

# **Communication Strategy and Propaganda Techniques: A Study on Communist Movement in Kerala (1930-1957)**

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masscomhod@uoc.ac.in

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**Dr. M S Priyamol**

Asst. Regional Director, Indira Gandhi National Open University Regional Centre, Trivandrum, Kerala, India

## **Abstract**

The present study aims at highlighting the communication factors contributed to the sworn-in of first democratically elected Communist government in the world. In 1957, Communist Party had come to power in Kerala, a small state in the southern part of India through democratic process. Apart from the tiny Italian principality San Marino, Kerala emerged as the first case of a democratically elected Communist government in the world. Whatever may be the reasons behind this victory, it is obvious that the communication strategy of the Communists had played a significant role in it. Social reawakening on socialist lines and ideological influence on art and literature during that period also substantiates the impact of Communist propaganda and persuasive mode of communication on the social life of Kerala. So it is felt that, an exploration on the communication practice of the communists would be worthwhile, in bringing out the methods they utilized to popularize such an alien, western concept like Communism in a cast oriented feudalistic society in Kerala.

## **Keywords**

communication, propaganda, communism, Kerala politics

## **Introduction**

History of Kerala unfolds the rich and varied tradition of its communication forms and practices. In early times oral communication was the only mode of communication for the mass. Written communication was confined to the educated elite. Mass communication at grass root level took place mainly through the word of mouth. Festivals, trade fairs, places of worship etc. were the early

forums of communication. These public gatherings provided them a platform to share their experiences and opinions. Being a great repository of various folk and traditional performing art forms, Kerala had a long history of social communication. Besides entertainment these folk media functioned as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge and instruments of social change.

### **Introduction of printing**

Arrival of Christian missionaries in the early half of 16<sup>th</sup> century was a major landmark in the development of mass communication in Kerala. Introduction of printing by Christian missionaries, their educational and literary activities nurtured the mass communication sphere of Kerala to a great extent. Though the educational and literary activities of the Christian missionaries were aimed at religious propagation, it also made possible for the majority of people to become literate. They established several schools and free education was given to all irrespective of caste and creed. They also had set up printing presses at various parts of Kerala. Increased literacy, extension of education and emergence of newspapers have fostered social, political and cultural renaissance in Kerala and shaped the thought patterns of people with new reformist ideas and opinions.

### **Era of national movement**

As anywhere else in India national movement made its repercussions on the socio-political milieu of Kerala as well. The mass communication sphere also underwent subsequent changes. Increased literacy and high percentage of media diffusion made communication process more effective and triggered the rise of public opinion tremendously. People showed keen interest in the ongoing socio-political reformation in the state. All these developments in turn gave vigorous impetus to the mass communication sphere, especially to the print media.

As a part of national movement, social reform movement was also intensified during this period. These movements were sphere headed mainly by various communally organized social organizations in Kerala. These social organizations were also utilized print media as an effective weapon for social change. *Nampoothiri Yoga Kshema Sabha* (NYS), an organization formed for the welfare of *Nampoothiri* community went a step further by manipulating comparatively a novel communication practice i.e. theatre. Leaders of *NYS* utilized theatre to mobilize public opinion against the age old customs of *Nampoothiri* community.

### **Emergence of Communist Party**

Socio-political milieu of Kerala witnessed a radical upsurge in early 30s. It was the global revolutionary mass movement of peasants and working classes under the Communist umbrella that sowed the seeds of revolutionary activities in Kerala. The enthralling victory of Russian Communists over capitalism and autocracy also boosted the aspirations of the younger generation. In 1939 formation of Kerala unit of Communist party was declared in a secret meeting at *Pinarayi* (a remote

village in northern Kerala). After the formation of Kerala unit organizational structure of Communist Party began to expand throughout Kerala.

### **Emergence as an electoral force**

Elections to the provincial assemblies, held in 1945 were an epoch-making event in the history of Kerala Communist Party. It was the first time that Communist Party came before the voters in its own name, under its own flag and with its own statement of policy or election manifesto. Though Communist Party candidates defeated in all constituencies, they secured enough votes to retain their security. In the first general elections held in 1951, Communist Party fielded its candidates in 53 seats and secured 29 seats. In the second general election in 1957, of the 125 Assembly seats Communist Party contested in 100 seats and won 60 seats. Opponent Congress won only 43 seats though contested in all 125 constituencies. The progress made by Communist Party during this period was phenomenal and significant compared to its own record in the previous elections and with that of the record of other parties. The electoral victory of 1957 would be a sufficient proof for their subsequent success in acquiring mass support. Present study aims to explore the Communist attempt to utilize various communication channels to achieve their political objectives and to examine the particular features of their communication pattern and propaganda techniques.

### **Research Design**

#### **Area**

Out of 14 districts of Kerala, four districts were selected for the study i.e. Kannur, Kozhikkode, Trissur and Alapuzha. Of these Kannur and Alapuzha can be considered as bastions of communist movement in Kerala, whereas Trissur and Kozhikkode had not much affiliation with communist ideology. The districts selected are of with different geographical, educational, political background, socio-economic status and religious status, literacy rate, media exposure etc.

#### **Respondents**

Since the study is mainly concerned with the communication practice of communists, a particular group of people was selected for the study. Criteria for the selection of respondents depended on their age and association with Communist movement. In order to get adequate information, the study was concentrated in certain places, which are well known for Communist upheavals in the district. All veteran party workers were interviewed to get their opinions and experiences regarding Communist movement in respective areas.

#### **Data collection**

Both primary and secondary data were collected for the study. Since the study is concerned with a historic subject oral history method was opted for the collection

of primary data. Oral history means the process of collecting opinions and experiences from the recent past by interviewing those who took part in the event. Secondary data collected from various sources like: Government documents, Police reports, judicial reports, News paper reports, biographies and auto biographies of eminent Communist leaders, books, pamphlets and other publications regarding Communist movement in Kerala.

### **Strategy and practice of communication**

Right from the beginning Communist Party was the most organized and engaged in the continual process of politicization of the cadres and communicating with the followers. Party cadres and workers were well informed about their party and its ideology policies. Even in the early stages of its development when the organization and its membership were negligible, Communist Party maintained an effective and impressive communication network. The most important feature of their communication practice was the importance given to verbal propaganda and direct communication. Study classes and night schools under the guidance of party leaders had been conducted throughout the state to give ideological orientation to party cadres. Along with the classes on Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism, issues like global revolutionary movements, national and international political situations, regional matters were also discussed in these classes. Besides this, general education was also given to them so as to enable them to read and write and thereby raise their consciousness.

Press and publishing programme form another important mass medium of Communist Party. They have maintained an official party press and impressive array of publications along with their political activity. Prabhatham (The Dawn), Deshabhimani (Patriot) were the dailies published by the Party. Of these, Deshabhimani is still functioning as the official organ of Communist Party of Kerala. Besides these dailies, dozens of weeklies and periodicals were published by the party with a clear motif to reach each and every sector of the society. In addition to the official party publications, communist influenced mass organizations and front groups were also launched a number of publications to support propagation Communist ideology in different sections of the society. *Krishikaran* (Farmer), *Trade Union*, *Railway thozhilali* (Railway worker), *Thozhilai* (Worker), *Adyapakan* (Teacher), *Vidyarthi* (Student), *Party samghatakan* (Party organizer) were important among them. Books and pamphlets were another important source of Communist propaganda in Kerala. On one side party press aimed at 'agitation' and party's interpretations on day to day socio-political issues and events, books and journals on the other side focused on ideological orientation towards Communist ideology.

### **Cultural activities**

The best element of the cultural heritage of Kerala is its songs and art forms. Communists have the credit to be the first to have initiated systematic attempts, in exploiting and manipulating the socio political potential of various art forms and

cultural activities in bringing out social change. They utilized songs and various art forms for the propagation of Communism in rural areas. Thousands of songs were composed by party activists and made it a practice to sing them during marches, meetings, party conferences etc. These songs were embedded with revolutionary ideas and called for the working class to fight against exploitation. Besides songs, various types of art forms both classical and folk were utilized to mobilize the public in lines with Communist ideology. The folk and traditional aspects of the art forms and simple style of presentation helped very much to cut across the traditional resistance to new ideas and removed barriers like illiteracy, limited media exposure to mass media, variations in socio-economic status etc.

Theatre also acted as a successful propaganda device to disseminate socialist and revolutionary ideas. Several plays with revolutionary themes were staged at party meetings, Farmers and factory workers conferences. In 1950 Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC) formed as the cultural wing of Communist Party. They presented a number of plays of socio-political significance. Of them '*You made me a Communist*', became a box office hit. The play symbolized Kerala's changing political culture. Audience responded so enthusiastically and the popularity of play swept like a storm for months along the length and breadth of Kerala. In March 1953 District Magistrate of Trivandrum banned the play. The efforts to ban the play itself proved the impact that it made on the sociopolitical sphere of Kerala. These cultural activities played a crucial role in creating a platform for the successful dissemination of complex revolutionary ideas and acted as instruments of mass communications for mobilizing the public in lines with Communist ideology.

Demonstrations form another kind of propaganda activity, which constitutes marches, meetings, campaigns, fairs etc. All these performances were intended to draw public attention to specific issues like labour problems; national and international issues etc and make them aware of their seriousness and far reaching impact on the society. Songs, art forms and cultural activities were also performed during these programmes to attract people.

### **Reading rooms**

Reading rooms form another forum of communication for the mass. In villages study classes and night schools were conducted in these reading rooms to educate the party workers. They were acted as centers for the dissemination of political ideology and also venues for the meetings of workers, peasants and students.

### **Mass/Front organizations**

Mass/Front organizations form another important part of their communication network. They formed cultural, youth and women's organizations, labour /farmer unions, to organize people from different sectors of life in lines with Communist ideology. These organizations were helped in rousing the interest of politically indifferent people and eventually drawing them into Communist party. During the

period of political ban these organizations were acted as intermediaries between the party and the public.

### **Analysis and interpretation**

From the study it is clear that Communists placed great importance on communication. They used communication as a tool to bring out changes in social structure. As an alien, western, atheist concept, Communism was totally unfamiliar to a caste oriented, feudalistic society like Kerala. But within a short time it is disseminated throughout the society ranging from illiterate village mass to the urban elite. Personal contacts, cultural activities and publishing programmes helped very much to create a favorable climate for the receptivity of their radical ideas.

### **Agit-prop instrument**

Agitation and propaganda are two inevitable factors in the communications strategy of Communist movement. Propaganda means the propagation of complex ideas to a select audience whereas agitation refers to the dissemination of simple ideas, often in the form of mere slogans, to mass audience. According to party principle every party worker should be full time agitator and propagandist. As an agitator he must, through the spoken or written word, through daily contact with masses, stimulate them to action with elementary political slogans related to immediate issues. As a propagandist he must address a reasoned exposition of the party principle to small, sophisticated groups with an aim of a total conversion. The study revealed that the overall communication strategy of the party is also designed in lines with this agit-prop mechanism. Propaganda forms like press, theoretical journals, books and indoctrination classes were primarily aimed at educating the party cadres and intellectual sympathizers, whereas the forms – cultural activities, demonstrations etc. were meant for drawing the masses towards party's activities and agitations. This mechanism enabled the party to draw people from different walks of life.

### **Communication as development mechanism**

Though Communism came as a part of an international Communist movement, it has acquired a nationalist and populist character in Kerala. Unlike international Communist movement's motto of socialism and revolution; themes of Communist movement in Kerala concentrated on national and regional specific issues like problems of working class, eradication of social evils like casteism, feudalism etc. and supported national liberation movement also. They have taken up local problems faced by the village mass as a matter of agitation. In those time majority of the people in Kerala were belonged to working class with lower socio-economic status and educational level. Study classes and night schools organized by the Communist party helped very much to raise their literacy level and general socio-political awareness ideology and the organizational leadership and ideological impetus provided by the Communist party politicized a substantial

section of the society which was hitherto marginalized or excluded from the main stream of public activities. This rapid politicization resulted in the emergence of the Communist party with a strong social base in rural areas.

### **Towards democratization of communication**

Communication practice of Communists in Kerala presents a striking model for alternative use of communication, which proved the potential of indigenous mode of communication and possibilities of integrated use of various communication channels to effect social development. The study disclosed that the Communists succeeded in exploiting and manipulating all available channels of communication in service of their propaganda. In rural areas, party gave more emphasis in the achievement of mass literacy, raising the general socio-political awareness among the individuals etc. and depended mainly on indigenous and popular media like songs, art forms, theatre and word of mouth to disseminate their ideology. Press and publishing programme oriented mainly towards the educated elite. Communication experience of Communists suggests that democratizing the process of communication by availing popular and indigenous communication media will facilitate active participation of individuals in the social and political development. By their educational and communication programmes, Communist Party enriched the general educational standard and socio political awareness among the working class and ensured their active participation in the ongoing socio-political reformation in the state.

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