

Political Resistance to the First Communist Government in Kerala: The Liberation Struggle and Mannathu Padmanabhan's Leadership

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Abstract: *The Communist Party was responsible for implementing the Land Reform Act and the Education Act. There were mainly three motives behind these Acts. First, Communist ideology was committed to the nationalization of schools and aimed at bringing an overall transformation in the educational field in Kerala. Secondly, the Communists intended to weaken the social power of the Christian community, as the Catholic hierarchy in Rome was opposed to communism. The Communist government in Kerala may have expected that the implementation of the Education Bill would reduce the influence of the Christian community. Thirdly, the government sought to improve the condition of teachers by ensuring regular payment of salaries and providing job security. During this period, the Communist government appointed an education committee to examine the existing school syllabus and recommend reforms. The objective of the government was to revise textbooks from Classes I to XII, with particular emphasis on Malayalam textbooks. The Christian community argued that the new syllabus reflected communist ideology and strongly opposed the move. They claimed that the newly introduced textbooks were intended to influence the youth towards communist ideology. The bishops of Kerala also publicly opposed the textbooks. Meanwhile, Christians, Nairs, and Muslims united in opposition to the policies of the Communist government. The provisions of the Agrarian Relations Bill seriously affected the economic interests of the Nair community. Although the Nairs had supported the Communist Party during the elections, some Nair members within the party opposed the Bill, which resulted in a serious split within the Communist Party. Under these circumstances, the Communist government decided to adopt a cautious approach towards the Agrarian Relations Bill. M. N. Govindan Nair, a member of the Legislative Assembly, announced that the Assembly would not immediately consider the Bill. However, the Bill was finally passed in June 1959. Following its passage, Mannathu Padmanabhan and other Nair leaders, along with Syrian Christians, strongly opposed the measure. The Christians also intensified their struggle against the Communist government, as they felt adversely affected by the Education Bill.*

Keywords: NSS, SNDP Yogam, Mannath Padmanabhan, Movement, Communist Government, Struggle

Leadership of Mannath Padmanabhan

All the major social groups of Kerala society, including the Nairs, Muslims, and Ezhavas, opposed the implementation of the Education Bill. Initially, the Nair Service Society (NSS) and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) accepted certain provisions of the Bill. However, the Nairs later joined the agitation when 50 percent of government job reservations were allotted to backward communities. They realized that any weakening of Christian influence would primarily benefit backward communities. Consequently, the NSS later aligned with Christian organizations in opposing the Education Bill¹.

On 8 March 1959, a meeting was held at Changanacherry under the leadership of Mannath Padmanabhan, the founder of the NSS. More than 200 prominent leaders of the Nair community attended the meeting. It was decided to initiate an agitation against the Communist government. In his presidential address, Mannath Padmanabhan declared that the time had come to end Communist rule in Kerala. On 1 May 1959, a joint meeting of the Nair and Christian communities was held at Changanacherry. This meeting constituted the "Liberation Council," popularly known as the *Vimochana Samara Samithi*, under the leadership of Mannath Padmanabhan. The Syrian Catholic and Latin Catholic communities, the NSS, and later the Congress joined the struggle against the government². The primary objective of the Liberation Struggle was to remove the Communist government from power. With the support of private school

managers, the movement soon transformed into a mass agitation³.

In March 1959, a conference was held at Ernakulam under the leadership of a Bishop, which formulated a programme of action against the Communist ministry. Subsequently, an Action Council was formed under the leadership of Mannath Padmanabhan, Fr. Mannanal, and V.O. Abraham. Christian community leaders strongly protested against the Bill, fearing that their younger generation might be ideologically influenced by Communist doctrines. On 18 March 1959, the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Conference met at Ernakulam and passed a resolution calling upon Catholics to take necessary action against the Communist government. A circular was issued encouraging both Syrian and Latin Catholic communities to participate actively in the agitation⁴.

On 30 May 1959, the NSS held another meeting at Changanacherry under Mannath Padmanabhan. In this meeting, he warned that the Agrarian Relations Bill would reduce Nairs to poverty in the future. Nearly three lakh people participated⁵. On 29 May, the Chambakulam Samara Samithi was formed to oppose the policies of the Communist government. On 1 June 1959, Congress General Secretary T. Henry Austin declared that the Congress had taken leadership of the direct action initiated earlier by the PSP and the Muslim League.

On 2 June 1959, the PSP, Muslim League, and Congress convened an all-party conference and decided to launch a

non-cooperation movement against the government. On the same day, KPCC President R. Sankar announced that the Congress would begin its struggle even before the planned action of Mannath Padmanabhan. A joint meeting of the Congress and Muslim League held at Ernakulam under R. Sankar, C.M. Stephen, and Panampilly Govinda Menon decided to begin agitation on 12 June 1959. Mannath Padmanabhan separately announced that the NSS would launch direct struggle from 15 June 1959⁶. On 3 June 1959, the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Sabha met at Kottayam M.C. Seminary English High School and resolved to join the Liberation Struggle. The meeting also decided to observe 10 June 1959 as Education Day. On 2 June 1959, *The Hindu* reported allegations that the Communist government was creating a privileged class composed exclusively of Communist Party members through nepotism and favouritism⁷.

On 5 June 1959, the Congress held a meeting at Quilon and decided to observe a complete hartal on 12 June. The All India Socialist Party also resolved to begin direct agitation. On the same day, the Vimochana Samara Samithi decided to observe 12 June as “Vimochana Dinam” (Liberation Day) and appealed to democratic forces to participate in the struggle. SNDP leaders meeting at Kannur under Director P.V. Mukundan also decided to join the agitation⁸.

Meanwhile, the Communist government prepared to suppress the agitation. On 9 June 1959, the Kerala government requested the Union Government to send military forces to control the situation. On 11 June 1959, the Vimochana Samara Samithi announced that the Liberation Struggle would commence statewide on 13 June with a complete hartal. Around this time, *The Indian Express*, through its editorial, criticized the education policy of the government and compared it with Communist educational policies in the People’s Republic of China⁹.

The Liberation Struggle began on 13 June 1959 with widespread picketing and demonstrations across Kerala. Violence erupted on 14 June at Thrissur and Angamaly when demonstrators attacked police stations demanding the release of arrested volunteers. Police action resulted in lathi charges and firing at Angamaly, killing seven demonstrators and injuring hundreds, including policemen. On the same day, police firing at Pulluvila in Thiruvananthapuram district resulted in five deaths¹⁰. These incidents intensified the agitation. On 18 June 1959, Congress leader Panampilly Govinda Menon wrote an open letter comparing the Angamaly incident to the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. By 23 June, nearly 80 percent of schools in Quilon and Thrissur remained closed, and students actively participated in protests. Demonstrators picketed government offices and buses, and more than 1,200 people were arrested. At Kunnamkulam, police lathi-charged striking students, causing several injuries¹¹.

On 24 June 1959, the KPCC meeting at Kottayam resolved to request the Prime Minister to dismiss the Communist ministry. About 1,500 people were arrested across several districts. On 25 June, lathi charges occurred at Kozhikode, where over 1,200 demonstrators were arrested. Students of

Malabar Christian College and Guruvayurappan College organized extensive picketing across Kozhikode district¹².

On 27 June 1959, Mannath Padmanabhan declared in a press conference at Thiruvananthapuram that the objective of the movement was to remove the Communist government. Around 1,800 people were arrested across the state that day. On 28 June, the RSP decided to intensify agitation, and on 29 June statewide strikes led to violence in Talassery, prompting the imposition of Section 144. Subsequent meetings, protests, arrests, and police actions continued throughout July 1959. Women’s participation became significant, especially during the statewide women’s strike on 4 July, when thousands were arrested. Torchlight processions, including a massive march led by Mannath Padmanabhan to the Raj Bhavan on 15 July, urged the Governor to recommend central intervention¹³.

By late July, law and order in the state had deteriorated considerably. Following the Governor’s report stating that constitutional machinery had broken down, the President of India, acting under Article 356 and on the advice of the Union Government, dismissed the Communist ministry on 31 July 1959. Subsequently, P. V. Rao was appointed as Advisor to administer the state¹⁴.

Liberation Struggle: An Overview

All major and minor political parties in Kerala actively participated in the Liberation Struggle. The movement initially began as a community-based agitation against the Education Bill of 1957. Subsequently, major communities such as the Nairs, Ezhavas, and Muslims joined the struggle. The entry of the Congress Party in May 1959 imparted a distinctly political character to the movement and created a sharp division between the ruling party and the opposition forces. The Nair and Christian communities emerged as the principal sponsors of the Liberation Struggle. During the 1950s, both communities were economically and educationally advanced in Kerala society. A significant proportion of leaders within the Congress Party belonged to the Nair and Christian communities, and they urged the party leadership to support their agitation against the Communist government¹⁵.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who served as the President of the Congress Party, extended her full support to the Liberation Struggle. In a press statement, she described the movement as a just, logical, and mass-based constitutional agitation. She supported the private school managements and strengthened their resistance against the Communist government. With her backing, the Congress Party began to participate actively in the struggle, which soon transformed into a mass movement opposing the Communist ministry¹⁶.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, also observed that the Liberation Struggle represented a mass upsurge against the Communist government in Kerala. On 15 August 1958, Nehru characterized the Communist approach in Kerala as “wholly unscientific, unreasonable, and uncivilized.” J. B. Kripalani described the Communist government in Kerala as a “totalitarian island in a sea of democratic India.” An editorial published in the *Malayala Manorama* daily on 12 September 1959 noted that the Liberation Struggle was one of the rare mass movements that united all anti-communist

parties and organizations. The editorial further observed that it was a mass-based movement and that such unity was rarely witnessed elsewhere in the country¹⁷.

The Liberation Struggle is often considered a significant episode in the history of Indian democracy. One of its major achievements was the political defeat of communism through democratic means. However, it is also argued that the principal communities behind the movement, particularly the Syrian Christians and the Nairs, were motivated largely by the protection of their own social and institutional interests, rather than solely by concerns for the growth and consolidation of India's young democracy¹⁸.

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