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# COMMUNISM, PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY, AND DEVELOPMENT

## An Analysis of the Political-Theoretical Line of E.M.S. Namboodiripad

*Hakim K. S.*

### Introduction

The Indian communist movement made a comparatively limited contribution to the expansion of the theoretical framework of Marxism, especially in contrast to the substantial contributions made by the former USSR, China, Cuba, Vietnam, and the communist nations in Latin America. However, the Indian communist endeavour has registered notable developmental accomplishments in certain regions of the country, particularly in advancing the interests of the working class. An analysis of communist developmental strategies in Kerala and the role of E.M.S. Namboodiripad as a pragmatic visionary in its guidance assumes prominence within this context. Namboodiripad wielded substantial influence in moulding the developmental trajectory of the state of Kerala subsequent to its formation. This chapter<sup>1</sup> endeavours to delineate the historical trajectory and political philosophy of the communist movement in the region, with a specific focus on the ideological foundations of Communism. The analysis predominantly relies on insights derived from the political writings, memoirs, and autobiography of E.M.S. Namboodiripad. In this process, the making and transformation of Namboodiripad as leader and theoretician, the rapidly varying political scenario before and after Indian independence, and the role played by the communist parties of Russia and China form crucial variables. This chapter also presents an understanding of Namboodiripad's line of thought on the relation between parliamentary modes of political activity and the communist movement in the region.

An analysis of the praxis of the communist movement in Kerala<sup>2</sup> brings to focus the interface between a Marxist theory-analysis and the socio-political dynamics in the region. The 67 years of parliamentary communism had its own impact on the socio-economic structure of Kerala society, aiding the state to be in the forefront of various development indicators like land reforms, literacy,

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education and healthcare, decentralization of power, and the role of public action. An inquiry into the history of the communist movement in Kerala and the role of E.M.S. Namboodiripad<sup>3</sup> as a practical visionary in guiding it need an examination in this context.

E.M.S. Namboodiripad stands as a prominent leader and a Marxist theorist within the Communist movement in India. Initially affiliated with the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in the 1930s, he later joined the Communist Party and was elected to the Central Committee of the Party in 1941. From that point onward, he consistently held leadership roles within the Party. Since the establishment of the CPI(M)<sup>4</sup> in 1964, Namboodiripad had been a member of the Political Bureau of the Party, and he served as its General Secretary from 1977 to 1992. Notably, he led the first Communist ministry in Kerala from 1957 to 1959 and later served as the Chief Minister of the United Front government in the state during 1967–69. Namboodiripad had exerted significant influence on the developmental trajectory of the region of Kerala from its official establishment in 1957 up to his death in 1998.

Even years following his demise, numerous Party leaders and workers in the region continue to invoke Namboodiripad's name during political crises, expressing the sentiment that "if EMS were present, he would have adeptly addressed such challenges". Here, the point to be made is not that the CPI(M) in Kerala was a party solely or even predominantly dependent on a particular individual. I consider him a doctrinal influence that garnered the endorsement of fellow communist leaders, ultimately resulting in the establishment and widespread acceptance of communism as a grassroots movement in the region.

To study Namboodiripad's line of thought, an in-depth understanding of the evolution of Namboodiripad as a leader is crucial. Commencing his journey as a reformist within the Namboodiri community, he evolved into a Nationalist-Gandhian figure, later aligning with the Congress Socialist group. Subsequently, he transitioned to Marxist ideology and ultimately emerged as a significant figure in the establishment of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala. Eventually, he became a prominent figure both within the communist movement and beyond and was popularly known as EMS. A critical examination of Namboodiripad's ideological framework, as delineated in his own written works and those of his contemporaries, serves as a valuable means to elucidate the historical evolution, political culture, and trajectory of the communist movement in the region.

### **Struggles for Independence and the Genesis of the Communist Party of India**

If one goes through the history of political movements in Malayalam-speaking regions of pre-independent India, it could be noted that the politically conscious Malayali youth had actively participated in different socio-political activities in this region, which later became the state of Kerala.<sup>5</sup> The historical political development in Kerala, spanning from 1900 to 1998, can be summarized in five stages. The first stage, starting in 1900, witnessed the emergence of social reform movements advocating for increased educational accessibility and challenging caste practices among Dalit, upper caste, and various religious communities. The second stage occurred during the national movement for independence, led by the Congress from 1921, marked by the dominance of Gandhi's perspectives and the initiation of the non-cooperation-Khilafat movements. The third stage, the CSP phase, transpired from 1934 to 1939. Subsequently, the fourth stage saw the dominance of the Communist Party of India (CPI) from 1939 to 1964. The fifth stage began in 1967 with the rise of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), signifying a pivotal phase in Kerala's political landscape.

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The origin and development of the ideologies of Namboodiripad are from this varied transformations and syntheses. Born in an upper caste Namboodiri Brahmin family in 1909, he began his social activism as early as 1920–23 by joining V.T. Bhattathiripad's Yogakshema Sabha to reform the Namboodiri community. Then, towards the end of the 1920s, he began to actively take part in the freedom struggle. The social movement in Kerala soon gave way for Gandhi's announcement of a civil disobedience movement and the Salt Satyagraha, which had an impact in Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore. Motivated by the principles of the Gandhi-led national movement, numerous politically aware Malayali youth actively affiliated with the National Congress, adopting Gandhism as their ideological orientation.

At the same time, but far apart from the milieu of political movements of the region, the CPI was officially formed in Tashkent in Russia on 17 October 1920. The members of the Party formed in Russia were M.N. Roy, Evelyn Roy, Abani Mukherji, Rosa Fitingova, Muhammad Ali, Mohammed Shafiq Siddiqi, and M.P.T. Acharya. However, the Party could not function in India due to restrictions under the British regime (Govindapillai, 2007, pp. 105–22). The formation of the CPI in Tashkent was a turning point in the history of India's independence movement, as it began a clear trend of ideological division within the larger freedom movement. Originating outside the geographical confines of India, the CPI encountered resistance from a substantial faction of socialists and individuals sympathetic to communist ideologies within the country. Many individuals, who believed that the Party's inception was not connected to the indigenous socio-political milieu, expressed suspicion and criticism owing to its external origins. Notwithstanding of these obstacles, the CPI was more important in helping the communist cause in India expand than many of its domestic equivalents combined. The influence that the CPI had on the overall narrative of India's independence movement was so significant that it transcended its unconventional beginnings (Namboodiripad, 1986, p.182). About the same event, Namboodiripad (1994) stated:

The existence of that group and its activities helped to attract Indian revolutionaries to communism, and they, in turn, led to the formation of several communist groups in India. The articles published, the letters written and other forms of communication established by the Tashkent group (which styled itself as the Communist Party of India) helped in radicalizing the Congress.

(pp. 8–9)

When the CPI was operating from Tashkent, the founders of the communist movement in Malabar, namely, P. Krishna Pillai, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, A.K. Gopalan, K. Damodaran, and others were youngsters with little knowledge of communist ideas and principles. As outlined earlier, they took part in many struggles initiated by Gandhi and were arrested and imprisoned in different jails in South India at different points of time (Fic, 1970, pp. 8–30). The young communist leaders of Malabar came to know about Karl Marx and Marxism only during their days of imprisonment. Their efforts to translate the ideas of Marx into action laid the foundation of the communist movement in the Malabar region. According to Namboodiripad, who spent several days and months in the Kozhikode subjail, the Kannur central jail, and the Vellore central jail, the jails were the birthplaces of socialist and communist ideas in the region (Namboodiripad, 1987, pp. 50–51). In prison, he got the opportunity to interact with many revolutionary leaders from Bengal and Punjab, which helped widen his world view. Thus, the entry of socialist and communist ideas into the lexicon of Malayalis was made possible in jails where many Central and North Indian socialist leaders were imprisoned along with local protestors. Young Malayali men

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had the opportunity to meet, interact, and live with these intellectuals. The older leaders gave the Malayali youth books and pamphlets to read that they had used in their political activities. Namboodiripad has mentioned that he got a chance to properly interact with A.K. Gopalan and Krishna Pillai during their prison term in Kannur central prison. He also had the opportunity to meet revolutionaries from Bengal like Trilok Chakravarti, Ramesh Acharya, and Rabi Sengupta in the same prison. This sort of political atmosphere, fed with serious philosophical thinking and intensive reading, in the jails could be considered as the initial spark for socialist and communist thinking in Malabar. It was the period during which socialist elements were becoming strong within the Congress-led national movement. These Malayali political activists from Malabar, who were imprisoned in the Kannur jail in the British Malabar Presidency and the Vellore jail in the Madras Presidency for participating in Gandhi-led Salt Satyagraha, left prison deeply inspired by socialist and communist ideas.

The people who were inspired by ‘socialist and communist ideas’ and the stories from the Soviet Union and Bolshevik revolution began to realize the need for a new platform to carry forward their political activities. The Congress-led national movement gradually became less attractive to socialists for several reasons. Gandhi’s decision to withdraw from the civil disobedience movement fuelled their anger. Many of them developed disagreements with Gandhian mode of struggle and the birth of the Communist Party gave them hope (Gopalan, 1973, p. 52).

Later, the development and formation of the CSP at an all-India level under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan in 1934 created a positive wave among communists in India (Rao, 2003, p. 58). The CSP was considered to be a socialist faction within the Indian National Congress and the party’s mission was to infuse socialist principles into the broader nationalist movement for India’s independence. P. Sundariah, who played a pivotal role in the formation of the CSP in Malabar, was actually in charge of the South Indian region of the CPI (Rao, 2003, p. 115). Young Malayali communist leaders, such as P. Krishna Pillai, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, A.K. Gopalan, and K. Damodaran, who were initially inspired by socialist ideas, were present at the formation of the Kerala branch of CSP in 1935 (Rao, 2003, p. 115). On that occasion, P. Krishna Pillai was assigned the task of explaining the party’s mission of ‘organizing the working sections of the society’ to other attendees. This new development was aimed to address not only the political independence of India but also the inequalities inherent in the socio-economic structure. Due to the CSP’s anti-imperialist stance and determination to fight back against the British government’s legal actions against them, members and supporters of the CPI made the decision to align with them. Acknowledging Kerala’s agrarian background, the CSP concentrated on resolving land ownership issues and tenancy concerns that affected the rights of the working sections of the society.

The communists used the CSP as an effective platform to carry out their work by forming local- and regional-level associations of industrial workers, plantation workers, peasants, tenants, and landless agricultural labourers (Rao, 2003, pp. 86–87). Slowly they strengthened their organizational base and began to consolidate working-class movements. A number of strikes and agitations that took place in Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore under the leadership of communist sympathizers between the 1930s and the 1950s were part of this consolidation.

### **Ideological Framework and Practical Realities in the Socialist Phase**

The communists in the initial stage of the development of the movement in Kerala had a meagre theoretical understanding of the fundamentals of Marxism. The leaders of the CSP in Kerala



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expressed great enthusiasm for the progress made by Soviet society. However, the Malayali leaders had limited knowledge of the theory of Marxism/Leninism due to a lack of materials for understanding the theory. However, they had a general idea of the Soviet Union, an iconic nation, which had achieved progressive growth in the social and economic aspects of their people. They made an effort to spread socialist ideas via accessible propaganda outlets despite having a limited comprehension of them. The only thing they could do was to follow what they had heard about the Soviet Union's course of action and the success story of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik) (CPSU (B)) in mobilizing people. Despite a global economic crisis, they were aware that the Soviet Union had successfully implemented the first five-year plan. This differentiation served as a strong foundation for the growth of favourable perceptions of socialist developmental strategy (Namboodiripad, 1994, pp. 12–16). During that time, few options for in-depth theoretical research were available, which aided in the formation of individual pro-socialist viewpoints and their dissemination to the general public. They knew the idea of class struggle and understood that they were to organize the working class to facilitate class struggle.

The leaders were aware that the practical concern of the socialist view was to organize peasants and workers by making them aware of the possibilities of collective protest against the atrocities and inequalities they had been suffering for many years. This was the area where the socialists had done some groundwork already. They established different cells for their peasant and workers' organizations. As a result, different layers of organizational work were carried out, from primary village level to the central committees, to make the movement more effective.

Party functioning, based on the vague understanding of the Soviet class movement, gained momentum only with the formation of the first Communist Party unit in Kerala in the middle of 1937. It was established during a secret meeting held at Kozhikode, in which four active leaders (E.M.S. Namboodiripad, P. Krishna Pillai, N.C. Sekhar, and K. Damodaran) of the CSP participated. In that meeting, P. Krishna Pillai was nominated and later elected as the inaugural secretary of the Communist Party branch in Kerala (Namboodiripad, 1994, p. 6). Among the people involved in socialist/communist activities in Kerala, P. Krishna Pillai is generally known as the founder of the Communist Party in Kerala (Namboodiripad, 1976, p. 69). Following this, in 1939, during a meeting that took place at Pinarayi-Parappuram, a small village in Northern Kerala, a movement was triggered to recruit unhappy CSP members to the Kerala branch of the Communist Party. The conversion of the CSP into the Communist Party was accompanied by a strong emphasis on developing a theoretical understanding. In this process, the focus was to educate the leaders of the Party in authoritative works like *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* by Friedrich Engels, *What Is to be Done?* by V.I. Lenin, and *Foundations of Leninism* by Joseph Stalin. The works like *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* by Joseph Stalin were translated into Malayalam for wider circulation among Party members.

The emphasis on learning theory became stronger when the Party came out from the 'underground' or secret activity. When the leaders understood the theoretical aspects of Marxist/Socialist ideas in a detailed way, it made an impact on the organizational strategies of the Party in the region. Upon gaining exposure to the theory, practice, and history of communism and its practical implications at the local level, leaders recognized the impracticality of organizing workers and peasants without providing Party classes. This unique feature characterized the communist movement in Kerala, where figures such as Namboodiripad took intentional measures to educate the cadres in the theory and history of Marxism. Additionally, they sought to inform the masses by systematically clarifying the Party's programme and ideology.

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### **The Communist Party of India and Mass Mobilization: Pre-Independence Dynamics**

The people's movement for independence in India became more powerful with the Second World War. The Communist Party was allowed to function legally in the country as part of the alliance between the Soviet Union and Britain in the Second World War. Following the cessation of the war, the British promptly initiated electoral processes across diverse provincial constituencies, fulfilling the commitment made to the nationalists prior to the onset of the war. Two major political groups of pre-independent India, the Congress and the Muslim League, faced the election and tried to mobilize people on two different agendas (Namboodiripad, 1999, pp. 67–69). Congress raised the slogan for 'United India' and the Muslim League demanded a 'Separate Nation' for Muslims in India. The communists claim that they demanded a 'Federal India' based on the reorganization of existing British provincial states on a linguistic basis with autonomous powers. They demanded an economic and socio-political system where land would be handed over to the tiller. They were also concerned with the rights of industrial workers and labourers and advocated for fair labour practices, workers' rights, and better working conditions. The Party actively took part in, and occasionally spearheaded, several large-scale rallies, strikes, and campaigns to address concerns related to political freedoms, economic fairness, and civil rights. The Party also aimed to reconcile the interests of labour with the broader goal of industrial development. The communists claimed that they participated in the election with this aim.

Namboodiripad (1999) observed that the provincial elections of 1946 were a landmark in the history of the communist movement in India as it was for the first time that the CPI contested in an election as an independent political force (p. 74). However, the Congress and Muslim League enjoyed a dominant victory in the elections. The communists failed in a majority of constituencies except in eight reserved legislatures, which were kept solely as labour-reserved constituencies (p. 69). Namboodiripad (1999) claimed that the benefits that came with the last election were deliberately ruined by the British during the first round and then appropriated by the Congress and the Muslim League to stir popular opinion in favour of their own programmes. The Communist Party argued that the introduction of problems with overtly religious and communal overtones undermined the proletariat's will and the national movement's class orientation. However, they contended that the large margin of seats won in labour-only constituencies and the substantial number of vote share received by communist candidates in some general constituencies created a tangible feeling of hope, indicating favourable changes for the communist movement in India's changing political scenario. In an effort to further this goal, the communists promoted coordinated actions, organizing different working-class sections around the nation. Organizing efforts in their strongholds, including Telangana in the princely state of Hyderabad, in different villages in Malabar, Punnappa-Vayalar in the Travancore region, and Tebhaga in Bengal, were noteworthy examples of such mobilization (p. 69).

### **The Communist Party of India and Post-Independence Mass Mobilization**

Diverse leaders within the Communist Party conducted a nuanced analysis of Indian independence and the transfer of power, interpreting it as a tacit agreement forged between British imperialists and the indigenous bourgeoisie. This purported accord aimed to preclude the emergence of a people's democratic movement, a prospect anticipated in the aftermath of independence (Namboodiripad, 1999, p. 78).

Under the influence of radical communist ideologies, the second Party Congress of the Communist Party, convened in Calcutta in February–March 1948, resolved to initiate confrontations against the Congress-led central government. Slogans such as ‘Telangana way is our way’ and ‘Land to the tiller and Power to the people’ reverberated within the confines of the Calcutta conference hall (Namboodiripad, 1999, p.7 8). This doctrinal stance came to be recognized as the renowned ‘Calcutta thesis’ within the annals of the communist movement, wherein the CPI adopted a position advocating armed struggle against the Congress-led government in New Delhi. Further, the radicals argued that the armed line of struggle should continue as mere change in government did not make any difference in the element of oppression and the exploitative nature of the state remained the same even after independence.

Nonetheless, it is evident that the communist-led uprisings against the government did not end abruptly on 15 August 1947. Mass movements initiated before 1947 endured and continued to exist. This phenomenon arises from their unwavering conviction that inequalities and exploitative practices persisted, notwithstanding the apparent attainment of national independence. Here, an important point to remember is that the stand against the ‘Nehru government’ was not the result of a homogenous voice within the Communist Party. Internal dissent arose among members of the CPI concerning the Party’s stance, specifically pertaining to whether it should endorse the Nehru government at the centre.

### **On the Parliamentary Path: Divergent Perspectives on Strategy**

In 1951, the CPI withdrew<sup>6</sup> from the armed line of struggle and decided to follow parliamentary line of action by taking part in the first general elections. At this juncture, people like Namboodiripad took the position that the Party should continue their struggles against the ‘bourgeois-democratic system’. The proposition of communist-led governance was articulated as a procedural approach aimed at implementing comprehensive measures in support of socio-economically disadvantaged populations, particularly the poor and the working class. Through this point of view, Namboodiripad (1999, p.85) asserted that the Party’s objective was not to thwart the evolution of the prevailing bourgeois democracy into bourgeois autocracy. Instead, the aim was to proficiently metamorphose it into a working-class democracy.

While adhering to a parliamentary course of action, the CPI decided to maintain extra-parliamentary operations in order to safeguard the revolutionary potential of the Party. This included participating in democratic elections at the regional and national levels. The Party had to follow its cadre character,<sup>7</sup> secrecy in the organization, and extra-parliamentary struggles to preserve its revolutionary content and carry forward the fight for the wider dream of socialism. Theoretically, the idea was that this would address the changing socio-political dynamics of the country at that point of time. At the practical level, the idea was not easy to follow and the new strategic position intensified differences in the Party. In the 1951–52 Lok Sabha elections, the CPI won only 16 out of 489 seats, but it became the largest group of opposition legislators. This led to senior leader A.K. Gopalan becoming the de facto leader of the opposition in the first Indian Lok Sabha.

Following the parliamentary line, the CPI also took part in the first state legislative assembly election following the formation of Kerala state in 1957. It won the election and formed the government under the leadership of Namboodiripad. The Namboodiripad government carried out revolutionary steps by bringing out the Land Reforms Ordinance and the Education Bill. K.R. Gauri,<sup>8</sup> the sole female representative and revenue minister in the inaugural Namboodiripad cabinet, played a pivotal role in formulating the Land Reforms Ordinance. The Land Reforms Ordinance was a

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groundbreaking policy that restructured land ownership patterns. By enacting tenancy changes, allocating surplus land to landless peasants, and placing restrictions on landholdings, it aimed to alleviate concerns related to land inequality. The Education Bill, on the other hand, likely focused on reforming the education system to make it more inclusive and accessible, aligning with the communist government's broader vision of social and economic transformation. Nevertheless, owing to the specific provisions outlined in these bills, the Namboodiripad government was dismissed by Nehru's central government in 1959 following Congress-led protests in the state, called as the Liberation Struggle. This added to the debate on whether CPI should support the Nehru-led Congress government.

During the India–China war in 1962, some members of the CPI and the Nehru government accused others, later known as the 'CPI left', of being Chinese spies and many of them were imprisoned (Namboodiripad, 2008, pp. 12–13). These long-running clashes and conflicts added fuel to the crisis when the letters of the CPI Chairman Shripad Amrit Dange to the British government were revealed. These letters asked for his release from police custody in return for his services during his jail tenure in the late 1940s. The letters became known to the other leaders only in 1964. In response, a section of communist leaders walked out of the CPI's national council meeting held at Calcutta (now Kolkata) from 31 October to 7 November 1964. Later, they were suspended from CPI and they formed a new party named the CPI(Marxist) or the 'CPI left'. They saw Dange's act as a betrayal of the revolutionary spirit of the movement and communist morality (Ray 2011, p. 114).

As most of the suspended members of the CPI were from Kerala, communist activities in Kerala came to a temporary standstill. To overcome this crisis, the so-called 'CPI left' organized an all-Kerala campaign to explain the factors and circumstances leading to the split. Namboodiripad and A.K. Gopalan were assigned to lead the campaign to convince the masses, who were confused by the split. In Namboodiripad's (1994) words:

[...] It was clear that a substantial section of Party members was in sympathy with the left; the mass of the people too gave their enthusiastic support to the struggle launched by the left. At the same time, within the State Committee, district and lower committees, there were bitter conflicts on which group, left or right, would control the organization. Where one group secured a majority, the others formed a separate party. Within a few weeks of the suspension from the National Council, the entire Party came to be divided into what were then known as the 'CPI right' and 'CPI left'.

(p. 211)

The seventh Party congress was organized by both 'CPI left' and 'CPI right' separately. At the congress, the 'CPI left' decided to form a new Party with a different programme – a new strategy for Indian revolution and a different tactical line (Namboodiripad, 1994, p. 231). The essence of the tactical line of the new Party was that of following a mass line to prepare Indian society for revolution. Yet Namboodiripad (1994, p. 231) observed, "the [seventh party] Congress [of the 'CPI left'] was remarkable for what it said and for what it failed to say".

[... .] the Party Congress deferred the discussion on the ideological questions that were being debated in the International Communist Movement. This act was taken as a refusal to toe the Chinese line as the left in the CPI had been expected to do.

(Namboodiripad, 1994, p. 232)



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Thus, at the same conference,<sup>9</sup> an ideological division within the CPI(M) took place as it seemed to follow a mass line that resembled the parliamentary line of action with some exceptions. This was unacceptable to a group of people (who later became Naxalites) in the Party who considered the Chinese line as the best suited revolutionary strategy for India. Namboodiripad (1994) justified the CPI(M) Party programme by saying:

[Even though] most delegates were, of course, inclined to accept the Chinese positions, but, considering the sharp division on ideological questions, and in view of the complete unity achieved on the strategic objective and the tactics of the Indian revolution, the leadership did not consider it advisable to divide the [seventh] Congress on international ideological questions.

(p. 231)

These events led the Chinese Communist Party and the people who supported the Chinese line to view the position of the CPI (M) as a betrayal and ‘revisionist’. The second phase of the split happened in the CPI(M) in 1967 and the Naxalite group<sup>10</sup> detached from the CPI(M) and formed a new organization, CPI(Marxist-Leninist), in 1969. The anti-parliamentary faction in Indian communism had its genesis in the Tebhaga Movement of 1946 in Bengal and the Telangana Movement (1946–52) in the Andhra region of former Hyderabad princely state (Dasgupta, 1974, p. 16). The second split in the Indian communist movement created two distinct groups within the CPI(M). External observers labelled these groups as either having a parliamentary orientation or an opposing anti-parliamentary/anti-state orientation.

Scholars like Rabindra Ray (2011) see this as:

[...]in both the split of the CPI(M) cadre from the CPI and the subsequent split of some of the CPI(M) cadre from it, the urgency of the matter brought home by the example of the Chinese success was summed up in the question, ‘Why is it that the Indian revolution has not yet succeeded?’ It led the CPI (M) to accuse the CPI of ‘revisionism’ and, subsequently, radicals within the CPI(M) to accuse itself of revisionism.

(p. 76)

There was an opposition, in the line of action and thought, regarding the method of revolution between Charu Mazumdar, the founder of the Naxal movement, and E.M.S. Namboodiripad. The radical communists like the Naxalites and others in Kerala, however, accused the CPI(M) and E.M.S. Namboodiripad of supporting the very structure of the state that promotes the ideology of the dominant class. Here they described:

E.M.S. Namboodiripad as a bourgeois agent and as No.1 revisionist in league with the revisionists of the CPI who fondly believed that communism could be achieved by the ballot box and democratic means.

(Ray, 2011, p. 84)

It is very important to note that the influence and involvement of both the CPSU (B) and the Communist Party of China had a wider impact in the different splits and developments of the Indian communist movement, which necessitates a detailed analysis. The CPI(M) saw itself as having an independent line from both, while its critique of the developments in the CPSU(B) and USSR at that time was stronger.

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### **Locating Soviet Union and China in Indian Communist Split**

During the 1950s, the Soviet Union came closer to India to form a strategic alliance. The Soviet Union was impressed by the fact that the Nehru-led Indian government was following a mixed economy pattern. They saw India as a transitional economy which might under Nehru's leadership transform into a full-fledged socialist economy. Also, India's history of colonial oppression prompted the Soviet Union to partner with India in their efforts to build an anti-imperialist front against the U.S. and European forces. Considering all these possibilities, the CPSU advised the CPI to support the Nehru government.

The 'CPI left' opposed the CPSU's direction and they argued that Nehru's developmental plans were semi-feudal and pro-capitalist in nature. However, those who were with the 'CPI right' accepted the CPSU's direction and thus their attitude towards the Nehru government became a crucial point in deciding the CPI-CPI (M) split of 1964. Prime Minister Nehru's recommendation to the President of India for the dismissal of the Namboodiripad-led government in Kerala in 1959 also became a crucial reason for the split. It occurred as the communist supporters across the country were viewing the radical policy initiatives of the Namboodiripad-led communist government, like the Land Reform Bill, the Educational Bill, and the Police Neutralization policy, as progressive steps for preparing a fertile ground for Namboodiripad's plan of socialism.

Like the CPSU, in the early 1950s, the Communist Party of China also perceived the Nehru government as progressive and anti-imperialist in nature. But by the end of the decade, when China had territorial issues with India, the Communist Party of China changed its stand. Namboodiripad (1999) explains the shift in Chinese position in the following words:

At that time, the Chinese Party itself was moving rapidly leftward, organizing 'the Great Leap Forward' first and then the Cultural Revolution. The ideology of these movements was based on, among other things, the negation of bourgeois parliamentary institutions. As the Chinese leadership told the delegation of the CPI(M) that visited China in 1983, they had no experience of working in bourgeois parliamentary institutions, and they thought that the line of working in bourgeois parliamentary institutions was right-revisionist and opportunist. It was the CPI(M)'s subsequent record that the Chinese understood that bourgeois parliamentary institutions could be used in a revolutionary way, to the extent of forming governments as in Kerala and West Bengal.

(p. 233)

He (1999) also observed that

[...] the Chinese went to the other extreme, equating the Nehru government in India with the Chiang Kai-shek government in China. As a corollary, they [Chinese Communist Party] held that the governments of socialist countries as well as revolutionary parties in India should do everything to bring down the Congress government.

(p. 233)

The CPI(M), however, viewed the shift in the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC) directive with criticism. Soon, therefore, the CPC labelled the CPI(M) as revisionists and then they extended their support to the radical elements within the CPI(M). About this Namboodiripad (1994) opined that:

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[...] the Chinese comrades noted that there was a revolt inside the CPI(M) against its 'revisionist' line. Those who were dissatisfied with the strategic and tactical approach of the Party formed the Naxal group, which called for total support to the ideological-political positions of the CPC. This group began to organize against the Party leadership in general and in the two states where the Party was in power in particular. [...] Beijing Radio and other organs of the Chinese media hailed the emergence of this group, which they called a genuine Marxist-Leninist Party. The leadership of the CPI(M) was denounced as revisionist in the Chinese media. The Naxalites publicly declared their loyalty to the Chinese Party and its Chairman and the Chinese media called the Naxalites India's genuine Marxist-Leninists. (p. 234)

Namboodiripad (1994) explained that the CPI(M) had an independent line of thought in assessing the Nehru government at the centre:

The CPI(M) analyzed soberly the class character of the Nehru government and its political role, and the Party formulated the political-tactical line of uniting the broadest sections of the people against the Nehru government. This did not mean, as the Chinese Party suggested, that the revolutionary forces in India were to work towards the immediate overthrow of the government. The line of the CPI(M) was to strengthen the mass democratic opposition to the Nehru government and thus to strengthen revolutionary forces led by the working class. In order to realize this objective, the Party Programme envisaged the formation of non-Congress governments in some states. (pp. 233–34)

Namboodiripad (1994) also pointed out that the position of the CPI(M) was not aligned with either the CPSU(B) or the CPC directives. Due to this, the CPI(M) had to face questions from both the CPSU(B) and the CPC. He (1994) justifies the CPI(M) line by saying that:

The practical implications of this line became clear when the Party became a significant force in the electoral struggle to defeat the Congress in more than half a dozen states, and was also able to form governments under its leadership in two states. In the opinion of the Chinese Party, these events were clear indication that the CPI (M) had become an ordinary bourgeois party. (p. 234)

### **The Parliamentary Road to Communism and Its Limits**

A significant criticism directed at both Namboodiripad and his party, arising from their involvement in electoral politics, argues that they broke their ties with the articulated strategy for bringing about a socialist/communist revolution in the region. However, analysing the situation in Kerala serves as a credible foundation for responding to criticisms and asserting that the urgency for societal transformation and the necessity to strengthen the forces of social change in India involve a comprehensive approach, successfully executed in the region of Kerala under the leadership of Namboodiripad. In this context, Namboodiripad and his party have taken a new and unrestricted direction due to a blend of resistance politics arising from class conflicts and distinctive policy

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approaches implemented by elected governments within the framework of a ‘bourgeois parliamentary democratic setup’. Unlike extremist groups in the Indian communist movement, who either make the sectarian line of avoiding participation in parliamentary politics or the revisionist line of joining any government regardless of its policies, Namboodiripad and his party followed a thoughtful strategy. They chose to collaborate with governments where communists could influence policymaking, showcasing a discerning approach.

The brief tenure of the first communist government of Namboodiripad in 1957, cut short by strong opposition from the pressure groups, has had the capacity to make a significant impact on the historical narrative of the parliamentary path taken by the communists. This is because of its comprehensive and forward-thinking policies designed to support the working classes and socially economically disadvantaged groups in their fight against feudalism and capitalist exploitation. At the same time, the government and the Party aimed to promote unity among the working classes and the agrarian sections in the region.

The mode of functioning opted out by Namboodiripad and his party in Kerala has consisted of two different but complementary strategies. First, during their parliamentary tenures, it was keen on implementing universalistic welfare policies such as democratization of public education, land reforms, public food distribution, and universal healthcare (Nossiter, 1982; Jeffery, 1992; Shariff, 1999; Casinader, 1995; Franke and Chasin, 1994; Herring, 1988). Speaking of the set of policies the Communist government implemented in its first assembly tenure in the 1957–59 period, Desai (2013) observed that “these policies were the most radical that was ever implemented by any left party in India (indeed anywhere else globally) through democratic means” (p. 120). Even though the first communist ministry was not able to successfully implement all their welfare policies, they were successful in building popular consent among the masses for the implementation of these policies. Therefore, successive governments could not roll back these policies in their entirety. Second, communists in Kerala have spent as much time out of power as in government and thus, as an opposition, they were able to employ what could be termed as an ‘insurgent’ logic to pressurize those in power to implement welfare policies. This implies that whenever they were out of power, communists pursued a strong campaign of resistance and opposition to possible rollbacks and other bourgeois-oriented policies of the ruling party. Communists are very keen on using the tactics of strikes and popular demonstrations to pressurize those in power to implement radical legislation (Desai, 2013, p. 120).

Comparing the performance of left governments in Kerala with their counterparts in West Bengal, Desai (2013) argues that “Kerala’s left governments have been more consistently activist and, propelled by affiliated movements among poor tenants and workers, they have implemented more far-reaching anti-poverty policies than the West Bengal left front governments” (Desai, 2013, p. 121). Acting as an effective instrument for structural change, the CPI and later the CPI(M) in Kerala implemented radical policies in the field of agrarian relations, public education, and public health. As pointed out in the previous sections of this chapter, one of the main reasons for the expansion of the communist movement in Kerala was the organized peasant movements in different regions of the state under the leadership of communists. Therefore, one of the first steps taken by the communists when they won the election of 1957 was to legislate for land reforms. The Land Reform Bill aimed to introduce a land ceiling and distribute the excess land among the poor agricultural labourers and to stop the illegal eviction of tenants by their landlords. Since the government of 1957 was dismissed by the central government in 1959, the communists were not able to implement the Bill. Later, in 1969, the Land Reform Bill was passed in the legislative



assembly by the C. Achutha Menon government and came into force in 1970. Even though the reintroduction of the Land Reform Bill was done by the coalition government led by the CPI under C. Achutha Menon, the strong agitations led by the communists in the 1950s and 1960s played a crucial role in materializing the Land Reform Act and other reforms in the field of agriculture. Agitations organized by the peasant unions under the leadership of the Communist Party made considerable changes in the field of agrarian relations. Peasant unions not only addressed the issue of employment security but also played a crucial role in the phenomenal increase in money wages (Tharamangalam, 1981; Herring, 1991).

The Education Bill of 1957 was another important policy document brought in by the communist government. Till then, a major part of Kerala's education system was managed by the dominant Syrian Catholic Church and other caste and religious organizations. The school system of those days favoured the education of Christians and upper-caste Hindus. Backward sections of Kerala society like Ezhavas, Muslims, and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations, who constituted about 65 per cent of Kerala society, were poorly represented in these schools (Desai, 2013, pp. 132–33). Therefore, with this Bill, the Communist government took steps to build a vast infrastructure for publicly funded education. Teachers were to be appointed by the state. This policy to modernize and secularize public education led to phenomenal increase in the literacy rate of Kerala. The literacy rate of Kerala increased from 31.9% in 1961 to 60.4% in 1971 (Desai, 2013, pp. 132–33), indicating that the levels of literacy and education in Kerala cannot be imputed only to earlier missionary, colonial, and reform activities.

The decentralization initiative in Kerala formed an integral part of Namboodiripad's vision of parliamentary communist action. Namboodiripad conceived the plan to institute decentralized governance upon the Communist Party's ascension to power in 1957. His government actively undertook initiatives to translate the concept of decentralized governance into reality. In pursuance of this objective, Namboodiripad established the inaugural Administrative Reforms Committee, which, in turn, proposed several measures for the restructuring of the extant administrative framework within the state.

The committee recommended<sup>11</sup> for the empowerment of panchayats as the viable and fundamental units for administration and development at the village level. Through democratic decentralization, Namboodiripad imagined to create a federated state government and governance, which was efficient through incorporating the 'voices from below' – voices which may have been sidelined in the top-down dispensation that existed in the prior top-down bureaucratic governance structure. Namboodiripad perceived the plan of decentralization as an avenue to heighten public awareness regarding their rights, thereby contributing to the long-term advancement of the socialist cause. In alignment with this envisioned trajectory, the Kerala Panchayat Bill of 1958 and the District Council Bill of 1959 were introduced in the State Assembly. Nevertheless, these bills also failed to be enacted into law owing to the premature dissolution of the government.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

In the course of diverse parliamentary initiatives, it becomes apparent that Namboodiripad exhibited a nuanced understanding of the effective operation of the Communist movement within the parameters of the parliamentary system. He articulated a lucid delineation of the Party's role in governmental engagement, underscoring the significance of prioritizing the cultivation of mass movements and the leadership of extra-parliamentary struggles, all directed towards advancing the welfare of the working class. This transformative process exhibited considerable breadth, yet

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it remained notably incomplete in pivotal aspects. The region, previously marked by instances of untouchability and extreme forms of inequalities based on caste, underwent a comprehensive transformation within a brief temporal span. This encompassed the implementation of one of the most comprehensive land reforms in the nation, dismantling the hegemony of feudal landlords and the establishment of a pro-working-class government unparalleled in the context of the capitalist third world.

Despite these advancements, the ‘democratic revolution’ in the region remains characterized by critical inadequacies. The region continues to face several difficulties, including low productivity and industrial growth, questions about the quality of the surplus land distributed to the landless during land reforms, ecological and environmental issues, issues of Dalits and tribes, and the intricacies of gender and sexuality. It was apparent that, in all the policy decisions taken by the communists, the direct experiences of the common people played a crucial role in revealing the limitations of governments functioning within a pro-capitalist system. However, this understanding, as Namboodiripad rightly emphasizes (1974), stresses upon the necessity to eliminate any illusions about ‘parliamentary democracy’ being a method to free the working classes from the capitalist system. The Communist leadership in the region, including Namboodiripad, has not forsaken the ideals of socialism or communism. However, their stance asserts that the opportune moment for revolution has not yet materialized, especially given the absence of widespread organization and mobilization behind communist principles and the Party. Notably, impediments to the consolidation of working-class unity against the bourgeoisie persist, encompassing issues such as caste-centric inequalities, religious polarizations, tribal and ethnic complexities, gender disparities, and communal politics. These multifaceted challenges collectively hinder the realization of a cohesive revolutionary movement. This perspective stems from the belief that the distinctive social and economic structure of India provides a scope for a revolutionary future.

In the final analysis, the prominence of E.M.S. Namboodiripad and his conceptualization of communism assumes centrality in comprehending the trajectory of the communist movement within the region. A detailed examination of the historical evolution of the communist movement in India has led to the determination that the sustained engagements with international, national, and regional considerations constituted integral elements of the movement’s progression. Namboodiripad’s ideological perspectives and consequential actions played a pivotal role in elucidating these multifaceted concerns, thereby contributing significantly to the authentic delineation of the movement within the region.

### Notes

- 1 I acknowledge that certain sections of this chapter were previously discussed and published in the *Journal of Social Orbit* (Vol. 2, pp. 157–178, 2016). While the core ideas have been expanded and developed for this book, the earlier discussions formed the basis for the current content. I also express my gratitude to Prof. Rajni Palriwala, my research supervisor at the Delhi School of Economics, for guidance and support throughout my research undertaking.
- 2 The first democratically elected communist government came into power in Kerala in 1957.
- 3 The complete name is Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad.
- 4 The Communist Party of India (Marxist).
- 5 The Kerala State was formed in 1 November 1956 by merging the Malabar, which was under the direct rule of the British government, with Travancore and Cochin which were princely states, and separating Tamil-speaking regions from Travancore and Cochin state.
- 6 In the post-independence phase, India underwent substantial political transformations, adopting a democratic system as the political landscape evolved. The CPI acknowledged the significance of participating in the democratic process to influence policies and advocate for the working class. Additionally, the

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- CPI's decision was influenced by the global context, particularly the Soviet Union's shift under Stalin, emphasizing peaceful coexistence and parliamentary engagement over armed revolutions. This ideological change had a widespread impact on communist parties globally, including the CPI.
- 7 The 'cadre system' also refers to an organizational pattern followed by the communist groups where the key positions are held by a select group of individuals (based on certain criteria's focuses on an individual's commitment to communist principles) and they are considered to be the core of leadership of the Party.
  - 8 Also known as Gauri Amma.
  - 9 Held at Calcutta from 31 October 1964 to 7 November 1964.
  - 10 Those people who initiate Maoism as their revolutionary strategy are known as 'Naxalites' and they are also called as Maoists.
  - 11 *Report of the Administrative Reforms Committee*. (1957). Vols. I and II. (Chairman-E.M.S. Namboodiripad). Trivandrum: Government Press.
  - 12 While Namboodiripad initiated efforts for decentralized governance as early as 1957, its implementation was realized in 1996 when the CPI(M)-led government assumed power with a substantial majority. Concurrently, the central government established a foundation to mandate local self-government institutions nationwide, following the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Commission during the 1992–93 period. Owing to these two potential scenarios, it is conceivable that Namboodiripad recognized the opportune moment for the execution of this project.

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