

## EXTRIMIST MOVEMENT IN KERALA DURING THE STRUGGLE FOR RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

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### Abstract

*Modern Travancore witnessed strong protests for civic amenities and representation in legislatures through the Civic Rights movement and Abstention movement during 1920s and early part of 1930s. Government was forced to concede reforms of far reaching nature by which representations were given to many communities in the election of 1937 and for recruitment a public service commission was constituted. But the 1937 election and the constitution of the Public Service Commission did not solve the question of adequate representation. A new struggle was started for the attainment of responsible government in Travancore which was even though led in peaceful means in the beginning, assumed extremist nature with the involvement of youthful section of the society. The participants of the struggle from the beginning to end directed their energies against a single individual, the Travancore Dewan Sir. C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer who has been considered as an autocrat and a blood thirsty tyrant. On the other side the policies of the Dewan intensified the issues rather than solving it. His policy was dividing and rule, using the internal social divisions existed in Travancore to his own advantage.*

**Keywords:** civic amenities, Civic Rights, Public Service Commission, Travancore, Civil Liberties Union, State Congress

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In Travancore the demand for responsible government was not a new development. As early as in 1929 in the South Indian States People's Conference held at Thiruvananthapuram under the presidentship of M. Visveswarayya, a resolution was introduced demanding the introduction of responsible government in princely states. But even the JPC leaders were in the beginning doubtful about the feasibility of responsible government. In 1936 George Joseph suggested the need for starting a struggle for the attainment of responsible government. He pleaded for the establishment of a government responsible to the representative legislature. Secondly he demanded an executive council consisting of the representatives of JPC communities replacing Dewanship.<sup>1</sup>

However in 1937 some individuals raised the demand for responsible government even though it did not catch the attention throughout the state. Mr. Santhanam, while speaking in the meeting of Travancore Youth League at Thiruvananthapuram stressed the importance of responsible government.<sup>2</sup> In 1937 in the meeting of the Travancore District Congress Committee, held under the presidentship of Pattabhi Sita Ramayya, a demand was raised to introduce responsible government in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin.<sup>3</sup> On 18 November 1937 P.K. Kunju, a leader of JPC moved a resolution in the Sree Mulam Assembly demanding responsible government.<sup>4</sup> Later on 1 February 1938 T.M. Varghese moved an adjournment motion demanding a discussion over the question of responsible government.<sup>5</sup>

Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer was well aware of the seriousness of the matter and though a discussion was allowed over the resolution, he closed it without permitting a voting. He raised some technical reasons for not implementing the responsible government. He argued, "Legally it is not possible, without the active concurrence of the British Government for the ruler, to divest himself of his individual authority and jurisdiction over the government of his state in favour of any other authority... There are certain rights and obligations arising from paramount relations which can apply and be enforced only between the ruler and the British crown."<sup>6</sup> He also stated that the Maharaja was the sole source of authority and the Travancore constitution "exhibits the

characteristics of a fully responsive as different from a responsible government.”<sup>7</sup> Already C.P. Ramaswamy had got an assurance from C.P. Scrine, Resident, Madras state agency, to the effect that the British Government agreed to support the native states in case of any action against any person or party or community in regard to the demand for the establishment of responsible government or other activities.<sup>8</sup> Now the situation became very favourable for the formation of a new organisation with wider political objective. The idea of such an organisation was finalised immediately because the Indian National Congress at its annual session at Haripura in February 1938 resolved that while the congress committee functioning in the Indian state should not engage themselves in parliamentary activity or direct action in the name of the congress, independent organisations may be encouraged to carry on internal struggle in these states.<sup>9</sup>

The leaders of Travancore, realising the need for a new political party took immediate steps in that direction. On 17 February 1938 they held a preliminary meeting to discuss the details. On 23 February a meeting of the prominent leaders was held in the political hotel of N.S. Kurup at Pulimoodu, Thiruvananthapuram under the presidentship of C.V.Kunjuraman.<sup>10</sup> This meeting decided to form a new organisation known as Travancore State Congress. Two days later another meeting was held in the house of John Philipose at Tycaud, Thiruvananthapuram in which a working committee of the State Congress was formed which consisted of Pattom Thanu Pillai, P.K. Kunju, T.M. Varghese, K.T. Thomas, C. Kesavan, P.S. Nataraja Pillai, A.J. John, E. John Philipose, V. Achutha Menon, A. Narayana Piallai, M.R. Madhava Warriar, T.K. Narayana Pillai and K.T. Thomas. Thanu Pillai was selected as the President, K.T. Thomas and P.S. Nataraja Pillai as Secretaries, C. Kesavan and T.M. Varghese as Joint Secretaries and M.R. Madhava Warriar as Treasurer.<sup>11</sup> A publicity committee was also constituted which consisted of C. Narayana Pillai, P.N. Krishna Pillai, Bodheswaran, K. Sukumaran and Miss. Annie Mascarene.<sup>12</sup> V.K. Velayudhan was selected as the deputy leader of the State Congress in the assembly.

On 26 February 1938 the State Congress Working Committee issued the first press statement, which proclaimed its aims and objectives. It aimed at securing responsible government, adult franchise and protection of minorities through just and peaceful means.<sup>13</sup> The first incident, which strained the relation between the State Congress and Dewan C. P, was the Narayana Pillai case. State Congress took this issue as a prestigious one and for the support of Narayana Pillai efficient lawyers like T.M. Varghese, Pattom Thanu Pillai and K.T. Thomas lined one after another.<sup>14</sup> A. Narayana Pillai was sentenced for eighteen months imprisonment and a fine of Rs.200/- Any way the Narayana Pillai case contributed for popularising the struggle for responsible government.<sup>15</sup> The State Congress gave maximum publicity to this issue to show the autocratic way in which Dewan Ramaswamy handled such issues. The State Congress devised a plan to protest against the atrocities of the government. But government prohibited public meetings for two months.<sup>16</sup>

A delegation of the State Congress led by Pattom Thanu Pillai went to Madras on 12 April 1938 to mobilize public opinion against state affairs in Travancore. The delegation consisted of Pattom Thanu Pillai, C. Kesavan, K.T. Thomas, T.M. Varghese, V.K. Velayudhan, P.K. Kunju, John Philipose, M.S. Anirudhan, K.M. Korah, K.A. Gangadhara Menon, T.K. Narayana Pillai and K.P. Neelakanta Pillai. The delegation met prominent leaders and held public meetings in Madras. The Madras branch of Civil Liberties Union hosted the delegation. Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy suspiciously viewed these developments and considered it as a measure to ridicule the Travancore administration. The entire wrath of the Dewan fell on the shoulders of K.C. Mamman Mappiali because he suspected that the Madras branch of Travancore National and Quilon Bank owned by Mamman Mappilai financed the journey of the state congress delegation. Thereafter he took measures to liquidate the bank. The State Congress prepared a memorial to submit to the King. The memorial, which was accompanied by a memorandum, became a sensitive issue through out Travancore and outside because it contained a number of personal charges against the Dewan. However the Maharaja refused to receive the memorial and memorandum and the state congress

leaders dispatched it to the Maharaja in registered post on 31 May 1938.<sup>17</sup> The memorial, which was accompanied by a memorandum, became a sensitive issue through out Travancore and outside because it contained a number of personal charges against the Dewan. However the Maharaja refused to receive the memorial and memorandum and the state congress leaders dispatched it to the Maharaja in registered post on 31 May 1938.<sup>18</sup> Later the working committee of the State Congress published it in a book form under the caption "Travancore Today."

Gandhiji directed G. Ramachandran, his close associate, who was also a member of the Travancore State Congress to inform him about the developments happening in the state. In his report to the congress working committee submitted on 29 July 1938, G. Ramachandran stated that Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy has been attempting to reduce the power of the Travancore State Congress by whatever means available.<sup>19</sup> He pointed out that the Dewan used a new organisation known as the Travancore National Congress to torpedo the Travancore State Congress and many of those who were in the new organisation were the friends of the Dewan.<sup>20</sup> He alleged that the Associated Press of India (API) was used to spread propaganda work against the State Congress and that agency received a subsidy of Rs.24000/- every year from the Travancore government.<sup>21</sup>

The State Congress in a special meeting held at Thiruvananthapuram on 4 August 1938 passed a resolution declaring its intention to start civil disobedience unless the government withdrew the prohibition orders. Gandhiji send his personal messenger Rajkumari Amrit Kaur to Travancore to avoid friction between the state authorities and the State Congress. She was a Christian lady with royal background (Kapurthala state).<sup>22</sup> She met both the Dewan and Pattom Thanu Pillai and ascertained the situation. In her report she pointed out that Dewan Ramaswamy raised a major allegation that the Christians were trying to capture Travancore and make it into a Christian state. She also pointed out the State Congress categorically denied all the accusations leveled against them by the Dewan. In her report she advised the State Congress to withdraw the personal charges against the Dewan. Gandhiji even though supported the movement for responsible government expressed his objection over the personal attacks against the Dewan.

The State Congress inaugurated the civil disobedience movement on 23 August 1938 with a huge meeting at Sankumugham seashore. Several leaders were arrested from the meeting place. M.M. Varkey, one of its leaders was forced to flee from the place to escape from the police arrest.<sup>23</sup> Several places witnessed the protest meetings. The All Travancore Youth League was in the forefront of the campaign. The workers of the League under the presidentship of Ponnara Sreedhar started campaigns through out Travancore. Several leaders received assaults from the police and unidentified persons. The leaders who received severe wounds include M.R. Madhava Varrier, Thomas Mathew Muthalali, Miss. Annie Mascarene, K.P. Neelakanta Pillai, Accamma Cherian, K.T. Thomas etc. Police firing took place at Neyyattinkara and disturbances reported at Kadakkal, Pangode and Chengannur.<sup>24</sup> When the Youth League organised a meeting at Thiruvananthapuram the Congress Socialist Party leader Kamalapati Chatopadyay attended. But she was arrested by the police.<sup>25</sup> C.P branded the State Congress and the Travancore Youth League as Christian enterprises. On 29 August 1938, he wrote a letter to Gandhiji in which he characterised the Youth League as a communist body.<sup>26</sup> At his instigation the Travancore government issued a press note alleging that the Travancore State Congress a communal body, its leaders hailed from the Samyukta Party and it a replica of the Joint Political Congress.<sup>27</sup> Even though C.P. Ramaswamy had his own reasons to label the State Congress as a communalist body, there was certain amount of realities underlying that contention. C. Narayana Pillai writes, "The State Congress leadership in Travancore were not above the communal and sectarian sentiments. Each leader considered first how a particular problem affected his community. How it adversely affected the totality of the state and society was not his immediate concern. Whenever there were collisions of national and communal interests the leaders were prepared to sacrifice the

interests of the state rather than those of their particular community. Never in Travancore, existed, a national leadership doubtless in nature”<sup>28</sup>

After the initial struggles started by the State Congress the struggle for responsible government in Travancore had been taken over by the All Travancore Youth League and the Communist party. The civil disobedience movements of the State Congress gave way to labour strikes and anti-C.P. slogans. The youth league held meetings throughout the state to protest against the undemocratic attitude of the Dewan.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand attempts were taken by the authorities to discourage the leaders of the State Congress. Several unsuccessful attempts were made on the life and property of the leaders like Ms. Annie Mascrene, a prominent leader of the State Congress. Some unknown persons pelted stone on her house during the first week of April 1938.<sup>30</sup> On 29<sup>th</sup> of April another attempt was made by which her house was thrown open, assaulted her and some valuables were taken away from home. Similar incidents occurred in the case of some other leaders of the State Congress.

Attempts were made to curtail the freedom of the press. It was stated that the death or inability of the licence the paper must stop publication and to get a new licence in the name of another individual all the formalities to be repeated. Thus a situation was created by which functioning of the news papers were allowed only when they enjoy the support of the government. Some news papers outside the state that criticised the policies of the Travancore government were not permitted to circulate copies within the state. Such instances can be seen in the cases of ‘Gomati’ and ‘Sanathani’ published from Trissur and ‘Deepam’, ‘Prakasham’ and ‘Malabar Herald’ published from Cochin. Harassment and assault against some notable leaders of the State Congress also deserves special mention in this respect. M.R. Madhava Warier and T.M. Muthalai, editors of the *Malayali* and the *Malabar Advocate* respectively were assaulted. No action was taken by the Travancore administration against the assailants. On 15 November 1938 Ms. Annie Mascrene was awarded imprisonment for a period of 18 months for her participation in the State Congress activities.

Another interesting thing is that the persons and publications that supported the government and criticised the State Congress were duly honoured. Persons who wrote articles attacking the State Congress and its programmes easily found places on Government committees. The editor of *Samadarsi* weekly was appointed a member of the Public Service Commission.<sup>31</sup> In order to persuade the people and organisations loyal to the Crown some new organisations were created. These includes ‘Loyalist Union’ or ‘Bhakta Sangham’ through the Land Revenue Department.

The meetings of the State Congress and the Travancore Youth league were declared illegal. Travancore Youth league was founded as early as in 1931. It has been contented that the news papers were prohibited from publishing any news in favour of the two organisations. Political cases were filed against the persons who have connections with State Congress in one way or other. There was a special police force for the Travancore State as in the case of Gustappo of Adolf Hitler.<sup>32</sup> The details of arrests were not published in newspapers fearing the actions from the government. C. Kesavan, M.G Koshey and P.G Varghese were arrested and imprisoned through a petty case by alleging that they threw pebbles on buses. Many persons were imprisoned without any trial. There was an instance at Pala in which the Magistrate imposed lashes to some agitators and ordered to execute it in his presence.<sup>34</sup>

From 1940 onwards the situation changed and the activities of the State Congress were taken over by the youth wing factions and the communist party workers involved in the agitations. The left wing factions of the State Congress took the lead and they organised themselves as a radical wing within the State Congress. The Travancore State Congress decided to launch a Direct Action on March 1939. But the attempt ended in failure following the stringent action taken by the Government under the instigation of C.P Ramaswamy Iyer. This incident contributed for losing the morale and prestige of the State Congress. The youthful faction became dissatisfied and they

reacted in a violent manner. Provoked at these vacillating policies of the State Congress leaders, the Youth League organised itself into a separate radical group in May 1939 with M. N. Govindan Nair as the Secretary.<sup>35</sup> Except a small faction led by N. Sreekandan Nair, all other leaders and their followers became the leading core of the communist party.

The civil disobedience movements of the State Congress gave way to labour strikes and anti-C.P. slogans. The youth league held meetings throughout the state to protest against the undemocratic attitude of the Dewan.<sup>36</sup> When the struggle for responsible government became very strong, Dewan was forced to grant some constitutional reforms. On 16 January 1946 he proclaimed reforms, which guaranteed universal adult franchise and an irremovable executive. This reform was hailed as American Model. This time almost all community organisations protested along with the State Congress. The provision for cancelling reservation was objectionable to most of them. In spite of the vociferous demands of the S.N.D.P. Yogam for reservation of seats to Ezhavas, the Dewan had brushed aside the issue on the ground that they were no longer a minority. The catchy slogan "American Model Arabikkadalil" (American Model in the Arabian Sea) which rent the air in those days gave clear expression to the feeling of popular disapproval of the proposed scheme of reform.<sup>37</sup> An unsuccessful attempt was made on the life of C.P on 26 July 1947. Following this he was forced to relinquish his Dewanship on 19 August 1947. After him P.G Narayanan Unnithan became the officiating Dewan on 21 August 1947. Travancore was granted responsible government on 4 September 1947 through a Royal Proclamation. A reform committee was constituted on 17 September consisting of 15 members. On the basis of its recommendations a free election was held in Travancore in February 1948. In the first ministry formed under Pattom Thanu Pillai, the cabinet members represented not political parties but community organisations.

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