



Vayanasalas As Catalyst For Change: Dissemination Of The Communist Movement In North Malabar

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Abstract: Diverse factors contributed to the growth of communist movement in Kerala. Beyond resistance against feudal lords and state, the communist party provided various services, encompassing disaster relief, agricultural production enhancement initiatives, and literacy programs. The establishment of reading rooms (*vayanasalas*) played a crucial role in educating the illiterates and fostering political awareness among them. It was the primary school teachers within the party who spearheaded their establishment, thereby promoting literacy. During the second quarter of the 20th century, these reading rooms disseminated communist ideology, thereby establishing a strong foundation for the communist movement in Kerala, particularly in north Malabar. The tradition of *vayanasala* movement helped communist party to a great extent escape from the fossilisation process in the period of crisis.

Index Terms - *vayanasala*, socialists, communist party, literacy, night classes

INTRODUCTION

The word *vayanasala* was simultaneously used to mean reading room and library where books, periodicals, magazines were available and accessible to all. In the first half of the 20th century *vayanasalas* acted as representational space in breaking the barriers of caste and untouchability. They were instrumental in taking communism to the people of Kerala in general and Malabar in particular. The early communist leaders made a conscious effort to establish reading rooms and a night-schools in every village by the end of 1930s. Becoming the informal center of political education, they expedited the socialisation process of the lower classes. Different types of activities and programmes were organised as part of the *vayanasalas* with a clear view of getting into the masses and thus, becoming converted to the repository of left political propaganda. This paper explores the role of communists in the establishment of *vayanasalas* and infusing communist thought among the people in north Malabar in the second quarter of the 20th century.

Public libraries started to come up in Kerala in the 19th century and it was by the 1930s that they permeated into every nook and corner of the state. The library movement in Malabar was slower as compared to the rest of Kerala, as British authorities were suspicious of political activities surrounding libraries, and tried its level best to minimize spaces of socializing. It was the nationalists who took initiative to launch *vayanasalas* in Malabar. With the radicalisation of the national movement in the left direction, it was made imperative for the socialists within the congress to broad-base the movement by getting into the masses. Consequent to the withdrawal of Civil Disobedience Movement by Gandhi many, who believed that freedom was at the door step, got disappointed and inactive. Thus, those who got disillusioned by the Gandhian mode of struggle gradually started moving towards the Left which culminated in the formation of Congress Socialist Party(CSP) in Kerala.

In Malabar, the leftists' first attempt at mass organization after they released from jails in 1934 had concentrated on the working class and within a year the Kerala CSP(KCSP) activists had established their committees in almost every village in Malabar which were backed by reading rooms where local activists taught the illiterate to read socialist books and pamphlets and conducted study classes¹. With the growth of the socialist movement, its committees were established in different villages of Malabar, with a disciplined core of volunteers and organizations of peasants and trade unions complementing this main political organization. It was necessary for the socialists within the congress party to develop political consciousness among the ranks through a programme of literacy mission by establishing *vayanasalas* across the villages. After the transformation of the entire state unit of the socialist party into communist party in 1939, the mission was, thus, carried out by the communists.

The well organised and co-ordinated activities of the *vayanasalas* began to be perceptible in Malabar by 1937. On June 12, 1937 a meeting, presided over by K.Kelappan, president of Malabar District Board, was attended by over 300 *vayanasala* activists as well as those interested in its activities from across Malabar. The meeting took a decisive decision to form *vayanasala sanghams*. This was significant in many respects as it resulted in the formation of large number of *vayanasalas* across Malabar. As the literacy became an essential part of the KCSP programme, reading rooms were started in almost every rural areas in Malabar particularly in north Malabar. ABYS(Abhinava Bharath Yuvak Sangham), formed by A.V.Kunhambu in 1934, played significant role in the growth of *vayanasalas* in northern part of Chirakkal and Kasaragod taluks. It was a politically oriented organization with definite programme of social services like construction of new roads, thatching the houses of the poor, cleaning of public wells, helping diseased people, starting of reading rooms and conducting of night classes etc². Similar movement known as Youth League, which was formed on the model of ABYS, at Kallyssery by the initiation of KPR Gopalan, also organized *vayanasala* activities both in the Chirakkal and Kottayam taluks³.

Recognizing the importance of *vayanasalas* in the social and political life, communist leaders like P.Krishna Pillai, A.K.Gopalan, A.V.Kunhambu, K.P.R.Gopalan and T.S.Thirumumb urged party workers to take initiative in their formation. Through their speeches they exhorted party workers to come forward to set up *vayanasalas* and educate the people. The *vayanasala* activities in Kandakkai was remarkable in many respects. SJM *vayanasala* at Kandakkai in Chirakkal taluk was set up in 1938 by Karshaka Sangham workers. Earlier, some of the youths in the locality under Kammaran Master had erected a temporary shed for reading *Mathrubhumi* newspaper which later developed as SJM *vayanasala*. It played a significant role in the social life of the people in the locality; when cholera was spreading fast in 1943, the workers of the *vayanasala* got engaged in wiping out misconceptions and blind beliefs with regard to the epidemic⁴.

One of the prominent centre of *vayanasala* activities was Kallyasseri in Kannur which became the centre of youth movements as well. Shri Harshan Smaraka Vayanasala in Kallyasseri, which was opened with the efforts of K.P.R.Gopalan, was the epicenter of the *vayanasala* activities in the area. E.K.Nayanar, who later became the chief minister of Kerala, also helped in its formation which was named after Harshan, a member of the oppressed caste who was tortured to death at the Kannur Central Jail for his participation in the national movement⁵. Around 1940, a *vayanasala* was active on a shop near Nadukadam in Mooli, known as Aikya Pradhayini Vayanasala. Communist party leaders like Sardar Chandroth, and Narayanan Master, V.K.Kunhiraman Master, Koolothu Kumaran, P.P.Anandhan were its organizers. But, the *vayanasala* was in existence only for a short period.

Dedicated effort in the *vayanasala* movement was taken by Parammal Krishnan Vaidyar who acquired land for setting up a *vayanasala* and was also at the forefront of its construction at Padannapuram. On account of his contribution, the *vayanasala* was named as Sakhavu Parammal Smaraka Mandiram⁶. Shortly after the execution of Kayyur convicts, a *vayanasala* known as Kayyur Raktha Sakshi Smaraka Vayanasala was set up at Kozhummal; Parangodan Kunhiraman himself took initiative of its formation⁷. Velam Pothujana Vayanasala near Mayyil in Kannur, which was started by Subrahmanya Shenayi and K.A.Keraleeyan, functioned as the epicenter of political activities as well as peasant movement in the area.

It was at the behest of A.K.Gopalan who was on a party programme in Kambil adjacent to Kannur that Kambil Yuvajana Vayanasala was started. The initiative to form this *vayanasala* was taken by communists like Govindan Vaidhyar and Chadayan Govindhan who, as part of it, conducted a door-to-door visit and collected books for its library. Later, Kambil Yuvajana Vayanasala came to be known as AKG Smaraka Vayanasala⁸. At Anthur near Kannur, *vayanasala* activities were organized by some women leaders: Karichiriyedathi, C.Pandal, M.K. Narayani, and P. Madhavi who were active in all peasant struggles in Kannur. Under the leadership of this group there was a night school functioning in Anthur during 1945⁹.

The initiative of Eruvasseri Kisan Sangh to set up a *vayanasala* deserves special mention. The *vayanasala* building was constructed at Eruvasseri Poopparambu and peasants and workers have contributed at their capacities. As part of the donation, paddy was collected with receipt. A significant aspect of its construction

was the sincerity and dedication on the part of the workers who came in the evenings after their regular works and participated in its construction like bringing soil and other materials from distant places with the help of petromax¹⁰.

Parangodan Kunhiraman spearheaded the formation of a *vayanasala* at Peralam near Karivellur which later named as Peralam Pothujana Vayanasala. His initiative in founding a school at Kozhummil led to the library hosting its initial classes until the school building was ready¹¹. At Vatakara in Kurumbranadu, Kairali Vayanasala was established in September 1934 near Nut Street, owing to the initiative of M.K. Kelu, a former patron of Viswabharathi Vayanasala-a platform for numerous youths¹². Inspired by the *vayanasala* movement, he spearheaded its formation, later relocating it to a land acquired through maternal inheritance¹³. The institution hosted lectures and discourses by Vaghdanandha Guru, Vidwan Kavil P. Raman Panikkar, Raman Vaidyar, and Achyuthan Gumasthan, with particular emphasis on speech training programs.

Azhekkodan Ragahavan was responsible for the formation of Deshvardhini Vayanasala at Kakkad, near Kannur in 1940- 41 period. It became a centre of many social activities in the area during the period. *Vayanasalas* were set up in Eranjoli and Thalassery by the initiation of Kudanjeri Kunhiraman Master and N.E.Balaram respectively. In 1943, when cholera spread in Malabar, many relief centers had been opened and some of them later started to function as libraries¹⁴.

It was the primary school teachers who took initiative to launch *vayanasala* movement. Their role in making people literate is significant at a time when the rigid caste system forbade education to the untouchable castes. In fact, they played dual role in the social transformation; being mentor of their students in the day times and teacher of the people in the evenings. Besides their teaching at schools, they got engaged in the task of imparting knowledge to the illiterate at night classes which were held in *vayanasalas*. Notably, majority of the communist party leaders in the earlier times were elementary school teachers and leaders of teacher's movement in Malabar. The role of teachers at Ayyallur L.P.School in Pazhassi is only one of the several instances¹⁵. Almost all the activities of the communist party during the 1940s and 1950s were chalked out and led by them.

The reading rooms became an integral part of the new political culture of Malabar. They became a part and parcel of people's life. It kept open from 5 to 8 in the evenings so that labourers could read after their work. Night classes were conducted in many *vayanasalas* as a part of popularizing political as well as class consciousness among the rural peasantry. *Vayojana* education (education to elders) was another significant achievement of the *vayanasala* movement. Special committees were constituted for organizing and conducting classes for the elders. Apart from learning reading and writing, the participants were imparted classes on contemporary social and political developments. In some localities classes were called '*Ragezhuthu*'. K.K.Balakrishnan Master in Pazhassi was a teacher in Pazhassi West U.P School who got involved in literacy activities at Pazhassi school¹⁶. Likewise, classes under the auspices of Payam Grameena Vayanasala held at Payam school were taken by A.V.Kunhikannan¹⁷. As a dedicated teacher, the role of A.V.Kunjambu in *vayojana* education in Karivelloor, could not be trivialized. K.C.Krishna Kurup in Kannur who practiced *visha chikitsa* rendered commendable service in the field of literacy. He started an educational institution at a shed attached with his house and imparted education to illiterates. Notably, communist party classes were also held at this shed¹⁸.

Similar was the contribution of Kollacheri Kumaran in Onchiyam near Vatakara in the literacy movement. The night literacy classes, which were held at a *vayanasala* run by him, imparted education to the illiterates in the locality. The financial assistance to run the classes was met by Kumaran himself and Valiya Valappil Pokkan, M.R.Narayana Kurup and others helped Kumaran in his endeavour. Edavalath Krishnan Nambiar and Thaipalli Narayanan Nambiar were among those who took classes there. T.K Kumaran was also one of the leading figures in the *vayojana vidhyabhyasam* which was held at Kolavattath Peedika in Onchiyam.

Vayanasalas were centers of cultural programmes as well and were instrumental in the formation of arts clubs. Different types of programmes were organized with the participation of different types of social groups. The members of the clubs were given training in different art forms including plays, *kolkalli* etc. The plays written by communists like K. Damodaran, Thoppil Bhasi, and others, portraying the social, political, and economic conditions of the people, were often staged under the aegis of the libraries, generating discussions and forming public opinions.

The establishment of the *vayanasalas* can be considered as an inspiration for the young people for reading the better books during the era when books were not abundant in the villages. Tapping the potential of the teens and youths, they created spaces for the cultural and sports activities for the villagers. *Bala Sanghams* (children's collective), youth organizations, and sports clubs were formed as integral components of *vayanasalas*, facilitating the arrangement of diverse games, encompassing football and other competitive engagements. The youth club established in Chirakkal, under the guidance of K.P. Gopalan and with A.K. Gopalan as a member, held substantial importance. Children and youths affiliated with these clubs

commenced participation in classes and programs orchestrated by the communist party through the *vayanasalas*.

Vayanasalas, through which political education got disseminated, were instrumental in creating political consciousness among the rural masses. At the progressive level, they conducted classes creating awareness among the people of the need to think rationally and scientifically with a view to eliminate blind beliefs and social evils from the minds of the people. The night schools and study classes along with the libraries and reading rooms set up by the communists became converted to the repository of left political propaganda. While school education provided the base for reading and writing, the political as well as class consciousness was injected among the rural mass through such reading rooms. The socialists-turned-communists through these programmes were able to create vibrant cadres to work among the peasants.

In the era of rigid caste system and untouchability, *vayanasalas* played a significant role in widening spaces of socialization. Unlike formal spaces, they enjoyed an autonomy that allowed them to create a broader network of people cutting across class and caste differences. They also managed to create a strong network of new social spaces which constituted informal but vibrant associational spaces for the youngsters, predominantly male. Ushered in a new space in the modern public sphere, *vayanasalas* eventually shaped mini-publics in villages where matters of social and political importance were discussed and debated. *Deshabhimani*, party mouthpiece, and other publications were available there which were read out to the public by literate party men. It enabled the formulation and discussion of social and political issues and the mobilization of significant numbers of people around such issues. It was often here—in the local reading rooms—that later political leaders began their association with the cultural, literary and political institutions. Becoming the nerve centre of cultural activities of the villages, majority of the *vayanasalas* turned to be breeding grounds of communist ideologies.

It was against the backdrop of the mushrooming of *vayanasalas* in the villages of Malabar by the efforts of the communists that the state machinery started to tighten its vigil over them. In the words of E.M.S.Namboothirippad, MSP (Malabar Special Police) first destroyed these educational institutions on account of the fact that these were acting as the instrumental of disseminating knowledge among the peasantry for uniting against government and *janmis*¹⁹. The period of ban on the communist party in Malabar, especially aftermath of Calcutta Thesis, was effectively used by the political opponents in suppressing all the Communist literacy activities. It is undeniable fact that the party was almost wiped off the cultural sphere in Malabar towards the close of the 1950s. It was after the adoption of parliamentary democracy in 1951, that ban on it was lifted. Thus, the party had to re-start from the zero; what was left there were the remnants of the earlier cultural activities. But the strong tradition of the *vayanasala* movement helped it escape from the fossilisation process in a period of crisis aftermath of Calcutta thesis.

Conclusion

It has to be recognized that *vayanasalas* contributed much to the growth of communist movement in north Malabar by imparting political education to the rural folk. Although nationalists initiated the library movement, communists, who later dominated over it, ultimately benefited from it. Socialists-turned-communists, many of whom were primary school teachers and previously affiliated with the congress party, recognized the potential of libraries for disseminating communist ideology. Their efforts resulted in the proliferation of libraries throughout North Malabar. By expanding avenues for social interaction and fostering political awareness, they integrated previously unorganized and marginalized segments into mainstream society. *Vayanasala* movement provided a strong foundation for the communist party enabling it to surmount the adversities of its nascent stage.

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