



# SOCIAL CONFLICTS AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN EARLY TRAVANCORE

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## **Abstract**

In 1947, when India was on the threshold of attaining independence, the attitude of the princely states underwent certain changes) The decision of the British Government to transfer power to India, leaders left the states free either to join the Dominion of India or the Dominion of Pakistan or to stand independent. The administration decided to declare Travancore as an independent state from the day of British withdrawal from India. This daring venture, undertaken by the Diwan and the Maharaja in disregard to public opinion complicated the political situation. The congress leaders of India including Gandhi vehemently condemned this policy of the Diwan. The state congress on the other hand, launched an agitation in June 1947 against this move. The formation of Travancore Constituent Assembly was remarkable in many respects. It marked the death knell of monarchy and the dawn of democracy. Travancore got the credit for conducting elections on the basis of universal adult suffrage for the first time in an Indian State. But it also marked the dawn of communalism and power games, indicative of the fact that it was the dress rehearsal of democracy and popular governance in Kerala.

*IndexTerms - British Government to transfer power to India, Diwan, Maharaja, agitation, monarchy, Travancore, Constituent Assembly, British imperialism, Lord Padmanabha.*

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## *Asha Rajan* **Introduction**

Travancore, commonly called South Kerala assumed significance as a major political unit since the days of King Marthanda Varma in the eighteenth century. Unlike in any other part of India, this princely territory assimilated itself to numerous distinctive features of its own. The concentration of royal power in the monarchs empowered the rulers to protect it from foreign invasions and for preserving unified political entity. The amalgamation of numerous petty territories of chieftains, however, reduced the transparency in the socio-political spectrum. Heavily concentrated under the mental attitudes of a single king, successive monarchs ruled the State as servants of SreePadmanabhaswami; their deity at Trivandrum.

Under these circumstances, the social sector came to be neglected a lot. The caste – Hindus enjoyed the confidence and good will of the ruling dispensation and reduced the lives of lower strata to the level of mere non-entities. However, the growth of an economically powerful Christian and Muslim population created more



space for speedy socio-political experimentation. The emergence of a new socio-political order in the State can be analyzed in such a perspective.

Among the princely States of India, Travancore, the tiny kingdom, situated at the southern tip of the Indian sub-continent occupied a pre-eminent position. This principality traces an uninterrupted monarchical system of government through the Ages. The period under study witnessed the last days of Monarchy and simultaneous rise and progress of nationalism that ultimately played the way for the emergence of popular democracy. The trends and developments that had favored the rise and growth of socio-political consciousness as well as the contradictions posed by communal and caste-based organizations have been brought out to the possible scale. While analyzing the different factors, care is taken to point out the techniques adopted by each one of these formations to assert its respective policy in an attempt to reach out to the people. The official machinery headed by the Diwan and his police force made all out attempts through overt and covert methods to scuttle both the Congress 'spirit of nationalism as well as the Marxian ideology of communism. The nationalists represented by the Travancore State Congress evolved varied strategies to overcome police repression. Simultaneously they adopted diverse methods to determination of communism as an acceptable political force. The communist party on the other hand, made frantic efforts to push ahead its mass contact programs through encounters and adjustments with the administration as well as the nationalists. The uprising at Punnappra-Vayalar earned martyrs' blood to the victory of revolution. It represented the amount of sacrifices for the liberation of the toiling and moiling masses who worked in the factories, agricultural fields and in the coastal waters of Arabian Sea.

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A study of people's role in nation making gained significance in the writing of history. The Indian National Congress, which led the struggle for freedom, opened a new era in the political map of India, having stood as the torch-bearer of people's rights and privileges. Undergoing different overtones due to the impact of ideologies, stresses and strains, the Congress movement attained success in a slow but steady pace. For a long time the national movement restricted its operation within the British provinces, which were directly under the Crown's administration. Slowly its repercussions spread to the princely territories too particularly after the entry of Mahatma Gandhi in the Congress agitation. The participation of political enthusiasts from the neighbouring princely states in the Congress programmes generated active interest among the former as a native state



Travancore acquired prominence by virtue of its high rate of literacy and progress of civilization. The awakening among the people precipitated a demand for securing a due share in the administration of the state for all people. Travancore, situated in the southernmost part of India and blessed by nature, was one of the important states in British India. The rulers of the state surrendered themselves to alien hegemony and accepted a vassal status. While the powers, those, who fought in defense of freedom, suffered and perished, those, who betrayed it, survived and flourished. Travancore was no exception. Protected by British imperialism, supported by a ruling clique and dedicating themselves to Lord Padmanabha, its princes systematically exploited the people, partly for their own extravagance and partly in competition with fellow princes for gaining the favour of the British.<sup>1</sup> What the common people experienced in favour of the day life in this state were the evils arising out of oppressive taxation, forced labor, social degradation, exclusion from temples, streets and services, starvation and torture. The Harijans, the Ezhavas, the Nadars and the Muslims were the worst hit. This sordid situation continued for long until there came organized opposition. The oppressed communities, particularly the Nadars and the Ezhavas took the lead in the struggle; but with the spread of political awakening, the State Congress spearheaded the movement.<sup>2</sup>

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### **United Kerala Movement**

The movement for the unification of the Kerala state presented an obstacle to the Diwan's move for an independent Travancore. In 1946 the demand for the formation of a linguistic province of all Kerala for the Malayalam speaking people by merging the Travancore state, Cochin state and the Malabar district of the Madras presidency assumed greater importance. In this movement there lurked a threat to the existence of Travancore as a separate state under the maharaja. It gathered a sudden impetus in consequence of the developments in Cochin politics. On 29<sup>th</sup> July 1946 the Maharaja of this state announced in the Cochin Assembly of his desire to work towards merging Cochin in a United Kerala province.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this assertion of the Diwan, the Malayalam speaking people who formed the majority of the population, extended their support to the Cochin scheme. The political parties, the Travancore State Congress, the Cochin *Praja Mandal* and the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee pledged to work towards the realisation of this objective. In order to mobilise public support, they held propaganda meetings and conferences in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar.<sup>5</sup> On 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> April, 1947 they convened a United Kerala Convention at Trichur under the chairmanship of K. Kelappan, president of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee. Nearly 300 delegates from Travancore participated in the convention. T.M. Varghese of the State Congress moved a resolution and it



was passed. It reads: “This convention of the people’s representatives of Kerala proclaim that Indian states such as Travancore and Cochin and the British Indian areas including Mahe should be considered as integral parts of Kerala on geographical, cultural, linguistic and economic basis and should form a separate self-governing unit under the Indian Union The administrative power in this unit should be vested in the hands of the people.<sup>6</sup> The convention constituted a Working Committee of fifteen members to organise the people for the formation of United Kerala. The Maharaja of Cochin, who inaugurated the conference, agreed to serve as the patron of the United Kerala Movement.

In the princely states of Travancore and Cochin there languished a large Tamil population. Mostly concentrated in south Travancore, Devikulam, Peermedu and Chittur, they constituted a linguistic minority in a Malayalee dominated area. Their ordeals defied description, for the Nairs who controlled the administration, denied to the Tamils any place in the establishments of the state. As the Nairs were in possession of most of the lands, the Tamils lived at their mercy as tenants and labourers.<sup>7</sup> They had no right either to enter the temples or to learn their language in the schools or to serve on the administration. Added to these, the princely administration promoted Malayalee migration to the Tamil areas, particularly Devikulam and Peermedu for creating a Malayalee majority. Threatened with extinction, the Tamils clamoured for the integration of their territory with Tamilnadu.<sup>8</sup> At a conference at Trivandrum in May 1938 the leaders discussed the issues, created by the imposition of Malayalam upon the Tamils, exclusion from public services and collection of oppressive taxes. In October 1938 at a meeting that was held at Rajakkamangalam, they adopted a resolution demanding the creation of a separate district for their areas.<sup>9</sup> This was followed by the organization of Tamil Sangam in December 1945 at a meeting at Nagercoil the leaders formed the all Travancore Tamilian congress, subsequently called Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress (TTNC) S. Nathaniel was elected president. Though Nathaniel was the President of the party, A. Nesamony wielded the real influence, the party demanded the merger of Tamil speaking areas of the princely states with the Tamil region in the east.<sup>10</sup>

After the United Kerala Convention at Trichur in April 1947 the leaders of the Tamilnadu Congress decided to press their demand for a separate district in Travancore. However, when the Diwan announced ‘independence for Travancore’, the Tamilnadu Congress felt themselves considerably relieved of their anxiety.<sup>11</sup> Yet in view of its stand for a separate district and of its resolve to impress the State Congress leaders of their political objective, the Tamilnadu Congress adopted an independent course of action. On 18 July 1947 the Working Committee of the Tamilnadu Congress met at Nagercoil under the presidency of S. Nathaniel.<sup>12</sup> The meeting unanimously decided to start direct action against the Diwan’s declaration of independence in case their demand for a separate Tamil district with the right of self-determination was not conceded before 15<sup>th</sup> August.

In 1947 when election were ordered to state legislature, there came keen rivalry between T.T.N.C. and the State Congress, the police, at the instance of the Nairs, broke up the Tamil, meetings and beat up the people. At Mankad and Keezhkulam the troops opened fire, killing three Tamils and injuring several. Despite the combined opposition of the Malayalees and the administration, the T.T.N.C. captured fourteen out of eighteen seat which it contested. The situation worsened after the elections. Pattom A. Thanu Pillai a Nair fanatic who entertained an inveterate hatred against the Tamils, formed his ministry. Supported by the state police, his fellow Nairs fell



upon the Tamils and assaulted them at several places.<sup>13</sup> Two persons were murdered, while another was thrown alive into a deep well and killed.<sup>11</sup> Men and women were dragged into police vans, dishonoured and tortured. A reign of terror spread its tentacles. In 1949 a new situation developed as the other Malayalam speaking state of Kochi was united with Travancore. This reduced the Tamils to a smaller minority. In protest against this development demonstrations were held but the leaders were arrested.<sup>14</sup>

On 3 June 1947, United Kingdom accepted demands for a partition, the Maharaja of Travancore desired to declare himself independent. Supported by the then Diwan, CP. RamaswamiIyer, as Travancore's declaration of independence was unacceptable to India, negotiations were started with the Diwan by the Government of India. Nevertheless, an attempt was made on C. P. on 25 July 1947 during a concert commemorating the anniversary of Swati Thirunal. C.P. survived with multiple wounds and hastened the accession of Travancore state to the Indian Union soon after his recovery. P.G.N. Unnithan chaired the Travancore Constitutional Reforms Committee and he relinquished office on March 24, 1948 when a people's government led by Sri PattomThanu Pillai as Prime Minister took over.<sup>15</sup> PattomThanu Pillai was the first Prime Minister of Independent Travancore state and he resigned as Prime Minister of Travancore on 17 October 1948. The formation of Travancore Constituent Assembly was remarkable in many respects. It marked the death knell of monarchy and the dawn of democracy. Travancore got the credit for conducting elections on the basis of universal adult suffrage for the first time in an Indian State. But it also marked the dawn of communalism and power games, indicative of the fact that it was the dress rehearsal of democracy and popular governance in Kerala.

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