

**In Search of a New Communism:  
Caste and Class in Kerala, 1943-1969**

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## Introduction

The Indian state of Kerala is often heralded as a model of progress, opportunity, and equality not only for the subcontinent but the world over. It boasts India's highest rates of literacy, gender equality, and healthcare access, outscoring more industrialized states and nations across developmental indices.<sup>1</sup> Such achievements are primarily attributed to the expansive welfare system created and maintained by the communist central government, a leftist outlier in a country otherwise dominated by mainstream liberal and conservative parties.

Following India's 1956 Nation States Reorganisation Act, the Princely States of Travancore-Cochin and Malabar, along with a number of surrounding municipalities, merged on the basis of linguistic commonality to create what is now known as Kerala. Departing from other newly-created states which favored the Congress Party of M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, radicals from the Communist Party of India (CPI) led by Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad, commonly referred to as EMS, successfully formed the state's first cabinet and made history as the world's second democratically elected communist government.<sup>2</sup>

Under EMS and subsequent communist administrations, the government of Kerala embarked on a series of radical reforms, advancing programs that claimed to begin eradicating class inequality: this included land redistribution, expansion of public education, the creation of large transportation networks, among others. Given its unprecedented and seemingly unqualified

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<sup>1</sup> Kallingal, Fathim Rashna, and Mohammed Firoz C. "Developing a Methodological Framework for Capturing Regional Disparities in Social Development." *Regional Science Policy & Practice* 14, no. 5 (2022): 1085–1112.

<sup>2</sup> Within this time period, there was an important split in the communist party on issues of political strategy and ideology, primarily but not exclusively related to issues of cooperation with the INC and diverging support along the Sino-Soviet split. From 1964 onward, EMS helmed the leftist wing of the party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), in Kerala and was a major ideological figure in its national apparatus as well. In attempting some level of precision, I will generally refer to the CPI when dealing with material before 1964 and the CPI(M) thereafter, additionally referring "communists" if I am speaking to members of both wings. This thesis will not deal on the split of these parties; for a contemporary account see Wood (1965), for a more recent telling of the events see Chakrabarty (2014).

success, these reforms were and remain a popular subject of study for academics across the spectrum of humanities and social sciences. Scholars were eager to find just which idiosyncrasy created Kerala's unique political climate: for some it was matriliney, others the state's mosaic colonial history; a few described a benevolence and altruism unique to EMS.<sup>3,4</sup> While no consensus formed as to which one factor led to communism's rise and success, an interdisciplinary literature on the "Kerala Model" of development quickly emerged, endowing the state with an exemplar status that remains to this day.

Work by researchers like Robin Jeffrey, Patrick Heller, and even such public figures as Amartya Sen were instrumental in this process. Though not without criticism, these thinkers upheld Kerala as a shining example of justice via redistribution. Particularly relevant are analyses by Rene Veron and Govindan Parayil, both of whom situated Kerala within the context of sustainable development, a concept in vogue at the turn of the millennium. Each made the case, to very receptive audiences in the international development community, that social organization in Kerala had been radically altered for the better, and that by engaging in similar styles of reform as delivered by EMS, other developing states with highly stratified societies may see similar levels of social equity.<sup>5</sup> The Kerala Model, in Parayil's words, could be summarized

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<sup>3</sup> Gulati, I. S., and TM Thomas Isaac. "EMS Namboodiripad: Revolutionary Intellectual." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1998): 689-692; Carson, Penelope. "Christianity, Colonialism, and Hinduism in Kerala: integration, adaptation, or confrontation?." *Christians and missionaries in India* (2003): 127-154; Jeffrey, Robin. *Politics, women and well-being: How Kerala became a 'model'*. Springer, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> In what is likely the most widely read consumed of writing on communism in Kerala, Arundhati Roy explains in *God of Small Things* that there exists a flower in Kerala known as the "Communist Pacha." Otherwise referred to as "Jack in the Bush," "Rouge Weed," among a number of other names, this plant is analogized to communism in that it grows and flourishes uniquely in Kozhikode, Kottayam, and various rainforest areas of Kerala.

<sup>5</sup> Parayil, Govindan. "The 'Kerala Model' of Development: Development and Sustainability in the Third World." *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 5 (December 1, 1996): 941-58; Véron, René. "The 'New' Kerala Model: Lessons for Sustainable Development." *World Development* 29, no. 4 (April 1, 2001): 601-17.

as “high human development but low economic growth,” a template ideal for decolonized countries struggling to industrialize under similar conditions.<sup>6</sup>

With its rising status did come those critical of the Kerala Model, however. In fact, cracks in the foundation of Keralite exceptionalism began to form as early as 1976, with the economist P. Sivanandan remarking that reforms had failed to uplift those at the bottom of social strata, particularly Indians from oppressed-caste backgrounds (henceforth Dalits).<sup>7</sup> He, and a minority of social scientists who followed, argued that there were systemic issues that prevented Dalits from accessing social and economic mobility. Prejudice among bureaucrats and a reliance on English made rural outreach difficult, and many of the jobs created by the central government corresponded to occupations associated with non-Dalit subcastes. As I will explore in the following chapters, the general exclusion of Dalit perspectives in the creation of public policy resulted in reforms that did not cater to or work around conditions specific to Dalit Keralites.<sup>8</sup>

Sivanandan’s account presented a departure from contemporaneous portrayal of caste inclusion by the CPI(M), which nominally positioned itself in favor of economic liberation for Dalits, fellow laborers and tillers struggling against landowners and the forces of capitalism. Anthropologists depicted EMS and companions as allies of people from oppressed-caste backgrounds, as the “only ones sitting and eating with [Dalits],” the only ones who treated all people as humans.<sup>9</sup> Some even argued that communists felt they could only achieve economic

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<sup>6</sup> Kannan, Kappadath Parameswara. “Political economy of labour and development in Kerala.” *Economic and Political Weekly* (1998): L61-L70.

<sup>7</sup> Sivanandan, P. “Caste, Class and Economic Opportunity in Kerala: An Empirical Analysis.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 14, no. 7/8 (1979): 475–80.

<sup>8</sup> Werff, Peter van der. *Modern Poverty: The Culture of Distribution and Structural Unemployment in the Foothills of Kerala*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Gough, Kathleen. “Kinship and Marriage in Southwest India.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 1973): 104–34.

prosperity with Dalit equality.<sup>10</sup> Reading these accounts in conversation with Sivanandan and others creates a tension that remains between the narrative of communists fighting for the wellbeing of all workers and the empirically proven abandonment of Dalits in the development of Kerala.

This thesis attempts to resolve this contradiction, and is primarily concerned with these intersections of caste and class as they were conceived, conflated, and utilized by communist politicians in Kerala between the 1943-1969. These years are bookended on one side by the first major publication of EMS and the other by his eventual resignation as Chief Minister, marking the transition into an important but distinctly separate period of communism in Kerala. I assert that in these years of EMS's early success, the communist party favored a worldview that privileged class as a more fundamental and preexisting condition to caste, hidden under impressive but ultimately nominal attempts at bringing about social equality. These ideological blind spots led to a political machinery dominated by and subservient to caste interests, resulting in a regime of public policy that dealt with caste as an outgrowth of class, a secondary consequence of the more ingrained and far-reaching force of economic exploitation. Identifying these ideological shortcomings of EMS and his communist allies not only explain policy failures, but lays the groundwork for a model of society that places caste and class as simultaneously and uniquely harmful evils.

Recent historians have begun confronting consensus historiography and critically examining Indian communist parties from the perspective of caste justice. Dilip Menon and Aditya Nigam are notable in this effort, applying critiques of modernism to caste in Kerala. Via analysis of literature and political theory respectively, they and others argue that fixation on the

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<sup>10</sup> Heller, Patrick. *The Labor of Development: Workers and the Transformation of Capitalism in Kerala, India*. Cornell University Press, 1999.



pursuit of progress, development, and secularity were inherently entrenched with a sense of elitism over the religious and common.<sup>11</sup> As prosaically phrased by Menon, having “eaten the forbidden fruit of western knowledge, an uncompromising retreat to tradition [did] not seem possible.”<sup>12</sup> Those who did not, or were not provided the opportunity to, adapt their lifestyle to a rapidly changing Kerala were left in the wake of an endless pursuit for development, deprived not only of a chance to escape destitution, but the ability to participate in society and culture.

Most relevant to this thesis is the work of Jayakumari Devika, who expands upon this critique of the Kerala Model by centering Dalit narratives in a historiography severely lacking in socially heterodox perspectives. She begins to resolve the contradictions of EMS specifically, arguing that his conduct and ideology were tantamount to “secularized casteism,” or an implicit form of discrimination that prioritized and favored the cultural practices of those who came from privileged caste backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> In practice, this resulted in the propagation of language, music, art, and lifestyles tailored around the lives of privileged caste Keralites and prevented Dalits from fully integrating, or even engaging in any sort of basic way, with state programs. While perhaps not as overt as the more draconian restrictions and segregative practices imposed upon Dalits in years prior, Devika argues that a fundamentally elitist vision of Dalit “uplift” inspired a communist conception of caste that enabled the casteism of today. I take this argument one step farther, that these biases took form in dramatic exclusions of Dalits from the political process as well as crucial oversights in the public policy that earned communists their laurels.

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<sup>11</sup> Nigam, Aditya. "Secularism, modernity, nation: Epistemology of the Dalit critique." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2000): 4256-4268.

<sup>12</sup> Menon, Dilip M. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900-1948*. 1. Indian ed. Cambridge South Asian Studies 55. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Devika, J. “Egalitarian Developmentalism, Communist Mobilization, and the Question of Caste in Kerala State, India.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 3 (August 2010): 799–820.

By synthesizing the work of scholars like Devika, Menon, and Sivanandan in combination with my own primary research, this thesis will critically reevaluate mainstream communism in Kerala. On both theoretical and material grounds I will identify foundational issues in the analytics of leftist thought, revealing a continuous pattern of class reductionism and caste oversight endemic to the CPI and CPI(M). I argue that these leaders failed to engage with caste on its own merits, instead reconfiguring, reinterpreting, and repackaging its issues as consequences of economic exploitation. In searching for a new communism, leftists in Kerala certainly made gestures toward social reform as part of their policy regimes, but ultimately failed to discard their orthodox Marxist impulses and fully incorporate caste into their theories of change.

Chapter 1 will analyze the writings and speeches of EMS, examining how his views of cultural unity and modernity were inherently dismissive to the practices of people from marginalized caste backgrounds. Devika has launched similar investigations into EMS's treatises, articles, and books, but by close-reading his language as found in dialogue, communications, and correspondence, I will shed additional light on how his views were disseminated to other government officials as well as the general public.<sup>14</sup> I will argue that his desire to "uplift" Dalits was inherently elitist and that his conceptions of development and progress necessarily resulted in an erasure of "inferior" culture in the pursuit of a new way of life centered around the practices preferred by his own caste group. EMS's stature and influence on communism in Kerala makes this imperative for understanding state ideology, both past and present.

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<sup>14</sup> Devika, J. "Egalitarian Developmentalism, Communist Mobilization, and the Question of Caste in Kerala State, India." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 3 (August 2010): 799–820;

Chapter 2 will extend this critique beyond EMS, providing novel insight into a number of key individuals who made up communist leadership and shared similar views toward Dalits. In doing so I will also continue the argumentative momentum of the previous chapter, demonstrating the influence that EMS had on his colleagues and how such influence tangibly altered the development of legislation. Using a combination of legislative speeches and communist party publications, I will reveal a bidirectional relationship between who rose to power in these parties and the ideology that was disseminated from them. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of legislative proposals created by the communist party and reveals tangible consequences of the incomplete conceptions of caste and class as manifested in policy.

Having demonstrated significant caste bias not only in EMS but the political infrastructure surrounding him, Chapter 3 will continue examining the material reflections of such views, beginning with an analysis of the electoral systems that enabled an echo chamber of Brahmin and Nair views of caste. By analyzing the demographic composition of communist and Congress candidates I provide novel evidence for systemic discrimination of Dalits not only by the CPI and CPI(M) but political parties across the spectrum of Kerala politics. In analyzing these shortcomings together with the policy and rhetoric of chapters 1 and 2, I bridge the gap between communist's theoretical underestimation of caste's valence with the material suffering of oppressed-caste Keralites.

Few issues are more existential to Indian identity as caste; understanding its modern underpinnings and identifying its ideological reverberations are thus of the utmost importance. The task of doing so, however, is uniquely difficult: the undoubtedly beneficial material gains and welfare developments of the state create a veneer of equality that obscures the suffering, segregation, and discrimination faced by Keralite Dalits. By countering and qualifying narratives

of modernity and progress, this paper hopes to shed light on the structural and foundational social change that must occur to create a community that truly accepts all.

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It is not the project of this thesis to describe the entire history of caste, leftism, or state formation in Kerala; many have begun this task in earnest and are doing impressive work to consolidate narratives into a cohesive and interwoven story.<sup>15</sup> It remains important, however, to situate this analysis within the historical context of caste and class, both as general concepts in India but specifically within the state of Kerala. The following section will attempt to define some of these terms in a way that remains entirely provisional and preliminary, for the remainder of this thesis will continue to explore how caste and class evolved in Kerala in the mid-20th Century.

## **Defining Caste**

While there have been various systems of social arrangement in the Indian subcontinent dating as far back as the Indus Valley Civilization, there is a rough consensus that caste as it is currently understood was formed during the transition from the Mughal Empire to British colonial rule in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Unfamiliar and overwhelmed by the foreign population of India, the British government's need to divide and conquer created the impetus for social stratification. Caste provided a convenient but crucially blunt tool for the new rulers, who built their administrative state by distributing employment and rights along lines of caste hierarchy, transferring material privilege in the process. British colonizers by no means created

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<sup>15</sup> Lindberg, Anna. *Experience and identity: A historical account of class, caste, and gender among the cashew workers of Kerala, 1930–2000*. Lund University, 2001; Rammohan, K. T. "Caste, Public Action, and the Kerala Model." *Development, democracy and the state: Critiquing the Kerala model of development* 28 (2010): 25; Deshpande, Ashwini. "Does caste still define disparity? A look at inequality in Kerala, India." *American Economic Review* 90, no. 2 (2000): 322-325.

caste discrimination, but rather codified caste as a legally legitimate identifier that ranked Indians in terms of purity, fitness, and worth.<sup>16</sup> It is this conception of caste as identifying one's position in the imposed taxonomy of Indian society that is most relevant to this paper.

Caste as practiced in India is a fundamentally Hindu concept, deriving from ancient religious texts that outline a system of *varna* or "order." The *varna* contains four classes, priestly Brahmins, warrior Kshatryias, merchant Vaishyas, and laboring Shudras. Each of these classes contain a number of subgroups known as *jati*, which themselves have complex systems of social organization that are the subject of extensive study. Traditionally, *jatis* were thought of as endogamous, segregated communities that developed occupational specialization, producing generations of tradespeople that socialized mainly with one another.<sup>17</sup> Recent literature has contested this narrative of social immobility and separation of communities, though at a very basic level it remains agreed upon that there was a shared culture and heritage of those of the same *jati*.<sup>18</sup>

Though the term "caste" has been used variably in scholarship to refer to *varna*, *jati*, or some combination of the two, I will henceforth use the term caste in reference specifically to *jati*. It must be underscored, however, that *jati* is a highly fluid concept in the Indian imagination, with dynamic associations, identities, and theoretical constructions that vary dramatically by region. So while definitionally we may say that a person's caste is likely reflective of some *jati* association, this on its own does not communicate perceived meaning, interpretation, or lived experience of said caste. Not only does someone with the last name Srivastava, for example, not

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<sup>16</sup> DeNicola, Alicia Ory. "Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India." *Anthropological Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2003): 177-180.

<sup>17</sup> Sharma, K. N. "Varna and Jati In Indian Traditional Perspective." *Sociological Bulletin* 39, no. 1-2 (1990): 15-31.

<sup>18</sup> Beteille, Andre. "Varna and jati." *Sociological Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (1996): 15-27.

necessarily descend from a lineage of military scribes as one may assume, but the experience of a Srivastava in Uttar Pradesh may be markedly different than a Srivastava in Gujarat.<sup>19</sup>

Few examples make this case as effectively as the state of Kerala, where even the system of *varna* as seen in nearly every other area of India was altered. Rather than the typical four-fold system mentioned above, the primary distinctions in Kerala were that of the Brahmins, Nair, and Ezhavas. Within and between each of these groups lay uniquely complicated, rigid, and enumerative set of subcaste delineations that outnumbered all other Indian regions, totaling well over 500 by the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>20, 21</sup>

Though a highly imperfect analogue, these groups can be thought of as Kerala's *varna*, composed of multiple encompassed *jatis*. Of particular note were the Namboodiris, a small caste of particularly privileged Brahmins who commanded immense social capital and owned a majority of land in the state. Below them were Nairs who at one point filled a role similar to Kshatriya warriors, but ascended to some degree of land ownership and functional aristocracy through intermarriage with Namboodiris. Typically some type of Vaishya or Shudra should fall under Nairs, but instead stood Ezhavas, who performed menial labor tasks and those duties which were considered too degrading or “polluting” for the Nairs and Brahmins.<sup>22</sup>

Ezhavas occupied a unique social position in that they were widely recognized as an explicit part of Keralite caste hierarchy, yet they also remained members of “Untouchable” castes.<sup>23</sup> Dalits, or those who were deemed “Untouchable,” are a group of people excluded from

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<sup>19</sup> Deshpande, Manali S. "History of the Indian caste system and its impact on India today." (2010).

<sup>20</sup> Nossiter, Thomas Johnson. *Communism in Kerala: A study in political adaptation*. Univ of California Press, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> Many reformers, politicians, and philosophers have commented on the uniquely convoluted and rigid caste system in Kerala. Perhaps most famous is the polymath Swami Vivekananda's conclusion that the state was a “madhouse,” or “lunatic asylum” of castes, depending on the translation of choice. See Vivekananda (1907) for his full thoughts on the matter.

<sup>22</sup> Hardgrave Jr, Robert L. "Caste in Kerala." *The Economic Weekly* 16, no. 47: 1965.

<sup>23</sup> Whether Ezhavas should be considered Dalits or part of the Chaturvana has changed over the course of Kerala's history. I will discuss this at greater length in Chapter 2.

the four-fold hierarchy, conceived as either forming a fifth *varna*, or existing outside the caste system entirely. The original name Untouchable is a literal term, with overt and severe discrimination that prevented physical contact at the risk of those of privileged caste backgrounds “polluting” themselves. This was taken to an even greater extreme in Kerala, where Ezhavas were not only prevented from touching Nairs or Namboodiris, but could not even physically approach members of either caste. Mere proximity was enough to pollute those of “superior” castes.<sup>24</sup>

Yet while subject to inhuman discrimination, Ezhavas still possessed some level of conceptual visibility that other Dalits in other parts of India did not have. Elsewhere, Dalits were not only marked as Untouchable, but were often degraded to the point of complete erasure in society. In some sense this was spatially enforced through the rules regarding social distance, but records of interaction with Ezhavas can be found in court proceedings, journals, and other documents.<sup>25</sup> There are at least two related explanations for this, convincingly and thoroughly argued by Sanal Mohan. The first is that certain Ezhava families, over the course of multiple decades, were able to accumulate capital as result of their agricultural labor, thus providing some level of nonzero but marginal leverage. The second is that there were in fact an entire bevy of Dalit castes who were provided even fewer opportunities than the Ezhavas, namely the Pulayas, Parayas, and Kuravas.<sup>26</sup> Within the larger category of Dalits in Kerala, these castes and others had even less access to fruitful labor, instead being relegated solely to duties like cleaning latrines and sewers by hand. They were subject to even more social distancing and

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<sup>24</sup> Thorat, Amit, and Omkar Joshi. "The continuing practice of untouchability in India." *Economic & Political Weekly* 55, no. 2 (2020): 37.

<sup>25</sup> Reghu, J. "'Community as de-imagining nation: Relocating the Ezhava movement in Kerala.'" In *Development, Democracy and the State*, pp. 50-63. Routledge, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Mohan, P. Sanal. "Religion, social space and identity: The Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the making of cultural boundaries in twentieth century Kerala." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 35-63.

untouchability practices, making the prospect of economic mobility impossible by virtue of not being able to even occupy the same room as members of other castes.<sup>27</sup> This latter point is particularly important both in understanding caste as distinct from class and also in explaining models of political organization in Kerala and India more generally. Chapters 1 and 2 will explore the complicated relationship and separation of these two concepts from one another.

### 19th Century Conceptions of Caste

One of the most prominent figures in the Indian anti-caste movement hailed from the Ezhava caste, mobilizing large swathes of individuals within and outside Kerala against discrimination. Born in 1856, Narayana Guru came from a family of power within the Ezhava community, raised by ayurvedic physicians in a village near the capital of Thiruvananthapuram. Unlike others of similar caste background, he was educated in Sanskrit and religious texts from an early age, affording him deep knowledge not only of Hinduism, but Buddhism and Christianity as well. Armed with such expertise, he traveled the areas now known as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, picking up spiritual disciples of Nair and Brahmin lineage who began extolling his virtue not only as a religious figure, but as an activist. In building a wide support base, Guru was able to push for significant changes in the lives of Dalits, advocating their right to enter temples, to cleanliness, and to access occupational training, among other basic abilities.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> VL Shastri provides the example of Nayadis to demonstrate how truly horrible and uniquely segregated Dalits were in Kerala. Nayadis were considered the “lowest” of all castes and accordingly had to maintain the farthest distance from Nambudiris. If these boundaries were transgressed (forget physical contact), the Brahmin would have to 1) perform a ritual bath in holy water, 2) dispose of the clothes they were wearing at the time, and 3) eat the five holy products of the cow: butter, milk, curd, urine, and feces. Though other castes did not have the same social distancing rules regarding their relation to Nayadis, they were still disallowed from touching anything that had made physical contact with a member of the group, as if there was a transference of pollution conducted through these objects.

<sup>28</sup> Archana, S. "The social reform movements in Kerala: A role of Narayana Guru in the development of Ezhava community." *ZENITH International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 5, no. 10 (2015): 104-113.



This last aim of caste liberation is most important for the context of this paper. We see that even in these earlier movements against discrimination that aspects of labor and caste identity are tied to one another — this much should not be surprising given the restrictions on employment inherent to the caste system as described above. While never invoking rhetoric of class or Western leftist philosophy, even the early 20th Century leaders of the anticaste movement were advocating material gain as a way to escape the shackles of oppression, such as when Guru urged Dalits to strive for “acquisition of both knowledge and wealth” as a means of social mobility.<sup>29</sup>

Another notable leader of the anticaste movement in Kerala was Ayyankali, who also operated in a space cohabitated by caste and class. Active in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries like Guru, Ayyankali was a Puliya activist who took to more direct forms of agitation when protesting discrimination. While Narayana Guru staged large marches, pilgrimages, and group prayers, Ayyankali gathered supporters to occupy roads, enter public spaces exclusively designated for Nairs and Brahmins, and wear clothes that signified privileged caste upbringing. He too demanded the right to work in industrialized sectors, to gain education, and to own land. Like Guru, Ayyankali recognized the importance of material reality in the liberation of Dalits and advocated for equal access to opportunity, at the bare minimum.<sup>30</sup> Ayyankali was more explicit and militant about his advocacy for caste abolition, however, using violent protest as leverage to force more radical and rapid change, such as the ability for Dalits to walk alongside Nairs and Namboodiris.

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<sup>29</sup> Bhaskaran, T., comp. 2000. *Sreenarayanaguru Vaighari [Sreenarayana's Wisdom]*. Kunnathunadu Perumbavoor: SNDP Union; Cybil, K. V. "Narayana Guru and formation of political society in Kerala: A contemporary critique." In *The Routledge Handbook of the Other Backward Classes in India*, pp. 100-111. Routledge India, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Nisar, M., and Meena Kandasamy. *Ayyankali: A Dalit leader of organic protest*. Other Books, 2007.

Looking at two of the dominant anticaste activists that predated the CPI(M), we can begin to create some understanding of caste as it was perceived by those advocating its abolition. Moreover, while there was not yet a formalized definition of class introduced into the intellectual milieu of Kerala, we begin to see intersections of these constructions and how, at one point, their fundamental principles were viewed in relation to one another. First however, we must investigate the analogous and parallel rise of communist ideology in Kerala.

### **Early Conceptions of Class and Communism**

While communism as a formal ideology in Kerala has origins as recently as the 1930s, concepts of collective ownership and redistribution can be traced back farther to the princely rulers of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar, who invested unprecedented and unusual amounts of money into public goods and institutions, foreshadowing what would later become an expansive welfare state at the command of the CPI.<sup>31</sup> As Jeffrey summarizes in his sweeping and comprehensive analysis of Kerala in the 1930s, increasing hypergamy between Nairs and Namboodiris (and the resulting consolidation of land between these two castes), the uniquely high level of literacy in the state, and high presence of European missionaries in coastal areas of the state led to a uniquely successful penetration and dissemination of Marxism.<sup>32</sup>

Particularly important in the imagination of these early Marxists was the Soviet utopia, longed for, idealized, and revered by both workers and theoreticians across the region. In his analysis of communism's rise in Malabar, Dilip Menon quotes a famous folk poem from the 1940s:

I have heard of a land called Soviet,

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<sup>31</sup> Basu, Raj Sekhar. "Ruling Classes, Missionaries, Non-state Agencies and Health Issues in Travancore in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *History and Sociology of South Asia* 9, no. 1 (2015): 80-101.

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey, Robin. "Matriliny, marxism, and the birth of the communist party in Kerala, 1930–1940." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 38, no. 1 (1978): 77-98.

I would like to go there some day.  
Over there one does not suffer the pangs of hunger,  
Nor the sham of oppression day after day.  
That I wasn't born there, I rue most sorely  
In Soviet land pure and holy.<sup>33</sup>

The title of the above poem is “Naniyude Chintha,” or “Nani’s Thoughts,” with Nani meaning grandmother; while it is unclear who’s grandmother, if any, truly lamented that she was not born in the Soviet Union, Menon argues that the longing for a utopia of abundance associated with life abroad permeated the conscious of minds across the region. The task for intellectuals, then, was to translate this fervor and desire into a cogent communist movement that could mobilize the nascent masses.

With the emergence of prominent Indian communists Manabendra Nath Roy (known as M.N. Roy) and Virendranath Chattopadhyay (or simply Chatto), it seemed that a unique mode of revolution may come to the colony. Roy and Chatto engaged with the international communist movement through the comintern, directly taking inspiration from and contributing to the global movement of leftism that took off at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Lenin was an important role model to this end, having seemingly translated the successes of Marxism to the “backward” context of Eastern Europe and proving that empirical flexibility was a viable model of praxis.<sup>34</sup> The various social forces unique to India complicated what was already a nuanced and complex set of factors underlying Soviet success, however: a vortex of caste, anti-colonial, religious, and nationalist currents needed to be incorporated into Indian communism if it were to truly encompass the heterogeneous beliefs that composed contemporary ideology. Such was the task of

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<sup>33</sup> Menon, Dilip. "Caste, nationalism and communism in South India." *Cambridge: Cambridge UP* (1994).

<sup>34</sup> Stalin and Mao would both occupy similar roles in the imagination of later communists, who took great interest and expressed great solidarity with their comrades implementing Marxism in new national contexts. See Mohan (1970) for a description of Naxalite invocations of Mao and Stalin.

Indian leftists: to move beyond a direct grafting of previously-defined Marxism and forge a coherent vision that specifically addressed the challenges faced by South Asians.

Doing so necessarily discarded a purely class reductionist view parroted by the most orthodox Marxists. To explicitly claim that class was the root of all other problems would alienate the huge swathes of Indians ideologically and politically devoted to movements that believed otherwise. At the same time, acknowledging that there may in fact be other divisions in society that coexisted with or even superseded class division betrayed the fiery dogmatism undergirding communism. To say that caste or early notions of nationhood existed outside economic consequence would require a radical reconfiguration of basic Marxist thought, a restructuring of a social politics that assumes a bedrock of material exploitation. Sinha (2014) explains that early communists failed to fully move away from this worldview, crucially leaving class as the justification for social reform: to them, it was because Dalits were oppressed in their labor rights that their caste condition needed rectifying, and it was because Muslims were afforded fewer material protections by the government that their religious liberties needed codification.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, to early Indian communists it was only by emphasizing the class character of these oppressed masses that solidarity could be engendered and revolution could occur. Lenin proved that the “backward” Soviet masses could be mobilized by a vanguard of revolutionaries armed with the ideology of change. It was in this tradition that the CPI was steeped, and this system in which the primary cast of Keralite communist politicians cut their teeth. EMS and comrades came to the national communist party in the mid-1930s, starting as youth organizers and eventually making their way into positions of power and influence. By then, it seemed as if

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<sup>35</sup> Sinha, Subir. "Workers and working classes in contemporary India: a note on analytic frames and political formations." In *Beyond Marx*, pp. 145-171. Brill, 2014.

there was a more concerted and disaggregated focus on caste, with the party declaring in its party platform that the “reactionary caste system” must be abolished for there to be true material equality for all.<sup>36</sup> The following investigation of EMS and his comrades of the CPI will reveal that this supposition of caste as an evil preempting class was nominal, and that they fundamentally failed to move beyond the confines of class as a primary, if not exclusive, analytic for societal development. Rather than engaging identity claims to caste and religion or ideological claims of anti-colonialism or nationalism as unique and coexisting (but intermingled nonetheless), they ultimately regressed to the mean of class reductionism.

The picture is undoubtedly complicated, as a critical analysis of communism in Kerala requires parsing through the finer details of EMS’s unprecedented and impressive administration, diving into the theoretical constructs underlying policies that brought tangible improvements to Keralites across the board. Yet in doing so, there is the hope that one day there will be a truly inclusive communism that genuinely and comprehensively works for all.

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<sup>36</sup> Communist Party of India, Draft Platform of Action (1930)

## **Chapter 1: EMS, Caste, and Class**

Among the various traditions associated with Kerala, few are as widely known as its annual harvest festival, Onam. Each year, the state massively subsidizes cloth and food sales in preparation for a massive celebration. Businesses and schools close for three days, during which people of all backgrounds prepare feasts, wear their finest clothes and jewelry, and dance to classical Indian music in the company of family and friends. The story of Onam is perhaps Kerala's most enduring tale, kept alive by word of mouth, told over sweets and chai by grandparents to anyone who will listen. It can be summarized as follows:

It is said that there was once an emperor who ruled not only Kerala, but the whole world over. Mahabali was a magnanimous leader who generously provided for his people, creating a truly equal society where every person had access to whatever they needed. It was a time of luxury, happiness, and abundance. It was to such a good land that the god Vishnu descended upon the planet in the guise of a dwarf, appearing at Mahabali's doorstep desperately requesting help. Without second thought, Mahabali asked Vishnu what he desired. Feigning destitution and landlessness, the disguised god asked for a modest agricultural plot that could be measured by three steps of his tiny feet, to which the emperor happily complied. In a move of cunning and deception, Vishnu then reverted to his original form, a giant that covered the planet in just two bounds. With nowhere to place his third step, he put his foot on the head of the emperor, sending him to the netherworld.

Now understanding the dwarf to be a holy deity, Mahabali asked for a parting wish: to return to his homeland once a year and see his subjects that he cherished so deeply. Vishnu granted this request, and it was thus decided that the former subjects of Mahabali would

commemorate the yearly return of their old ruler with a celebration known as Onam, celebrating and remembering life as it once was.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of his staunch atheism, Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran (EMS) Namboodiripad was famously fond of this story. To him, the myth of Onam signified a time before the shackles of class, competition, and private property restrained the human spirit and prevented communal prosperity. He argued that the festival only acquired such a national and legendary character because it commemorates a societal shift from primitive communism to a world marred by division of labor, a world governed by capitalism.<sup>38</sup> EMS's understanding of this transition is instrumental to his formulation of caste and class, as his treatment of each is based in their respective origins and evolutions, topics that much of his writings evaluate.

This chapter attempts to recreate and critique EMS's views on caste by critically evaluating his seminal "Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," in addition to highly informative treatises like "The Peasant in National Economic Construction," "Towards an Alternate Policy Framework," and others. Doing so will reveal a fundamentally inadequate, if not even regressive, variation of class reductionism that construed caste as an outgrowth of class that should be dealt with as such. While communists in Kerala are far from monolithic, EMS's position as the undisputed thought leader of the 20th Century Malayali Left allows for insight into the foundational texts that informed the practice and praxis of the CPI(M) contemporarily.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>A fantastically cross-cultural interpretation of this story comes from Manoj Chitra Khata's comic book depiction of Mahabali, which I personally grew up reading. That, a phone call with my grandfather, and A. M. Kurup's 1977 "The Sociology of Onam," form the basis of my own retelling of the myth.

<sup>38</sup> Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad, *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. (Calcutta: National Book Agency Private Ltd, 1967), 14.

<sup>39</sup> Devika, Jayakumari. "'A people united in development': developmentalism in modern Malayali identity." (2007).

## Yesterday: On the Origins of Class and Caste

First and foremost a student of history, EMS devoted a vast majority of “Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow” to the “Yesterday” of the state. Beginning with an introductory “peep into ancient history,” he combatted various mainstream views of Kerala in antiquity, taking issue with the accounts of migration and indigeneity cited as foundational to most who study South India before the common era. The substance of these arguments is not immediately relevant for contemporary understandings of class and caste, but the methodological character of EMS’s investigation is illustrative of the lens through which he viewed history.

Perhaps most revealingly, he opened this section by citing Lewis Morgan’s *Ancient Society* and Fredrich Engels’s *Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*, texts that in part formed the basis of evolutionary anthropology and the practice of historical materialism.<sup>40</sup> It surely helps that these authors wrote extensively on South India’s uniquely developed matriliney, but more importantly, in referencing them as foundational, EMS made clear his preference for “scientific” interpretations of history. From the first pages of his writing, he demonstrated a desire to situate the social transformations of Kerala within a chronology that can, with some deviations to be sure, be applied across civilizations. In studying history within India and globally, he hoped to find laws that are as fundamental to social systems as gravity is to physics, to formulate a series of progressive stages that would plot the development of all burgeoning communist societies.<sup>41</sup>

EMS continued to critique the historiography of Kerala, arguing that the two main accounts of its founding, *Kerala Mahatmyam* (Greatness of Kerala) and *Kerala Pazhama* (Antiquity of Kerala), were ill-conceived and inappropriately interpreted, co opted by British and

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<sup>40</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 15-16.

<sup>41</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 3.



Indian bourgeoisie historians doubly impeded by their privilege, simultaneously blinded and motivated by their class interests.<sup>42</sup> Though he appreciated the metaphoric and cultural value of the *Mahatmyam* and *Pazhama*, to EMS their notably religious and literary character disqualified them as valid archives.<sup>43</sup> The fact that these texts were rendered historically valuable pointed to a marked lack of seriousness in the study of history, and only further proved that it must fall to the working class to (re)write history, as only it “can look objectively at facts ... and establish the laws of social development in history.”<sup>44</sup>

There are a number of instructive implications here. First, it is important to note that EMS regarded history as a tool that had previously been used to reproduce existing inequality, allowing those in power to maintain their position atop hierarchies created by class or colonial domination. Second are those very aspects of identity he highlights as relevant, that these historians were either colonialists, bourgeoisie, or both. Those who make up an indigenous “working class” were the only actors capable of more accurately understanding the past, creating an urgent need to define who exactly composes such a class. Third, the goal of this process of writing history must eventually lead to “laws of social development,” once again indicating EMS’s proclivity for identifying systems of universal laws and systems that can be applied across cultural contexts.

None of these framing devices are unique to EMS (and are almost impressively archetypical of a Marxist historian of the era), nor are they substantive in the retelling of Kerala’s

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<sup>42</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Though an imperfect analogy, one could equate the *Mahatmyam* and *Pazhama* to the New Testament, not in its religious importance but in its documentation of historical events. The archival role of these two texts was highly contested at the time of EMS’s writing, and though their content is not relevant to this thesis, his reaction is representative of the rationalist response to a historiography then highly influenced by religious scholars. For a more elaborate articulation of EMS’s views on religion in history, see his 1975 “Some Problems of Indian History.” For an evaluation of religiosity, EMS, and texts like the *Mahatmyam*, see S.P. Sreepriya’s 2016 “Brahminism and Marxism in the Writings of EMS Namboodiripad.”

<sup>44</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 17.

history, but through the identification of EMS's priorities and the observation of what he chooses to focus on, we can begin to reconstruct his worldview and contextualize his later writings on class and caste.

A telling example comes from the above-mentioned historians that EMS referenced and (rightly) criticized. While it is certainly true that they overwhelmingly came from upper class/bourgeoisie backgrounds, their privilege extended to caste as well: A. Sreedhara Menon, K. P. Padmanabha Menon, and Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai were all Nairs, while K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, R. Narayana Panickar, were Brahmins.<sup>45</sup> Such is a consistent blindspot in EMS's critique that is emblematic of his larger views paradigmatically: while he astutely identified issues of class, he either entirely failed to acknowledge, or at the very least underestimated, the presence of caste. This pattern continued as he moved to the thrust of his historical analysis, describing the origins and evolution of caste and class in Kerala.

EMS proposed that the areas of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar, which make up present-day Kerala, first existed in a Rousseauian state of nature characterized by communal ownership and peaceful cooperation, a land like that of Mahabali. While he derided the religious-historical claim that the institution of caste came from Vishnu's divine action, he did not himself pose another mechanism by which caste arrived in South India. Even in claiming this ambivalence, though, his bias is clear. EMS noted that "historical science has yet to explain the material conditions that led to the rise of Chaturvarna," taking for granted that there was a preexisting class component that led to the four-fold caste system as it existed at the time. He

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<sup>45</sup> More so than in most parts of India, Malayali last names are highly probable predictors of caste background. Menons, for example, are almost invariably of the Nair caste, and Sastris are almost invariably of the Brahmin caste. Panickar is somewhat ambiguous, though R. Balakrishnan Nair confirms his Nair heritage in the 1996 biography *നാരായണ പണിക്കർ* (*The Life of Narayana Panickar*).

certainly acknowledged and appreciated caste, but assumed that it was historically born from material differences.<sup>46,47</sup>

Moving beyond the murky origins of caste and class, EMS added unexpected nuance in discussing their interplay in early Indian society. He argued that each of the four major castes formed its own self-contained version of primitive communism, hierarchically privileged relative to one another, but free and equal within their segregated groups. This was not to last for long though, as EMS explained the parallel introduction of agrarian markets and development of cultivating technologies led to the creation of sub castes within the original four. With an increasingly specific division of labor and growing number of occupations needed to maintain an advancing society, complex caste-class interactions and structures followed. Within these micro groups, equality deteriorated and intra-group competition emerged. Stratified though they were, EMS claimed that the “differences between rich and poor ... [were] overshadowed by the sense of solidarity which caste or subcaste had toward all its members.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps a surprising claim given his writing thus far, it seems as if he argued that caste played a more major role than class in the lived experience of Indians.

In fact, this is quite consistent with the rest of EMS’s writings, particularly as demonstrated in the sections of text to follow. For it was at this point that he implicitly began outlining two separate forces that develop concurrently and perhaps even codependently: the covert processes of class and the overt mechanisms of caste.

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<sup>46</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Particularly following the discovery of archaeological evidence of caste in antiquity, EMS revises these arguments slightly, maintaining the same position that capital processes overtook the development of caste, but expressing more uncertainty regarding the origins of Chaturvarna in Kerala. See the 1981 “Once Again on Castes and Classes” and the 1990 *കേരള ചരിത്രം മാർക്സിസ്റ്റ് വീക്ഷണത്തിൽ* (*Kerala’s History in Marxist Perspective*).

<sup>48</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 28.

EMS's ensuing description of private property makes this clear. He wrote, "class division took the form of caste division: those who were in a position to accumulate the greatest amount of wealth came to be considered the highest caste; the next in point of the accumulation of wealth became the next highest caste, and so on."<sup>49</sup> These inequalities were then exaggerated as caste groups developed their own religious customs, and necessarily, their own temples. Temples in turn required land, which led to private property, inheritance, and intergenerational privilege concentrated in the hands of religiously important families, i.e. Namboodiri Brahmins.<sup>50,51</sup> Thus, per EMS, while Indians labeled and experienced these differences as caste, they were actually a consequence of wealth inequality and accumulation.

Again, there are a number of instructive implications here, two of which I will deal with in the remainder of this chapter. EMS had now firmly established that while caste may be a real entity as perceived and felt by Indians, it is in reality a manifestation of inequality that can perhaps be dealt with by addressing these material differences. But first, the task at hand seems to be that of instilling class consciousness, of showing people that what they are suffering from is not oppression of caste, but class.

### **Today: Class Consciousness and Caste Vanguardism**

EMS concludes the introduction to *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* by claiming that the "working class and its ideology are as yet so weakly developed here that they have not been able to apply historical materialism to the problems of history of Kerala." He hoped that his

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<sup>49</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 44.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>51</sup> More important than the veracity of this hypothesis is the demonstration of EMS's logic and presupposition of class before caste. For more recent evaluations of private property in Kerala see Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam (2007), Yadu and Vijayasuryan (2016), and Iyer (2019). The latter two provide a particularly relevant and impressive account of Dalit identity in the construction and deprivation of property rights.

work, as laid out in the ensuing pages of historical analysis, would begin “stimulating discussion and encourage [the working class] to take up the study of real scientific history.”<sup>52</sup>

It is in these lines that we can find EMS’s understanding of his own role in revolution. Not only did he identify himself as outside the working class (“*they* have not been able to apply historical materialism...”), but he saw himself as beginning the process of historical revision and enabling class consciousness. His role was that of the vanguard, enlightening workers who do not know the nature and extent of their oppression, developing and disseminating ideology among those who yearn for change. This much should not be surprising: EMS repeatedly identified himself as a Marxist-Leninist and within this text itself remarks on three different occasions that if Lenin were to see the union organizing that occurring in Kerala, he would view it as favorably as his famous support for the 1900 class-based protests in North India.<sup>53</sup>

Devika has written extensively on EMS and the concept of vanguardism, valuably reexamining his stance through the lens of caste. Drawing on Dalit accounts of CPI(M) outreach and autobiographies of communists influenced by and in the company of Namboodiripad, she writes on EMS’s depiction of himself and his fellow activists as “self-sacrificing communists,” selfless leaders putting their lives on the line to help the less fortunate. His strategy was simple and effective: by minimizing sectarian differences and presenting all people of oppressed-caste backgrounds as suffering from the same system of exploitation, he was able to position himself as a true leader of the people, someone who understood the struggles of fellow laborers. The process of doing so necessarily required misrepresenting the efforts of competing organizers, particularly those who attempted to mobilize Dalits for more explicitly anti-caste efforts. A deliberate contrast was drawn between “self-seeking” Tiyya (Dalit) activists from and the self-

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<sup>52</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 49, 80.

sacrificing communists of the CPI(M), portraying the former as emphasizing caste differences to elevate their own position within an exclusive faction inaccessible to Brahmins like EMS.

Moreover, in playing down these differences in the lived experience and culture of people from different caste backgrounds, Devika argues that EMS was engaging in both erasure and impersonation, ignoring the customs that were unique to people of oppressed-caste backgrounds and falsely advertising shared suffering that he simply could not have experienced.<sup>54</sup>

Devika makes a compelling case for how political motivations informed poor organizing and ethically questionable representations, though I argue that the ideological underpinnings of these practices can be found in the writings of EMS before the elections of the 1960s and 70s, the time period she is primarily concerned with. Even in revisiting the material already discussed in the formation of caste and class in antiquity, we can see that EMS was positioning himself as a figure that was able to effectively cut through the chaff of caste and present the reality of oppression as originating from class. At least as a scholar, if not also as an agitator, he believed that he is the person that can show the masses how to put their sectarian differences behind them and realize their shared class experience.

Nowhere is this clearer than in his discussions of present and future, the latter most portions of *Kerala; Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. In speaking on the existence of caste organizations, EMS wrote they “consolidate the caste separatism of the people in general and of the peasantry in particular, so that the grip of these caste organizations on the peasantry has to be broken if they are to be organized as a class.”<sup>55</sup> To EMS, not only were caste organization and class mobilization mutually exclusive, but the latter is preferable to the former. It was thus his

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<sup>54</sup> Devika, Jaykumari. "Egalitarian developmentalism, communist mobilization, and the question of caste in Kerala State, India." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 3 (2010): 799-820.

<sup>55</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 114.

duty to correct the course of those who have been misled by caste solidarity, to provide a more objective view of society untarnished by self-seeking Dalits.

EMS's word choice when referring to groups of Keralites provide further evidence to this point. Devika explains how he used the term "Thozhilaali," which is closer to "worker," when describing laborers across castes, while "karshakan," which is closer to "peasant," was used to describe Dalits. EMS thus created something of a venn diagram between the two terms, with Dalits ("peasants") being a subset of laborers ("workers") — while there is something unique about the oppression that is faced by people of oppressed-caste backgrounds, then, the fundamental issue to be solved is still one of economic exploitation. The following chapter will continue this analysis in EMS's later writings and speeches, demonstrating an evolution toward nominal gestures of prioritizing caste while maintaining this fundamental principle of class reductionism.

The diminishment of caste experience and the lack of understanding of caste oppression also becomes clear in this line of strategy. In an attempt to either downplay the hardship wrought by caste discrimination or to convince his audience of the comparatively fundamental structuring power of capitalism, EMS went as far as to say that from the 20th Century onwards, the "real day to day life, the intense competition between individuals and groups to live better than others, made it impossible for people of higher castes to claim that they are superior to other castes."<sup>56</sup> Being as generous as possible, it seems the point EMS attempted here is that the necessity to labor and compete is so ingrained in the worker that even caste differences are subsumed by the power of markets. Per usual there is absolutely some truth to this, in that even Brahmins of the 1900s had to work for wages and some Dalits managed to overcome the societal barriers that

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<sup>56</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 124.

previously inhibited their success. Also per usual, such a picture of society either in Kerala or in India generally is grossly inadequate, papering over the social discrimination that operated alongside and often compounded class struggle, creating a system wherein Dalits earning low wages were double oppressed, Dalits of sexual and gender minorities even more so.

Reading these conclusions in particular, it is difficult not to be reminded of EMS's own view of history, that one's privilege in hierarchy can distort perception and prevent the "objective viewing of facts." In his critique of mainstream historiography, he isolated the class background of problematic historians as the root cause for their skewed vision of the world that at least coincidentally aligns with their material interests. Given EMS's status as a Namboodiri Brahmin and his fundamental misunderstanding of Dalit reality, it would only be logically consistent to conclude that his own failure to see the world in front of him owed in part to his caste upbringing. Perhaps it is because he had not experienced caste oppression that EMS was so easily able to reformulate discrimination as rooted primarily in class, or that he is able to advocate for the dismantling of groups that draw solidarity from these very experiences of shared suffering that he did not have personal exposure to.

EMS's 1967 treatise, *Kerala: Society and Politics*, presents the synthesis of the above views on caste and class, vanguardism, political organizing, and cultural identity. Prolific even in times of stress, EMS wrote this book when campaigning for the post of Chief Minister, attempting to reclaim the seat after nearly a decade of relegation to parliamentary opposition. One of the main developments of the interim period between his first and second term was the establishment of Malayalam as a statewide mode of instruction, leading to widespread debates on issues of literacy and culture, as exemplified in the following passage.

"It is also true that many of these national literary works were confined to upper-class (caste) circles. Nevertheless, these works of literature and art



forms have laid the basis for the creation of a style and technique that go beyond all castes and communities; they are truly national. Furthermore, men of culture, drawn, of course, from the upper classes but of all castes, began to appreciate and even adopt this style and technique in their own particular caste or religious circles. This flowering of literature and the arts was nothing but the expression of the development of that ‘community of economic life, economic cohesion’ which, as is known to Marxists, is one of the characteristics of a nation. The artists who developed these art forms and the audiences attracted by them have together created, through generations, a sum total of cultural sensitivity that has come to be part of the distinctive psychological make-up of the Malayali.”<sup>57</sup>

Again, there is certainly truth to the fact that literature as a practice necessarily requires literacy, and that those in oppressed-caste communities had far less exposure to books and writing.

However, to acknowledge this to be true and then to declare that these forms of art, inaccessible to large swathes of people, were representative of an all-encompassing national character is difficult to read in any way that is not fatally exclusionary. This is especially true of the final sentences, where it is made clear that those steeped in the literary tradition, both as consumers and producers, had cumulatively and iteratively created the “cultural sensitivity” of Kerala. These art forms, self-admittedly “confined to upper caste circles” until the time contemporary to EMS’s writing, formed the psychological makeup of the Malayali, which then definitionally could not include people outside those circles.

Even if one is to buy EMS’s argument that privileged caste culture laid the basis of a Malayali art style, the implication is then that there is a unidirectional transmission of culture from Brahmins downward. EMS did not speak of “national” literature being generated by these select upper class Dalits on the receiving end of Brahmin education — their work did not seem contribute to the “national character” in the same way as the culturally transcendent style of the privileged caste artist. Instead, Dalits and those outside the Brahmin-Nair contingent were made

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<sup>57</sup> Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad, *Kerala: Society and Politics*. (New Delhi: National Book Center, 1984), 46.

passive subjects, forced to acculturate to imposed art styles distinctly of a group separate from their own, yet advertised as part of a nation they are being folded into.<sup>58</sup> These conceptions of identity are emblematic of the biased normativities characteristic of EMS's thinking. His construction of "neutral" or "objective" are rooted in his own preference for Brahmin practice, fatally holding him back from a truly inclusive and comprehensive inclusion of Dalits into his view of communism.

Put in Devika's language, this creation and transmission of culture is in fact a form of caste vanguardism and is representative of a broader ideological leaning that pervaded nearly every aspect of EMS's thinking on class and caste. In his formulation of the origins of class and caste, he presented the latter as an outgrowth of the former, a social manifestation of preexisting material inequality. Given his own critique of upper-class scholars acting as proponents of history that benefits the bourgeoisie, his caste position may have at least partially influenced his bias toward Brahmin-dominated culture. And it is perhaps then a combination of his class and caste background that informed the preference for a top-down change that attempted to "modernize" the population, i.e. to homogenize them such that they become more like privileged caste Malayalis. Though EMS clearly and repeatedly acknowledged the existence of caste, he also clearly and repeatedly held contempt for it as a valid source of solidarity and organization — a contempt that significantly shaped his views on policy and reform, opting for legislation that tackled economic inequality under the assumption that caste-based discrimination would fall with class division. The following chapter will continue to explore the far-reaching consequences

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<sup>58</sup> EMS's argument here functions within a broader tradition of "Brahminization," demonstrated by privileged caste leaders across India who establish cultural hegemony over people of lower caste backgrounds. Pullapilly (1976), though dated, is one of the most comprehensive evaluations of this Brahminization in Kerala, while Figueira (2008) provides an impressive and important update in an early 21st century context.

of EMS's ideology, in particular how he shaped the function, composition, and advocacy of the CPI.

### **Tomorrow: Caste Organizations and the Speeches of EMS**

While EMS's extensive writings on caste and class are vital to construct a comprehensive understanding of his views on these issues, equally as important are the omissions, underestimations, and exclusions that he makes when addressing caste. In a number of highly consequential contexts, EMS failed to include caste as a relevant form of social identity, and when he does, they appear as afterthoughts at best. I argue that there is a throughline of caste bias in the early writings found in *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* to the later speeches as he made as an elected official, where he presents a political vision not only for the future of Kerala, but the development of communism itself.

C. Bhaskaran provides a useful collection of EMS's speeches, given before, during, and after his time as Chief Minister, revealing the arc of his views on caste and caste organizations. The most famous of these is his 1957 Policy Address, delivered to the public days after forming his first ministry. Understanding and reveling in the historic nature of his victory, much of EMS's speech is spent speaking to the general trends of communism in the world and the mass mobilization that enabled the CPI's ascent. In doing so, EMS highlighted the work of the Kisan Sabha of the Communist Party, variably referred to as the farmer's wing or the peasant's wing. Crediting it as a major force of galvanization and unification, he praised the Sabha as having "surpassed all of its predecessors that have attempted to organize social groups." He was careful not to indict specific organizations here, but context makes clear that he was at least partially referring to caste groups; a few lines later he argues that the Kisan Sabha allowed large swathes

of Keralites to “join the movement and feel solidarity, regardless of caste.”<sup>59</sup> More economical in his speeches than writing, EMS managed to make gestures toward caste division while still making his implicit argument that class serves as a superior mobilizing force, all in one fell swoop.

The only other time that EMS explicitly mentioned the term caste in this otherwise all-encompassing speech is when discussing issues of cultural unity. He claimed that “Caste-community enmity, superstitions, and deep-seated religious sentiments” prevented the creation of an aesthetic that was uniquely Malayali, an artform that could be attributed to Kerala.<sup>60</sup> In combination, then, we see that EMS portrayed caste as an issue that impeded the organization of Malayalis both politically and culturally, preventing the congregation of working class individuals commonly exploited by the bourgeoisie and the cultural exchange of caste groups segregated in society.

Reading these invocations of caste help recreate the worldview, strategy, and ideology of EMS. On one hand he was able to powerfully articulate the harms of caste to voters who viscerally feel its oppression, performing the role of a public figure with skill and charisma. Yet when tasked with actually defining the process of overcoming caste, we see that his solution lay not in respecting people who suffer from discrimination, but rather homogenizing the population by supplanting the culture of Dalits with the “superior” practices of Brahminical art and literature. There is inherently a sense of elitism imbued into this “education” of oppressed-caste

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<sup>59</sup> Bhaskaran, C, ed. 1996. *ഇഎംഎസ് ന്റെ തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത പ്രസംഗങ്ങൾ നയപ്രഖ്യാപനം (Selected Speeches of EMS)*. Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers. 75.

<sup>60</sup> In the original text, EMS uses the term “അന്ധവിശ്വാസങ്ങളു,” which I have translated to “superstition.” While technically correct, there is a connotation of “traditional practice” or perhaps “folk culture” that is not captured in this approximation. While these secondary meanings fit into the cultural elitism portrayed by EMS in previous works, parsing the more culturally complete definition of this term is beyond my familiarity with Malayalam.

populations, wherein they must be “taught” the correct way to acculturate to EMS’s vision of history and identity. This much could be said directly to the voters, of course, but was revealed rather transparently in a speech delivered during a policy planning session of the CPI.

In a review of Kerala’s policy achievements, which was later transcribed and distributed among CPI members, EMS spoke to the task of instilling class consciousness in the masses deluded by caste division:

“The Party tried to point out to the poor, downtrodden millions that they are being oppressed and exploited, not because they belong to a particular caste or religious community, but because they are poor and propertyless; that there are people belonging to other castes also who are poor and propertyless as they themselves are; that therefore it is in their interest to unite with all the poor people in the country regardless of the caste to which they belong and regardless of the religion in which they believe.”<sup>61</sup>

It is easy to understand why members of the public would believe EMS to be a champion of Dalits. His public facing statements made efforts not to antagonize caste movements or organizations, while his private statements reveal a more causal view that caste is in fact a manifestation, a misnomer even, of the true problem that is class. Part of this is definitely a matter of audience and politics, though the context of his other writings provided above situate this within a context of consistently missing the mark, of failing to understand caste as a unique and separable force from class.

This blind spot in his thinking took form in glaring omissions that are even more instructive than his explicit mention of caste. In the above-mentioned declaration of policy, he touched on social issues of discrimination along dimensions of identity such as age, maternal status, and religion.<sup>62</sup> Per EMS, these statuses deserved rights enshrined in the state constitution,

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<sup>61</sup> EMS Namboodiripad, *28 Months in Kerala: A Retrospective*. (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1959) 14.

<sup>62</sup> *Selected Speeches of EMS*, 77, 80, 83, 87.

guaranteeing protection from workplace discrimination and ensuring fairness in the legal system. Conspicuously, there was no mention of caste. Similarly, he argued that groups of various backgrounds needed to be consulted in the construction of social policy, primarily with regard to religion and gender, but again, did not mention caste. EMS's policy vision thus rested on the assumption that a) caste was not in the same tier of identity as gender and religion, not deserving of its own set of policies and/or b) that by implementing the economic program of the CPI, caste would cease to be relevant.

A follow up proposal, issued ten years after *28 Months in Kerala* and the 1957 Declaration of Policy, showed slight modifications from EMS's blatant omission of caste policy toward a nominal interest in legislation that identified the problem as distinct from class. In "Towards an Alternate Policy Framework," he outlined a robust regime of policies he hoped would shape India's Fourth Five Year Plan, which determined in broad strokes the allocation of state resources toward development and welfare. Inspired by the Soviet Union, both the Indian national government and the various state governments beneath created policy at regular time intervals, producing 5-year plans that outlined the tenets of central planning, both economically and socially. Importantly, EMS was commenting not on the direction of state policy, but rather his vision for how the Indian economy should be structured, representing his views as a prominent and founding member of the national communist party.

EMS spoke at length on how the central government ought to plan its economic policy, devoting an impressive 112 provisions to the cause of improving the economy, most of which are substantiated with granular and specific demographic data. Taxation and labor policy composed the bulk of these recommendations, receiving 15 and 17 provisions respectively, with agricultural policy following closely behind at 13. Each moved beyond platitudes and are

concrete, for example delineating a modified system of graduated tax brackets, or creating regulations on the use of certain agricultural technology. It was in this context that caste stood as a stark outlier, being covered in a single recommendation at the end of his framework. He proclaimed that the ministry must adopt “energetic measures to eliminate all traces of caste domination. Observance of caste rules involving caste superiority or inferiority to be made a punishable offense. Encouragement to inter-caste marriage.” And there it ended.

The blatant omission and lack of thought put into caste policy was a result of the ideology outlined above. Though EMS understood it to be an issue, and even at times seemed to nominally gesture in a direction of appreciation for its unique harms, he devoted little time to tackling caste head on. There was a clear underestimation for the pervasiveness and strength of caste discrimination and an implication that it required far less attention than the various economic issues that he pontificated on. Words most certainly were there, but actions most certainly were not.

### **EMS's Kerala**

EMS either chose or was not able to figure caste identity into his views of reform, both past and present. He devoted his intellectual capacity to the development of economic legislation and left caste oppression an afterthought at best. His views on culture and identity generally showed a bias against Dalits, who needed the help of those in more educated and enlightened positions to unveil class oppression from the veneer of caste. It was the responsibility of this vanguard to teach these poor masses how to become Malayalis, an identity constructed around Brahminical ideals of culture and civility. These views stemmed from his account of the origins of class and caste; he presented the latter as an outgrowth of the former, a social manifestation of preexisting material inequality.

Using his own critique of upper class scholars acting as proponents of history that benefits the bourgeoisie, I argue that EMS's caste position may have at least partially influenced his bias toward Brahmin-dominated culture. At the very least, he was consistently "blind" to the skewed normativity that he took for granted, proposing a view of progress that greatly privileged dominant-caste culture. Though EMS clearly and repeatedly acknowledged the existence of caste, he also clearly and repeatedly held contempt for it as a valid source of solidarity and organization — a contempt that significantly shaped his views on policy and reform, compelling him to opt for legislation that operated under the assumption that caste based discrimination would fall with the fall of class division. The following chapters will continue to explore the far-reaching consequences of EMS's ideology, in particular how he shaped the function, composition, and advocacy of the CPI(M). We will see that many others shared this view of caste and class, and that the policy outcomes reverberated for decades to follow.



## Chapter 2: Foundations and Mechanisms of Keralite Communism

Though EMS was an unprecedentedly influential intellectual figure in Kerala, he by no means operated in isolation. He had a number of comrades who helped develop his views on caste and class and were crucial in giving them form as public policy. Symbiotically taking from and contributing to the construction of these two concepts as political entities, the various leaders of the communist party helped create the elitist ideology exemplified by the above writings of EMS, operating in conversation with their chief minister to form a party and eventually state system that privileged class as a preexisting condition to caste. Like EMS, these thinkers failed to move beyond an analytic of class reductionism, resolving the tension between caste and class by posing the former as an outgrowth of the latter.

This chapter hopes to shed light on the pervasive bias against people of oppressed-caste backgrounds as it existed within the foundations of the Communist party of India. First, I will look to the CPI's reception, interpretation, and dissemination of EMS's administration, demonstrating that they too were spreading a view of public facing benevolence toward lower caste groups, but in actuality arguing that there needed to be economic reform that would sweep up Dalits in its wake. This will primarily take form in close reading of the CPI's main organ, *New Age Weekly*. Given the CPI's success in Kerala, the publication had extensive coverage of EMS's ministries and spoke at length to its work as a model for other state parties. Important here will be a discussion of caste organizations and their representation in communist media, demonstrating how their unique othering of these groups would have attracted those who themselves expressed any level of dissatisfaction with caste as a relevant tool of mobilization.

Second, I will evaluate the speeches of prominent members of the communist party including the two ministers charged with Dalit Affairs in EMS's two ministries, P.K. Chathan

Master and M.K. Krishnan. I argue that their rhetoric echoes the same themes of elitism and class reductionism demonstrated in Chapter 1, and is evidence of a conflation of class and caste present throughout the membership of the CPI(M). This sets the stage for a demographic analysis of the communist party and a more concrete evaluation of public policy in Chapter 3.

### **Caste and Caste Organizations in *New Age***

*New Age* began as a monthly journal in 1934, at first publishing heady theoretical treatises on Indian Marxism ranging from economic analysis of various modes of production to cultural critiques of media. In the early 1950's they transitioned to a weekly publication format, now covering news developments relevant to state chapters and providing editorial input on these breaking stories.<sup>63</sup> Given the unprecedented and unreplicated success of communism in Kerala, the successes and challenges of the Namboodiripad ministries were naturally covered at length, at times to the extent of a weekly column called "Notes from Kerala." It is in describing the policies and reactions to communism in the state that a vision of caste becomes clear, portraying it not only as organizationally unhelpful, but necessarily an impediment to the understanding of a class-based society. A prime example can be seen in the reaction to threats from the national government to seize control of Kerala's parliament in 1959:

"The battle in Kerala is between the ofrces of the people and progress under the Communist Ministry and the forces of religious, communal, caste and vested interests whoare panicky. The Congress and reactionaries know that if the Kerala Government succeeds and runs its full course the Congress rule wil disappear from a few other States. Hence the attack on our Ministry. The ruling party having lost its majority in Kerala is organizing illegal activities in alliance with the reactionary forces and

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<sup>63</sup> I am inferring that this shift happened in the early 1950's based on the publishing schedule of *New Age Weekly*. The digital archive I have access to begins in 1958 with Volume VI, with each successive volume spanning a year. To my knowledge there are no digital archives of previous issues, nor is there much scholarly work analyzing the content of these publications.

from the Union Centre is being added and abetted despite the constitution and all parliamentary conventions.”<sup>64</sup>

Here, non-communist organizations were generally being lumped together in a way that not only implied some misunderstanding of class oppression, but rather a fundamental incompatibility with the CPI’s view of the world.<sup>65</sup> The language was intentionally vague and alarmist in a way that can be read in many ways, all of which implicated caste organizations as either inadequate or actively harmful to the project of communism. By consolidating such groups as those founded around caste and religion with the clearly evil “vested” interests—understood as a euphemism for the ruling class—there is an unspoken equivalence, or at least association, between the bourgeoisie and caste/religion organizers. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, these organizers were depicted as accessories to the INC’s attempted coup, forming an amorphous other that must be fought to maintain the communist stronghold that was Kerala.

In his own editorial piece a year earlier, national CPI General Secretary Ajoy Ghosh made this grouping of forces even more clear, going as far as to say that the “defense of Kerala from such reactionaries as casteists and Congress stalwarts has been the greatest accomplishment of the democratic movement since independence itself.”<sup>66</sup> To him, and by extension the CPI, “casteists” were equivalent to Congress activists who were themselves representative of democratic backslide and equal in evil to colonial rule itself. Ghosh managed to contort all the existential threats to the Indian psyche into one multifaceted Frankenstein of a villain most notably associated with anti-caste activism. Associations were piled onto each other such that the

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<sup>64</sup> Ali, Raza “The Real Upsurge,” *New Age Weekly* Vol VII No 27 July 26 1959,

<sup>65</sup> While interesting and important to the history of EMS’s administration, the various conflicts between his ministry and the Nehruvian central government are not of immediate relevance to this thesis. For an overview of Center-State relations with regard to the development of Kerala and federalism in India, see Ajayan (2020).

<sup>66</sup> Ghosh, Ajoy: “On The Decisions of the National Council,” *New Age Weekly* Vol VI No 1 October 5 1958

*New Age* audience was presented ample opportunity to find some issue they identified with, some way to feel incensed by these anticommunist “reactionaries.”

A particularly Kerala-heavy issue of *New Age* dedicated 7 out of its 15 pages to the state and in various ways invoked caste, though rarely explicitly.<sup>67</sup> Similar to the above, caste organizations are mentioned in passing antagonists to the CPI, but more interesting is the in-depth analysis of Allepey, a State Legislature district which was then reserved for Dalits. In the two-page spread, there are no usages of “harijan,” “backward,” or any other words that are traditionally associated with oppressed-caste groups. There are, however, multiple mentions of “peasants” in the district, which can be interpreted as 1) an intentional papering over of caste identity in favor of the economically-based label of peasant, or more likely 2) a lack of attention paid to caste identity. In the same way that EMS uses specific Malayalam terminology that depicts Dalits as a subset of “workers,” this *New Age* spread euphemized Dalit struggles by focusing on the class- rather than caste-character of their identity.



Figure 2.1: Various excerpts covering Kerala in *New Age* Volume VIII No. 2.

<sup>67</sup> *New Age*, Pages 1, 3, 9 Vol. VIII No. 2. 1/10/1960

Taking these various articles of *New Age* together, there is a sort of double bind of Dalit otherization that forms: either their caste identity is overshadowed by economic status, or their presence in caste organizations renders them oppositional to the communist cause. By papering over issues of caste, those actively focused on its abolition would not have found material catering to their interests, thereby them from the target audience. When caste was in fact presented, the antagonism toward “reactionary organizations” would have drawn into the fold those who are predisposed against caste as means of mobilization —i.e. those who benefit the most from its existence. Though these latter people would surely make efforts to criticize caste when prompted, and undoubtedly recognized caste as a negative force in achieving an equal society, it is only fitting that they overwhelmingly choose the ideology of a party that positions them as the solution, not the problem.

Put another way, it was for these people that a class analytic would be most convenient. Adopting a worldview that reframed problems of caste as those of class, dominant-caste communists could maintain their positions of power while claiming to solve the existential problems plaguing society. In the words of EMS himself, Nairs and Brahmins were motivated by their own interests and were attracted to visions of change that allowed for them to helm the movement. Communism as presented in *New Age Weekly* thus functioned as both a tool for attracting dominant-caste Keralites into the fold while also serving as an end of the insular politics and worldview demonstrated by leaders like EMS and Ajoy Ghosh.

### **The Executive Branch**

After their watershed victory in 1957, the CPI helmed by EMS was now tasked with assembling a cabinet ministry that would implement their highly ambitious programs. Who was chosen for these positions and what exactly their roles are come almost unilaterally from the

Chief Minister and their advisors, though technically proclaimed through the figurehead Governor.<sup>68</sup> As such, the candidates selected through this process can be seen as a fairly direct measure of the bias within EMS and his closest companions.

The first cabinet was composed of 11 ministers including 4 Brahmins, 2 Nairs, 3 Christians, 1 Muslim, and 1 Dalit. The second ministry was composed of 13 ministers: 3 Brahmins, 3 Nairs, 3 Muslims, 3 Christians, and 1 Dalit.<sup>69</sup> P. K. Chathan Master was the sole Dalit representative of the first ministry and held the position of “Minister for Local Self Government and Harijan,” which functionally dealt with Dalit and Adivasi affairs. In the second ministry, this position was renamed as the “Minister for Forest and Harijan Welfare” and was filled by M. K. Krishnan, who also came from a Dalit background. Regardless, by looking to these two cabinet ministries, we see that there is only Dalit representation where it is required, perhaps not legally in the way that reserved districts are at the legislative level, but by way of optics. In its attempt to depict selflessness and solidarity, it was functionally required for the CPI to include at least some Dalit representation within the party —it would have been a little too on the nose for, say, a Brahmin to be selected as the primary authority on Dalit affairs in Kerala.

The two cases of Dalit ministers also present an interesting point of investigation, providing some insight to which members of oppressed-caste communities were recruited into the fold my EMS. In a 1958 testimony to the legislative assembly of Kerala, P.K. Chathan Master summarizes why an emphasis on Dalit affairs should be considered vital to the program of the CPI:

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<sup>68</sup> Nair, Parameswaran, and Parameswar Nair. "The party system in Kerala." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 27, no. 1 (1966): 69-83.

<sup>69</sup> Chief Ministers and Leaders of Opposition of Kerala: Biographical Sketches and Other Data, Secretariat of the Kerala Legislature Thiruvananthapuram 2018; Leelamoni, P. “EMS Namboodiripad and Sapta Munnany Government In Kerala." *History Research Journal* 5, no. 6 (2019): 2687-2689.

“അയിത്തം ആദി യായ അനാചാരങ്ങളിൽ നിന്നും  
 ഹരിജനസമുദായത്തെ ഉദ്ധരിക്കുന്നതിനും ഈ മാതിരിയുള്ള  
 സാമൂഹ്യപരിഷ്കരണശ്രമങ്ങൾ ആവശ്യമാണ്. നമ്മുടെ  
 സംസ്ഥാനത്തു ഇന്നും ഇങ്ങനെയൊരു സമുദായത്തെ  
 അങ്ങേയറ്റം അവശത യോടുകൂടി കാണാൻ ഇടയാകുന്നത്  
 ആക്കം തന്നെ അഭിമാനകരമല്ലാത്ത ഒന്നായതുകൊണ്ടു മുഴുവൻ  
 ജനതയും ഈ മാതിരിയുള്ള എല്ലാ കാര്യങ്ങളിലും ശ്രദ്ധിച്ചു ഈ  
 പരിപാടി സത്വരമായ പുരോഗതിയെ പ്രാപിക്കുന്നതിനുള്ള  
 പ്രചരണം വല നടത്തേണ്ടതാണ്”

*“The CPI(M)’s social reforms are vital to lift [Dalits] out of their primitive practices. It is not a matter of pride to see such a community and such poverty exist in our state today; the entire nation should pay attention to all such matters and campaign for the speedy progress of this program.”<sup>70</sup>*

There is little doubt that Master was genuinely interested and dedicated to improving the lives in Dalits in Kerala, but it is immediately clear that much of the language and justification he uses to urge reform reads similarly to EMS and others. Dalits are posed as simple and uncivilized people that need to be rescued from their depravity. Their existence as a “backward” people was a blight both on record of both Kerala and India more broadly, in much the same way that the very existence of poverty is a mark of incompletely administered communism. Master’s speech and the uncanny likeness to EMS’s language is further evidence of the ideological bias of the CPI machinery, selecting even among Dalits those who see the issue of untouchability and caste oppression through a similar lens.

In a particularly heated session of parliamentary debate that involved charges of corruption and Hindu devotional songs, M. K. Krishnan could be observed adopting language similar to his predecessor.<sup>71</sup> When defending the CPI’s crowning achievement, the Land

<sup>70</sup>Discussion of the Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for the Year 1955, *Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly*, 639(1958) (P. K. Chathan Master, Minister for Local Self Government and Harijan Welfare).

<sup>71</sup> **Mr. Joseph Chazhikkadan:** “Sir, I would like to say that Mrs. Gowri and the Chief Minister have gone wild in making this bill. Ganesha was born as a result of going wild. Some lines can be sung in a short song:

Reforms Act of 1967, he argued that such a measure was necessary to “enable [Dalits] to reach the heights of their Brahmin companions” and to “push them out of their conditions of depravity.” By redistributing land, Krishnan promised that Dalits would be able to ascend to their full potential and “become comrades that we can be proud of.” If only they would have the rights to tenancy and land ownership, Dalits would “achieve a life of prosperity and equality independent of landlords and cultivators” Though nine years later than the speech of Chathan Master, the same themes of pride and uplift are at the forefront of Krishnan’s arguments. Moreover, while he highlights that Dalits are uniquely in a position suffering, the language of “depravity” in particular imbues his logic with a moral evaluation of the oppressed-caste condition, not unlike EMS himself in his writings of the backward masses evaluated in chapter 1.<sup>72,73</sup>

Krishnan’s defense of the Land Reforms Bill also presents a telling example of the specific interactions between class and caste as conceptualized by the CPI. Clearly he and his colleagues did not believe that land redistribution in isolation would solve all the range of problems faced by Dalits in Kerala, but it does seem clear that he believed land reform would cause a seismic shift in the very structure of labor relations. With the benefit of retrospect, it is clear that this was not the case. In separate but overlapping articles, anthropologist Joan Mencher (1980) and economist P. Radhakrishnan (1981) explain how most Dalits experienced only

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‘He started from nothing, yet he became so great.  
Add to his body a trunk and a chest, then he will be complete.  
Move quickly, move simply, and good things shall come.’”

**Mr. Speaker:** “Mr. Chazhikkadan, the amendment is not about Ganesha.”

<sup>72</sup> *Question Hour: Land Redistribution to Harijans, Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly*, 2061(1967) (M.K. Krishnan, Minister for Forest and Harijan Welfare).

<sup>73</sup> Krishnan chose to deliver his remarks during this session in English, I am quoting his words without translation.



marginal benefits from the legislation, both as a result of misdiagnosis and a lack of multidimensional reform.<sup>74</sup> For one, many Dalits lived on communal properties by way of segregation and untouchability practices – not only were upper caste landlords averse to physically approaching their tenants, but wherever Dalits did stay was considered blighted and unholy for Caste Hindus. As such, the legal redistribution of land functionally subdivided these communal plots of land and accelerating the privatization of property among Dalits.

Moreover, the land that was in fact allotted to Dalits through these schemes was so minimal that in very few instances were people able to engage in any sort of cultivation; rather, those who did not have their own hut dwellings were just barely able to build homes in the confines of their new space. The communists famously campaigned on the slogan of “Land to the Tiller” as they ran for office, and while the tillers were certainly granted *some* land, it was not *the* land that they continue to till to this day. Dalits were still beholden on Brahmins and Nairs who owned the vast majority of agricultural property to employ them as laborers and continued to face tragic levels of discrimination in the workforce. Rather than radically restructuring modes of production, the Land Reforms Act thus functioned more as a guarantee of tenancy rights, a qualified success emblematic of the CPI’s accomplishments related to Dalits. While their reforms were certainly helpful and undoubtedly improved the conditions of people of oppressed-caste backgrounds, the force of caste discrimination significantly limited the benefits of what could have truly brought the socialist ideal of Nani’s Thoughts.

The Land Reform Act presents a convergence of the CPI’s underestimation of caste and its unfamiliarity with the Dalit experience. Writings from *New Age* and speeches delivered on the

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<sup>74</sup> Mencher, Joan P. "The lessons and non-lessons of Kerala: Agricultural labourers and poverty." *Economic and political weekly* (1980): 1781-1802; Radhakrishnan, P. "Land reforms in theory and practice: The Kerala experience." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1981): A129-A137.

floor of the Legislative Assembly demonstrate how the fatal limitations of the class reductionist analytic endemic to the communist party as demonstrated in the early formation of Kerala as a state all the way through the end of EMS's second ministry. The following chapter will continue to explore these shortcomings by proving that the lack of Dalit considerations was not confined to matters of ideological opining, but rather extended into political representation and policies beyond the Land Reforms Act.

### Chapter 3: Politics, Policy, and the CPI

The Kerala Model is predicated on the notion that there have been major improvements to quality of life in the state. When viewed in the aggregate this cannot be disputed: since formation in 1957, literacy, access to healthcare, and nutritional standards have all skyrocketed.<sup>75</sup> Public figures and intellectuals constantly emerge from the state, and on face much of the progress initiated by EMS's administrations seems to continue. Parsing apart these gains by socioeconomic and caste grouping reveal an entirely different picture, demonstrating how the conditions of Dalits in modern Kerala, though undeniably improved from the days of legal untouchability, lag far behind their counterparts in dominant-caste circles. Under the veneer of state uplift, Dalits have disproportionate out-of-pocket medical costs, little to no diversity in employment options outside of agriculture, and far lower median wages.<sup>76</sup>

This chapter will connect the ideological shortcomings of EMS and the CPI to the tangible and material discrimination faced by Dalits in Kerala. First, I will examine the electoral history of Kerala, both in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislature, looking to the caste composition of candidates running on major party tickets. In doing so, I show the manifestation of ideological bias towards people of higher caste backgrounds, as proven in massive disparities of who could and did run for office. Second, I will examine two of the CPI's hallmark policies through the lens of caste vanguardism, demonstrating the tangible consequence's of the communists' insularity. Not only intrinsically unjust, the lack of caste representation in the State Legislature had immense consequence on the generation and implementation of public policy in Kerala. Many scholars have done important work to communicate the nuanced successes and

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<sup>75</sup> Jeffrey, Robin. *Politics, women and well-being: How Kerala became a 'model'*. Springer, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Sreekumar, Sreenidhi. "Understanding Dalit equity: a critical analysis of primary health care policy discourse of Kerala in the context of 'Aardram' mission." *International Journal for Equity in Health* 22, no. 1 (2023): 165.

failures of these policies; it is my aim to provide explanatory context for these economic shortcomings by drawing a throughline from EMS's writings, to the underrepresentation of caste in the State Legislature, to misconceived policy. My analysis will demonstrate how material failures were a result of conceptual errors, the blind spots in communist ideology created by a flawed political machinery and bias in the foundational writings that shaped the CPI.

### **Caste Representation in the CPI**

The structure of Kerala's government includes an executive branch, composed of the Chief Minister's cabinet, and a unicameral legislative branch known popularly as the Kerala Niyama Sabha (translated to State Legislature). Like other Indian states, Kerala also has a number of members elected as representatives to the Lok Sabha, or the lower house, and the Rajya Sabha, upper house, of the national government. In the former, politicians are typically nominated by political parties to stand against their opponents, while in the latter, there are open primaries where any number of citizens able to surpass a threshold of popularity can stand for office.

The nomination process of the Lok Sabha thus provides an opportunity to see inside the minds of CPI leadership, revealing who they endorse for election.<sup>77</sup> Accessibility and digitization of Lok Sabha election results make it an ideal way to see which kinds of candidates were most successful and which were able to gain a foothold within the machinery of the CPI. The state legislature too is quite interesting, as it portrays a political scenario akin to an open "jungle primary," with candidates running against opponents from within and outside their party. Many scholars have demographically analyzed the composition of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, but

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<sup>77</sup> Oomen (1984) provides an excellent analysis of Dalit mobilization in both the Communist and Congress parties. See Jaffrelot (2010) for a compelling account of Dalit discrimination in the political climate of Bihar, as well as Rao (2009) on the identitarian consequences of Dalit marginalization of discourse across North India.

to date no study has evaluated the election results of the Kerala state legislature. Moreover, very few of even the national election analyses delineate specific caste groups, rather only presenting the number of “Scheduled Caste” (Dalit) members in a session.

To fill this gap, I extracted data from the electoral reports of the Kerala State Legislature between 1957 and 1969 and categorized candidates by caste and religion.<sup>78</sup> Caste was approximated using heuristics, biographical data, and obituaries. A first pass identified candidates who had distinctly and reliably caste-identifying surnames such as Nair, Menon, Namboodiripad, Iyer, or reliably non-Hindu religion-identifying last names such as Matthew, Joseph, Majeed, Haji, etc. The second pass required a search of the remaining candidates familial history and autobiographical data: because Kerala has a tradition of patronymic naming, or incorporating one’s father’s name into their own, if a candidate’s own name was not immediately indicative of caste, their father’s often filled in gaps of information.<sup>79</sup> Certain prominent or prolific politicians also published autobiographies where they elaborate their own caste upbringing, providing a more definitive identification helpful for categorization.<sup>80</sup>

Of the 1673 total candidates that ran for state office in this time period, a combination of the above methods identified the caste/religious background of 1178 candidates. Importantly,

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<sup>78</sup> Election Commission of India, Statistical Report on General Election, 1957 to the Legislative Assembly of Kerala, New Delhi. Web, [https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/KLA/KL\\_1957\\_ST\\_REP.pdf](https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/KLA/KL_1957_ST_REP.pdf) (Accessed 02/17/2024); Election Commission of India, Statistical Report on General Election, 1960 to the Legislative Assembly of Kerala, New Delhi. Web, [https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/KLA/KL\\_1960\\_ST\\_REP.pdf](https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/KLA/KL_1960_ST_REP.pdf) (Accessed 02/17/2024); Election Commission of India, Statistical Report on General Election, 1965 to the Legislative Assembly of Kerala, New Delhi. Web, [https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/KLA/KL\\_1965\\_ST\\_REP.pdf](https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/KLA/KL_1965_ST_REP.pdf) (Accessed 02/17/2024); Election Commission of India, Statistical Report on General Election, 1967 to the Legislative Assembly of Kerala, New Delhi. Web, [https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/KLA/KL\\_1967\\_ST\\_REP.pdf](https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/KLA/KL_1967_ST_REP.pdf) (Accessed 02/17/2024)

<sup>79</sup> e.g. the name “K.V. Surendranath” is not immediately helpful for identifying caste, but finding that his father was Shri K. Velayudhan Pillai allows for a very reliable assumption that he comes from the Pillai subcaste.

<sup>80</sup> I take methodological inspiration from Verniers and Jaffrelot (2020), who attempted to profile the caste backgrounds of candidates in the Lok Sabha using similar techniques. Partha Chatterjee (2015) mentions engaging on a similar survey of the last names in Calcutta phonebooks, using last names as his method of caste identification. He came to a remarkably similar distribution of identifying/non-identifying names, with roughly 25% his sample remaining ambiguous. Though I claim nowhere near the knowledge of caste as Chatterjee, it tracks that I would reach a similar percentage of identification given additional research into candidates’ familial history.

there is significant bias in the those who were not identified through this method, as Dalits in particular are less likely to have these obituaries, autobiographies, and reports available at all—even more so in digital form. Moreover, in Kerala there are fewer last names that are uniquely attributed to people of oppressed-caste communities, making it more difficult infer identity from last name alone. That being said, there are two reasons to believe that the below data captures at least a conservative estimate of caste discrimination: First, in the Dalit-reserved districts (discussed on the following page), those who were from oppressed-caste backgrounds were denoted on ballots and electoral reports to contrast against the non-Dalits running for office. This leaves the question of whether or not Dalits ran for office in other districts, which INC legislator K. Kochukuttan claims in a 1969 legislative floor speech was not the case. When debating the merit of government reservations, he argued that this was the very reason that the policy was necessary, that without seats that were dedicated to people of oppressed-caste backgrounds, they would have no representation in government whatsoever.<sup>81,82</sup>

## Kerala State Legislature

Looking first to the election results for state legislature elections, the general bias against Dalits and toward dominant-caste candidates is strikingly clear<sup>83</sup>:

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<sup>81</sup> Discussion of the Report on Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Reservations or the Year 1965, Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, 672(1969) (K. Kochukuttan, Minister from the district of Vadakkancherry)

<sup>82</sup> Given the hundreds of candidates that ran for the legislative assembly per year, it is almost guaranteed that there were at least some Dalits that ran for office outside the knowledge of Kochukuttan. It is fairly likely, however, that there were few, if any, that ran under the banners of the mainstream CPI and INC. There is not quite enough data to make this argument with confidence of statistical significance, but of the few Dalits I was able to identify outside of reserved districts, it seems that they may have a tendency to run either as independents or as representing smaller third parties like the United Socialist Party. This would be an excellent topic for further research.

<sup>83</sup> Some notes on categorization here. 1) Population data has been extrapolated from the 1968 Census of Castes produced by EMS's second ministry, which consolidated dominant subcaste groups like Ambalavasis into the umbrella of Brahmins, Nadars and Kurups as Nairs, etc. For consistency I have done the same, though this necessarily presents a somewhat simplistic view of castes in Kerala. 2) The status of Ezhavas in particular has been contested; at the time of EMS they fluctuated between various categories on the fringe of Dalit identity and oppressed cast inclusion in the main Chaturvarna, in this case I have included them as Dalits as they were in the 1968 Census. 3) The discrepancy in representation of Muslims can be in large part explained by the introduction of

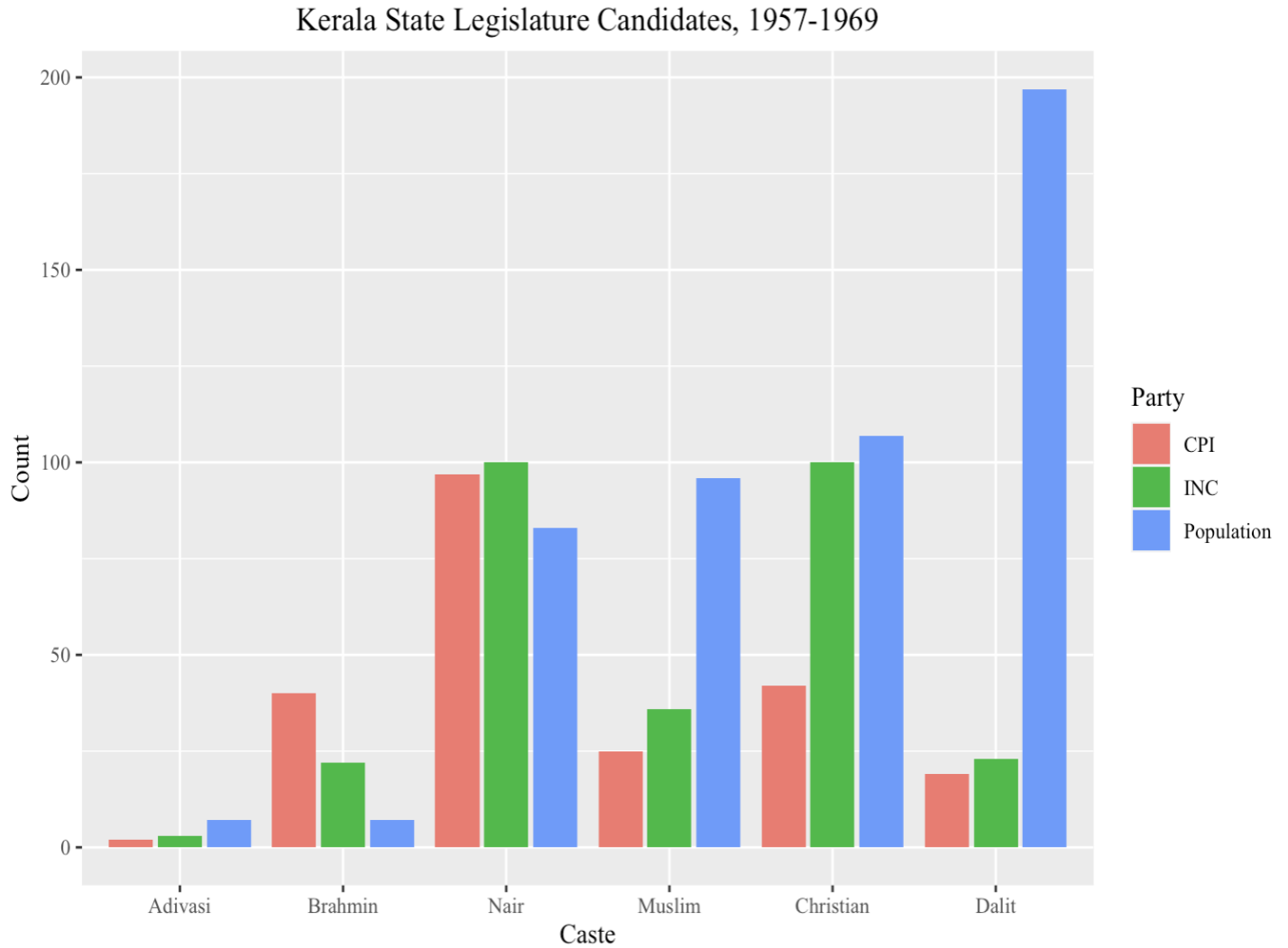


Figure 3.1: Kerala State Legislature Candidates, 1957-1969. Data extracted and compiled from the Election Commission of India.

The above figure presents the caste distribution of CPI and INC candidates who ran in State Legislature elections between 1957 and 1969. Within each caste group, the red bar corresponds to CPI candidates, the green bar corresponds to INC candidates, and the blue bar corresponds to the proportional population of each group in Kerala – that is, the number of

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the state's branch of the Muslim League, which formed in 1960 and recruited a strong portion of Muslim political candidates afterward. 4) I have yet to discuss in detail the category of Adivasi, or "scheduled tribe," in India. In short, these are the people indigenous to the Indian subcontinent who also have seats reserved in state and national governments. Rao (2018) provides an excellent overview of Adivasi history and rights in contemporary India.

people one might expect to run for office based on the percentage of the population they make up. Because Dalits made up roughly half the population of Kerala in 1957, for example, all things equal one would expect them to compose half of all candidates put forth by major parties. Clearly, this is not the case. There is a stark underrepresentation of Dalits on both CPI and INC tickets. It was on this basis that the first Constitution of Kerala, as with the national government of India, reserved a certain number of positions across state and local government for Dalits, hoping to overcome the societal discrimination that would likely prevent their election to office.<sup>84</sup> These are generally allocated to certain districts where they make up a significant portion, likely the majority, of the population. Reserved districts typically elect two, rather than one, representatives, one of which is required to be from an oppressed-caste background. This creates an interesting strategical question for parties, as they have the choice of simply running one candidate to try and get this reserved seat, or perhaps two candidates in the hopes of winning both. The slight discrepancy between Dalit candidates between the INC and the CPI is due to two districts where the former chose to run two candidates while the latter ran one.

A larger and more concrete difference in parties is the overrepresentation of Brahmins running for office. Brahmins made up just 1.5% of the population in 1968, which when generously rounded comes out to a maximum of 8 candidates of the sample analyzed, yet we see that in this period, 46 Brahmins ran for office on the CPI ticket. Not only is this disproportionate to the state population, but it is remarkably higher than the percentage of INC candidates that were Brahmin in the same period. In fact, there were almost double the number of CPI Brahmins than INC Brahmins who ran for office, tracking with general trend toward sentiments of caste

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<sup>84</sup> The question of caste reservations was and is central to the constitutional and social policy of India. Most famously, B.R. Ambedkar argued against reservations and for the more radical proposal of separate electorates on the basis of caste. See Ambedkar (1936) and Gandhi (1930) for the ideologically foundational arguments on this issue.



superiority discussed earlier in the writings of EMS. Though there is certainly overrepresentation of Nairs in this distribution as well, the degree of disproportionality is less stark than that of Brahmins and is also less unique to the CPI. Rather, Nair overrepresentation was (and continues to be) endemic and notoriously characteristic of Kerala politics, and is less idiosyncratic to the specific party dynamics of this time period.<sup>85</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that high political caste bias was far from the only Dalits did not run for office. Because they were starting from a place of material and social inequity, the prospect of a political career was beyond the realm of imagination. Even if not the case, Dalits may have understandably questioned their viability as candidates outside reserved districts given the segregation and untouchability practices that had only been outlawed merely years earlier. I argue that this skepticism was likely mirrored in the machinery of the communist party, which systematically selected candidates from dominant-caste backgrounds to the Lok Sabha, as I will explore in the following section.

### **Lok Sabha Elections**

For a more causal link to the CPI(M) leadership, we can look at the caste backgrounds of candidates for the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's legislative body. Though at the time there were no formalized processes of documented by the CPI, Kerala's political climate in the 1960s was dominated by informal campaigns by party leaders to back a certain set of candidates that mimicked the caste bias of the state legislature.

From independence, the INC had a fairly bureaucratized and standardized selection process for its nominees to the Lok Sabha, requiring a fee and application to run on the ticket.

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<sup>85</sup> Nair, A. Balakrishnan. "The dynamics of Kerala politics." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 3 (1994): 251-260.

After running through many rounds of interviewing and vetting by various election committees (who were “encouraged to seek the guidance of relevant sources of public opinion”), a singular candidate would be selected.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps in an effort to contrast themselves to the INC, the CPI had no such process and instead technically allowed for any number of candidates to stand on their tickets to the Lok Sabha. Sarker (1960) outlines how this was far from an open and unimpeded process, rather resulting in a more under-the-table but heavy handed approach from party leadership to select candidates. In reality, leaders like EMS would lobby and pull strings to discourage dissent and encourage like-minded others to run for office, hoping to consolidate support around a single candidate.<sup>87</sup> Hardgrave (1965) adds that the CPI machinery would most often “evaluate the ‘social base’” of a given district and push for candidates from the “dominant community” in the area – dominant not in numbers, but in perceived social capital.<sup>88</sup> These processes are directly reflected in the electoral results of Lok Sabha elections, compiled and depicted in a manner similar to the above analysis of state legislature candidates and castes:<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Kapur, Narinder S. "RULES OF PROCEDURE ADOPTED FOR THE SELECTION OF CANDIDATES TO THE PARLIAMENT AND STATE LEGISLATURES BY THE CONGRESS PARTY." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 3 (1967): 154-162.

<sup>87</sup> Hardgrave (1970) cites legislative speeches of members from the CPI to argue that this was a main reason for the split of the party into its now two branches.

<sup>88</sup> Hardgrave Jr, Robert L. "Caste and the Kerala Elections." *Economic Weekly* 15 (1965).

<sup>89</sup> Election Commission of India, STATISTICAL REPORT ON GENERAL ELECTIONS, 1957 TO THE SECOND LOK SABHA, New Delhi. Web, <https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/LOKSABHA-HISTORY/1957-LS.pdf> (Accessed 02/17/2024); Election Commission of India, STATISTICAL REPORT ON GENERAL ELECTIONS, 1962 TO THE THIRD LOK SABHA, New Delhi. Web, <https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/LOKSABHA-HISTORY/1962-LS.pdf> (Accessed 02/17/2024); Election Commission of India, STATISTICAL REPORT ON GENERAL ELECTIONS, 1967 TO THE FOURTH LOK SABHA, New Delhi. Web, <https://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/pdf/LOKSABHA-HISTORY/1967-LS.pdf> (Accessed 02/17/2024)

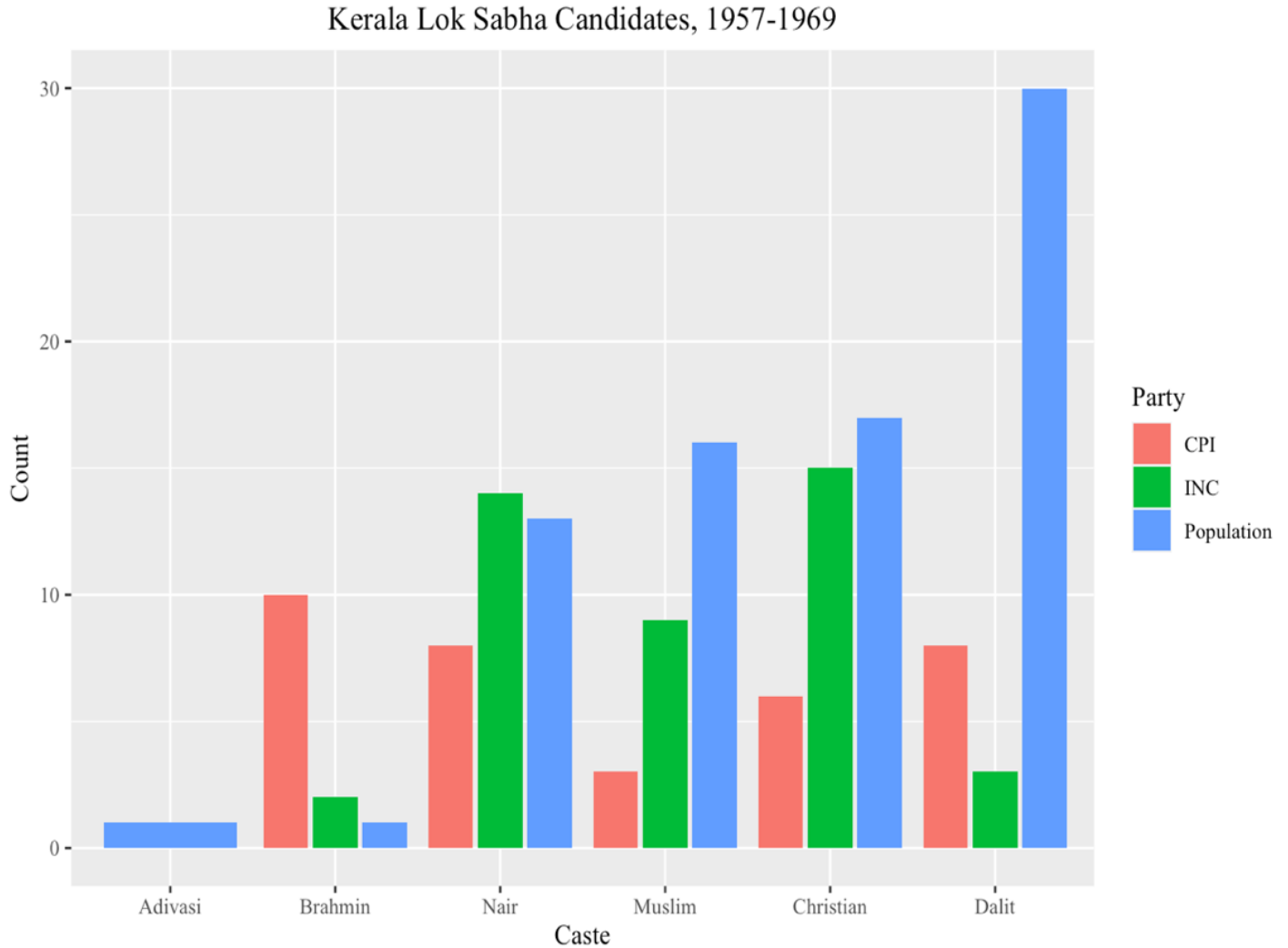


Figure 3.2: Kerala Lok Sabha Candidates, 1957-1969. Data extracted and compiled from the Election Commission of India.

The same lack of Dalit representation is striking, though an interesting increase can be seen in the number of oppressed-caste candidates under the CPI banner. On face, this may read as an increased attention to Dalit concerns or perhaps even a greater desire for diversity within the party—in reality, this is likely a combination of at least two factors that I will deal with in turn: 1) limitations in the electoral reports provided by the Lok Sabha, and 2) a movement of oppressed-caste voters toward the CPI.

Unlike the State Legislature data that lists all of the candidates who ran for office, the Indian Election Commission only provides the names of the winning candidate and the runner up for a given seat, excluding the candidates and parties who earned fewer votes. Thus, only 145 of the what may have been closer to 300 candidates who ran for office between 1957-1969 are represented, a small majority of which (89) were endorsed by the CPI and INC respectively.<sup>90</sup> More so than in the state legislature, the remaining candidates are distributed across various important but less mainstream parties such as the Rajya Socialists Party, the People's Socialist Party, and for the election of 1967 specifically, the Muslim League. Because there are relatively few candidates from each of these respective parties, it is more difficult to draw party-wide conclusions than is possible for the INC and CPI.

Keeping this in mind when interpreting the above figure, another important conclusion emerges regarding the popularity of these given parties: that religious and caste groups increasingly consolidated their support around specific political organizations. Because this data is more telling of which candidates performed well in an election rather than depicting the entire spread of parties represented on a ballot, the increased number of Dalits running under the CPI indicates that the party was more effective at winning these seats, or at the very least coming in second place, than its counterparts. Looking to these districts of Palghat, Ponnani, Mavelikara, and Adoor individually, we see that of the 12 total Dalit winners/runners up across the three depicted elections, 9 came from the CPI while 3 came from the INC (and none came from smaller parties).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Of these 89 candidates, 80 could reliably be identified by caste or religion per the methods described earlier in this chapter.

<sup>91</sup> Over the course of these three elections, the bounds of constituencies and the allocation of reservation changed, resulting from changing demographic information gathered by the state and center governments. While some like Ponnani have remained reserved since the creation of Kerala, others like Adoor only emerged as new districts and reserved areas in the election of 1967 and beyond.

These findings provide empirical support for a qualitatively observed consolidation of Dalit support around the CPI and its leading figures. Kathleen Gough, a longtime anthropologist who studied rural Kerala, reported as early as 1960 that Dalits living outside the fray of mainstream politics were becoming increasingly faithful to communist politicians. She quotes an Ezhava worker cynical of actual change but grateful of the gestures made by CPI politicians: “Nobody really helps us, but we feel the communists are thinking of us. They are friendly and have good hearts.” Another worker added that while she did not see any tangible under the CPI ministry, she was convinced that were it not for the forces of rich people who unjustly removed them from power (see footnote 15), the communists would have enacted real and substantive change.<sup>92</sup> Because other parties spent so little time, if any at all, addressing Dalits, even the CPI which was perceived as delivering little tangible improvements were perceived as genuine. It is by understanding this that we can more holistically analyze the other major trend of Lok Sabha results: increased representation of Brahmins.

In an even more dramatic fashion than the State Legislature, Brahmins had outsized representation as CPI Lok Sabha candidates. In fact, the CPI recruited Brahmins more so than any of the other caste/religious groups, and far more than their counterparts in the INC. The context of the candidate nomination process is crucial here, creating an image of an insular group of Brahmins strongly preferencing other Brahmins when choosing who would run for office. Both the INC and CPI of course had the primary objective of winning elections, and it can be fairly assumed that they chose the candidates they thought were most likely to win. The above electoral data clearly demonstrates that whatever weighing of factors went into this calculation, the outcome was the CPI choosing to nominate Brahmins over other religious and caste groups,

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<sup>92</sup> Gough, Kathleen. "Kerala politics and the 1965 elections." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 8 (1967): 55.

while the INC opted mainly for Nairs and Christians. Not only did the CPI leadership highly prefer candidates who came from dominant-caste backgrounds, but that after securing legislative victory and taking control of the state government, communists overwhelmingly selected bureaucrats and public officials that represented dominant-caste interests.

The initial ideology of the CPI, based largely on EMS's writings and speeches, privileged an establishment of Brahminical superiority that created a feedback loop of elitism, an echo chamber that entrenched implicit, and increasingly explicit, notions of caste superiority that had tangible consequences at the level of political representation and material inequality. The following sections will demonstrate that lack of caste representation in combination with an elitist conception of Malayali identity resulted in public policy that was not only misconceived, but poorly implemented.

### **Malayalam as State Language**

Given the vast linguistic diversity of South Asia, topics of national, regional, and state languages have been hotly contested for multiple decades. During the struggle for independence, Gandhi supported the broad use of Hindustani, a mixture of Hindi and Urdu as a compromise between Hindus and Muslims. Others like Subhash Chandra Bose agreed but preferred a Romanized script à la Atatürk's Turkish. Hindu nationalists like V.D. Savarkar preferred Hindi written in the traditional Hindu Devanagari script. After partition, Pakistan adopted Urdu as a national language while the undecided Indian government floundered to choose between these various schools of thought. Hindi was the most commonly spoken by INC leaders of the North, though English was perhaps more distributed across the geographical breadth of India. That being the case, there was resistance to adopt what many considered the language of colonization, leading Jawaharlal Nehru and Congress leaders to decide that Hindi would be India's official

language.<sup>93</sup> English was given a temporary designation as the same, but was to be phased out with the remnants of colonial government, a promise reneged on in years to follow.<sup>94</sup>

Rightfully, there was widespread protest across India by citizens who spoke any of the other hundreds of languages found across the country. To many, this played into an existing dynamic of Northern hegemony, where members of Eastern, Western, and Southern Indian constituencies were not represented culturally or ideologically in government. Major movements formed in opposition to the imposition of Hindi, such as the Aikya Kerala movement, which demanded the formation of a state based on the perceived common linguistic identity of Indians in Travancore, Cochin, Malabar, and surrounding areas. It was due to this and various companion movements in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and others, that the national government passed the aforementioned State Reorganisation Act, creating Kerala within the boundaries it bears today.

Though the bulk of the movement's activism predated the formation of the CPI, EMS worked as an Aikya Kerala organizer at the tail end of its political influence.<sup>95</sup> As an elected official and intellectual leader of the CPI, he actively and ardently opposed any sort of national language, arguing that such a policy would erase the culture and tradition that came with other predominant languages of regions outside the north and favor a national identity conceived over

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<sup>93</sup> I am using the terms "National" and "Official" languages interchangeably here partially for convenience but also as a reflection of their fluid definitions in the debates common to the era. Legally speaking this was purely a question of what language would be used in government administration (i.e. the Official Language), but activists on all sides would also refer to the concept of an Official Language as also representing an aspect of national identity (i.e. the National Language). This was certainly true of fundamentalists like Sarkar who supported a Hindu nationalist vision of India, but also of EMS and others outside the North who viewed the Official Language debate as representing the divide between regions of India. In an address to the Parliament in 1968, then Governor of Kerala V. Viswanathan succinctly summarized the intermingling of these concepts in arguing "The question is not of what the national language should be, but the spirit of asking the question itself."

<sup>94</sup> Gupta, Jyotirindra Das, and Jyotirindra Dasgupta. *Language conflict and national development: Group politics and national language policy in India*. Vol. 5. Univ of California Press, 1970.

<sup>95</sup> Shefi, A. E. "VIMUCHANA SAMARAM AND FIRST COMMUNIST MINISTRY IN KERALA." In *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 80, pp. 1150-1158. Indian History Congress, 2019.

the ashes of regional traditions. Moreover, he worried that those who were not natively trained in Hindi, i.e. those outside the North, would face systemic disadvantage in operating within and trying to access services of a national government, worsening the blow already issued by the papering over of regional culture. Per EMS, in matters ranging from employment to culture, the establishment of Hindi as a national language would confer “superior status” to North India and North Indian identity.<sup>96</sup>

In 1951, at the height of the Aikya Kerala movement, Malayalam was spoken by roughly 3.78% of the national population, an important but undoubtedly small minority.<sup>97</sup> To EMS, this was a large enough group of people to ensure its own state, and a large enough minority to warrant significant linguistic and cultural protections. It is curious, then, that he simultaneously and subsequently argued that Malayalam be the official language of Kerala, where larger proportions of the state were composed of non-Malayalam speakers. In fact, one survey of linguistic diversity found that there were 28 distinct mother tongues spoken throughout Kerala, two of which, Kannada and Tamil, were spoken by nearly 1 million people, or a cumulative 10% of the population in 1969.<sup>98,99</sup> It seems fair to assume that there were rich linguistic and cultural differences attached to this linguistic diversity in the same way that one should argue the same to be true of Malayalam and Malayalam-speakers.

Despite this, the Communist Party of Kerala emphasized the need for the “immediate institution of Malayalam as an official language” in its 1966 brief “Toward an Alternate Policy Framework,” its declaration of opposition to the Congress government which then held power in

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<sup>96</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. 77.

<sup>97</sup> Nair, U Sivaraman, and Travancore-Cochin. India. Superintendent of Census Operations. “Census of India, 1951: Travancore-Cochin: Census Reports - 1951” 2 (01 1953). <https://jstor.org/stable/saoa.crl.25803745>.

<sup>98</sup> Central Institute of Indian Languages. 1973. Distribution of languages in India in states and union territories, inclusive of mother-tongues. Mysore: CIIL.

<sup>99</sup> “Economic Review, 1970” Kerala State Planning Board



Kerala.<sup>100</sup> As soon as the CPI(M) reclaimed power in 1967, led largely by its vanguard of Brahmins and Nairs, it then comes as no surprise that it successfully lobbied for and passed legislation that made Malayalam and English dually state languages. Clearly, the significant population of Keralites speaking other languages within the state did not warrant the same concern of identity, culture, and literature, as Malayalam and Malayalis when considering Hindi as a national language. The communists were thus reproducing the crime of erasure they rightfully levied onto Congress politicians, in this case neglecting the needs of the significant non-Malayalam speakers within the state.

To date no scholar has spoken to the dimension of caste underlying minority language policy in Kerala. I argue that it is precisely because of the bias demonstrated in chapters 1 and 2 that the communists made such a crucial oversight. EMS's own writing is most revealing to this end, as in his historical analysis of caste development in *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, he mentions in passing that the vast majority of Keralites who speak Tamil and Kannada are in fact Dalits in regions bordering the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (then Mysore and Madras).<sup>101,102</sup> Having written this 15 years before the passage of the Kerala Official Languages Act, he perhaps forgot or simply did not make the connection that the linguistic minorities of his state constituency belonged to oppressed-caste backgrounds, thus positioning them as doubly disadvantaged in trying to preserve their culture and traditions. This much is actively in line with his views on culture and identity; in the same way that he ignored the culture and practices of Dalits in the creation of Malayali art and literature, here too EMS ignores that

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<sup>100</sup> EMS Namboodiripad. *Toward an Alternate Policy Framework for the Fourth Five-Year Plan: Conclusions of a Seminar Organised by the Kerala State Planning Board*. Thiruvananthapuram: The Economic Division of the State Planning Board, Government of Kerala, 1966.

<sup>101</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. 46.

<sup>102</sup> I have not found any official demographic results that confirm this assertion, but a number of researchers have qualitatively argued the same thing in more recent scholarship. See Panikkar (2020), Darwin (2019), Sini (2016), and Nair (2013).

perhaps there is some value to the language and culture of these minority groups who do not already speak Malayalam. If nothing else, it is logical inconsistent to (rightly) demand rights for a linguistic minority at the national level and ignore a similar group within his own state.

What seems like a point in favor of the CPI is that the final clause of this legislation allows for certain exceptions to be made for Tamil and Kannada-speaking residents, particularly as they engage with government. There are two considerations to keep in mind here, however: first and foremost, an investigation into legislative speeches from 1967-1968 reveals that the initial draft proposed by the communist party did not include this clause. It was only after E. Ahamed, a Muslim League representative from the Dalit reserved Kannur district proposed there be the inclusion of such protections that the clause was appended to the original draft.<sup>103</sup> He persuasively draws attention to the gap in communists' logic through the example of naming conventions, arguing that in the same way that members of the State Legislature expressed distaste at using the Hindi for India, "Bharat," non-Malayalam speakers may resist being forced to call Kerala "Keralam," the "proper" Malayalam word for otherwise anglicized name of the state.<sup>104</sup> It is hard to imagine that Ahamed's religious background and Dalit constituency played no role in his advocacy, empathy to minoritization likely struck him in a way less likely than his communist colleagues who were relatively insulated from and oblivious to concerns of caste.

It is important to acknowledge that members of the CPI(M) did capitulate on this issue, accepting the suggestion of Ahamed after some debate. Such changes can be considered a victory of good-faith policymaking and should be celebrated as such. Even so, the fact the communists failed to see an issue unique to Dalits bears emphasizing; it was not in their nature

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<sup>103</sup> This very E. Ahamed would go on to serve as a representative to the U.N. under Prime Minister Atul Vajpayee and Minister of External Affairs under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

<sup>104</sup> Discussion of the Proposed Bill to Declare Malayalam the Official Language of Kerala, Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, 365(1968) (E. Ahamed, MLA from the district of Kannur)

or instinct to think of language accommodations, requiring an outside voice from a separate political party to point them in a direction that might speak to needs of Dalits. This was perhaps not enough though, as in Ahamed's speech he merely calls for "reservations in language policy" for those who do not already speak Malayalam, failing to provide a concrete vision of how this might look. What provisions eventually were included to this end reflects a level of unwillingness or disinterest in truly engaging in the preservation of these languages and cultures.

First of all, the legislation's reservation clause specifically guarantees a response from *local* government in Tamil or Kannada if that is the citizen's only language of communication, so if a person tries to communicate with the *central* government in Tamil or Kannada, the same right is not guaranteed.<sup>105</sup> It was thus it unlikely if not impossible for these people, i.e. Dalits, to interface with the central government without learning Malayalam or English. For those Dalits who spoke languages outside of Tamil or Kannada, this was even more difficult, as even their local governments (or officers of the Central government that would travel to their municipalities) had no legal obligation to communicate with them in their native language. Instead, the legislation proclaims that all communication with local and central government figures would be conducted in English.<sup>106</sup>

Per the legislation itself, the logic here was to use English as a "link language," or a lingua franca that could bridge the divide between disparate indigenous groups in the state. The concept of link languages are found across India and imbued within the national constitution as a means of bridging the divide between various Adivasi, Dalit, and regional groups that do not engage with the mainstream language of government.<sup>107</sup> An intuitive idea on face, the problem

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<sup>105</sup> *Kerala: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. 86.

<sup>106</sup> THE KERALA OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT, 1969

<sup>107</sup> Bhattacharya, Leena, and S. Chandrasekhar. *India's search for link language and progress towards bilingualism*. No. 2020-015. Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, India, 2020.

lies with the diagnosis of Kerala schools: at the time when this legislation was being written, schools attended by Dalits (those in rural and reserved caste districts) had far less access to English education than schools in urban and/or dominant-caste settings.<sup>108</sup> English was thus being prescribed as the language of government in areas where it was disproportionately unknown. Ironically, it was only in dominant-caste areas where English as a link language was remotely possible, say in the areas inhabited mainly by Tamilian Brahmins (Palakkad, Trivandrum, Kollam, and Thrissur, for example) who generally had access to robust systems of multi-lingual education.<sup>109,110</sup> Few contradictions are a better exemplar of CPI(M) caste bias: imbued within the postulation of English as a link language is the assumption that its attainment either 1) already has happened, or 2) can happen easily. This may have been, and likely was, the case for the vast majority of politicians who made up the communist party, but demonstrably was not true for Dalits in Kerala.

The Official Languages Act has consequences that remain to this day. In an examination of minority languages spoken by Adivasi and Dalit communities in Kerala, Prema (2011) finds that nearly all dialects and languages outside of the main Dravidian languages are on a trajectory towards obsolescence.<sup>111</sup> While Tamil and Kannada are not at risk of dying out, languages associated with oppressed-caste groups like Palaiyan, Wayanad Kadar, Malakkuravan, Pulaya Kattunaikkan were categorized as anywhere from “definitively” to “critically endangered” in the

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<sup>108</sup> Nair, Sreedevi K. "The Teaching of English in the Government/Aided Primary Schools in Kerala under DPEP." *Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development Discussion Paper* 58 (2004); Gough, Kathleen. "Literacy in Kerala." *Literacy in traditional societies* (1968): 132-160; Nair, PR Gopinathan. "Education and socio-economic change in Kerala, 1793-1947." *Social Scientist* (1976): 28-43.

<sup>109</sup> Retnakumar, Janakumaran Nair, and Perianayagam Arokiasamy. "Explaining school enrolment trends in Kerala, India." *Journal of South Asian Development* 1, no. 2 (2006): 231-248.

<sup>110</sup> Venkitaraman, Abhishek Koduvayur. "Exploring Utopia in Agrahaarams: Early Tamil Brahmin settlements in Kerala." *International Journal of Research*, Available at <http://internationaljournalofresearch.com/list-of-volumes/list-of-issues> 1 (2014).

<sup>111</sup> Prema, S. "Status of Dravidian Tribal Languages in Kerala." *OSMANIA PAPERS IN LINGUISTICS* 37 (2011): 63.

state. Of course there are a number of factors that contribute to the fading of indigenous language, but the same report also categorized the current Kerala government as “passively assimilating” populations toward speaking Malayalam, of “enthusiastically encouraging the adoption of the language” without simultaneously affording resources to the preservation of minority languages.<sup>112</sup>

Though Prema is primarily speaking to the communist party of the 2010s, the legislation’s language and the speeches given prior to its passage demonstrate that her assessment can be applied to EMS’s ministries as well. The communist party clearly did not antagonize or actively oppose the existence of minority languages, but there is a distinct lack of validity granted to these modes of communication, validity that as is given to English and Malayalam, and to differing degrees Tamil and Kannada. They desired the existence of a state where the language of government, and by extension the language of Keralites, was Malayalam. This uniquely Malayali identity can be traced back to EMS’s writings as discussed in Chapter 1, where he explicitly speaks to a superior literary and artistic quality to the language and practices of dominant-caste groups.

As with the creation and publication of *New Age*, I argue that the installment of Malayalam as a state language is both means and end of the reductionist and insular bent of communists in Kerala. As proven by an analysis of the state executive branch, the state legislature, and the national Lok Sabha, communist governance between 1957 and 1969 was

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<sup>112</sup> A major one of these confounding factors that bears mentioning is the national adoption of the “Three Language Formula” in 1969. In an attempt to address the concerns of non-Hindi speakers, the central government mandated that schools in non-Hindi-speaking states teach three languages: Hindi, English, and a third regional language. In predominantly Hindi-speaking states, the three languages were Hindi, English, and a regional language, preferably from South India. Devi (2017) provides an analysis of the policy in Northeast India, demonstrating how this allowed for the preservation of preferentially privileged regional languages and contributed to the decline of smaller languages associated with Dalits and Adivasis.

characterized by an extreme lack of competing perspectives. Even if there were significant opponents to a state language, they likely would not have found a voice in the machinery of the state. Rather, the electoral politics of the CPI and later CPI(M) reinforced Brahmin/Nair domination, consolidating power among the ranks of dominant caste representatives. These politicians, entering the fray with the class reductionist analytic demonstrated in chapters 1 and 2, only continued to then create legislation and advocate change on the basis of a wholly economic character, failing to account for caste interests that may have been crucial to a more inclusive consideration of language policy. It is in this sense that politics and policy provide a tangible consequence to the theoretical shortcomings of leftists in Kerala, emphasizing the urgent need to construct new ideologies that move beyond class reductionism and incorporate the unique plight wrought by caste (and other social) discrimination.

## Conclusion

*“Ranged against us on the one hand are those who denounce us for our alleged ‘departure from the principles of nationalism and socialism’ since we are championing ‘sectarian’ causes like those of the oppressed-castes and religious minorities. On the other hand are those who, in the name of defending the oppressed-caste masses, in fact, isolate them from the mainstream of the united struggle of the working people irrespective of caste, community and so on.”*

- EMS Namboodiripad, “Once Again on Castes and Classes”<sup>113</sup>

By the end of his term as second Chief Minister, E.M.S Namboodiripad was an embattled man. Though the undeniable leader of an unprecedentedly successful communist movement, his reascendence to power was stopped short by former confidant, comrade, and friend C. Achutha Menon—in a coalition with the INC no less. Facing a vote of no confidence, EMS relinquished the reigns of government to Menon and resumed his position as leader of the opposition, continuing to write prolifically as a lead theoretician of the national communist party and contributing to the development of ideology in India and abroad. Perhaps with distance from elected office there was an increased candor in EMS’s these later writings that demonstrates both more and less self-awareness than his earlier work.

EMS’s sympathy for marginalized communities ran long and spanned multiple causes, creating a career of activism that brought under wing a number of communists that would eventually form the CPI and his successive administrations. EMS and his colleagues positioned themselves as champions of the downtrodden masses, including such groups as Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims, and in many ways they were. Because they did indeed suffer from material inequality, many of the reforms advocated for by the CPI led to notable improvements in the lives of Keralites across the social spectrum. Yet it is undeniably true that for a majority of the

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<sup>113</sup> Namboodiripad, E. M. S. "Once again on castes and classes." *Social Scientist* (1981): 12-25.

oppressed ranks among the state's diverse population, communists failed to usher in the utopia they desired, falling short of the abundance and luxury seen in the mythical days of Mahabali.

This thesis has argued that the ideology of EMS and the communist party created a vision of reform that did not, and could not, bring about equality for Dalits. From their interpretation of caste as a historic outgrowth of class, to their belief that class reforms could propel Dalits through the glass ceilings imposed by discrimination, the CPI consistently failed to adequately incorporate caste into its model of revolution. The party's leadership expressed on various occasions a specific opposition to caste organizations that when viewed in combination with their euphemistic language of "enlightening" or "uplifting" those of oppressed-caste backgrounds reveals a bias against Dalit politics, cultures, and identities. I have demonstrated that this bias cyclically reinforced itself through communist party publications and political machinery, disseminating a negative view of caste organizations and recruiting to its ranks a disproportionate population of dominant-caste candidates for elected office. The lack of Dalit perspectives led to a series of reforms that not only failed to consider specific issues of caste, but excluded from the fold those who did not already conform to a Brahminical notion of Malayali identity.

Through a complexly flawed system of ideology, politics, and policy, EMS and the communist party thus fell crucially short of revolution. Try as they did to radically alter the structure of society in their two short ministries, the failure to incorporate caste as coexisting with and unique from class prevented comprehensive success of their otherwise progressive agenda. Rather than engaging with caste as its own legitimate entity, they continued to view it through class reductionist analytic, falling prey to the impulses of orthodox Marxism. A more complete model of change would have treated caste and class as simultaneous, interwoven, and



unique, each evil in their power of division and polarization, each forces that require solidarity, empathy, and compassion to overcome. It is the ambitious hope of this thesis that identifying the flawed basis and mechanisms that maintained this system of caste oppression is a step in the process of rectifying these missteps and creating a communism that truly works for all.

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