were politically alert and looking for opportunities to improve their social and economic position—or at least prevent it from growing worse.

The first trade union, the Travancore Labour Association, was formed in Alleppey in 1922. It began at the inspiration of an employer, but by the 1930s, it provided the focus for free-thinkers, radicals and eventually Communists. "Bolshevism pure and simple is preached," a Christian newspaper wrote in dismay in January 1934, "and violence and murder advocated."¹⁶ Sugathan published his early poems in the Association's long

¹³Puthuppalli Raghavan, *Sakhavu Sugathante Jivacaritram* [Comrade Sugathan's Biography] Prabhatam Printing and Publishing Co., Trivandrum, 1979, pp. 6-7. See also Robin Jeffery, "Travancore: Status, Class and the Growth of Radical Politics, 1860-1940," in Robin Jeffrey (ed.), *People, Princes and Paramount Power*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 159-61.

¹⁴"Report of the Shertallai Famine Survey," *Arunodayam*, Vol. V, Nos. 7-8, Nov.-Dec. 1941, p. 168, CS 712/1944.

¹⁵*Census 1941*, Part 3, pp. 109-10. Travancore's remarkable literacy owed much to government spending on education, matrilineal society, Christian missionaries and educational competition among different communities.

¹⁶*Malabar Herald*, Cochin, 27 Jan. 1934, p. 3. P. Kesava Dev recalls these events in "viplavamudravakyam" [the revolutionary slogan] in P. Kesava Dev *Ormmakalute Lokattil* [In The World of Memories], National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1972, pp. 144-51.

running (if irregular) weekly newspaper, *Thozhilali* (The Worker), which provided a forum for many of modern Malayalam's outstanding writers. A factory owner noted that workers in Travancore were far better educated than elsewhere: "Most of them are able to read and even edit newspapers. Many of them deliver splendid lectures. Some of them are even able to compose beautiful poems in Malayalam."¹⁷ By 1935, workers in the coir industry were sufficiently conscious of themselves as a class to elicit from the same owner the lament that "the employer" was now portrayed as "a monster who is sucking the life blood out of the labourers."¹⁸

Until the late 1930s, the Travancore Labour Association had been haphazard and welfare-oriented. Its president was usually a local notable or lawyer who was looking for positions that would enhance his own importance.¹⁹ The secretaries, however, often emerged from among the workers themselves, or, in the case of P. Kesava Dev, were deracinate caste Hindus who had imbibed a little Marxist literature. Although there were strikes, they were short, poorly co-ordinated and for limited aims.²⁰

This changed in 1938. The civil disobedience movement of 1930-3 had disillusioned a section of the younger generation with Gandhian methods of non-violence and led it to search for a more "scientific" solution to India's national and social problems. A Communist League had been formed (and outlawed) in Trivandrum in 1931. The Youth League, a casual organization based on young men who had been to jail in British India during civil disobedience, replaced it. In the mid-1930s, the Youth Leaguers made little attempt to involve themselves with the coir labourers of Alleppey and Shertallai. But in 1938, Travancore's established legislative politicians, influenced by an all-India upsurge in the princely states resulting from the fact that Congress governments were in power in British India, began to campaign for responsible government. Members of the Youth League were instrumental in engineering a movement of full-scale civil disobedience against the princely government. When the legislative politicians were all in prison, the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union (TCFWU), as the Labour Association had recently become, led a general strike which helped to force the release of the prisoners. However, instead of embracing the labour movement and fostering the general strike, the freed Travancore State Congressmen went on

¹⁷*Sri Mulam Assembly Proceedings*, Vol. VII, 18 Nov. 1935, p. 478.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 12 Nov. 1935, p. 35.

¹⁹The ambitious president is well captured in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, *Scavenger's Son*, R.E. Asher, trans., Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi.

²⁰For details of the Travancore Labour Association, K.C. Govindan, "Lebar Assosiyente Caritram" (History of the Labour Association) in *Tiru. Kayarfaktari Varkezhhs Yuniyan Kanakjubili Sunnir* [Coir Factory Workers' Union Golden Jubilee Souvenir], Janayugam Press, Quilon, 1972, pp. 179-200.

triumphal tours while the strike was allowed to crumble.

The Youth Leaguers, on the other hand, moved to Alleppey on their release and linked with the TCFWU. To the Youth Leaguers and the coir workers, the apparent betrayal of the general strike by the State Congress "brought most of us to the logic of having a Communist Party."²¹ Already in 1937 a Communist cell had formed within the Congress Socialist Party in Malabar District, the northern, British-ruled portion of Kerala. By 1940, the Congress Socialists had secretly merged *en masse* into the Communist Party, and many of the Youth Leaguers in Travancore followed their lead. In November 1940, the Communists won control of the TCFWU.²²

The Union was a valuable prize. By 1939, it had more than 7,400 fee-paying members in the mats and matting factories in the neighbourhood of Alleppey; this represented about a quarter of the 30,000 wage labourers in the industry. By June 1942, the executive claimed that membership had increased to between 12,000 and 15,000 and by the end of the war, even official committees were conceding a union membership of 17,000.²³

The fact that its members were prepared to pay a fee—even the tiny one of less than a rupee a year—indicated the importance they attached to the union. Its activities included not only welfare work and negotiations with government and employers, but also propaganda campaigns aiming to enhance still further the workers' attachment to ideas of social revolution. In the year prior to March 1943, the Communists claimed that the Union held 2,300 public meetings before audiences totalling 800,000, while the Union's reading room in Alleppey drew more than 400 people a day.²⁴ The influence of the Union and of the class consciousness its communist executive sought to propagate extended far beyond the coir factories.

The impact of the Travancore Labour Association and the TCFWU led to the creation of other unions. Workers who had experienced the usefulness of the Union while working in the coir factories carried the organizational ideas with them when they took on other jobs—as boatmen, fishermen, palm-tree tappers and, indeed, agricultural labourers. The formation of an agricultural labourers' union in January 1942, one of the first in India, resulted directly from the involvement of coir-factory workers. The "culprits", a police official reported, were "out of work coir factory labourers and their labour leaders who are . . . organizing

²¹M.N. Govindan Nair, *New Age*, 7 April 1957, p. 11.

²²Daily Report, 19 Nov. 1940, CS 740/1944. For the background, see Jeffrey, "Travancore: Status, Class," pp. 156-61 and Robin Jeffrey, "Matriline, Marxism and the Birth of the Communist Party in Kerala, 1930-40," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1, Nov. 1978, pp. 77-98.

²³*George Report*, pp. 121, 129. T.V. Thomas to K.T. Chandy, 23 June 1942, CS 299/1942. *TIL*, Vol. VII, No. 1, Sept. 1946, pp. 36-9.

²⁴*People's War*, 11 March 1945, pp. 1, 11.

agrarian labour on so-called trade union lines by promising them to bring about a rise in wages.”²⁵ The link between coir workers and agricultural labourers was evident in the Punnapra-Vayalar revolt, as we shall see. By 1946, Travancore had 50 officially recognized unions,²⁶ while Shertallai taluk alone was said to have 11 with 15,000 members out of a work force of about 20,000.²⁷ As well as the agricultural labourers’ union, these included smaller coir-factory unions, palm-tappers’ unions and boatmen’s and fishermen’s unions. All were to be represented in the bloodshed of October 1946.

By the mid-1940s, therefore, the Alleppey neighbourhood had given rise to a peculiar set of social circumstances, unusual even in Travancore and probably unique in India. These conditions explain the irrepressible militance of a large section of the population, based on coir labourers and ex-labourers, and their readiness to accept Communist leadership. In summary, we can identify four important elements in the social complexion of the Alleppey area. First, it was highly literate. Second, it had experienced unprecedented intellectual turmoil since the 1920s, which widespread literacy had communicated to large numbers of people. Third, it had a high concentration of a single caste—Iravas—who had been most affected by the intellectual upheaval. However, the ideas that led them to attack the dominance of other castes eventually led many of them to reject caste itself: the attacks on caste led to a growth of class-consciousness. Fourth, the coir factories created conditions in which men and women of different castes and religions were forced to mix. Factories, conventionally, are supposed to foster class-consciousness. Around Alleppey they did. By the mid-1940s, the Communist Party prided itself on the multi-community nature of its support—on its genuine class base: “a real cross-section of society in Kerala, more so than in any other political party”.²⁸ Out of these conditions, the Punnapra-Vayalar revolt grew.

A NEW CONSTITUTION AND TRAVANCORE’S FUTURE

The Punnapra-Vayalar revolt owed much to two beliefs that were widely held in 1946. The first was that the State’s rulers would attempt to make Travancore an independent nation-state after India’s approaching independence from Britain. The second was that the middle class leaders of the Travancore State Congress, exhausted after eight years in the wilderness, were coming to terms with the princely government over a

²⁵Assistant Superintendent of Police, Alleppey, to the Inspector General, 22 Jan. 1942, CS, 436/1944. See also Joseph Tharamangalam, *Agrarian Class Conflict*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 1981.

²⁶*TIL*, July 1946, p. 36.

²⁷George, *Immortal*, p. 19.

²⁸*People’s Age*, 25 Nov. 1945, p. 6.

new constitution that would facilitate independence.

In February 1946, the Dewan (minister) stated the independence objective baldly. If a Muslim-majority nation of Pakistan was to be created, he declared, then India would fragment. In that event, Travancore would be "entitled to a Stan [i.e., country] for herself."²⁹

Why should Travancore have sought independence? The answer lies in the fact that the state was still very much the personal estate of the the ruling family. To be sure, Travancore had had a legislative council since 1888 and hotly contested elections from about 1910. But even as late as the 1940s, the whim of the ruling family counted for far more than the will of a powerless legislature returned by a small electorate. Since 1931, the state had been ruled by a young Maharaja, but real power lay with his mother, the younger Maharani, and her close friend, the Dewan, Sir C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar. This regime had crushed the challenge from the middle class politicians of the Travancore State Congress in 1938. The State Congress, however, had held together during the war, and with the independence of India obviously approaching, its leaders were yearning for a share in government similar to that experienced by their contemporaries in British India. By the beginning of 1946, elected governments were once again in power in the British India provinces.³⁰

Ramaswami Aiyar knew that public opinion in the State would oppose independence and favour Travancore's joining an Indian union led by Gandhi, Nehru and the Indian National Congress. Thus, if the plans for an independent Travancore were to have a chance of success, he would need the support of local politicians. Ramaswami Aiyar knew, too, that many of the State Congressmen who had been active in legislative politics before 1938 were weary. They were also under pressure from Socialists within their organization and from Communists outside it. He appears to have calculated that he could devise a constitutional carrot, tempting enough to win their co-operation, yet one that would leave the substance of power with the princely government. This was the "American model" constitution he proposed in January 1946.

Ramaswami Aiyar argued that the Westminster system was unsuited to Indian conditions. Under his "American model" there would be universal suffrage but an irremovable executive to ensure planning and continuity. Elected [members of the bicameral legislature were to be organized into committees to oversee different areas of the administration (recalling the Donoughmore Constitution of 1931 in Ceylon). The catch, however, was that the executive was to be *appointed* by the Maharaja and hold office at his pleasure; the position of chief executive looked uncannily like

²⁹*Kerala Kaumudi* (Trivandrum), 6 Feb. 1946, p. 2. *Hindu*, 13 March 1946, p. 6.

³⁰Robin Jeffrey, "A Sanctified Label—'Congress' in Travancore Politics," in D.A. Low (ed.), *Congress and the Raj*, Heinemann, London, 1977, pp. 435-72.

that of the present Dewan.³¹

Ramaswami Aiyar may well have been pleased with the initial reaction to his "American model" constitution. Although characterizing the proposals as "not only disappointing but definitely retrograde and undemocratic", the State Congress significantly did not reject them out of hand.³² Moderates were prepared to discuss them and suggest changes.³³ When Ramaswami Aiyar and the leader of the State Congress met in New Delhi in May 1946 in connection with the British Cabinet Mission, they held talks. In Travancore, rumours spread that a sellout was on the way.³⁴

The Communist Party in Travancore, on the other hand, rejected the proposals from the start. It coined the slogan "American Model—In the Arabian Sea", and sought to join with the left wing of the State Congress to initiate a civil disobedience movement against the constitutional proposals.³⁵ A number of Communists, no doubt, also remembered that in August 1938 the provocative actions of the Youth League had helped to bundle the middle class, middle-aged State Congress leaders, who had previously never been to jail, into a civil disobedience movement.

THE COMMUNIST DEBATE

Circumstances in Travancore thus began to "fit" very well with some national Communist leaders' analysis of the post-war situation in India as a whole. The national leadership at this time lacked instruction from the Soviet Union which was still preoccupied with reconstruction in Europe and had not yet broken completely with the Western allies. National Communist leaders, therefore, taxed themselves over the question of alliance with, or opposition to, the national bourgeoisie, and over whether the CPI should be attempting to strengthen progressive elements within the Congress, the national bourgeois party, or rejecting the Congress totally. Were the newly formed Congress provincial governments tools of the British imperialists or did the Congress contain progressive elements,

³¹*Hindu*, 17 Jan. 1946, p. 7. S. Srinivasa Iyengar, a Tamil Brahman lawyer like C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, had been canvassing a scheme similar to the "American model" since 1938. N.D. Varadachari to R.K. Shanmukham Chetti, Dewan of Cochin, 21 May 1938, Dewan's Letters, Cochin, Constitutional References, Vol. 1 Kerala State Archives, Ernakulam.

³²"Statement Issued by the Working Committee of the Travancore State Congress," n.d. [Jan. 1946], held by Puthippalli Raghavan, Quilon.

³³*Kerala Kaumudi*, 24 Jan. 1946, p. 4, reporting the activities of P.S. Nataraja Pillai, an ally of the president of the State Congress.

³⁴*Kerala Kaumudi*, 22 Feb. 1946, p. 1, reported the State Congress' intention to submit a memorandum to the Maharaja about the proposals. "Mr Pattom Thanu Pillai has to explain," typescript, n.d. (held by Mrs Akkamma Cherian Varkey, Trivandrum), accused the State Congress President of planning a sellout.

³⁵George, *Immortal*, p. 7.

like Jawaharlal Nehru, that should be encouraged?³⁶

Without instruction from Moscow, the CPI drifted for a year after the end of the Second World War. It attempted to ally itself with the Congress and the Muslim League—a “united front from above”—to oppose the British and win independence. The policy was associated with the general secretary, P.C. Joshi, a “moderate”, opposed to what he saw as futile, adventurist tactics. But with “new unprecedented features of the mass revolutionary upsurge” from January 1946, dispute over a more aggressive line increased within the Party.³⁷

The relevance of this dispute to Travancore was obvious. More important, Travancore Communists could claim to have had their decision made for them. The fact that moderates in the State Congress were prepared to negotiate with the princely government about details of the “American model” provided hard evidence for those who argued that the representatives of the national bourgeoisie could not be trusted. An independent, more militant line of action was therefore called for. But Communists in Kerala were disciplined, and it required an apparent change in direction by the CPI nationally to impel more aggressive tactics in Kerala.

The balance tilted in their favour with the arrival in India in March 1946 of R. Palme Dutt, member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and possibly a bearer of authoritative instruction from Moscow. Indeed, even if Dutt was not serving as a courier, the fact that he came from Europe would have given his opinion considerable weight within the Moscow-oriented CPI.³⁸ Dutt was particularly impressed by the “quit Kashmir” campaign launched against the princely government in June, and he interviewed Sheikh Abdullah, the imprisoned leader of the movement, just before attending a fateful meeting of the CPI Central Committee in Bombay from 23 July to 5 August.³⁹

Overstreet and Windmiller have characterized the outcome of that

³⁶For the divisions within the CPI in 1945-7, P. Sundarayya, *Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons*, Communist Party of India [Marxist], Calcutta, 1972, p. 52; E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *The National Question in Kerala*, People's Publishing House, Bombay, 1952, pp. 161-2; M.R. Masani, *The Communist Party of India*, Derek Verschoyle, London, 1954, p. 88; Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall F. Windmiller, *Communism in India*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1959, pp. 223-46; John H. Kautsky, *Moscow and the Communist Party of India. A Study in the Post-War Evolution of International Communist Strategy*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1956, pp. 17-40.

³⁷*People's Age*, 18 Aug. 1946, p. 1.

³⁸Unlike Communists in South-East Asia, Indian Communists were still looking to the Soviet Union, not to China, for their models and examples. Palme Dutt came to India as a correspondent of the *Daily Worker* to cover the Cabinet Mission.

³⁹Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism*, pp. 241-2.

meeting as “a drastic though confused reorientation of policy”⁴⁰ and the resulting resolution, published in *People’s Age* on 18 August, as “an undigested mixture of radical and moderate views, an obvious and uneasy compromise between Joshi and leftist factions”.⁴¹ This “reorientation”, however, was to lead directly to India’s first armed working class revolt.

The August Resolution, perceiving “new unprecedented features” in India and a “mass revolutionary upsurge”, had striking relevance for Travancore. Impressed by the movement in Kashmir, the resolution foresaw “a new round of States people’s struggles” which would frustrate a British plot to create an “alliance between the Princes and the Congress and League leaders”. It condemned the “national bourgeois leadership of the Congress” for compromising with the princes and “coming out openly against States peoples’ struggles”. It called for constituent assemblies in the States to decide whether to retain their rulers and whether to unite with the neighbouring provinces of British India. The Communist Party’s role lay in “boldly leading partial struggles” and in “developing, extending and unifying” them, “thus setting the stage for the final struggle for power”. The resolution concluded that India’s freedom struggle had entered “the revolutionary phase”. In the princely states the Communist Party must defeat the “compromising leadership” of Congress-style nationalists and prepare for struggles on the Kashmir model. Throughout India, it must assert its “leadership of mass struggles”, develop “the fighting initiative of the masses” and prepare for “the decisive struggle for power”. With its references to “compromising” Congress leaders, the alleged conspiracy between princes and bourgeois leaders and the need for the Party to orchestrate “partial struggles”, the resolution could have been written with Travancore in mind.⁴²

Perhaps it was. Though no Travancorean attended the meeting, the only Malayali, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, was well acquainted with Travancore affairs and would certainly have been consulted on the drafting. The sheer length of the resolution, which ran to nearly 10,000 words, suggests a number of hands were involved. More important, one can see a decisive change in the tactics of the Party in Kerala after Namboodiripad’s return from Bombay. In propagating the new tactics, Namboodiripad played a leading part.⁴³

Although the dispute between militants and moderates within the national leadership of the CPI was undoubtedly reproduced in the Kerala branches, until July 1946 the Party in Kerala—that is, in Travancore,

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 241-2.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁴²All references to the August Resolution come from *People’s Age*, 18 Aug. 1949, pp. 1, 2, 11 and 12.

⁴³George, *Immortal*, pp. 129-30, attacks Namboodiripad’s integrity.

Cochin and Malabar District—pursued a constitutional and generally peaceful line. In July, indeed, the Party in Malabar announced the creation of a 150-member district committee, a six-member working committee and taluk and village committees. Organizational meetings were widely publicized throughout July and early August, but, significantly, these public meetings were not mentioned in the Party newspaper, *Deshabhimani*, after 17 August.⁴⁴ On that date, Kerala Communists met in Calicut to hear Namboodiripad's report on the Central Committee meeting in Bombay.⁴⁵

Two other pieces of evidence confirm that the Party in Kerala changed direction sharply after Namboodiripad's return from Bombay. First, British officials in Malabar, always watchful and suspicious of the Communists, had found little noteworthy or provocative about their activities hitherto.⁴⁶ Second, in Travancore, the coir workers of Alleppey struck work from 7-10 August for relief of what was described as "famine conditions" and won most of their demands.⁴⁷ This was an economic, not a political, strike, undertaken before the August Resolution reached Travancore; yet the strike involved the same men and women who were to take part in the Punnapra-Vayalar rising in October. Thus, in early August, they struck peacefully and won. Yet within a week of this successful strike, a statewide general strike was mooted. The strike of 7-10 August had come too soon to be influenced by the August Resolution. But the victory, and the enhanced morale of the workers and their leaders, emboldened them to attempt to put into practice the Resolution by calling for a strike that would clearly be political. The government promised to use the police and army if such a strike were attempted.⁴⁸

In Malabar, the Party signalled its changed tactics by attempting to arouse the Moplahs, the large Muslim population in the southern part of the district. On 20 August, Namboodiripad published an article, entitled "The Call and the Warning", in *Deshabhimani* to commemorate the twentyfifth anniversary of the Moplah rebellion in Malabar in 1921.

All those factors [he wrote] that brought about the Moplah rebellion in 1921 are in existence even today. Today, as in 1921, we are in a period following the termination of a frightful world war. . . . All sections of the people in all parts of India are going to give battle as the Moplahs of Malabar did in 1921.⁴⁹

⁴⁴*Deshabhimani*, Calicut, 14 Aug. 1946, p. 4.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 17 Aug. 1946, p. 4.

⁴⁶C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Dewan to Edwards, Resident, 27 June 1946, CS 330/1947.

⁴⁷*Deshabhimani*, 13 Aug. 1946, p. 1; 14 Aug., p. 3. *Hindu*, 9 Aug. 1946, p. 6.

⁴⁸*Hindu*, 16 Aug. 1946, p. 8.

⁴⁹*Deshabhimani*, 20 Aug. 1946, a copy of which is in Madras Public Dept, No. 692 of 4 March 1947 (KS).

The District Magistrate of Malabar was convinced that "the policy of the Communist Party is to incite the Moplahs to rebellion, taking advantage of the intricacies of the All-India political situation".⁵⁰ His successor reiterated that there was "a definite attempt to rouse the Moplahs to rebellion".⁵¹

Prior to the publication of this article, Namboodiripad had explained the August Resolution to a meeting of Kerala Communists in Calicut which began on 17 August. They had publicly resolved to set up political schools in three towns, rejected the "American model" constitution and Dewan rule in Travancore, and demanded the release of political prisoners, establishment of a constituent assembly in Travancore and the satisfaction of the immediate needs of workers and peasants.⁵² The conference ended on 20 August, the day "The Call and the Warning" appeared in *Deshabhimani*. Namboodiripad visited Travancore between 1 and 9 September, and out of this came another article pointing the way towards the October rising, as we shall see.

In short, the August Resolution decisively tilted the balances in the Kerala Party in favour of those who wanted to mount militant challenges to governments. The Resolution appeared to "fit" conditions in Travancore so well. And at a time when Kerala Communists were still devoted believers in Stalinist infallibility, the prospect of being in a position to carry out a theoretical line apparently approved from Moscow (for so Palme Dutt's presence in Bombay could lead one to believe) was both an honour and a duty. The Party in Kerala had the discipline and the numbers to drive onwards a policy that promised to carry the whole of India towards "the decisive struggle for power". Thus the Party set out on the road to Punnapra-Vayalar.

SCARCITY, LOCK-OUT, SELLOUT

Three circumstances accelerated the momentum towards the October rising: the scarcity of food, a lock-out by coir-factory owners around Alleppey, and continuing evidence that the moderates in the State Congress were about to compromise with the government over the "American model" constitution.

It is important to stress that the revolt did not happen at a time of depression in the coir industry. Discontent resulting from widespread unemployment is not part of the explanation. In the latter half of 1946, the industry was still enjoying the last stages of the boom produced by war-

⁵⁰D.I.R. Muir to the Chief Secretary, Madras Govt, 24 Aug. 1946, Madras Public Dept, No. 692 of 4 March 1947.

⁵¹W.T. Bryant to the Chief Secretary, 11 Sept. 1946, *Ibid.*

⁵²*Deshabhimani*, 20 Aug. 1946, p. 4; 23 Aug., p. 2.

time demands, as the president of the manufacturers' association remarked in a speech in September 1946. A government publication in the same month lamented "an acute shortage of labour".⁵³

The scarcity of food, however, which had been the major reason for the strike of 7-10 August, was more acute than it had been when the war ended a year earlier. At the beginning of June 1946, the Travancore government banned the export of bananas and fish, and on 25 August—the timing, from the point of view of dampening enthusiasm for the August Resolution, could not have been worse—the food ration was cut to 14 ounces a day, only nine ounces of which was to be rice.⁵⁴ This was three ounces less than a year before, and, still more important, the three ounce reduction was in rice, the preferred food of all Travancoreans.⁵⁵ What aroused working people was the fact that now the war was over, their sacrifices were rewarded with a worsening, rather than an improving, diet. It was little use for the government to explain that shipping was limited, that South-East Asia and Europe had to be fed and that Indian communications were in disarray as a result of strikes and demobilization. The point was that workers had experienced better times and expected, in a world at peace, better still. If food was short, it was easy to believe, as the Kerala Communists insisted, that corrupt officials and self-serving, decaying governments were to blame.

Workers in Quilon, Travancore's other important industrial centre, passed a resolution on 28 August calling for a general strike. On 5 September, a one-day general strike was called throughout Travancore in sympathy with the strike in British India of the South Indian Railway workers. In Ambalapuzha and Shertallai taluks, the stoppage was almost total, in spite of the presence of armed police and military units.⁵⁶ Even the police conceded that the strike was "partially successful", while the owners of the small Shertallai factories panicked and declared a lock-out against their workers—"these upstarts".⁵⁷ The lock-out was a crucial blunder. Now the workers were not only angry; they were out of work. They had time, as well as reason, to concentrate on politics. Further strikes followed around Alleppey on 15 and 20 September to protest

⁵³ *Hindu*, 25 Sept. 1946, p. 9. *TIL*, Sept. 1946, p. 36.

⁵⁴ *Hindu*, 8 June 1946, p. 6; 28 Aug., p. 5.

⁵⁵ Press Communique, 23 Aug. 1943, CS 499/1944. Madras States Fortnightly Report for the First half of Jan. 1945, Home Political Dept, 18/16/45, National Archives of India, New Delhi. The food ration had fallen to five ounces in August 1943. A worker, according to one estimate, needed 24 ounces of foodgrains a day. *Memorandum on Food Position in Cochin State* (n.p., n.d. [c. 1944; probably written by the Dewan for a food conference in New Delhi]), p. 34, Kerala University Library, Trivandrum.

⁵⁶ *Deshabhimani*, 11 Sept. 1946, p. 1. Keene, "Short Note."

⁵⁷ Keene, "Short Note."

against government repression and the arrest of the vice president of the TCFWU.⁵⁸ The District Magistrate banned public meetings for 15 days, and on 1 October, the government introduced an Emergency Powers Act providing for arrest and detention without trial.⁵⁹

E.M.S. Namboodiripad explicitly stated the Communist Party's fears and objectives in an article, headlined "Travancore Labourers on the Brink of War against Starvation and Rule by the Dewan", in *Deshabhimani* on 13 September. Describing his recent visit to Travancore, he condemned the government for the acute food shortage and for its attempt to crush the labourers and impose the "American model" constitution. The State Congress, he wrote, was defeatist—on the brink of accepting the constitutional proposals at a time when there were 100 political prisoners, 50 political workers had had to go underground and the military was being used to try to cow down militant areas of the State. Although the State Congress and the Dewan seemed increasingly to speak with one voice, workers and Communists would not yield in the battle for their rights.⁶⁰ Namboodiripad's statement fitted neatly with the Central Committee Resolution adopted in Bombay. The Travancore government prohibited the import of *Deshabhimani*.

The role of the State Congress lent credence to the Communist view that a sellout was imminent. Though rejecting the reform proposals, the State Congress did not rule out negotiation, and its president, Pattom Thanu Pillai, and his followers, entered into these with unseemly seriousness.⁶¹ On 25 September, C. Kesavan, an Irava and one of the militant State Congressmen, promised his full support to the struggle against the "American model" and asked that the call for a general strike be delayed until after the working committee of the State Congress met on 11 October. This would give Pattom Thanu Pillai two weeks in which to exhaust any possibilities of compromise with the Dewan.⁶²

Kesavan strongly urged that the State Congress launch a civil disobedience movement in its own right for responsible government. In a pamphlet dated 8 October and entitled *Ini Oru Samaram Matram* (Only One More Struggle), he argued that Travancoreans were involved in a war of nerves; everything was banned; there was no food and no work. To destroy the constitutional proposals and retain its leadership, the State Congress had to begin an agitation, which all organizations—labour, peasant and communal—would accept if led by the State Congress. What

⁵⁸George, *Immortal*, p. 28. Inspector General of Police to the Registrar, 20 Sept. 1946, CS 744/1946.

⁵⁹CS 744/1946.

⁶⁰*Deshabhimani*, 13 Sept. 1946, in CS 798/1946.

⁶¹*Malabar Herald*, 24 Aug. 1946, p. 4.

⁶²George, *Immortal*, pp. 30-1.

was more, an agitation now would succeed.⁶³ The State Congress working committee in fact met on 8 October, came to no decision and the following day, Kesavan was arrested under the Emergency Powers Act. It was widely believed that moderates in the State Congress were relieved to have his pressure removed from their deliberation.⁶⁴

Pattom Thanu Pillai and T.M. Varghese of the State Congress met the Dewan to negotiate about the "American model" on 13 October, and although the Dewan rejected the idea of Westminster-style responsible government, they agreed to meet again in November.⁶⁵ Among the public, there was a general feeling that talks were going on between the government and the State Congress "with a view to exploring a *via media* that will satisfy the majority".⁶⁶ Indeed, so cordial had the negotiations become that another Christian leader of the State Congress had to make a public speech on 20 October asserting that it would settle for nothing less than responsible government and that whatever the working committee did, it could not go back on the general body's resolution rejecting the "American model".⁶⁷ At the same time, the situation in Ambalapuzha and Shertallai had become so tense that on 18 October Thanu Pillai and Varghese left Trivandrum to tour the areas to see conditions for themselves.⁶⁸

The Communists too had experienced disagreement and uncertainty. On 11 October, after discussion among the top Kerala Communists in Calicut, K.C. George, the Travancore president, was sent to Bombay to consult all-India leaders. He reached Bombay on 13 October, but the General Secretary, P.C. Joshi, was in Calcutta. George spoke to him on the telephone, but little could be discussed. George was told to consult G. Adhikari, who was in charge of the Bombay office in Joshi's absence, and though "the inevitability of a clash with the government and that too with the military perturbed him. . . he had to respect the decision of the Travancore committee".⁶⁹ George returned to Calicut on 17 October with the sanction of the national executive for the militant line in Travancore and the calling of a general strike.⁷⁰ On 20 October, the Communists called a general strike throughout Travancore to begin on 22 October. The day of the strike call, the government outlawed the Communist Party, Fishermen's Unions at Alleppey and Punnappra and the Shertallai

⁶³C. Kesavan, *Ini Oru Samaram Matram* [Only One More Struggle], Bharath Press, Trivandrum, 1946, CS 734/1946.

⁶⁴Inspector General to the Registrar, 22 Oct. 1946, CS 713/1946.

⁶⁵*Deepika*, Kottayam, 14 Oct. 1946, p. 3.

⁶⁶*Malabar Herald*, 19 Oct. 1946, p. 4.

⁶⁷A.J. John in *Deepika*, 21 Oct. 1946, p. 2.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 19 Oct. 1946, p. 3.

⁶⁹George, *Immortal*, p. 61.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 62.

Coir Factory Workers' Union.⁷¹

The requirements of the August Resolution thus seemed about to be fulfilled in Travancore. Bourgeois Nationalist leaders appeared to be on the point of coming to terms with a ruling prince. One of the best organized working classes in India, dissatisfied with food shortages and the political uncertainty hanging over its state, was ready to challenge the princely government. And representatives of the Communist Party, eager to demonstrate the militance of Travancore's workers, had been instructed by the national leadership to develop "partial struggles" in order to accelerate "the seizure of power by the people".

THE REVOLT

By the middle of October, rival mobs—organized peasants and workers on one side and landlords' and factory-owners' retainers on the other—were clashing in the remoter areas of Ambalapuzha and Shertallai. A police informer was murdered by a mob on 14 October.⁷² On 17 October the workers in the coconut oil mills in Shertallai walked out of the factories with all the iron bars they could find.

The Maharaja's birthday fell on 24 October, and the government later claimed that the Communists told their credulous followers that the police and military would not open fire during the birthday-week celebrations. Until 24 October, there was only one attack (on a lone, plain-clothes policeman near Alleppey), though from 22 October, the general strike in Alleppey was complete.

On 24 October, however, well-organized crowds armed with arecanut spears, knives, choppers and iron bars attacked the armed-police outpost of 20 men at Punnapra. A sub-inspector, a head constable and two policemen were killed when they went out to meet the crowd. The remaining police retreated into a house and opened fire. They were under siege for about 90 minutes and killed about 30 of the crowd, according to the police.⁷³ The mob captured nine rifles.

Meanwhile, three miles east of Punnapra on the main Alleppey-Quilon road, another procession blocked a military convoy and dispersed only after the military opened fire killing one or two people.⁷⁴ The military party, however, turned back to Alleppey, and the garrison at Punnapra was not relieved until about ten at night, six or seven hours later.

In Alleppey itself, processions moved through the town unopposed by

⁷¹*Hindu*, 21 Oct. 1946, p. 3.

⁷²Keene, "Short Note" from which the following detail comes.

⁷³George, *Immortal*, p. 72, writes that the number of casualties was unknown "but only four or five policemen survived". E.M.S. Namboodiripad claimed 17 rifles were taken. *People's Age*, 15 Dec. 1946, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁴George, *Immortal*, p. 71.

the police or army, but there was no violence and only a few cases of petty arson, according to the police. North of Alleppey in the Shertallai peninsula, mobs blocked roads, cut culverts and small bridges and brought down phone lines. Nine people were killed when the police opened fire on the mob destroying a bridge at Mararikulam.⁷⁵ On the following morning when the commander of the military and the Inspector General of Police flew over the area, civilian traffic was moving freely south of Alleppey and military convoys were unchallenged north of the town.⁷⁶

Martial law in Ambalapuzha and Shertallai was declared on 25 October when news of the killing of the police at Punnapra reached Trivandrum. Leaflets proclaiming martial law were dropped from the air on 26 October.⁷⁷ According to K.C. George, the men in at least one of the camps vigorously rejected a suggestion on 26 October that the camp should be disbanded before the apparently inevitable military attack.⁷⁸ Rebels and military contested the road north of Alleppey on 26 October, and, according to the police, four were killed while attempting to attack the bridge at Mararikulam while it was being repaired.

The denouncement came the next day when the military attacked the largest camp at Vayalar, which had water on three sides and could be approached only by boat. According to the police, warning of the attack was given in advance and law-abiding men, women and children had already left. The police description, with which this paper began, claimed that many of the young men in the camps escaped in boats after the police and army opened fire. The storming of the Vayalar camp was decisive, and from 28 October onward, the question was merely one of clearing up small pockets of resistance and arresting fugitives.⁷⁹

There are intriguing omissions and inconsistencies in the police version. No estimate was made of the number killed at Vayalar. The contention that the Communist leaders exploited gullible peasants and workers does not square with the observation that at Vayalar the camp "consisted of mostly young bloods who were full of the wartime stories of guerilla bands, patriot armies and the success of the Soviets". The police explanation was that the militants were "mostly young men in the twenties who felt thwarted and frustrated and grew desperate". The older Communists used them "in the belief that every unsuccessful action . . . was a step on their onward march".⁸⁰

According to K.C. George, 300-400 soldiers attacked the 200 inmates

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, p. 101. The Police Daily Report, 25 Oct. 1946, CS 446/1947, wrote of "300 ex-Army men in uniform" leading the crowd at Mararikulam.

⁷⁶Daily Report, 25 Oct. 1946.

⁷⁷George, *Immortal*, p. 104.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁷⁹Keene, "Short Note."

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

of the camp at Vayalar and killed about 150 people. About 120 were killed in the attack on the Menassery camp on the same day.⁸¹ The Communists dissolved all the remaining camps on 28 October and went underground.⁸² The general strike was called off on 31 October, the day after the arrest of T.V. Thomas, the president of the TCFWU, who had not gone into hiding.⁸³

The Communist version stresses the defensive nature of the camps which "were not set up but came up spontaneously under the impact of conditions there".⁸⁴ It was *not* a revolution to capture power (or give everyone 13½ cents of land, as the police later claimed). Even after the disaster at Vayalar, some ordinary workers were in favour of maintaining the remaining camps, and to have abandoned them earlier would have been totally demoralizing. The rebels attacked at Punnapra because they were simply confronting a small party of police. They did not take the initiative at Vayalar because they faced the military. Although the Communist version too does not offer a casualty total, by adding up the figures offered by K.C. George, one comes to a figure of between 300 and 400 dead people. Ramaswami Aiyar claimed that fewer than 200 people died. "The people of Travancore," *People's Age* declared, "expect the State Congress leaders to turn their backs on Sir C.P. and head the struggle they have begun".⁸⁵

A third version of events came from non-Communist politicians. The State Congress was in a distressing dilemma. It issued a statement accusing the government of contributing "to the strengthening and prestige of the Communist Party" and asserted that "only a people's Government . . . can prevent such developments". Ramaswami Aiyar attacked the State Congress for "hunting with the hounds and running with the hare". Its role, he said, showed how little influence it had with labour.⁸⁶

R. Sankar, general secretary of the SINDP Yogam, the Irava caste association, accused the Communists of betraying the workers and fleeing for their lives. Sankar had toured the area before and during the rebellion and claimed to have seen "lorry-loads of dead workers" being removed from the Punnapra area, presumably on 25 October. He maintained that the allegations against the armed police were baseless. He appealed to Irava workers and peasants to renounce their connections with the Communist Party, surrender unconditionally and rely on relief measures organized by the SINDP Yogam. The people should not believe that the

⁸¹George, *Immortal*, pp. 105, 108, 110, 118.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 160-5. *People's Age*, 27 Oct. 1946, p. 12.

⁸⁶*Hindu*, 31 Oct. 1946, p. 6.

State Congress was about to start a movement to help them.⁸⁷ A Congress Socialist leader, N. Srikantan Nair, wrote a pamphlet called *Travancore Betrayed* and asserted that "the Communist-led working class of Ambalappuzha and Shertallai, by their precipitous and foolhardy actions, played into the hands of the Government".⁸⁸ Another Socialist, who toured the area immediately after the revolt as one of the three-man party sent by the Students' Federation, estimated that more than 500 people had died.⁸⁹

By 2 November, conditions had largely returned to normal. Work had resumed even in the coir factories at Alleppey, and the general strike throughout the state had been withdrawn. Ramaswami Aiyar flew to Bombay the next day for a meeting and was able to claim that calm had been restored, otherwise he would not have left the state.⁹⁰ Communists were rounded up, and many were to remain in jails for eight years.⁹¹

If the government's aim was to destroy the Communist hold in Ambalappuzha and Shertallai, it failed totally. A year later, 6,000 people celebrated "martyrs' day" in Alleppey on 24 October, and even the police admitted that "great enthusiasm was shown by the labourers . . .".⁹² At another meeting to welcome the release of some prisoners early in October 1947, 15,000 attended at the lowest estimate, and the police reported "an awe-inspiring atmosphere about the whole function".⁹³ The Inspector General of Police concluded that "it is a well-known fact that these ill-educated labourers consider communism as the only panacea for all their socio-economic evils". His solution was that "this creed" must be "put down with an iron hand".⁹⁴ The iron hand, however, had already failed.

A WORKING CLASS REVOLT

Who took part in the Punnappra-Vayalar revolt? What is the justification for asserting that it resulted from working class organization and consciousness? I have described the intellectual climate, the coir factories of the Alleppey neighbourhood, the turnover of their labour, the manner in which the industry shaded off, through rudimentary factories, into the raw-material extraction of the countryside, and the spread of trade unions modelled on the Travancore Labour Association. Evidence on the occupations of those brought to trial after the revolt is lacking, and the

⁸⁷*Kerala Kaumudi*, 1 Nov. 1946, p. 2.

⁸⁸*Janata*, 19 Jan. 1947, p. 9.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 7 Nov. 1948, p. 10.

⁹⁰*Hindu*, 5 Nov. 1946, p. 7.

⁹¹135 were released only in January 1955 in a desperate attempt to buy Communist support for a failing Travancore-Cochin government. *Hindu*, 28 Jan. 1955, p. 13.

⁹²Report, Assistant Supt of Police, Alleppey, 25 Oct. 1947, CS 540/1947.

⁹³Inspector General to the Registrar, 8 Oct. 1947, CS 109/1948.

⁹⁴Inspector General to the Registrar, 9 Oct. 1947, *Ibid.*

most detailed account of men and occupations appears to be the haphazard one in K.C. George's book. George cites the evidence of the Malayalam writer, S.L. Puram Sudanandan, who was in one of the camps in Shertallai taluk: "The majority of the men. . . were. . . mainly the coir factory and agricultural workers".⁹⁵ Another witness to the attack on the police at Punnapra contended that "the majority. . . were port and fish workers".⁹⁶ George himself mentions more than 75 men by name and cites agricultural workers (George, pp. 17, 111), palm-tappers (pp. 48, 50, 83), *beedi* workers (p. 48) and oil-mill workers (p. 115), as well as coir workers (p. 113) and numerous officials of small unions (pp. 17, 21, 28, 37, 50, 51, 52, 79, 105). It is not surprising that his evidence should highlight the more prominent organizational men whom he would have known. Yet their prominence, when added to the other evidence, supports my contention that the participants in the Punnapra-Vayalar revolt were men strongly influenced by radical ideas, party activists and union leaders. In spite of the vast difference between the Alleppey neighbourhood and the dark satanic mills of nineteenth century Europe, they *were* a class-conscious working class.

The revolt itself resulted from a conjunction of very special circumstances. Without the CPI's August Resolution, for example, it could not have occurred. That much is obvious from a careful examination of the chronology of national and Kerala events in July, August and September 1946. Yet the August Resolution by itself was incapable of sparking revolt, as its docile reception elsewhere in India showed.

Drafted with Palme Dutt's Kashmir experience in mind, the Resolution was an attempt by the Communist Party, itself divided, undirected from Moscow and undecided on its tactics, to exploit the spontaneous local protests of 1946. The Resolution seemed to fit the Travancore dilemma perfectly. An organized, angry working class already existed under the leadership of dedicated, well-read Communists seeking to capitalize on post-war instability and the impending departure of the British. Here was a potential "partial struggle" against a princely state set on doing a deal with bourgeois nationalists. Enough such partial struggles would lead to "the seizure of power by the people".

But how they would lead there was left unspecified, and, from the Travancore experience, it is clear that Communists had no idea what the next step should be. Although ex-military men in uniform often led the workers against the police and army, no one knew what to do with the nine rifles captured from the police at Punnapra. There seems to have been an awareness that to open fire on the police or military would be to raise the stakes to a totally new, unacceptably high level. "Reflecting on it

⁹⁵George, *Immortal*, p. 157.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 81.

later", K.C. George wrote, "I have felt that a small guerilla squad would have spontaneously taken shape then and [there]. . . if our Comrades had [had] training [in how] to handle rifles".⁹⁷ But no such contingency plans had been made.

Communist explanations since 1946 emphasize the alleged aim of the Travancore government to provoke violence and thereby have the excuse to smash its most dangerous foe, the organized workers and Communists. E.M.S. Namboodiripad established this tradition within two months: ". . . the Diwan found that he had to crush the Left if he was to settle with the Right."⁹⁸ He concluded that "the suffering and sacrifice undergone by the workers under Communist leadership. . . weakened the forces of compromise" and handed a grave "set back" to the "American model" constitution. Certainly, there was a danger that the State Congress would accept the "American model". In the fluid politics of late 1946, such acceptance would have lent crucial support to the Dewan's plan for an independent Travancore and, indeed, to attempts by princes elsewhere in India to establish their independence once the British departed.

One should not be misled into dismissing Punnapara-Vayalar as a case of "ignorant workers" being manipulated by unscrupulous and muddled Communists. Indeed, when one examines what the revolt was *not*, one finds confirmation for the view that it was the product of an organized, disciplined working class, taking its orders eagerly from the vanguard Party it supported. The revolt had nothing at all to do with communal or caste issues, even though it took place after the Calcutta killing and the worsening of communal tensions throughout India. The revolt was *not* economic: the workers had won their economic demands in the strike of early August, and the coir industry itself was buoyant; jobs were available. The revolt was *not* a jacquerie or spontaneous uprising; the buildup had gone on for more than two months. Nor, similarly, was it a riot: the workers retreated to armed camps where political instruction was given; they sallied forth from such camps to attack the police at Punnapara, and were smashed in a similar camp at Vayalar. To be sure, the organizers and participants had little idea of what the outcome would be, yet they were convinced in a vague way that their actions were helping to advance some broad masterplan or historical force.

Nationally, though the Communist Party of India correctly identified mass discontent after the war, it was unable to channel that discontent in

⁹⁷K.C. George, "Punnapara-Vayalar: Five Days that Shook Travancore," in *Communist Party of India Ninth Congress Souvenir*, C. Unniraja, Cochin, 1971, p. 89. *Deshabhimani*, 27 Jan. 1947, quoted Lenin after the 1905 revolt in Russia on the need to arm "with more boldness, more determination and more firmness", *Madras Public* 2658/25 Aug. 1947 (KS).

⁹⁸*People's Age*, 22 Dec. 1946, p. 5.

ways that would increase the chances of revolution. Indeed, the theoretical disarray of the Party in mid-1946 emphasizes not the possibility of a Communist "conspiracy" to provoke local revolts but the Party's inability to organize such risings. The Party had not created the explosive conditions of post-war India—food shortages, enhanced expectations, inflation, communal riots—and it groped uncertainly about how best to exploit them. Even in Travancore, where it could count on the enthusiastic support of a large section of a population acutely affected by post-war conditions, the outcome of Punnapra-Vayalar revealed the Party's tactical line to be gravely limited and poorly thought out. The Communist Party proved far more successful at organizing the legend of Punnapra-Vayalar than the "conspiracy" of 1946.