

Defending the Indefensible

By A Correspondent

The dastardly attack on the eminent writer Paul Zacharia by the DYFI in the CPM fortress of Payyanur in north Kerala on 10 January has been roundly condemned across the political spectrum in Kerala. Zacharia was heckled and abused at a literary seminar organized by a publisher for criticizing the moral policing practiced by the official left in Kerala. He condemned the recent DYFI-PDP joint 'moral action' against the Congress leader Rajmohan Unnithan and a Sewa Dal leader which, according to the the DYFI leadership, were 'provocative'. Zacharia was accosted by a gang of men when he was about to leave Payyanur and openly threatened. He was told that such talk was not permitted in the left bastion of Payyanur; when the threat did not produce the desired reaction, they resorted to physical intimidation, and relented only after the intervention of the organizers who are CPM sympathizers, and other writers present there. The day after, prominent leaders in the CPM, including the Chief Minister and the Minister for Education, condemned the action.

However, the CPM Czar Pinarayi Vijayan sounded quite unrepentant when he declared that 'provocation' is likely to produce violent reactions. He compared the outrage felt by the DYFI activists to that felt by Christians and Muslims faced with blasphemous utterances. The lower CPM warlords of north Malabar sound deeply encouraged by Their Master's Voice, and have been issuing similar statements. Zacharia has denied Vijayan's accusation that he portrayed the early communist leaders as 'sexual anarchists', pointing out that all he had accused them was of a modern, liberal attitude towards interaction between the sexes.

While the 'liberal' elements in and around the CPM have been struck dumb by their hero's performance, many of ordinary people remain unsurprised. And not just because the CPM resembles, all the more recently, anti-political and institutionalized religion. In fact, the communist elite in Kerala have always been ardent defenders of what Marxist theory has called 'bourgeois morality' from their earliest days. One needs only to glance at the debates about literary aesthetics that raged between the leftist 'progressive writers' and early and later modernists, from the 1940s onwards. Nor have they been strangers to verbal lumpenism—rather, it has been a fine art practiced and perfected by, actually, the most Holy among them, and deployed against even the most venerable figures in the history of modern Malayalam literature like Kesari A Balakrishna Pillai and Joseph Mundassery. However, the audacity of the present violence is scary indeed. Zacharia is an immensely popular writer respected in Kerala and outside and one of the most formidable public critics of organised religion in Kerala. That he should be physically threatened for voicing his views is new in the history of intellectual intimidation in Kerala.

Perhaps it is important to understand that this new phenomenon is not a chance occurrence, but related to the rise to hegemony of a certain style of anti-politics that is increasingly becoming the hallmark of the CPM in Kerala. In the mid-20th century, the communists were equally powerful in north Kerala—

Malabar —and in the south—Travancore and Kochi. The south, however, was hegemonic in communist politics. Deeper social democratization had occurred through powerful lower caste community movements in the south; it was more advanced in literacy and health care; it had a strong, well-organized working class—which was very militant indeed.

In the north, the communist leaders had to combine political work with social reformism and anti-caste activism and hence the idealised image one possesses of many communist leaders of the north, which are laden with a moral halo that leaders from the south do not often have. In the extreme north which were strongholds of communist peasant militancy, a violent style of activism far removed from the 'civil' style of the communist elite, or the 'uncivil' style of the organized working classes of the south remained active, which stressed the (feudal) value of community loyalty above everything else. Communists of the extreme north were too uncritically praised for being 'down to earth', 'simple', passionately committed—all else was forgiven, especially the ugly undemocratic tendencies that lay in the underside of precisely these 'virtues'. Thus was born the image that was projected on the prominent CPM leader from the extreme north, the former Chief Minister of Kerala, the late E K Nayanar : of the simple soul, completely committed to the Party, 'pure' and unsophisticated in his ways, 'direct' and 'uncomplicated' in his speech. And this image underplayed the violence of his speech, his contempt, for instance, for women who demanded greater 'civility' in public life, evident in the crudity of his 'jokes'.

It is perhaps important to distinguish between the early militancy of the left working classes and the kind of bullying that Keralites are now witnessing. Indeed, in the earlier phases, militancy was identified with the working classes mobilized by the communist party and not its leadership—as a child this correspondent remembers his very middle-class and upper caste relatives defend the communists against common elite complaints about their 'lawlessness' by pointing out that this was a feature of the 'lowest orders' of the party and not its elite—who were praised as the most 'civil' in Kerala! Now, the scene appears reversed. The 'lowest orders' at present are perhaps a 'civil-political society'—welfare beneficiaries in the panchayats, especially the women in the government supported self-help groups' network —which is utterly and terrifyingly 'civil' and docile (and not the organized working class, which is increasingly declared to be 'problem'). The upper echelons, in contrast, are increasingly being filled with Pinarayi- clones who embrace his chillingly uncivil, openly threatening style. The content of militancy is also striking. The earlier working class militancy involved plenty of 'ethical illegality'; it strained the very seams of India's liberal political order; but it was also committed to the breakdown of caste and privilege. The present one, however, is closer to the intolerance perpetuated in the mid-20th century by the middle-class elite left intellectuals against writers who refused to wed their writing to immediate left political interest. It is also deeply elitist in its defense of 'bourgeois morality': the earlier working class militancy was much less committed to bourgeois morality and marriage, as the autobiographical accounts of working class mobilizers and activists show. In the 1970s, the left trade union leaders were more likely to support the public protests by working class women left pregnant by factory owners or supervisors, and thus people do have stories of

a number of *garbhasatyagrahams* (pregnancy satyagrahas) in Kollam in the narratives of workers active in struggles of those times.

How did this shift happen? One needs to think more, but perhaps this is related to the decline of the style of left politics that was shaped in the pre-independence south Kerala. This period saw the decay of working class clout, and the weakening of traditional industries in which the militant working class was concentrated; at the same time, the rise of the 'rubber economy', concentrated in largely non-left interests, and later, the flow of wealth through migration, increased the political clout of the non-left in the south, especially the Congress. While the north caught up with the south in development indices in a few decades after independence, the Gulf Boom ushered in a flow of wealth, which especially benefited the north, and gradually coalesced into specific economic interests by the end of the 1990s. New flows of wealth strengthened non-left community interests in the north and the south, and this translated into strength for the Congress in the south; in the north, where it is not the Congress but the communists and the Muslim League which have been dominant traditionally, the new economic interests feeding on Gulf-based wealth seemed to have helped to create new centres of power within these two parties. In the same period, after the land reforms, the power of the farmers' and agricultural workers' organizations have also become divided and weaker within the left. The idealistic early leadership of the CPM and the genteel and development-and-reform-oriented early leadership of the Muslim League have disappeared. Kunhalikkutty's rise in the Muslim League and the rise of the extreme north lobby in the CPM may not be entirely coincidental, then.

The new millennium has seen the steady march of this lobby to power within the CPM, and their style is now increasingly copied by the lower ranks of leadership in the CPM. The brashness of the statements made by student and youth leaders of the CPM, often defending the completely indefensible—is quite visible at present. And all of the official left's entrenched intolerance now comes laced with a heavy dose of extreme north-Kerala style of violent 'feudalised' activism. Interestingly, this style can only bring political disaster to the CPM, given the fact that the increasing horror of all sorts of 'uncivility', 'feudalised' or 'ethical', that one finds circulating through the mainstream media and increasingly, in the views of the burgeoning consumerist middle-classes. If the Malabar Special Police was the most feared arm of the colonial oppressor in Malabar in the pre-independence years here comes the Malabar Moral Police! Quite updated, actually, with considerable 'civil society' participation! □

[Source : *Kafila*]