

## **VS' Legacy and the CPI(M)'s crisis**

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VS Achuthanandan's disciplinary issues with his party should not detract from his legacy as a leader who enthused the Left sections of Kerala by taking up issues related to land use, agricultural labour apart from leading various other struggles in the near past. His legacy and the issues he has raised are even more important as his party faces a serious credibility deficit in the state of Kerala following recent events.

For VS Achuthanandan, the 88-year-old leader of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) from Kerala, as well as his party's state leadership, the central committee meeting of his party on July 21-22 this year was crucial. The gathering was convened to discuss issues regarding the Kerala state unit of the party. And topping the agenda was the "indiscipline" of VS (as Achuthanandan is popularly known in the state), the party's senior-most and the only existing founder-leader who had been challenging the state leadership in several public fora, and issues he had raised in a few letters to the central leadership in which he charged the Kerala unit with grave right-wing deviation. The meeting assumed greater significance because it happened against the backdrop of an unfolding organisational crisis for the CPI(M) in Kerala after the brutal murder of Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP) leader TP Chandrasekharan on May 4. Chandrasekharan was a CPI(M) activist for over three decades, who dissented and left the party in 2009.

To the uninitiated, VS is known for his steadfast opposition to the state leadership's stances towards several key policy issues. He often raised issues related to both the ideology and praxis of the party in a prolonged intra-party struggle. At times, his ways breached the disciplinary code of the organisation, giving the leadership enough reasons to portray him as an undisciplined warhorse. VS faced disciplinary actions on several times, the latest of which was expected to come at the July 22 meeting of the central committee. The meeting took place after VS publicly criticised the "dictatorial way" the state leadership functioned. He likened state secretary Pinarayi Vijayan with SA Dange, who was the leader of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) at the time of the split in 1964. Invoking memories of the split, when VS, along with 31 other comrades, walked out of the national council of the CPI to form the CPI(M), the veteran communist said the state secretary's was

“not the last word” in the party.

Later in the central committee meeting, he reportedly raised several vital issues, the major one being a criticism that the party secretary was “violating ideological discipline” (a long excerpt of the speech was published in *Mathrubhumi*, a leading Malayalam daily). The state leadership, obviously, did not buy this argument. It, instead, squarely demanded strong action against VS for his “indiscipline”.

But the central committee decision surprised many. Despite his public outburst against the secretary of CPI(M)'s largest state unit in terms of membership, the central leaders of the party stopped short of taking any major disciplinary action against VS. Instead, they only censured him publicly, saying he admitted at the meeting that he had committed a few mistakes. However, in an unprecedented event, the Malayalam version of the resolution approved by the central committee was published in the CPI(M) organ, *Deshabhimani*. The resolution dismissed VS' charge of the party tilting towards the right.

From a pragmatic standpoint, it is not difficult to understand the logical basis of the central committee decision. Despite his organisational indiscipline, the party cannot let go of VS' legacy, which is deep-rooted in Kerala's struggle against feudal-capitalist forces. He is the most popular mass leader of the Left movement in the state, despite his rivals' often-fruitful efforts to sully his standing. That said, from the point of view of a party that still swears by democratic centralism, VS should not be given a free hand in his “undisciplined ways” of dealing with the state leadership, particularly after the “Dange press conference”. In this context, the central committee has sent out mixed signals by retaining him in the party even while officially and publicly terming him as “factionalist”. It wants VS to continue within the party, but cannot tolerate his self-styled ways.

### **Achuthanandan's politics**

This is not the first time that the CPI(M) in Kerala faces a serious rebellion at its leadership ranks. The party had expelled prominent leaders MV Raghavan and KR Gouri Amma in 1986 and 1994, respectively, for anti-party activities. VS was the state secretary when Raghavan was expelled. But unlike now, such rebellions did not spill into serious organisational crises for the CPI(M). While Raghavan was expelled for advocating ties with the Indian Union Muslim League, Gouri Amma, who had turned against the party after it refused to make her the chief minister in 1987, was expelled for anti-party activities. Today, when VS faces charges of factionalism, why is the party reluctant to take any action despite immense pressure from the state leadership? One possible explanation could be the class base of VS' popularity, the loss of which could trigger a near-fatal organisational crisis. And, at a time when the party faces a serious credibility deficit after the murder of Chandrasekharan, ousting a leader such as VS could prove disastrous.

How did VS become so popular in Kerala? The explanation that he enjoys the support of the bourgeois media is a complete *non sequitur*. Kerala's popular non-left media never lent any

structural and substantial support to the fundamental issues VS raised over the past decade. Instead, there was a coordinated attack against him and his government led by *Malayala Manorama*, the largest circulated daily in the state, in the run-up to the 2011 Assembly polls. Further, such a support in itself is not enough to make somebody a mass leader. So the argument actually aims to undercut the mass base of VS, which has to be explained by the class reality of Kerala's society.

To understand this mass base, one has to go beyond the popular arguments such as “media activism” or “media syndicate” and look deeper into the class composition of the Kerala society. Kerala's early communists including VS built the communist movement through immense struggles against feudal and capitalist forces. While in Malabar, communists mobilised petty producers and peasants in largely anti-feudal and anti-British struggles, in the princely states of Travancore and Kochi, where capital versus labour relations were in an advanced stage compared to north Kerala, the communist movement largely consisted of agricultural labourers and workers of primordial industries such as coir, cashew and plantation workers. VS, who joined the CPI in 1940, cut his teeth in the coir worker struggles in Alappuzha. Later he was sent to the Kuttanaadu region by P Krishna Pillai in 1940s to mobilise coir agricultural workers who worked for big land lords. These struggles, by providing socio-economic concrete consonants to the sustained articulation of the values generated by the social renaissance movement that was born and matured in the former half of the 20th century, played a pivotal role in the emancipation of the society from the slumber of servitude and took the communists to the helm of power in 1957. The communist government implemented radical policies such as land and educational reforms, which, among others, proletarianised a large number of *adiyan* people. *Adiyans'* condition in Kerala was worse than serfs, their (relatable) counterparts in European feudal societies, because, apart from bonded labour, they faced caste suppression, too. Early communist struggles and subsequent land reforms were crucial in liberating *adiyans* from this oppressive caste-class structure and setting the pace for their metabolical development into a new class — agricultural labourers. This class became the backbone of the communist party.

The rise of agricultural workers and their organisational development played an important role in the consecutive intervention in the policy making processes of successive governments from 1957 onwards. Their emphatic presence and active part in the process redefined not only the property relations but even the further unraveling of the civil society. It should be remembered that observing May Day and putting its meaning into practice was begun only by the promulgation of 1957 EMS Namboodiripad led government in Kerala. Nowhere in India has such awakening of a non-propertied class carried ahead the banner of social renaissance to the fore with a graduated slogan of socialism on it. This force was instrumental in the struggle within the undivided CPI between the right and left wings. After the formation of the CPI(M) this class under the banner of the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU) carried ahead the furthering of land reforms. Its presence and struggles defied the right wing attempts to erase land reforms. That's how the course of land reforms went on. Private monopoly of land and a rise of malevolent new rich were

thwarted mainly by the political articulations of this class. It won't be far stretched if we say that Lenin's programmatic recipe of the people's democratic revolution found its suited force in this class (in Kerala) to connect the advanced proletariat that waged its war cry against capital, the most modern form of property, with the small peasants and other downtrodden and marginalised sections who had long cried for property rights against the feudal and imperialist clutches that were denying it to them.

However, this social fabric of Kerala came under attack with the onslaught of globalisation. New economic policies being implemented since the late 1980s have had structural effects on the society as well. With the agricultural sector coming under stress, material condition of plantation workers deteriorating and the traditional small-scale industries in disarray, the social development of workers and agricultural labourers took a downturn. Of this, agricultural labourers and marginal cultivators were the hardest hit. As a class, they faced an existential threat as the area of cultivation as well as production shrank sharply over years. For example, the area under paddy cultivation fell 34% from 322,368 hectares (ha) in 2001-2002 to 213,187 ha in 2010-11. Paddy production during the same period tumbled 26% from 703,504 tonnes in 2001-02 to 522,738 tonnes in 2010-11. There was a sharp fall in the area of cultivation of paddy during the five years between 1980-81 and 1985-86 (a fall of 123,399 ha). It was against this backdrop the KSKTU started an anti-reclamation stir in Alappuzha under the leadership of VS. The agitation was launched to highlight the problem of the massive conversion of paddy fields into other type of land, affecting the food production.

## **Social Utility of Land**

The agitation found space in the media for all wrong reasons. Kerala largely failed to discuss the significance of this agitation, which the mainstream media termed a "crop destruction drive" (this provided a new derogatory epithet in Malayalam language - "*vetti-nirathal*" (slaughter-felling)). But ever since, the issue of land utilisation became the central subject of VS's political struggles. This is out of a conviction that for sustaining and advancing the social achievements of Kerala and for the social development of the basic classes, the party should address issues related to land utilisation. Three components could probably be seen to have generated this conviction, such as land being the prime means of production in a still largely agrarian state, agricultural utilisation of land in sustained and planned way being the key factor to enhance food security in one of the most densely populated states of the country, and land being the highest possible labour provider in the state. Therefore, any radical macro movement that aims at advancing the social development of the poor and the marginalised cannot move forward without correctly addressing the question of land.

Most of the struggles VS led when he was the opposition leader during 2001-06 were related to land issues. He struck a vast alliance of left-minded people in these struggles against land encroachment, ecological destruction and corruption and for the rights of the poor and the marginalised, including the adivasis. To name a few, he played a pivotal role in

agitations against land encroachments in Mathikettan and Pooyamkutty areas in south Kerala as well as against the land grab in Kovalam, near the state capital Thiruvananthapuram. His stand against sex rackets and legal fights he led against corruption need no further explanation.

There are, however, criticisms that VS backed off from these struggles when he became the chief minister in 2006. This cannot be said to be true. If one looks at the key policies of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government between 2006 and 2011, it is not difficult to see that there is a continuity of resolve and action from “VS the opposition leader” to VS the chief minister. The LDF government put forward a programmatic approach towards development, what economist Prabhat Patnaik (and former vice chairman of the Kerala State planning board) calls the “Kerala strategy”. The government partly addressed the question of land and adopted measures to check real estate speculation and fall in agricultural production. The famed Munnar operation, initiated by VS, in which the government seized hectares of illegally-occupied land, raised serious questions about the ownership of land in Kerala. It was after the Munnar operation, that the government passed the paddy field and watershed protection bill (Kerala Nelvayal Neerthada Samrakshana Bill 2007). It is a radical legislation, which bans the conversion of paddy land for other purposes and proposes stringent punitive measures for its violation. The government’s strong position against violation of lease documents by privately-held estates also stands in sharp contrast with the policies state governments adopted towards the plantation sector earlier.

Of course, VS did not win the whole war here, though he claimed a few battles. He had to snap the Munnar operation in the wake of opposition from within the party and the LDF and the talk of a second land reform was stopped by the party leadership. Kerala’s land reforms, though instrumental in breaking the feudal structure of the society, left the plantation sector untouched, leaving huge swathes of land in the hands of big business houses such as the Tatas (Kannan Devan tea) and RPG (Harrisons Malayalam). A second land reform should address this issue, which is pivotal for the development of the state's plantation sector.

Also, the once-fragmented feudal land that went to the then tenants has outlived its existence as the enthusing petty property of the small and medium peasant that had propelled commodity production of agrarian produce, the purchasing power of the farmer, resulted in the newly liberated agricultural worker and in the bettering of food availability. The integration of the market, the pressure of negative changes in the policies that has turned against petty production support schemes, growing inadequacies of petty production to imbibe new technological advances have necessitated collectivisation of land for better centralised planning with higher application of advanced technology. This entails two options. One is the amassing of land by capital houses; and, the other, *the intervention of state investment accompanied by active co-operative production units and joint production ventures of farmers*. The latter - the clear progressive measure - definitely needs a second phase of land reforms.

VS's approach has largely been bottom-up, instead of the top-down tactical line adopted by the state leadership. It doesn't mean that VS was a tactless ultra-Leftist or that the party leadership was full of empiricists. Rather, the party failed to offer a programmatic support to the rights-based politics VS and many other comrades represented despite the significance of that politics at a time when the Kerala society was undergoing massive changes in the "neoliberal era". This was a major element in his disagreements with many decisions taken by the party. Analysing those disagreements through the prism of a disciplinary moralism is tantamount to negating the dialectics of his many differences.

## **What next**

One can say that VS raised the slogan of social utility, a compromised concept of social ownership in a socialist society. The theoretical explanation of this politics derives out of the Marxist understanding of land. According to Karl Marx, the "price of land is an irrational category because it's not a product of human labour". Agricultural economist Utsa Patnaik elaborates in "Agrarian Distress and Land Acquisition" in an essay in *Frontline*:

Though it is the cradle of all human activity, the extent of land cannot be increased beyond a point, once the limits of reclamation have been reached, while further deforestation would be highly detrimental. In this sense, land is a primary resource that is fixed in supply.

When agriculture production is plummeting, large swathes of land are being diverted for other purposes and real estate lobbies are growing in strength, the question about the nature of land utilisation naturally assumes greater significance. This stall in production and the onslaught of globalisation hit the agricultural workers the hardest. With neoliberal capitalism being unable to bring the masses displaced by the primitive accumulation of capital into the workforce, a huge reserve army of labour was created, adding tensions to the social life in Kerala.

To counter this trend, there has to be a structural intervention in the society, which only a communist party can enact. For any such move, the party has to first address the issue of land utilisation for which the model has already been laid down by VS. No matter whether VS will be sidelined further within the party for his "indiscipline", the party cannot turn its back to his legacy - because, his it represents a radical idea that could activate the basic classes of the society. It should be instrumental in the process to collectivise land and encourage mechanised farming, keeping monopoly capital at bay, to groom the culture-and institutions-of co-operative production in the field, advocating transgression into socially accountable owning/social owning of land, promote traditional small-scale industries with active state help and even rethink about the decision to leave the plantation sector in the private hands.

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Such measures will regenerate a more modernised and politically willful agricultural proletariat with advanced know-how. It will place them higher in the cultural echelon. It is through this activation of the basic classes, the CPI(M), which is facing an unprecedented moral crisis in Kerala after the murder of Chandrasekharan, can make a comeback. That needs a fruitful and a positive act of introspection.