Red in white: A Historical Study on Political Mentalities and Naxal Sympathies within the Kerala Police from the period of emergency to the end of the twentieth century (1975-2000)

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Introduction

In the History of the Naxalite movement in India, the police-Naxal relationship is portrayed as one of intense dichotomy. Mass media, Fiction, Films, Numerous books and Articles hitherto written and published on the Naxal movement present a picture of a blood-stained relationship between police and Naxalites, filled with mutual hostility. Policemen are often projected as hunting dogs of the state serving the interests of the exploiting propertied classes. Liberals and the Left often described them as soulless tools of white terror unleashed by the bourgeois state against proletarian classes. To some extent, there could be truth in all these narratives, but my paper is a humble attempt to reach the other side of the spectrum, searching for voices of compassion, sympathy, solidarity, if any, within the police force of Kerala towards Naxalites or the Naxalite movement. My Study will help assess the degree of penetration of Naxalite ideology and sympathy for their cause in the Kerala police force from the period of emergency in 1975 to the end of the 20th century.

Significance of the study

A Close scrutiny of the history of the world reveals the fact that the people's struggles against tyrannical regimes succeeded only when men in armed forces deserted their masters and sided with the people. History shows the tyrants were ousted or forced to step down whenever armies supporting them refused to do so. In ancient and medieval periods weak and corrupt rulers were ousted from power by the next in kin, popular ministers or military commanders who could win the support of the armies. In the modern world shift of loyalty of the common soldiers to the people's side served as an important factor behind the success of socio-political revolutions in France and Russia. At the onset of revolution in France in 1789 a section of French soldiers joined the crowd in storming the bastille fort on 14th of July, 1789 the event which had heralded revolutionary period in the history of France. Radicalization of lower rungs of French army was one of the primary causes for the success of French revolution in the revolutionary period (1789-1799). Initial success of the progressive and radical elements in Paris in the year 1871, who were able to establish Paris commune and could survive for seventy days shortly after the debacle of French military forces in the war against Prussia, was primarily due to the fact that war exigencies compelled the French government to enlist common people including workers and other proletarian classes in Paris into the National guards leading to lose of its apolitical professional character. National guards, dominated by newly enlisted proletarian classes of Paris began to show their sympathy towards socialists and other radical elements in Paris and helped them to capture and retain power-even though it was for a brief period- by the creation of an institution called Paris commune. Roughly four and more decades later on March,1917 a massive procession of more than hundred

thousand protesters were moving towards winter palace of Tsar Nicholas 2.He had ordered his Cossack regiments who were till then considered most loyal to tsarist regime to intercept and disperse the protesters. But the Cossack soldiers who were deployed to disperse the protesters deserted their master and refused to fire at the people when ordered to do so by their commanders. With the loss of support of the army Tsar Nicholas 2 was forced to abdicate leading to fall of autocratic tsarist regime in Russia. In the final phase of civil war in China large chunks of right wing Kuomintang army units till then fighting against communists deserted to their side leading to ultimate communist victory in China by 1949.So a critical study of the mentalities of the police men and soldiers serving as pillars of state power especially in a country like India facing left wing extremism is very significant in the contemporary context.

Research Methodology

I had mostly relied on primary sources like oral testimonies and autobiographies of former and present naxalites and to much lesser extent, secondary sources like articles and books written on history of Naxalite movement in Kerala. Personal interviews played a major role in analysing the attitude of police personnel towards the Naxalites and Naxalite movement. Propaganda notices prepared and circulated by Naxalites were also collected and scrutinized especially one issued by naxalites in Kerala in Malayalam language expressing their solidarity with the strike of the police men. Writing style is narrative and analytical.

Naxalites and the Indian armed forces

Interestingly, song of the communist international which was compiled decades before successful Russian revolution contain lines calling upon the soldiers to turn their guns against their Generals. Vladimir Lenin illustrious leader of successful Russian revolution had perceived 'Soldier as a peasant in uniform' and had understood the need to win over common soldiers for the success of proletarian revolution. Propaganda notices circulated by Bolsheviks (Russian communists) during the period of Russian revolution were addressed not only to workers and peasants but also to soldiers. In China few of the erstwhile military officers under the Kuomintang regime like Zhu de joined Chinese communists under Mao Tse Tung in the early phase of revolutionary civil wars and contributed towards the formation of earliest units of people's liberation guerrilla army. Charu mazumdar master brain behind the Naxalbari uprising and ideologue of Naxalbari movement had not envisioned creation of frontal organizations as a prelude to Indian revolution. .Neither he (Charu mazumdar died in police custody in 1972 and became a martyr) nor his compatriots like Kanu sanyal and Sauren bose, made any serious effort to win over the police men and soldiers to the cause of Indian revolution. But gradually in the later course of Naxalite movement, at least in the context of Kerala, a section of Naxalite leaders began to take interest in the issues facing the police personnel and attempts were made to fraternise with them. However this paper primarily focuses on those police men who sympathized with the naxalites even without any serious attempt on their part to win them over for Naxalite cause.

My research paper starts with a critical study of sympathizers in the Kerala police force towards Naxalites from the period of emergency and extends up to the closing years of the 20th century.

During emergency many of the Naxalites were arrested and kept in captivity in the prison cells. K.Venu, K.N.Ramachandran, T.N Joy and Kuttikrishnan were the few among them. Here they met a police man called Bharathan who had great respect for K.Venu (who had been Kerala state secretary of CPI ML for a long time) due to his intellectual calibre and literary skills. While taking them to court or to another prison in a police vehicle, he had not tied the hands of Venu and other Naxalite prisoners as mandated

by police regulations. K. Venu and the other three hatched a conspiracy to free themselves from police captivity on one such occasion, exploiting the lenient attitude of Bharathan and his team.[1] But Bharathan's respect for Venu was purely personal and not ideological he himself grabbed K.Venu and foiled his attempt to flee from police custody while accompanying him to court in a police jeep from Kannur Central Prison.

Somasekharan was another eminent Naxalite who was also kept under captivity for a long time during the emergency. In post emergency period he rose to the position of state committee member of C.R.C CPI ML and after split in the party in 1987 became state committee member of splinter faction which was later called CPI ML (Red flag). He talked about another interesting episode in his life as Naxalite. He says "While in police captivity during emergency I met a young police man who had been a member of our naxalite group. When he saw me in police camp in Kakkayam he burst into tears".[2] Somasekharan still remember a police man named Kelu from Karivelloor in Kannur district which had been a communist strong hold, who while on guard duty did not allow other police men to enter the room and lynch them where Naxalite captives were kept in illegal custody after Kayanna police station attack. If his testimony could be taken as true, at least a few among the police men in Kerala state came closer to Naxalites and their ideology. On another occasion in the post emergency period CPI ML(Red flag)-Splinter faction of CPI ML- activists attacked and vandalised an infamous bar. According to Somasekharan it was welcomed by ordinary policemen since they too suffered at the hands of goons of bar owner.[3]

On 16th day of month of January 1980 Madathil Thomas, wicked son of infamous land lord and planter Kenichira Madathil Mathayi, was murdered by a group of Naxalites in a remote village named Kenichira in District of Wayanad.The very next year on 19th day of May 1981 Madathil Mathayi himself was killed by the Naxalites.CPI ml had not claimed the responsibility for the annihilation of Thomas in public and the police remained clueless about the culprits. But in the case of action against Madathil mathayi they-Naxalites- had already made their intentions clear through the notices and posters circulated among the public. Shortly after this incident state police launched a massive man hunt to nab the culprits. They opened a police concentration camp to interrogate and torture the suspects to find out the culprits involved in this case. Hundreds of people suspected to be Naxalite sympathizers especially activists of the Janakiya samskarika vedi (Peoples cultural forum) were kept in captivity in this camp for indefinite days defying the constitutional provisions of India and were subjected to brutal torture and humiliating treatment. One among those was James, his brother Johny, and mother Rosa. James recalls ''More than two hundred persons who were suspected to be linked to murder of Madathil mathayi were detained in the police camp. We were not allowed to bath, denied enough food and drinking water, permitted to wear only a single underwear (Shaddy) and were subjected to brutal torture method of Uruttal –Police constables who are assigned the duty will tie both the hands and legs of the suspect to a bench reserved for it.Thereafter they will squeeze the body of the hapless victim from the muscles of the feet to waist with a big roller. His mouth will be filled with rags of cloth so that his painful screaming not comes out. Police men will repeat this action for many times. Once it is finished bones and meat of the legs and thighs of the victim will be separated. Police officer who want to extract information from the victim about the culprits and details of the crime committed, had just to press his thighs, because according to James even a fly resting on the thigh of the person subjected to Uruttal will cause him enormous pain, so no need to speak much about the intensity of pains generated by the interrogating police officers when they pressed the thighs of the victims of the Uruttal to squeeze out secrets behind the crime. In addition to it one of the biggest hardships generated by this brutal method of torture is that due to enormous pain in the thighs, going to toilet became too difficult a task for them –my hair dried up and parasites began to infest my head and rest of the body". According to James

‘’Dysp Nandakumar who was in charge of the police camp was not a human but an animal”. He added that veteran Naxalite leader P.S Govindan had told him that “ Had an elephant suffered assault from the police in the same intensity as faced by me it would have died’’[4].However even amidst such an atmosphere of reign of terror generated and sustained by state police we could find a section of police men sympathetic to naxalite cause. In connection with it we hear the name of an honest and efficient Police Sub inspector called T.U Joseph (Nick named Minnal Jose).He was famous for his uncompromising stand against criminals and anti-social elements and used to take stringent action against them. But contrary to expectation he emerged as a Naxal sympathizer. He caught Madhu Nellikkara one of the prime accused in the case, but had not beaten him and given him a decent treatment.[5] He also forwarded a private message to Vadhyanapilly Jose another prime accused in the case, requesting him to surrender, and assured him that, he will neither beat nor do any personal harm to him. Finally Jose surrendered before him and was given gentle treatment similar to one received by Madhu Nellikkara. Minnal Jose serving as police inspector in the locality may have aware of the Criminal background of Madathil Thomas and his father Madathil Mathayi that may be the reason for his lenient attitude towards Naxalites who were accused in the murder of these two. He told Vadhyanapilly Jose that in each Yuga the gods takes birth in human form as divine incarnations to eliminate evil doers from the world. In this era in Kenichira gods may have born in the form of Naxalites to eliminate the evil doers. He also added that in spite of his sympathy for Naxalite cause in this case he is helpless, since he is just a watch dog of the state compelled to obey its master, whatever be his personal conviction. [6] Rajagopalan police man performing the duty of writer in the police station seems to have similar sentiments towards Naxalites. He told Vadhyanapalli Jose who had surrendered before Minnal Jose to tell a story according to his own imagination on the murder of Mathayi. [7] Years after, all the accused in Madathil mathayi assassination case were acquitted by the honourable court. Vadhyanapalli Jose and Madhu Nellikara along with many acquitted in this case continued as CPI ML activists for few more years. Vadhyanapalli Jose says even after his acquittal in the case he used to meet Police inspector Minnal Jose seeking financial help whenever CPI ML unit in kenichira faced shortage of party fund. Minnal Jose though was willing to give him money, mocked at him citing the irony of law breaker collecting fund from a law enforcer.[8] James whom I mentioned earlier also shares information on those police men in the camp who had shown compassion and sympathy to the suspected Naxalite detainees in the camp. He says there were police men who refused to either beat or perform Uruttal, under instructions from their superior officers. These policemen used to say that they too are from ordinary families. According to oral testimony of James, Dysp Nandakumar beat up those police men, who were reluctant to perform horrible torture method of Uruttal for him. Few of such policemen gave food, medicine, oil and water to the suspected Naxalites in the camp without the knowledge of their superior officers. Name of Minnal Jose (T.U Joseph) is also cited by James as well in this regard, as a compassionate police officer providing all such items to Naxalite detainees.[9]

Ameer Ali former Naxalite leader from Kannur records the help given to him by the police men -even though he had not revealed the details of it to avoid service issues for them- who were deputed in the police picket in Mundappadam in Nilambur while he was living there after leading a people’s movement against Aboobacker Haji a local land lord and his goon, Alickutty in the early years of 1980’s[10].

In the year 1992 conservative reactionary elements in state of Kerala tried to revive defunct ‘Putrakameshti yagam’ (Grand ritual ceremony to procure male offspring).It was part of broad conspiracy to rejuvenate brahmanical patriarchy and reactionary traditions in the state and was against modern concepts of gender equality. It was supposed to be held between 2nd and 9th of May. Most of the political parties in the state, even the main stream left remained silent on the topic. Malayalam

newspapers dedicated entire news columns to report daily events of the ritual. In those days while rest of Kerala was swayed by the tide of brahmanical revivalism and orthodoxy, a group of naxalites came forward to stem the tide. Adhasthitha Navothana Munnani (The term broadly mean Front for the renaissance of oppressed or dalits) which was formed under the initiative of C.R.C CPI ML to take up the issues related to caste oppression and to fight for the rights of the dalits, decided to launch an ideological and frontal attack on the reactionary elements in the state, who were trying to bring back obsolete brahmanical ideology and traditions into the state. As part of their struggle against attempt to revive brahmanical patriarchy through Putrakameshti yagam they decided to organize a protest march from Vaikom in Kottayam district to site of ritual ceremony in Cochin. It was led by Salim kumar, convenor of Adhasthitha Navothana Munnani, who belonged to Oorali tribe of Kerala by birth. More than fifty protesters were participating in the march. Police erected barricades to prevent them reaching site of ritual ceremony. When protest march moved closer to site of ritual ceremony protesters were stopped by the police force comprising police women as well. Then Salim kumar-Convenor of the Adhasthitha Navothana Munnani-leading the protest march delivered an emotional speech against Putrakameshti yagam. As I already mentioned it was performed to procure male offspring and was against the concept of gender equality. According to Salim kumar in the end of his speech tears were coming out of the eyes of police women who were deployed to prevent the advance of their march. After his speech protesters were arrested by the police and were taken to police station. Police Inspector Martin showed a friendly attitude towards the Naxalite protesters who were taken into police custody and served them tea and snacks before being released.[11] This episode shows the respect and sympathy of a section of police personnel towards atleast some of the progressive and radical ideas expounded by the Naxalites.

In the early phase of Naxalite movement in Kerala Naxalite activists had not realized the importance of winning over police men and soldiers to their side for a successful Indian revolution. But in later phase of Naxalite movement in Kerala few of the Naxalite leaders seems to have understood the significance of propaganda work among the men in uniform. Kunnel Krishnan one of the veteran leaders of Naxalite movement claims initiative for the formation of police association in Kerala was taken by CPI ML activists even though it was hijacked by mainstream communist party of India (Marxist) in later course of time.[12]

Socio- economic back ground of policemen in Kerala went through radical changes in post independent period in Kerala. Rajendran who was one of the convict in kilimanoor-Nagaroor-Kumil annihilation case of 1970's, recalls that, most of the police men in those days were either nairs (Upper caste Hindus) or Nadars.who were mostly uneducated and uncultured. In those days External physical appearance alone was the criteria for selection of policemen.[13]Grow Vasu former Naxalite leader says "In early days of Naxalite movement treatment of the Naxal detainees in police custody varied with their caste. Police identified one's caste from their name. Detainees from higher caste were treated mildly by the police but those from lower caste were subjected to maltreatment and severely beaten up"[14].James accused in Kenichira mathayi murder case recalls that on one occasion Nandakumar Dysp in charge of the police camp, while beating up P.S Govindan, Veteran Naxalite leader-Who was blacksmith by profession- humiliated him by citing his menial profession[15]. But these references could be isolated experiences of respective individuals because most the past and present Naxalites whom I had interviewed had not shared me any personal experience with regard to presence of caste based discrimination towards Naxalite captives in custody, by the police men.

According to Grow Vasu "Caste and class composition of police force in Kerala had underwent radical changes through decades from 1967 (The year of Naxallbari uprising and beginning of Naxalite

movement in India) to 2024 .Unlike 1960's and 1970's where most of the police men were from higher caste communities like nairs, due to effective implementation of reservation policy(Reservation for government jobs in Kerala was introduced for the first time in princely state of Travancore in 1936 after abstention movement led by lower castes and religious minorities for socio-political equality. Travancore public service commission came into existence in the same year. After the formation of Kerala state on 1st of November 1956 system of reservation of government jobs was extended to rest of Kerala) and also due to rise in financial and educational standards, more and more number of persons from other back ward castes, Dalit and Tribal communities began to enter police force. More than half of the government employees as well as police personnel-Fifty per cent of government jobs in Kerala including those in police are reserved for various Other Backward Castes, Dalits, and Tribals- now are from these communities. In addition to it unlike in the past most of the police personnel today are highly educated. All these factors combined together brought a positive change in attitude towards naxalites."[16] Irony is that special branch police officer-secret police officer- Kumaran nair serving in medical college police station who was entrusted with the duty to secretly observe Grow Vasu after his release from prison post-emergency was the very same person who had for the first time invited the attention of Comrade Vasu towards the corruption and bribery of the senior doctors in Kozhikode Medical college which in later period led to the People's trial led by Naxalites of one of the most corrupt doctor named Dr.K.M.George in that institution. This event in course of period unleashed a wave of people's trials.[17]

In the later phase of Naxalite movement CPI ML turned its attention not only towards the issues faced by Peasants, Agricultural labourers, Workers, Dalits and Tribals but also towards the issues faced by soldiers and police personnel. A Six page notice issued by CPI ML, twelve years after Naxallbari uprising(1967) addressed to police men in state police,Crpf,Cisf and Soldiers in the army expressed its solidarity towards forthcoming strike of police men in Kerala police, All India Police strike and strike of the policemen in Crpf and Cisf raising the demands like Abolition of orderly system, Bury the police act created by foreigners, Permit organizational freedom, Transform the police force as protectors of weak and poor, Abolish tradition of employing the ordinary police men as servants and watch dogs of superior I.P.S Officers, Abolish the practice of compelling police men to procure signature of the local elites on patta book, Readmit the dismissed police men to the forces ..Etc. Notice intend to convince the police men that, they were being used as a tool by a reactionary regime, unconcerned with poor and suppressed masses, for the past three decades since Independence, to preserve their power and hegemony. It pointed out gross socio-economic inequalities existing in Indian society and tried to expose semi colonial and semi feudal nature of the Indian state. It advised the police men not to confine their struggle for redressal of service grievances within the limits of their class. Their struggle could succeed only if they are able to form a broad front, against the reactionary regime in India serving the interests of exploiting classes, in alliance with exploited classes of landless agricultural labourers, Poor peasants, Workers, Dalits and Tribals. Notice reminds the police personnel in state police, Crpf, Cisf and soldiers, of their proletarian origins, since they are sons of landless agricultural labourers, poor peasants, workers and petty bourgeoisie. It concludes with a clarion call to the police men and soldiers of the country to join the ranks of the proletarian classes and play the historic role in Indian revolution. [18]Finally twelve years after the Naxalbari uprising ultra-left in India started realizing the need to win over soldiers and policemen for successful Indian revolution.

NB-C.R.C CPI ml means Central reorganization committee of CPI ML

[1] Personal interview with K.Venu, Former Naxalite leader
[2] Personal interview with Somasekharan, Former Naxalite leader
[3] Personal interview with Somasekharan, Former Naxalite leader
[4] Personal interview with James, Former Naxalite leader
[5] Personal interview with Madhu Nellikkara, Former Naxalite
[6] Personal interview with Vadhyanappilly Jose, Former Naxalite
[7] Personal interview with Vadhyanappilly Jose, Former Naxalite
[8] Personal interview with Vadhyanapalli Jose, Former Naxalite
[9] Personal Interview with James, Former Naxalite
[10] Ameer Ali (Bavakka), Marx,Mao,Malabar Ormakurippukal(Autobiography),Other books,Kozhikode,2020,P.231
[11] Personal Interview with Salim kumar, Former Naxalite
[12] Personal interview with Kunnel Krishnan, Former Naxalite leader
[13] Personal interview with Rajendran, Former Naxalite , See also Interview with Rajendran conducted by R.Sunil published in Madhyamam weekly, Lakkam 1082,26TH of November 2018)
[14] Personal interview with Grow Vasu, Former Naxalite leader
[15] Personal interview with James, Former Naxalite
[16] Personal interview with Grow Vasu, Former Naxalite leader
[17] Personal interview with Grow Vasu, Former Naxalite leader, See also
T Ajeesh,Naxal charitam Atiyanthiravasthaykku shesham,Green books,Manipal,2016,P.163
[18] CPI ML Party notice with six pages

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