

Communist Activities in the State of Mysore (During the Period 1920 to 1950)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolution and character of communist activities in the princely state of Mysore during the period from the 1920s to the 1950s. Using archival records, secondary historical studies, and documentary evidence, it investigates how leftist ideologies penetrated Mysore's unique political context, shaped by its semi-autonomous princely administration. It analyses how communism intersected with social reform, labour organisation, and agrarian unrest. The article concludes by assessing the legacy of Mysore's communist activities and their contribution to the broader political and intellectual history of Karnataka.

Keywords: Princely State, Political, Communist, Movement, Mysore, Leftists, Congress.

Introduction

The princely state of Mysore, though nominally autonomous under British paramountcy, experienced strong political currents in the early twentieth century. By the 1920s, a growing number of intellectuals, trade unionists, and reformists began engaging with radical ideologies circulating across India. Communism, introduced through contacts with Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, found local expression in Mysore's industrial towns and peasant regions. This article examines these activities, their organisational forms, and their political implications.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative historical method, integrating archival analysis, content review, and interpretive synthesis. Primary materials include colonial and princely government reports, Communist Party publications, and contemporary newspapers. Secondary sources include academic monographs, journal articles, and dissertations concerning Mysore's political development. A contextual approach was applied to trace ideological transmission, institutional responses, and patterns of mobilisation.

Historical and Political Background

The princely state of Mysore occupied a distinctive place in colonial India's political landscape. Ruled by the Wodeyar dynasty under indirect British supervision, Mysore maintained an image of administrative progressivism. However, rising social consciousness and inequalities within agrarian and industrial sectors created fertile ground for dissent. The late 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of student and labour organisations, some of which gravitated toward socialist and Marxist ideologies. The Mysore Praja Paksha and Mysore Congress provided political space that Communist sympathisers later engaged with.

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Growth of Communist Activities in Mysore

Communist presence in Mysore initially developed through informal study circles and labour groups influenced by developments in Bombay and Madras. By the late 1930s, individuals sympathetic to the Communist Party of India (CPI) began organising workers and peasants through unions and cooperative societies. The spread of leftwing publications and participation in antiimperialist campaigns facilitated broader ideological diffusion. The period of the Second World War, followed by postwar repression of the CPI, shaped the tactical orientation of activists in Mysore, who increasingly focused on social reform and cultural mobilization.

The Communist Activities in Mysore State

Even from the days of the establishment of the Mysore Provincial Congress Committee in 1931, a group of youngsters influenced by the Marxist ideology began to take active part by functioning within the Congress. N.D. Shankar, C.B. Monnaiah Ramaswamy, Kumaran, Chandur and Srinivasa Murthy received their early political training through their participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. It was during their stay in the jail that they could come into contact more with the left ideology in general. These youngsters were not much attracted towards the Hindi propagation, Khadi or other so-called constructive activities of the Congress done under the tacit approval of the Princely Government of Mysore. These men were eager to do something more adventurous, revolutionary and progressive in nature. It was a period when the labour was becoming increasingly restless. The labourers of Bangalore, Mysore, KGF and Tumkur not only fought for their economic demands but also in several political struggles inaugurated under the leadership of the Indian National Congress. Congress leaders like K.T. Bhashyam made serious attempts to organize the workers and mobilize them for the greater participation in the national struggle.

When a strike broke out in the Tobacco factory in 1936, it provided an opportunity for several congressmen with left leanings to jump in to the struggle. The Tobacco factory did not have an earlier history of labour, strike. Hence, for the young left-wingers, it was an opportunity to plunge into the struggle and organize the workers. The Tobacco company (The Peninsular Tobacco) Company was started in the Cantonment area in the beginning of the 20th century. The Cantonment or the Civil and Military Station had certain special privileges. Area was beyond the jurisdiction of the labour laws of the Government of Mysore. The British Indian Acts for Labour had to be specifically extended or adopted for the region. Therefore the factory owners had greater freedom to deal with the workers. The Tobacco factory was just like a seasonal factory with long hours of work, less pay, absence of safety measures and without other benefits like maternity benefits.

The Indian National Congress had boycotted the foreign goods, which also included Tobacco. A campaign against the Foreign liquor was also taking place. Taking this as a pretext, the Tobacco company retrenched 300 employees. In fact, its business was affected by the Congress programme. But even when the company started picking up after the initial setback, the process of retrenchment continued unabated.

The company understood certain modernization and mechanization programmes which reduced the need for more workers. The class of workers called Tinkers found that with the introduction of new machinery, their work was reduced and hence the wages were brought down. As a result of this, on 5 May 1936, 50 tinkers of the factory went on strike. On 8 May, they were supported by all the tinkers of the company. As a retaliation, the company retrenched a large number of women employees. On 8 May, the management informed 700 women workers of the packing department that their services were not required for a period of few weeks, because the soldering work was going on. These workers were on daily wage, they had no other way. They too joined the strike. The strike also became violent, because people started throwing stones at windows and doors. Policing was brought inside the factory to restore order. But the strike became total and it continued for a few days. Their attempt to get the Resident intervene failed. Hence they formed a union and put forth the following demands.

- Payment for the strike period to be ensured.
- Leave, increment and provident fund to be introduced as in the case of Binny Mills.
- Maternity benefits, sick leave with pay for 15 days to be ensured.
- The Company should promise that the retrenched workers would not be harassed.
- The role of the Maistries to be avoided while making any new appointment.

The strike was conducted in such a way that food and provisions had to be supplied to the striking workers and their families. The workers had accepted the leadership of Chandur and Rangaswami but the management was not willing to negotiate with them, saying that they were outsiders. By June 18 the Management declared lock-out and removed the machineries. Chandur then made an attempt to mobilize support for the strike from other parts of Mysore and outside the State.

When all attempts at negotiations failed the three thousand workers reduced their demands to three basic ones, such as

- No victimization
- No retrenchment and
- Provision of maternity benefits.

But even these demands were rejected by the Management. After two months, it was announced that the factory would be re-open with just 500 workers. After a week, the number increased to 600, and by August almost 1,100 workers were re-employed.

Chandur who had toured other metropolitan cities returned to Bangalore and requested the Congress to take up the issue with the British. The communists were the only people to take interest on the Tobacco factory of cantonment. The organization of the struggle and its continuation for a longer period was a significant achievement for left-wing leaders who had taken up the leadership of the struggle. On the other hand, the Congress leaders, who were initially supporting the struggle did not participate actively thinking that it would be futile to fight against a Civil and Military Station Factory which did not come within the purview of many legislations.

The period between 1932-1937 was very crucial for the left movement in Mysore. Although the Communist Party was not founded till 1942, the left leaders continued their activities under multiple banners. The Mass Awakeners Union, National Youth League, the Young Mysore League, Civil Liberties Union were some of the important organizations which made serious attempt to provide a radical sharpening for the Congress struggle. Officially they functioned within the Congress, but planned leftist strategies and plans.

It was Savoi Aswath Rao, who founded the National Youth League in 1932. This organization had its activities in Mysore, Bangalore and other areas. Savoi Aswath Rao was elected its founder President.

Similarly, the Mysore Unemployees Union was founded in 1938. Another important association was the Malleswaram Labourers' Club which was organized in 1937. It was during the same year, that the Mass Awakners' Union was founded. N.D. Shankar, C.B. Monnaiah and Aswath Rao were the leaders behind the formation of the Mass Awakeners' Union. In the year 1935, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya founded the Young Mysore League. Kamaladevi was a well-known freedom fighter with her base in Karnataka. She had established wide contacts with several national level leaders. She had very clear leftist leanings, which helped the radicalization of the Congress organization to some extent.

These leaders never thought of organizing a separate Communist Party or even a Congress Socialist Party (CSP) as it was case with several regions of India. Perhaps many of them thought that they were not strong enough to for an independent identity.

But a very salutary point to be mentioned here is that they did not adopt a confrontationist position vis-à-vis the Congress. They generally accepted the Gandhian leadership.

In fact in Bombay, the communist group disrupted the trade union movement and left themselves away from the third great wave of struggle. On the other hand, the left wing activists in Kerala totally immersed themselves in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Krishna Pillai, Kerala's first Communist started his political career by enrolling himself as a Congress volunteer in the salt Satyagraha March to Payyanur in January 1930. For the left inclined youth of Kerala, the famous Dandi March and the beginning and the beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement were not just sham struggles, started to pre-empt the next struggle of the exploited masses of India. According to EMS Namboodiripad, when they read records about the Dandi March and breaking of the salt law, they felt grateful that they were born in a generation that could bear witness to all these historic events. EMS further states, similarly the Guruvayur Satyagraha in which A.K. Gopalan was the volunteer explain thrilled "thousands of youngmen like me". After the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Guruvayur Satyagraha it was the same would be communists who enrolled numbers for the Congress, organized

political meetings, demonstrations, Youth conferences and the first Trade Union Organizations. It was this participation in the national struggle and the Congress activities which helped the communists in Kerala to become politically relevant and successful when they founded the Communist Party in Kerala.

The early leftists in the Mysore State also had a similar policy towards nationalist cause and Congress-led struggles. Each of those front organizations founded by people like C.B. Monniah, Savoi Aswath Rao and N.D. Shankar struggled hard to make the nationalist struggle a success through those organizations. But unfortunately, these leaders were only on the periphery. They could not capture the mainstream position in the Congress and decide the fate.

The Left wing continued their agitations in other factories too. One T.R. Mills had 800 workers and where the left leaders organized three strikes during January-February 1939. In this Mill, the workers declared a strike demanding advance payment for the Pongal Festival. Another struggle was for taking back a dismissed weaver and for the opening two other dismissal cases. The workers were successful in these struggles. Savoi Aswath Rao had started organizing meetings and provided full support to the agitation. Dismissal of workers had become a common feature in many establishments. Hence the Left leaders took serious steps to counter these trends.

There was a ban against the Mass Awakeners Union for its political activities. However, S. Ramaswamy ignored the ban and tried to form a Union of the Railway Employees in Mysore City. He was arrested and produced before the court. When his trial was taking place, thousands of railway workers marched to the court to attend his trial. In the thirties trade unions were not legalized by the government and any attempt was fought with tooth and nail by the government.

The government was against any serious activities in the nationalist struggle. Therefore, N.D. Shankar was failed for a seditious speech in Mandya. C.B. Monnaiah was served with a deportation notice from Mysore. Similarly, Ramaswamy was arrested for his attempt to form the Railway Workers Union.

In 1941, the workers of the textile Mills demanded the payment of bonus and dividend. The management was adamant in not paying it. The Mill workers, therefore decided to go on strike again. The strike was triggered when a worker was interrogated and threatened for asking others to go on strike. When this news was reported, the entire Mill went on strike on the bonus and dividend issue. The workers invited the Left leaders like N.D. Shankar, Kumaran and Rama Rao to lead the struggle. The three leaders formed a 40 member strike committee. They started picketing the lorries entering the premises, they started holding neighbourhood meetings. They started a novel idea of fund collection for the striking workers. Since the leadership was completely in the hands of the left leaders, Congress adopted a policy of non-cooperation and they withdrew from the struggle.

Since the war was going on, the factory production was also declared as part of the war-effort and it should proceed without any hindrance. Hence, the Government of Mysore externed the Left leaders like Shankar, Kumaran and Rama Rao for a year from the city on 9 Feb. 1941.

Thus, the left leaders organized their activities under different associations like Mass Awakeners' Union, Civil Liberties Union, Young Mysuru League, Mysore Unemployees Union, Malleswaram Labourers Club etc. They also organized several trade unions in some of the mills, factories and the Railways. Unfortunately they could not become a strong force, primarily due to the fact that they could not build a strong cadre behind them. N.D. Shankar, C.B. Monnaiah, N.D. Shankar functioned as individuals without a regular cadre behind them.

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