

Chapter IV

THE BIRTH OF A NATION

It is the common practice of the bourgeois champions of United Kerala to consider the fall of the Perumals as an unfortunate accident in history. It appears to them as if a nationality that had from the beginning been united was on that day divided by the arbitrary will of the last of the Perumals who partitioned his empire among his sons, nephews and other relatives, as the traditional account of the fall of the Empire says.

This, as we have seen, is unhistorical: the Empire of the Perumals tumbled down not because of the caprice of the last of the emperors but because the material basis for the continuation of such an empire was absent in the Kerala of that epoch. As a matter of fact, an accidental character can be attributed, if at all, to the formation of the Empire, rather than to its disruption, since, as we have seen, it was formed on a soil quite unsuited to any and all kinds of centralised empires. It was just because its existence was accidental (in so far as any historical phenomenon can be spoken of as being an accident) that that empire collapsed like a house of cards.

This however is not all. Not only is it a distortion of history to say that the fall of the Perumals meant the disruption of a united nation; it is true, on the other hand, that it was in the centuries after the disruption of that Empire that, for the first time in history, the nation of Kerala began to take shape. It was just when the rulers of the petty kingdoms in Kerala (numbering about 2 dozens) were fighting among themselves that the various tribes and castes inhabiting the tract of land that is present-day Kerala began to mark themselves off from their Tamil, Tulu and other neighbours and to unite themselves as Malayalees. Nay more, it was these very internecine quarrels—or, rather, the material conditions that gave birth to these quarrels—of the rulers, so loudly and persistently mourned by the present-day champions of United Kerala,

that constituted the biggest and most vital factor that contributed to the birth of the nation.

A conglomeration of several tribes, each of which leads its own distinctive tribal life and has its own distinctive tribal character but has the common characteristics of those relations of production that are known to historical science as primitive communal; a conglomeration of castes, each of which leads its own distinctive caste life and has its own distinctive caste character but all of which are united by the caste rules of Hindu society; the organisation of all the tribes and castes inhabiting a particular territory under the political-administrative authority of a ruler and the administrative machine under his control—these are the three phases through which Kerala, like other parts of India, passed in the prehistoric, and what may be called the early historic period, i. e. the period upto the fall of the Perumals.

It was only with respect to the character of the State machine built up in the last of the three phases mentioned above that Kerala differs from the other parts of India. While the need of a central organisation for the development of irrigation led to a centralised imperial State in other parts of India, the absence of this need made for a State with a far smaller area under its control in Kerala. While the bigger size of territory subjected to the authority of the State plus the communal ownership of land made the emperors the source of all authority, both in theory and practice, in other parts of India, the smaller size of territory plus private property in land led in Kerala to a system in which the feudal chieftains—Naduvazhi, Desavazhi, etc.—shared power with the king.

This difference in the character of the state machines in Kerala and other parts of India and the consequent failure of the attempt to transplant the all-India type of state to the soil of Kerala, does not mean that, with the disruption of the all-India type of state, the state itself ceased to exist in Kerala. Nor does it mean that with the reduction in size of the territory administered by the ruler—from the empire of the Perumals to the 2 dozen or so petty principalities—the development of society from tribal and caste to the territorial organisation was reversed. The fall of the Perumals was, in other words, only the formal declaration of the failure of a particular type of the territorial State organisation and its substitution by another, and not a going back to the tribal and caste organisations of the earlier epochs.

The social and state system that was set up in Kerala after the break-up of the Empire of the Perumals was an adaptation of the village community, so vividly described by Marx in his "Capital", to the conditions of a private property in land. Land is not "tilled in common" and hence its produce is not "divided among the members"; it is, on the other hand, tilled individually by each cultivator who however has to share its produce with the landlord. Nor are the dozen or so of individuals, described by Marx as part of the Indian village community, "maintained at the expense of the whole community" as in other parts of India; these dozen individuals and several others were each of them given same sort of right on land itself or on its produce. Thus was created the system described as follows by the late Mr. Logan:

"The unit of the Hindu system was the family, not the individual. An association of families formed a body or corporate guild. These corporate bodies each had distinct functions to perform in the body politic, and those functions were in old times strictly hereditary. . . . The Nayars were the people of 'the eye', 'the hand' and 'the order' and it was their duty 'to prevent the rights from being curtailed or suffered to fall into disuse'. The Kanam comes from the Dravidian word kanuka (: to see or to be seen) and the root from which the verb is derived is kan (: the eye) So that kanam in its original sense seems to have denoted this function of theirs in the body politic. . . . But what was this supervision right (kanam)? The kon (shepherd, king) and the pathi (lord, master) had shares of the produce due to them as the persons of authority in the land. And the specific word to denote these shares was pattom signifying the padu's (: authority's) varam (: share) The Nayars were no doubt spread over the whole face of the country protecting all rights, suffering none to fall into disuse, and at the same time supervising the cultivation of the land and collecting the kon or king's share of the produce, the public land revenue in fact. . . .

"All the state functionaries employed had well-defined shares of the produce set apart for them. The kon or king had his share. The pathi or overlord (the hereditary grantee apparently if there chanced to be one) had likewise a share. And if there was no such pathi or hereditary grantee, then it seems his share went to the general

body of protectors and supervisors—the 'Six Hundred'—the Nayer guild, the kanakkar.

"But when the right of the Perumal came suddenly to an end, their (Kon's) share of the produce, was, in Malabar at least, certainly not passed on to the chieftains who in some measure supplied the Perumal's place. . . . The chieftains certainly had revenues from their demesne lands, but from the lands of the bulk of those subject to them they levied nothing. The chieftains were hereditary holders (jenmis) of the lands from which they derived a share of the produce, and on the other hand, the bulk of their subjects—the headmen of the Nayer protector guild—had likewise become hereditary holders (jenmis) of their lands by usurping the kon's share of produce. . . .

"If the fundamental idea of the Malayalee land tenures is borne in mind, namely, that the land was made over in tract to certain classes for cultivation, the above will be seen to be a most natural outcome of the Hindu system."

Thus was created the system of feudal landlordism, the system under which the jenmi, kanamdar and other categories of non-cultivating owners as well as the actually cultivating tenants has each of them his allotted share of the produce. It is this system that was subsequently modified and perfected by the British and continues to this day. It is therefore a target for well deserved condemnation at the hands of all modern democrats. But, as Engels said with regard to slavery, "we are compelled to say—however contradictory and heretical it may appear—that its introduction under the conditions of that time was a great step forward. . . . It is clear that so long as human labour was still so little productive that it provided but a small surplus over and above the necessary means of subsistence, any increase of the productive forces, extension of trade, development of the state and of law, or beginning of art and science, was only possible by means of a greater division of labour. And the necessary basis for this was the great division of labour between the masses discharging simple manual labour and the few privileged persons directing labour, conducting trade and public affairs, and, at a later stage, occupying themselves with art and science." Hence, while fighting our utmost to smash the present system of feudal landlordism, we should recognise, again as Engels did, that "it

is very easy to inveigh against it in general terms and to give vent to high moral indignation at such infamies. Unfortunately, all that this conveys is only what everyone knows, namely, that these institutions are no longer in accord with our present conditions and our sentiments, which these conditions determine."

It was on the soil of the system of feudal landlordism that the various tribes and castes inhabiting present-day Kerala started developing as a distinct nationality. For, it was the division of labour between the manual and intellectual workers and the development of the latter from generation to generation, made possible by the allotment of a definite share of the produce to the classes and castes that did not engage themselves in the direct process of production, that helped the unification of several dialects into a national language—the first criterion of a nation.

We have seen that Malayalam as a distinct literary language developed at a very late stage in our history and that it was subjected very much, first to Tamil and then to Sanskrit. But we find that, in the centuries after the fall of the Perumals, literary works in Malayalam begin to get more and more freed from the clutches of both these languages and give birth to a really new national language. Both in poems and other artistic creative works as well as in the State records of different feudal rulers, we find a gradual development of style that has the characteristics of the language of a developing nationality. This process reached such an advanced stage by the 16th and 17th centuries that that period may well be considered to be the period of the formation of real national literature. We find in this period that the works of literature are not merely translations or weak adaptations or imitations of some Sanskrit authors but original works (not of course original in the themes adopted but certainly original in the style, imagery used, etc.); nay more, the style and technique of writing have become so popular that these works have become the classical works studied in every home, and continue to be so even today.

It is not however only for the emergence of a national language that the centuries after the fall of the Perumals is remarkable. An equally remarkable flowering of arts in general also took place in this period. Hindu temples, Christian churches and Muslim mosques became the centres of attraction for lakhs of common people who were entertained and

enlightened through the various forms of religio-cultural activity; it was through these that the kathakali, the ottamthullal, the kuthu, etc. developed and acquired the status of national arts. The artistes who developed these art forms and the audiences attracted by them, have together created through generations, a sum total of cultural sensitiveness that has come to be part of the distinctive psychological make-up of the Malayali.

It is true that most of these works of literature, most of these art forms, arose within the narrow compass of one caste or a group of castes: the classical literary works of Malayalam are mostly by Hindu authors and deal with Hindu religious themes; so are kathakali and other arts of a mainly Hindu origin. It is also true that many of these national arts and literary works were rather confined to upper-class circles. Nevertheless, these works of literature and art forms have laid the basis for the creation of a style and technique that surpasses all castes and is truly national. Furthermore, men of culture, drawn of course from the upper classes, of all castes, began to appreciate and even adopt this style and technique in their own particular caste or religious circle (e.g. The chavittunatakam of the Christian is an adaptation of the Hindu's kathakali).

This flowering of literature and the arts was nothing but the expression of the development of that "community of economic life, economic cohesion" which, according to Comrade Stalin, is one of the characteristics of a nation. It was, as we have seen, the absence of this community of economic life that led to the fall of both the Chera and the Perumal Empires. But the development of production and exchange which took place after the fall of the Perumals—the introduction of non-food crops like cocoanut; the adoption of certain processes of utilising primary produce for further production; the development and perfection of some crafts; exchange of many products locally or even with the outside world, etc.—led to the development of domestic and foreign trade, greater and greater use of money, mortgage or sale-purchase of land, etc. Thus was emerging, slowly and through generations but nonetheless unmistakably, that prerequisite for the formation of a nation—the national market. It was this, as is well known, which attracted first the Arabs, then the Portuguese, then again the Dutch and lastly the British, to the coastal

towns of Calicut, Cochin, Quilon etc. where they opened their factories and started trade.

The very theory of the unity of Malayalees as a nationality referred to at the beginning of this chapter—the theory that the disruption of the Perumal Empire into a number of petty kingdoms was an unfortunate accident—is the reflection in social consciousness of this economic reality, the reality of the growing national market. For, although the centralised imperial state was an institution unsuited to the soil of Kerala in the ancient and early mediaeval days, although therefore the Chera and the Perumal Empires were bound to collapse at the time when they were sought to be set up, the centuries after the fall of the Perumals saw such an increase in production and such an expansion of the market that the system of petty kingdoms, established on the ruins of the Perumal Empire, was growingly becoming out of date. The process of strong rulers devouring the neighbouring kingdoms and transforming the rulers of these neighbouring kingdoms into ordinary feudal chieftains, or worse still, ordinary jenmis, was increasingly taking place. It was this that led to the destruction of those obstacles to trade between neighbouring kingdoms which are inevitable in the system of petty kingdoms that was set up after the fall of the Perumals.

The Zamorin of Calicut and the Rajahs of Cochin and Travancore were the rulers that strengthened themselves through this process at the expense of petty kingdoms. Each of these claimed the right to become the Emperor of Kerala—the Zamorin on the ground that he was the direct descendant of the Perumal, because the son of the last Perumal was the founder of the Zamorin dynasty; the Rajah of Cochin on the ground that the sister's son of the last Perumal was the founder of his dynasty; and the Rajah of Travancore on the ground that he is the direct descendant of the Chera emperors. Which one of these three mightiest rulers of Kerala was to become the Emperor—this alone was the issue to be settled.

These rulers however were not satisfied with the expansion in the geographical territory of their kingdoms. They also demanded an extension of their political power, a restriction of the powers of the feudal chieftains, the temple associations etc. They wanted to put an end to the system under which, both militarily as well as administratively, they were dependent on their feudal subordinates. They were, in short, trying to establish a type of state under which the ruler was supreme

and naduvazhis, desavazhis and jenmis were absolutely under the sway of the ruler. With a view to the establishment of such a state system, they organised a system of ruthless terror against their feudal opponents. Many are the stories of conflict between the ruler and his feudal satellites, both the one and the other resorting to identical methods in asserting their rights. As the biographer of one of these rulers says, these rulers "conciliated those who were to be conciliated; fought those who were to be fought; denounced those who deserved it; squeezed those who could be squeezed; helped those who deserved help; destroyed those who were to be destroyed—all this with a view to establish the principle of *One State, One Ruler.*"

Kerala was thus going through the same process of national unification, the setting up of the nation-state etc. as was witnessed in the European countries in the same period. The very internecine struggle of the rulers of Kerala for supremacy, which the champions of United Kerala so much deplore, was an expression of the growing unity of Kerala, of the fact that the obstacles to national unification were being removed in the only manner which is known to history—the use of physical force. The wars waged by the Zamorin and the Rajahs of Cochin and Travancore, both among themselves for the title of the Emperor of Kerala as well as against their respective feudal chieftains, were the media through which the political unity of Kerala was being forged. That is why the rulers who waged those wars were at the same time great patrons of national art and literature, why their courts were the centres to which great scholars, poets and artists thronged. On the soil of the national market was thus rising the national state and national culture. Kerala had thus acquired all the main characteristics of a nation.