Helpdesk Research Report: Communist Government in Kerala, India
01.05.08

Query: What has been the experience of democratically-elected Communist parties in the state of Kerala, India, particularly in terms of social policy?

Enquirer: DFID Nepal

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1. Overview

This query discusses the experiences of the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM) in India – specifically in the states of Kerala and West Bengal - which has had a long and, in some cases, highly acclaimed record of government in the two states.

Kerala became the first Indian state, in 1957, to elect a Communist government. It is widely argued that almost continuous communist rule in Kerala since then has produced both order and some success in alleviating poverty. It has also been associated with the formulation of clear and cohesive transformative projects, including a successful land reform programme and, more recently, democratic decentralisation. However, the CPM has faced some considerable challenges to its government. On election in 1957, it was immediately confronted by a resistance alliance made up of the Christian Church, landlords, plantation owners, merchant capital and upper caste groups who organised under the umbrella of the Congress Party. This led to the so-called ‘liberation struggle’ which almost resulted in civil war. In 1959, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru dismissed the Communist government and imposed President’s rule in Kerala, a first in India. It is argued that, by that time, however, the ground had already been laid for a series of redistributive political programmes that were to dominate the state’s politics for the next decade and a half.

Some commentators have assessed the record of Communist parties in Kerala as compared to West Bengal. They argue that despite coming to power in both states, the Communist party achieved far-reaching change only in Kerala. Here, the CPM has used its reach into trade unions, and peasant and volunteer organisations, to work towards decentralised development, and even to encourage greater productivity and economic growth. In Bengal however, CPM-led governments have displayed weak political will towards implementing reforms, and have allowed the party’s organisational interests to supersede its commitment to political struggles and reforms. Some experts argue that this is due partly to the different ways in which the two parties have historically evolved. In contrast to the CPM in West Bengal, the CPM in Kerala developed broad-based support within the grassroots which allowed it to evolve an agenda of popular development specifically centred around further democratisation. This broadened the development agenda beyond redistributive issues.
However, Kerala is not a sovereign state and therefore the value of its experience to Nepal may be somewhat limited. It is also important to remember that the context within which the Communist party evolved in Kerala was quite specific. A key enabling factor was a favourable and unique institutional and political environment. Usually agrarian communism has been marked by violence. In Kerala the rise of communism was a comparatively peaceful process. While they were subject to occasional censorship, the communists were mostly allowed to operate in public spaces, and managed to build a dense network of unions, farmer associations, schools, libraries, cultural organisations, and press organs.

Unfortunately as much of the relevant literature was written in the 1970s and 80s when this issue was of topical significance, few of the materials identified for this query are available publicly.

2. Key Documents

  This book, based on extensive fieldwork and historical analysis, presents a comparison of the Communist parties of India and South Africa in their pursuit of socialist democracy. Williams explores the organisational characteristics and party history, as well as how these parties have pushed forward their similar ideologies within their unique political and economic environments.

  This book is available from amazon.co.uk: http://www.amazon.co.uk/Communism-Kerala-Study-Political-Adaptation/dp/0905838351/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1209378760&sr=1-2
  A preview is available at: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=93W5rNYRC-0C&printsec=frontcover&q=communist+government+kerala&lr=&source=gbs_summary_r&cad=0
  This book aims to analyse and evaluate communist parliamentary and governmental activity in Kerala and assesses the extent to which both the CPI and CPM have allowed the practice of government to modify theory. The author assesses the experience of the CPI which came to power in Kerala with 38% of the vote and almost formed an overall majority in the Assembly. He argues: “The new government found office a turbulent experience. Its attack on vested interests in land and education generated powerful opposition which culminated in the so-called Liberation Struggle of 1959, aimed at persuading the central government to intervene and end ‘tyranny’ and ‘anarchy’” (p. 1). (A little over two years later, the government was dismissed by the Indian Prime Minister). Chapter 6 reassesses the objectives, record, and demise of the first communist government. Chapter 8 outlines the genesis of the CPM-led United Front coalition which came to power in 1967 and the temporary accommodation of rival communist parties, and explains the Front’s 1967 success. Chapter 10 then analyses the United Front’s politics in relation to communist theory espoused by the CPI, CPM, and the breakaway groups, including the Naxalites, who rejected parliamentarianism not only as a strategy but also as a tactic. Chapter 11 discusses Front politics from a development perspective and assesses the reality of the structural constraints set by the Centre-State relations and evaluating the ministries’ performance in selected key areas.

This book offers a historical analysis of the emergence of two different welfare regimes in Kerala and West Bengal where left parties have ruled consistently since independence. The book uses archival and other primary materials to analyse the effects political struggles have had upon welfare regimes, and compares the Kerala to the state of West Bengal. Like Kerala, West Bengal has been ruled by leftists; but the latter has not enjoyed the same degree of success in raising equal access to welfare, literacy, and basic subsistence. This comparison highlights the role of left party formation and its mode of insertion in civil society. It raises the question of what kinds of parties can affect the most substantive anti-poverty reforms within a vibrant democracy.

  This article is available for purchase from the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS):
  [http://cat.inist.fr/?aModele=afficheN&cpsidt=14209233](http://cat.inist.fr/?aModele=afficheN&cpsidt=14209233)

This article compares two regions in India, namely the states of Kerala and West Bengal, where leftist parties have either governed or formed the leading opposition when not in power. It aims to address the question of why the same leftist party has had differential success in reducing poverty in these two states. Communists in the Communist Party of India (CPI) and later, in the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM) have held power for successive terms in both states, but have implemented far-reaching social policies only in Kerala. In Bengal however, there is evidence that CPM led governments have displayed weak political will toward implementing reforms, and that the organisational interests of the CPM have superseded its commitment to political struggles and reforms. These differences are attributed to the political practices of each party during the anticolonial movement, the structural conditions within which each had to function, and the consequent variations in political power. "The general theory developed in this paper is that the political power of leftist parties depends on the degree to which they have built organizational strength, political hegemony, and a broad social base through their extraparliamentary struggles. While the party’s leadership in the political arena is a crucial determinant of such success, its chances are also circumscribed by social structure and the levels of organization of contending political actors – in this instance, class and party." (p. 39).

The author also advocates a historical approach and stresses the importance of understanding the genesis of political parties in social movements. An issue that emerges from such an approach is that “political struggles waged at one time under party leadership can, for decades afterward, affect the extent of that party’s political power. Thus there can be significant (and unintended) lag effects through which political struggles affect future generations […] In Kerala, the CPI grew out of the anticolonial movement in the region, whereas in Bengal it grew largely in separation from it. This was a crucial factor in affecting the type of party formations that emerged in both cases […] For this and other historical reasons, the CPI in Kerala grew out of a tradition of mass-based, grassroots organization, while the CPI in Bengal was more isolated from popular movements. Consequently, at the onset of independence from the British in 1947, the two regional parties developed different levels of organizational strength, large differences in membership, and different political capacities to win elections and implement reforms. In Bengal, Communists belonging to the CPM…were faced with the problem of creating a rural base while attempting to win elections. While Communists in Kerala faced a similar trade-off between elections and reforms, they were a far more popular party, with far-reaching ties in civil society. These historically developed links allowed them to implement more substantial reforms.” (p.40)

**Land Reform**

This article highlights that unlike the rest of India, states like Kerala and West Bengal (where communist parties have exercised considerable influence) have had a relatively good record of land reform. The state of Kerala was the first to undertake land reforms of any substance. Immediately after coming to power in 1957, the communist party took a number of measures aimed at tenure reforms. The author argues: "(t)raditional Marxist approaches to these questions (of social transformation) are couched in a language of class war. In places where Marxists have entered the parliamentary process, a different approach to the whole question becomes necessary. A democratically elected government is expected to function as a mediator among sections of society with competing claims, where class struggle will have to be tempered with the imperatives of democratic administration, where the interests of the oppressed will have to be protected within a legal framework, at the same time having regard to some of the legitimate claims of the so-called oppressors" (p. 87). The author also describes the government's experience of formulating the Kerala Agricultural Reform Bill (KARB): "More radical collectivist forms were ruled out lest they should affect a break with the processes that peasants themselves had evolved. It was a case of pragmatism rather than sticking to the dictates of orthodox Marxism, and was explicitly "anti-feudal and pro-capitalist, not socialist." A radical political party was thus forced to work within a liberal constitutional framework, an elitist bureaucracy and a court system, and above all, a highly volatile and anti-communist environment of political opposition in the state, at the centre, and in the rest of the country. This made it inevitable that the Bill should have been "punctuated by moderation and caution, concessions and compromises" (p. 89).


This article assesses the experience of the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM). It explores whether the CPM has compromised its commitment to 'revolutionary class war' and the establishment of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in order to succeed electorally and survive politically, within the framework of democratic-capitalism. Given the compromises, is the CPM any more efficacious an agent of redistributive forms than other Indian parties? The author argues that "the CPM has moved in an increasingly 'social democratic' direction, while initiating a multi-pronged effort to alleviate West Bengal's rural poverty. Reformist actions have replaced revolutionary goals in face of both a realistic assessment of constraints on the one hand, and political interests of the power holders on the others [...] The capacity of the CPM to initiate redistributive reforms stems from its political characteristics. The type of leadership, ideology, and organization the CPM brings to bear on the operation of political power enables it to perform two tasks important for implementing reforms from "above": first, penetration of the countryside without being directly captured by the landed classes; and second, controlled mobilization from "below" to buttress state power as a tool of agrarian reform. The CPM's developmental experience thus has some general implications as well. It highlights how a well-organized, left-of-center party regime creates a degree of separation between political and social power and thus enables the implementation of rural reforms within a democratic-capitalist model of development." (p. 784)

**Development Strategies**


This article is available for purchase from Informaworld: [http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a787116647~db=all~order=page](http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a787116647~db=all~order=page)
This article examines the evolution of class politics and developmental strategies in the state of Kerala in South India. Following independence, lower-class mobilisation produced an agrarian transition and resulted in the consolidation of a redistributive-welfarist state. Since the early 1980s, however, there has been "a fundamental change from the past when the role of the state was almost entirely dictated by the political imperatives of social reform and accumulation strategies were entirely subordinated to redistributive demands. The new role that the state is playing in Kerala's development is of course directly tied to the CPM's conversion to democratic corporatism. For over three decades, the Communist Party was driven by a revolutionary agenda, in the classic mould of Leninist parties. Its democratic-centralism, internal discipline and highly motivated cadre base proved very successful in building a viable working-class movement. Its principal goal was to overthrow the landlord-feudal order which it effectively did through radical land reforms and the empowerment of agricultural labourers and industrial workers. But its very success in transforming Kerala's social structure created a structural dilemma, the existence of a redistributive-welfarist state in a dependent capitalist economy, in which the politics of class struggle became counter-productive. The imperative of securing the redistributive gains in a more viable productive base as well as the transformation of the political-institutional playing field thus set the stage for a major reorientation of the party's politics. That reorientation involves important political realignments as well as new developmental strategies. The uniqueness of this strategy, which seeks to promote growth on the strength rather than at the expense of the redistributive-welfarist state, can be attributed directly to the hegemonic position of the working class and the character of Kerala's democratic institutions. For the CPM it is now possible to pursue a reformist agenda involving a major shift away from its traditional advocacy of class struggle in favour of a more broad-based alliance. Because the collective power of the working class has been incorporated within the state, militant mobilisation has made way to mediated corporatist arrangements. Likewise, given the ability of an organised working class to capture a share of any increases in surplus, productivity increases, once viewed as inherently exploitative, have now become an area of negotiated compromise. Of course the outcome of these compromises remains critically tied to developments in both the national and global economy. But at a very minimum, democratic corporatism, having been built on the strength of a redistributive strategy of development and the political power of the working class, takes into account the social and political costs of blindly unleashing market forces. As such, it has made the possibility of the transition to a high-growth capitalist economy that much more viable." (p. 666)

  A preview is available at: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=r7ar3x8KAQsC&printsec=frontcover&dq=communist+government+kerala&lr=&source=gbs_summary_r&cad=0
  In 1993, West Bengal had the longest ruling Communist government in world history, and received considerable worldwide attention as a positive example of Third World development and change. This book argues that, in fact, Communist party rule has been a failure in terms of redistributive development reforms. Using interviews with government officials and ruling party members as well as internal government and party documents, the author focuses on the party's rural development policy and compares and contrasts this with its policy towards industrial labour, the state bureaucracy and big business. He explores the role of different classes in formulating and directing the Communist party's policies and explains why communism developed in Bengal, but not in neighbouring states. The author argues that the communism that has developed in West Bengal is not of a revolutionary character, but of the most minimal type of reformism. The lower classes have had a peripheral role and their standard of living has not significantly improved. Mallick concludes that, although the powers and policy options of the state government were necessarily limited, a great deal more could
have been achieved had the ruling party not been impeded by the elitist nature of its political base.

**Coalition Politics**

  This article is available for purchase from JSTOR: [http://www.jstor.org/pss/2642819](http://www.jstor.org/pss/2642819)
  This article assesses the experience of the CPM-led coalition government of the United Front (UF) in Kerala from 1967 to 1969, which entailed accommodation with the Communist Party of India (CPI). The author highlights that the "(M)arxists conceive of the United Front Governments in Kerala and West Bengal as 'instruments of struggle in the hands of the people more than as governments that actually possess adequate power, that can materially and substantially give relief to the people.' The United Front then is for the Marxists essentially a revolutionary concept. For the CPI and others, such a stance was a "big party chauvinism" (p. 995). "The Marxists were alleged to have used the police and the administrative machinery of the state government as an adjunct of the party, their efforts being directed mainly against the CPI. They were also accused of interfering with the administrative spheres under the control of other parties, notably agriculture and industry, under CPI ministers. At the same time, within the areas of their own administrative responsibility, the Marxists failed to provide any effective relief to the people – as in their handling of the food procurement program and in the two year delay in passage of the land reform act. The Marxists thus were charged with seeking to advance their own position at the expense of allied parties within the United Front on the one hand and with failure to implement the minimum program on the other. The Namboodiripad (UF) government did indeed emerge with a relatively low performance record on a number of accounts, but ironically its failure to implement more of the minimum program was due in considerable measure to caution. In choosing to work within the system, they were inevitably limited by it...Indeed, some six months after the UF government came to power in 1967, the Central Committee of the CPM was highly critical of the Marxist leadership in Kerala and its failure to 'independently mobilize the people' and for putting forward 'only such proposals as are likely to be immediately accepted by other partners.' A year later, the Central Committee again took note of the 'serious shortcomings' of the Kerala leadership. It warned of the dangers inherent in the type of parliamentary struggle engaged in and of the 'reformist and constitutional illusions it breeds'." (pp. 995-996)

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  Please note: I have not seen this article and an abstract is not available.

### 6. Additional information

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**Websites visited**
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