THE SOUTHERN CHALLENGE

> Jawaharlal derives strength from the people. He likes vast crowds. Personal popularity leads him to believe that the people are satisfied with his administration: this conclusion, however, is not always justified.
>
> NARENDRA DEVA, socialist, 1949

> As the years rolled by, the very foundations on which Nehru's prestige and reputation rested began to weigh him down. At one time, he had a solution to every difficulty; today, he faces a difficulty in every solution.
>
> R. K. LAXMAN, cartoonist, 1959

I

THE YEARS 1757 AND 1857 ARE much memorialized in Indian history. In the first, the East India Company defeated the ruler of Bengal in the battle of Plassey, thus gaining the British their first bridgehead on the subcontinent. In the second, the British faced, and eventually overcame, the massive popular uprising known to some as the 'Sepoy Mutiny' and to others as the 'First War of Indian Independence'.

Like 1757 and 1857, 1957 was also a year of momentous importance in the history of modern India. For it was in that year that India held its second general election. After the end of the Second World War, dozens of African and Asian nations won freedom from their European colonizers. From their inception, or very soon afterwards, most of these new nations became autocracies ruled by communists, the military or unaffiliated dictators. India was one of the very few exceptions and, because of its size and social complexity, the really remarkable one. Before and after the great gamble of 1952 a series of provincial elections were held, in which the verdict of the ballot was honoured. Still, for India to certifiably join the league of democracies there had to be a second general election to follow the first. This was held over a period of three weeks in the spring of 1957.

Sukumar Sen still served as chief election commissioner. Though fortuitous, the continuity was important, because the man who had designed the systems could test afresh how well they worked. The evidence suggests that they did so quite well: this general election cost the exchequer Rs45 million less than the previous one. The prudent Sen had safely stored the 3.5 million ballot boxes used the first time round and only half a million additional ones were required.

Before the election, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting distributed a film called *It Is Your Vote*. Dubbed in thirteen languages, the film – which took 'scrupulous care . . . to avoid any matter which might be construed as propaganda in favour of any political party' – was screened in 74,000 cinema halls around the country. Among the viewers were many women who, the chief election commissioner noted, 'have come to value their franchise greatly'. Ninety-four per cent of adult women were now registered voters.

In all, 193 million Indians were registered to vote; of which slightly less than half actually did. The ballots they marked collectively consumed 197 tonnes of paper. Keeping them in line were

273,762 policemen, aided by 168,281 village *chowkidars* (watchmen).

The Election Commission had recommended that liquor stalls be kept shut on the days of polling, so that 'no alcoholic beverages might be available to the rowdy elements in the locality'. But there was plenty of colour nonetheless. A candidate in New Delhi insisted on filing his nomination in the name of 'Lord Jesus Christ'; a voter in Madras refused to exercise his franchise in favour of any person other than 'Shri Sukumar Sen, Election Commissioner' . In Orissa a dwarf, only two and a half feet tall, carried a stool with him to the polling booth. Everywhere ballot boxes were found to contain much else besides ballot papers: abusive notes addressed to candidates in one place, photographs of film actors in another. Some boxes were even found to have cash and change, which 'of course, [was] credited to the Treasury'.[1]

II

As in 1952, the 1957 election was in essence a referendum on the prime minister and his ruling party. Nehru was, again, the chief ideologue, propagandist and vote-catcher for the Congress. Helping him behind the scenes was his only child, Indira Gandhi. Estranged from her husband Feroze, she and her two sons stayed with her widowed father in his spacious official residence, Teen Murti House.[2] Mrs Gandhi was often the last person the prime minister saw in the evening and the first he saw in the morning. Serving as his official hostess, she met and mixed with the high of this land and of many others. Her health, previously frail, had noticeably improved. Contemporary photographs show her once sickly frame to have filled out; the improvement obvious not just in her appearance, but in her manner as well. A recent biographer has linked this improvement to the new antibiotic drugs then entering the market, which cured the tuberculosis shewas thought to suffer from. [3]

What we know of Mrs Gandhi's medical condition is based on intelligent speculation. However, there is also hard evidence that between the first and second elections she became more of a personality in her own right. In March 1955 she was appointed to the Congress Working Committee to 'represent the interests of women'. Following this appointment she began touring the country speaking to women about their rights and responsibilities. Her interests were not restricted to her own gender; she presided over meetings held in Bombay to hasten the liberation of Goa from Portuguese rule.

To those who knew her in her pre-political days, Indira Gandhi sometimes affected a disdain for hernew role. '*Mera sara samay kumaiti-yon thatha dusron kamon mein lagjata hai',* she complained to afriend: All my time now goes in committees and suchlike.[4] But other evidence suggests that she rather liked it. The man who knew her best of all wrote thus of her energetic participation in the election campaign of 1957:

> When voting finished today, large numbers of our Congress workers turned up at Anand Bhawan, including many women. Indu has specially shaken up the women, and even Muslim women came out. Indu has indeed grown and matured very greatly during the last year, and especially during these elections. She worked with effect all over India, but her special field was Allahabad City and District which she organized like a general preparing for battle. She is quite a heroine in Allahabad now and particularly with the women. [5]

III

Back in 1952 the most powerful ideological challenges to Nehru and his Congress Party had come from the Jana Sangh on the right; and from the socialists on the left. Both those parties were now in disarray, caused in part by the departure of their charismatic leaders. S. P. Mookerjee was dead and Jayaprakash Narayan had abandoned politics for social service. Across northern India the Congress was virtually unchallenged. It won 195 seats in the north out of 226 it contested, this dominance contributing handsomely to its overall tally of 371 seats, which gave it a comfortable majority in Parliament.[6]

Its overall triumph notwithstanding, there were worrying signs for a party that had led the freedom struggle and since guided the Indian state. Outside the Indo-Gangetic plain a variety of challenges were taking shape. In Orissa the Congress was opposed by the Ganatantra Parishad – a grouping of local landlords – which, with the parties of the left, reduced it to a tally of 7 seats out of 20. In Bombay province, once the heartland of Indian nationalism, the Congress won 38 seats out of a total of 66. Most of the others went to the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti or the Mahagujarat Parishad, each fighting for a separate state. (In what was effectively a plebiscite on the creation of a Marathi-speaking state with Bombay as its capital, the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti garnered 5.5 million votes to the Congress's 5.3 million.) These losses were reproduced in the local elections which followed, with the Samiti capturing the municipalities of the great historic cities of Poona and Bombay.

A regional challenge was also brewing in the south. This took the shape of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (or DMK), a party which grew out of the Dravidian movement started by E. V. Ramaswami Naicker. Known as 'Periyar' (great man), Ramaswami was a fervent opponent of the northern domination of Indian politics, culture and religion. He stood for a creation of aseparate nation in south India, to be called Dravida Nadu. The DMK was started by a group of his former followers, who sought to use the vehicle of parliamentary politics for articulating their secessionist demands. The 1957 election was the first they took part in. Although they won but a handful of seats – these mostly in the assembly polls – their creeping successes were worrying, since the party stood not merely for a new province based on ethnicity or language, but for a separate nation-state altogether.[7]

It was, however, in the southernmost state of the Union that the Congress's claim to represent all of India was most gravely undermined. The state was Kerala, where a resurgent Communist Party of India had emerged as a strong popular alternative to the ruling party. In the parliamentary election the CPI won 9 seats out of the 18 fought for (the Congress won only 6). In the assembly polls, which were held at the same time, the communists won 60 seats out of 126, the support of five independents assuring it a slim majority.

The communist victory in the Kerala assembly election was a spectacular affirmation of the possibilities of a path once dismissed by Lenin as 'parliamentary cretinism'. A town in Italy had recently elected a Red mayor, but here was something qualitatively new; a first chance for communists to govern a full-fledged province of a very large country. With the Cold War threatening to turn hot, what happened in Kerala was of worldwide interest. But it also posed sharp questions for the future of Indian federalism. There had, in the past, been a handful of provincial ministries led by opposition parties or Congress dissidents. What New Delhi now faced was a different matter altogether; a state ruled by a party which was underground till the day before yesterday, which still professed a theoretical allegiance to armed revolution, and whose leaders and cadres were known to

have sometimes taken their orders from Moscow.

IV

Located on the south-western tip of India, Kerala is a very beautiful state, with along coastline and high mountains. The monsoon is both early and abundant, the vegetation gorgeously diverse; no part of India is greener. And no part is as culturally diverse. Hindus constitute about 60 per cent of the population; Muslims and Christians, the remaining 40 per cent. Crucially, these minority communities have a very long history indeed. The 'Syrian' Christians of Kerala claim to have been converted by St Thomas in the first century of the Christian era. More recently, Protestant and Catholic missionaries had also enjoyed conspicuous success. The first Muslims were a product of trade with the Arabs, and go back to at least the eighth century. These are the oldest communities of Christians and Muslims in the subcontinent. Like the Hindus of Kerala they spoke the local tongue, Malayalam. However, their relative abundance in the population lent the state a certain distinctiveness, as Table 14.1 indicates.

Table 14.1 – Religious composition of Kerala vis-à-vis that of India as a whole

	Percentage of total population		
	Hindu	*Christian*	*Muslim*
Kerala	60.83	21.22	17.91
India	83.51	2.44	10.69

SOURCE: K. G. Krishna Murthy and G. Lakshmana Rao, Political Preferences in Kerala (New Delhi: Radha Krishna, 1968), p. 10.

From the late nineteenth century Kerala had been in a state of social ferment. These changes were being directed by four kinds of actors. First, there were the missionaries who, because of the Christian influence, found it easier to work here than in other parts of British India. Their Churches promoted modern education through a vast, interconnected network of schools and colleges. Second, there were the successive Maharajas of Cochin and (especially) Travancore, more progressive than most of their counterparts, and challenged by the missionaries to open decent schools of their own. Third, there were energetic caste associations, such as the Nair Service Society, which represented the dominant landed caste; and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana, named for Narayana Guru, the legendary leader of the Ezhavas, the caste of toddy-tappers ranked low in the ritual hierarchy. These too ran their educational institutions, as well as societies devoted to welfare and charity. Finally, there were the political parties, which included the Congress, of course, and also the Communist Party of India.[8]

The Kerala unit of the CPI was strongly rooted in the local soil. Its most influential leaders had started life in the Congress, then graduated leftwards. They started peasant unions to demand security

for tenants and labour unions to demand better wages and working conditions for the landless. They instituted ‘reading rooms’ where intellectuals communicated radical ideas to their underprivileged audiences. Theatre and dance were also pressed into the service of left-wing propaganda. Through the late 1930s and beyond the communists made steady gains, their ideas and manifest idealism appealing to a divided society further hit by depression and war.

In a country generally riven by inequality, Kerala still stood out for the oppressiveness of its caste system. Here, the lowest of the low were not merely ‘untouchable’ , but even ‘unseeable’ . When a Namboodiri Brahmin approached, a Paraiya labourer had to cry out in advance, lest the sight of him pollute his superior. Yet the combined efforts of the missionaries, the princes, the caste societies and the communists had seriously undermined traditional structures of authority. In a mere half-century, between 1900 and 1950, defiance had replaced deference as the idiom of social exchange in the Kerala countryside.[9]

When, after 1947, universal suffrage came to the state, the communists were in a very good position to exploit it. But instead they went underground, following orders from Moscow. They resurfaced in time for the 1952 election, and made a decent showing. Through the 1950s they worked steadily at expanding their influence. In February 1956, less than a year before the Indian general election, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had its 20th Congress. Here Khrushchev famously denounced Stalin, and in passing also endorsed the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism. In the general secretary’s words, ‘The winning of a stable parliamentary majority backed by a mass revolutionary movement of the proletariat and of all the working people could create for the working class of a number of capitalist and former colonial countries the conditions needed to secure fundamental social changes.’[10]

There would, of course, be no elections in the Soviet Union, but Big Brother now did not mind, indeed perhaps approved of, participation in elections by comrades elsewhere. (This shift was caused in part by imperatives of foreign policy – competing with their fellow superpower for allies, the Russians had to cultivate ex-colonial regimes that were of ten unsympathetic to revolutionary communism.) The communists in Kerala could now throw themselves more energetically into their campaign. Their manifesto declared that they wished only to make this a ‘democratic and prosperous state’ , by starting new industries, increasing food production, raising wages of workers in factories and farms, nationalizing plantations, building houses and streamlining schools. The party of protest sought to become a party of governance; a transition which, it told the voter, its stewardship of local bodies had prepared it for. As the manifesto declared,

> the people also know that the administration of many municipalities and of the Malabar District Board under the leadership of the Communist Party is better than before, and that both the *panchayats* [village councils] which won awards from Prime Minister Nehru for good administration are under the leadership of the Communist Party. These experiences have made it clear that the Communist Party is capable not only of uniting the people for conducting agitation, but that it can also take over and run the administration successfully.[11]

V

The newly elected Communist chief minister of Kerala was E. M. S. Namboodiripad. ‘EMS’ , as he

was known to foe and friend alike, was a small man, barely five feet tall, but with a deep commitment to his credo, this allied to a fierce intelligence. Born in a Brahmin family, he had donated his ancestral home to the party. He read widely and wrote prodigiously - among his many works was an authoritative history of Kerala. Like Sheikh Abdullah, Master Tara Singh and A. Z. Phizo, EMS was, in this huge country, considered a mere 'provincial' leader. Yet he remains a figure of considerable historical interest, because of both the size of his province and the distinctiveness of his politics.[12]

Virtually the first act of the new government was to commute the sentences of prisoners on death row. Next, cases were withdrawn against those involved in labour disputes or other such 'political struggles'. More substantive measures were to follow, such as the opening of thousands of 'fair price' shops, to aid the distribution of food to the needy in a food-deficient state.[13]

The communist ministers made an impression with their efficiency, this a stark contrast with the sloth of their Congress counterparts. A liberal monthly praised EMS for his 'enviable record of public service', and for choosing as his colleagues 'people with the sovereign quality of throwing their minds into joint stock in the hour of deliberation. They will not be simple feeders at the public trough.'[14] They weren't; thus an otherwise congenitally anti-Red weekly was deeply impressed when the irrigation minister, V. R. Krishna Iyer, responded immediately to a call from a remote hamlet where a bund had been breached. The minister 'at once cut through histour programme, and personally visited the place. He issued orders on the spot for immediate repairs, and personally supervised the carrying out of the job.' Further, he promised an enquiry into the conduct of those officials whose negligence had endangered the paddy crop.[15]

By taking office the communists had pledged to work within the framework of the Indian Constitution; by accepting central funds, to abide by the recommendations of the Planning Commission. But there was plenty they could still do within these constraints. For one, they could reform the archaic, inefficient and grossly inequitable system of landholding. Here they had the sanction not just of the Planning Commission and the constitution, but of successive policy documents of the Congress Party itself. These stated a commitment to land reform; a commitment which, as Ronald Herring has noted, 'did not become operative under any Congress regime but was closely approximated by the reforms of the Communist Party of India in Kerala'.[16]

The aims of the Agrarian Relations Bill introduced by EMS's government were modest: not the socialization or collectivization of land, not even the bestowing of land titles to the landless, merely the providing of stability of tenure to the mass of small peasants who cultivated holdings owned by absentee landlords. The bill sought to curb the wide powers of eviction previously enjoyed by landlords, to reduce rates of rent and waive arrears, and to fix a ceiling on ownership and redistribute the surplus land thus garnered. These were important measures, helping hundreds of thousands of poor peasants, but still somewhat short of what the Red catechism prescribed. The contradiction was resolved by recourse to the 'stages' theory of classical Marxism. It was argued that rural India was still 'semi-feudal'. All non-feudal classes were to be rallied around the proposed reforms which, when in place, would unleash agrarian capitalism, the next, necessary stop in the high road to socialism.[17]

The standard history of Kerala communism is subtitled 'a study in political adaptation' (to bourgeois democracy). Reformism in agriculture was one manifestation of this; a second, which must surely have confused the cadres more, was the encouragement of private enterprise. The party's manifesto had threatened the nationalization of plantations, many of them foreign-owned. After the election this was quietly abandoned. Then, within its first few months in office, the Kerala government invited India's largest capitalist house, the Birlas, to setup a rayon factory in Mavoor.

The entrepreneurs were assured subsidized supplies of bamboo – to be gifted to the Birlas at one rupee per tonne, when the prevailing market price was perhaps a thousand times as much. This project constituted, on the capitalist's side, a breaking of ranks, for the Indian industrial class detested the communists. Their hope was that the central government would be likewise exercised by the Red menace; that 'Home Minister Pant and his New Delhi group [of Congress politicians] comes down on the Kerala Communists with a heavy hand and knocks them out of office'.[18] The pragmatic Birlas, however, were responding to the fact that the CPI controlled trade unions in important industrial centres outside Kerala. To start a plant here was to buy peace here – as well as elsewhere. As one columnist archly commented, it was hard to believe that the clan's patriarch, Ghanshyamdas Birla, had succumbed to the 'superlative charm of Chief Minister Namboodiripad'; it was more likely that he was 'getting ready for a Communist triumph in Bengal, where his interests are concentrated'.[19]

In office, as in opposition, the communists attracted a wide range of interested comment, this ranging from the warmly approbatory to the viciously hostile. There were those who wrote of an emerging new dawn, in terms reminiscent of the opening pages of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, with its sincere salute to the soul of man under socialism. On the first anniversary of the assumption of office by EMS's government, a journalist went to a tea shop where

> the central figure was the boy serving tea. Most of the discussions were based on rumours. But the boy was always sure of his facts as retailed by 'Janayugam', the Communist daily. It was a delight to watch this lad of sixteen arguing with a school-teacher on the wrong side of forty, a NGO (non-gazetted officer)in his twenties and the others in the presence of his boss, the tea-shop owner, and at the same time performing his own duties uninterrupted by the discussion. This can happen only in Kerala.[20]

On the other side, there was talk of Red terror, with a Kerala newspaper writing in apocalyptic mode of a class war to the finish, with the state taking the side of the lower orders:

> If there is a conflict arising between labourers and company managements woe betide the company managements, the police will side with the labour.
>
> If a jenmi [landlord] is so ill-advised as to pick a quarrel with his agricultural labourers, woe unto the jenmi. The police will know what to do . . .
>
> If a howling mass besiege a college or a bishop's palace, it will be termed as a popular, peaceful and constitutional agitation of aggrieved students . . .[21]

VI

In the winter of 1957/8 the Hungarian writer George Mikes travelled through India. As a refugee from communism – by then settled comfortably in London –he found 'the Kerala affair' most intriguing. 'What is a democratic Central Government to do with a Communist state?' he asked. 'What would the American administration do if California or Wisconsin suddenly – and I admit, somewhat unexpectedly – turned Communist? And again, how is a Communist government itself to behave with democratic overlords sitting on its neck?'[22]

One cannot say how an American president would have behaved in a similar situation – would

he have sent in the Marines? – but in India the prime minister of the day was inclined to wait and watch. For the land reforms proposed by EMS's government were merely those promised by Congress governments. And the personal integrity of the Kerala ministers was not absent in the best of the Congress Party, such as Jawaharlal Nehru.

More controversial by far were the educational initiatives of the Kerala government. In the summer of 1957 it introduced an Educational Bill aimed at correcting the abuses in privately owned schools and colleges. These were the norm in Kerala, with schools managed by the Church, the Nair Service Society and the SNDP. The bill sought to enhance the status of teachers by checking the powers of the management to hire and fire at will, by setting norms for recruitment, and by prescribing salaries and humane working conditions. It also gave the state the powers to take over schools that did not abide by the bill's provisions.[23]

The opposition to the bill was led by the Church, whose own powers – moral as well as material -depended crucially on its control of educational institutions. The clergy was deeply anti-communist, a sentiment it managed successfully to instil in its flock. In the 1957 election, for example, the CPI had won only 3 out of 18 seats in Kottayam District, the Syrian Christian heartland.[24]

As it happened, the minister of education, Joseph Mundaserry, had spent decades teaching in a Catholic college in Trichur. He knew the corruptions of the system, and his bill was in some respects a brave attempt to correct them. However, his government sought to go further than modernize the management; it wanted also to introduce changes in the curriculum. New textbooks were prepared which sought subtly – and not so subtly – to present history through communist lenses. The lenses used by Christian pedagogues were ground to a very different specification. Consider these alternative versions of the Russian Revolution, in circulation in the schools of Kerala in these years:

> *New version:* A republican Government was established under George Lavoff, a member of the Royal Family. It failed to secure popular support and proved incapable of ending the war or of effecting social and economic reforms. At this time, Lenin arrived in Russia and this gave impetus to the Russian people. A new Government with Lenin as President was evolved. First, Lenin made the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany. Then land and other capital goods were nationalised. All agricultural land was taken away from the landlords and divided among the peasants. All factories became the property of the State. The privileges of the clergy and the nobility were abolished. Mines, railways and banks were taken over by the Government. And thus to the astonishment of all, a new world, based upon Socialism, took shape in Russia and the dreams of Karl Marx were realized in this way.
>
> *Old version*: Lenin established a Workers' Government. But the first election showed that the Bolsheviks had no majority. However, to maintain themselves in power, they dissolved the Duma on the ground that it was reactionary. Local Soviets who did not support the Bolsheviks were also disbanded. Private schools were forbidden and education was taken over by the State. Voting right was denied to the nobility and the clergy. Communism encourages violence, and does not believe in an omnipotent God. The Communists forget that man has a soul. It is a one-party Government that prevails in Communist Russia. There is neither freedom of opinion nor of religion. Many other defects in the System may also strike the eye of an observantcritic.[25]

Here were two alternative visions of the kind of society Kerala should become; masquerading as two

alternative readings of the Russian Revolution. One can see how the Christian version would enrage the Communists, and vice versa. In any event, the textbook row added fuel to an already well-burning fire. For by this time the Christians opposing the bill had been joined by the Nairs, the other community that loomed large in the economic life of Kerala. Where the Christians had always supported the Congress, the Nairs were split down the middle; about half of them had voted for the communists, the other half against. However, since the Nair Service Society also ran schools and colleges, the new bill helped tilt them against the communists and into a somewhat opportunistic alliance with theChristians.[26]

More opportunistic still was the local Congress Party. Defeated in the election, it saw in the resentment against the Educational Bill a chance to regain power. Its leaders proposed an anti-communist popular front, an idea attractive to 'the reactionary Catholic Church, landlords, planters and the other disgruntled elements', but a seeming betrayal of the socialistic philosophy of its leaders at the centre.[27] Through the latter part of 1958 there were a series of strikes and protest marches in Kerala. In one incident in Trichur the police fired on a crowd of Congress Party members, killing six.[28]

Feeling besieged, E. M. S. Namboodiripad was compelled to state his case through the pages of the country's most popular English-language weekly. Their 'opponents were scandalised', he said, because his government sometimes sought to act against the landlords, even if it did so strictly within the framework of the constitution. A Congress leader answered back, writing in the same columns about the growing 'lawlessness and insecurity in Kerala' , caused by the tendency of communists to raise themselves above the law while acting vindictively against those who did not agree withthem.[29] After the Supreme Court rejected an appeal in February 1959, the Kerala Education Bill received the assent of the president of India. In the same month Mrs Indira Gandhi was elected president of the Indian National Congress. She was the first woman to hold the post since Nellie Sen Gupta in 1933. Asked whether her domestic duties would suffer, Mrs Gandhi answered with asperity: 'My household work takes ten minutes only.'[30]

At this time the Congress was 'speaking with three voices: the members in Kerala active in violent agitation, the central leadership permitting such activity without approving of it, and Nehru disapproving of it but taking no action to curb it'.[31] Meanwhile the agitation intensified with the entry of the Nair doyen Mannath Padmanabhan. A founder of the Nair Service Society, long active in its schools and colleges, Mannath was an austere, *dhoti*-clad man who spoke only Malayalam. It was said that he had turned against the communists when they refused permission for him to start an engineering college in Palghat. Now he intended to dispatch 'these Communists, bag and baggage, not merely from Kerala, but from India and driv[e] them to their fatherland – Russia'. When an interviewer asked whether his age was not against him (he was eighty), Mannath reminded them of Bhishma Pitamah, the octogenarian warrior who had led the Pandavas into their own *dharma yuddh,or* holy war.[32]

The clash in Kerala is perhaps best understood in terms of the political theorist W. H. Morris-Jones's characterization of the three 'idioms' of Indian politics. The first of these idioms was the 'modern', basing itself on universal ideas of freedom and justice, and expressed in Parliament, the law courts, and the English-language press. The second was the 'traditional', which emphasized primordial loyalties, the interests of one's caste or religion.

In its first phase the Education Bill controversy was, like so much else in modern India, simply a clash between the modern and traditional idioms of politics. But Mannath Padmanabhan brought with him yet a third idiom: the 'saintly' . Morris-Jones himself saw this idiom as operating 'at the margin'

of Indian politics – as in the social work of Vinoba Bhave. Mannath, however, brought this idiom into a direct engagement with the other two – as,long before, and to even more spectacular effect, had Mahatma Gandhi. The people of Kerala followed him in part for the same reasons that the people of India had followed Gandhi; namely, that his personal integrity was unimpeachable, and that he had never sought or held political office.[33]

Mannath's arrival gave a huge boost to the movement, which soon contained, in the patriarch's words, 'everyone in Kerala who is not a Communist'. On 1 May 1959 a conference of community organizations met at Changanacherry to form a Vimochana Samara Samiti, or Liberation Committee, under Mannath's leadership. Over the next month its members carried their message into schools and colleges, churches and temples, into the homes of fisherfolk, peasants, merchants and workers.

By early June thousands of volunteers were ready to court arrest. Now commenced a series of *hartals, or* shut-down strikes, leading to the closure of schools, hospitals, public offices and factories. Large processions were taken out, often headed by Mannath, who – belying his saintly pretensions –allowed himself to be carried on a white horse with a silk umbrella held over him. Nair youths with swords walked menacingly in front of him.

The communists 'replied with organized brutality'. By one estimate there were 248 lathi-charges by police; also many bullets fired, leaving at least twenty dead and many more wounded, children and women among them. Each lathi-charge served only to swell further the ranks of the protesters. Some 150,000 protesters were jailed; a quarter of these were women.[34]

VII

It is hard to say who found the situation more distasteful – E. M. S. Namboodiripad, as the head of a 'people's government' which was now ordering daily lathi-charges and incarcerating thousands of ordinary folk; or Jawaharlal Nehru, the constitutional democrat who watched as his party took to the streets to dislodge a lawfully elected government. In Nehru's case the agony was compounded by the fact that he largely approved of the agrarian and educational policies of the Kerala government.[35]

Buoyed by the success of the agitation, Congress politicians in Kerala were pressing for the centre to invoke Article 356 of the constitution, whereby the president could dismiss a state government on account of a breakdown in law and order. The article had been used four times in the past, usually to call mid-term elections when a ruling party had lost its majority on account of a split or defections.

To see the situation for himself, Nehru visited Kerala in the last week of June 1959. He was alarmed at the 'thick walls of group hatred'; the two sides, he thought, were almost like two hostile countries at war.[36] But he remained reluctant to ask the president to dismiss EMS's government. His hesitancy was not shared by his daughter Indira, who thought the action was long overdue: 'When Kerala is virtually on fire' , said Mrs Gandhi in a speech in Delhi, 'it becomes the centre's duty to go to the aid of the people; the misrule of the communist rulers of the state has created a situation which is unparalleled in the history of our country. *Such a situation does not brook legal quibbling.*'[37]

Mannath and his warriors were now preparing for a final showdown. The Muslim League had joined the struggle, lending it more legitimacy still. Through the month of July there were daily marches, with the protesters provoking the police into violence. In one particularly gruesome incident the police entered a fishing hamlet and fired on bystanders, killing a pregnant woman and two others near her.[38]

The Vimochana Samara Samiti had declared 9 August 'Zero Day', when 50,000 volunteers, representing all classes and communities, would descend on Trivandrum to paralyse the administration. On 26 July groups started marching on the capital from all parts of the state, gathering momentum and men along the way. 'The hour was approaching when the Communists must choose between massacre and defeat.'[39] A letter from the state governor, pleading with the centre to intervene, strengthened the hand of the Congress president, Indira Gandhi. Her prime minister (and father) finally succumbed, writing to Namboodiripad on 30 July that an order of dismissal was on the way, since 'it is no longer possible to allow matters to deteriorate, leading to continuing conflicts and human suffering. We have felt that, even from the point of view of your government, it is better for Central intervention to take place now'.[40]

Six months later Kerala went to the polls again. The Congress, allied with the Socialist Party and the Muslim League, asked the voter to choose between 'democracy and communism'. Nehru led a band of stalwarts in a campaign which featured posters of Flory Mata, the pregnant fisherwoman shot by the police during the 'liberation struggle'. A record 84 per cent of the adult population turned out to vote. In a House of 127 the communists won only 26 seats. The Congress won 60; their allies a further 31.[41] The results appeared to vindicate the dismissal of Namboodiripad's government. But, as Sarvepalli Gopal points out, that decision had 'tarnished Nehru's reputation for ethical behaviour in politics and, from a long-term view, weakened his position'.[42]

VIII

Recall that in the early years of Independence, circa 1947-9, the Congress had faced challenges from the extremism of left and right. The communist, claiming that this was a false freedom, had launched a bloody revolution against the nascent Indian state. On the other side, the RSS was mobilizing the forces of reaction in an attempt to create a Hindu Pakistan. The centre had held, and the Congress had successfully tamed these threats; by drafting a democratic constitution, winning a democratic election and putting in place the rudiments of a modern pluralist state.

Now, a decade later, the Congress was once more under attack from the far edges of the political spectrum. The left's challenge this time was democratic, and hence potentially more dangerous. For if EMS's government was to bring about social reform successfully, by redistributing land to the poor and creating schools for all, it might create a domino effect, that is, the victory of non-Congress parties in other states of the Union.

As it happened, there was also a new challenge from the right. This came from C. Rajagopalachari, 'Rajaji', the veteran Congress politician who had previously served as governor of Bengal, governor general of India and Union home minister. In 1952 the Congress asked Rajaji to take over as chief minister of Madras province. He stayed in that post until April 1954, when his party indicated that they wanted the powerful backward-caste leader K. Kamaraj to replace him. Now Rajaji settled down in a small house to spend his days, he said, reading and writing. (He was an accomplished short-story writer in his native Tamil, and had also written masterful versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.)

However, philosophy and literature proved inadequate substitutes for public affairs. Thus Rajaji was moved to comment from time to time on the nuclear arms race between Russia and America, with regard to which he took a line not dissimilar to Nehru's. Then, when the second five-year plan committed the government of India to a socialist model of economics, he began commenting on

domestic affairs too. Here, however, he came to be increasingly at odds with the prime minister.

The differences were in part political. Rajaji felt that the Congress had become complacent in the absence of a strong opposition. In October 1956 he made public his belief that there should be an opposition group *within* the Congress, without which – so he feared – the party 'would simply degenerate into a hunting ground for every kind of ambition and self-seeking'.[43] The proposal was rejected; so the veteran turned to promoting an opposition outside the Congress instead. In May 1958 he published an article with the provocative title 'Wanted: Independent Thinking'. This argued that 'probably the main cause for the collapse of independent thinking' in India was 'the long reign of popular favourites without any significant opposition'. However, a healthy democracy required 'an opposition that thinks differently and does not just want more of the same, a group of vigorously thinking citizens which aims at the general welfare, and not one that in order to get more votes from the so-called have-nots, offers more to them than the party in power has given, an opposition that appeals to reason . . .'[44]

The differences between Nehru and Rajaji were also economic. Rajaji worried that the second five-year plan would lead to an excessive centralization of state power. He was disturbed by the massive increases in taxation, conceived in the interests of the public sector, but which might only serve to 'discourage and deject citizens and wither the private sector'. In his view, the plan must 'be conceived as a supplement to rather than a substitute for the market economy'.[45]

In May 1959, and touching eighty, Rajaji launched a new political party, the Swatantra Party. This party focused its criticisms on the 'personality cult' around the prime minister, and on the economic policies of the ruling Congress. Its founding statement asked for a 'proper decentralized distribution of industry' through the nurturing of 'competitive enterprise' and, in agriculture, for the encouragement of the 'self-employed peasant proprietor who stands for initiative and freedom'. It rejected the 'techniques of so-called socialism' and the 'bringing into being of "Statism".'[46]

A democracy run by a single party automatically becomes a tyranny; such was Rajaji's rationale for starting Swatantra. For 'the Congress Party has so far run without a true Opposition. It has run with accelerators and no brakes.'[47] This party started by an octogenarian quickly gathered momentum. Those who joined up included captains of industry, naturally, but also peasant leaders worried by Congress threats to promote 'co-operative farming'. Although conventionally described as 'conservative', the party was in fact a curious amalgam of free-market liberals and agrarian leaders seeking an alternative to the Congress.[48]

Congress cheerleaders dismissed Swatantra as a party of 'right reaction'. The prime minister himself affected an airy disdain. When asked at a press conference about Rajaji's newparty, he merely joked, 'He likes the Old Testament. I like the NewTestament.'[49]

IX

The challenges posed by the communists on the left and the Swatantra Party on the right were compounded by serious accusations of financial malfeasance against the government in New Delhi. In September 1957 questions were raised in Parliament about the propriety of large investments made by the state-owned Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) in a private firm in Kanpur owned by an industrialist named Haridas Mundhra. When the finance minister, T. T. Krishnamachari, gave an equivocal reply, dissident Congress MPs began to ask sharper questions. Prominent in the debate was the prime minister's estranged son-in-law, Feroze Gandhi. He claimed that the Mundhra shares had

been bought to boost their price well above their true market value. He wondered how 'the Life Insurance Corporation became a willing party to this questionable transaction with the mystery man of India's business underworld' . There was, Feroze Gandhi concluded, 'a conspiracy to beguile the [state-owned] Corporation of its funds'.[50]

Bowing to the criticism, the government announced a Commission of Inquiry into the affair. In fact there were two separate and successive enquiries, each headed by an eminent judge. Their findings were not complimentary to the Congress government. The LIC had a publicly stated 'blue-chip' policy, which committed it to investing money only in firms of high reputation and sound management. The Mundhra companies were neither; yet the Corporation had seen fit to make its largest ever investment in its stock. The officials quizzed by the judges could not satisfactorily explain their decision; nor could their minister.

The proceedings of these Commissions were held in Delhi and Bombay, and kept open to the public. They attracted great attention, most of it critical. People flocked to the hearings, there to see the minister and his officials fumble under questioning or contradict one another. The final reports of the judges were damning, and exacted a price: both the minister and his secretary were forced to demit office.[51]

The judicial probe into the LIC investment in the Mundhra companies, wrote the *Hindustan* Times, 'had the effect of an overall political shake-up, the like of which has not been experienced since Independence'. What 'looked like a molehill when the issue was first ventilated in Parliament', had 'assumed the proportion of a mountain'.[52] Known initially as the Mundhra Affair, it was soon promoted to become the Mundhra Scandal. Until it erupted, the ministers of Nehru's government were widely held to be fond of power, yet above financial impropriety. A halo of Gandhian austerity still hung around them. The Mundhra Affair made the first serious dent in this image. It was a dent as deep, and as damaging, as those made by political parties of left or right.