

Left, Right, Left...

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Kerala politics is dominated by two fronts, United Democratic Front (UDF) and Left Democratic Front (LDF). This underscores role and importance of smaller groups in the parliamentary system of democracy. However, in the context of Kerala's economic development, a number of questions arise about the positive relevance of smaller parties. Has twin front model of Kerala done any good, apart from providing political stability? Is political stability that much important? What would people of Kerala opt for if given a choice between stability vs governance and development?

There are leaders of smaller parties that argue and justify their existence on the grounds of federalism, diversity and democracy. But they often represent a small minority community or a caste group, and generate a feeling of reluctance to move together with the mainstream.

While looking at the developmental challenges of Kerala, it seems that for both the political fronts economic, social and local developmental issues become secondary when the issue of 'front-management' comes. Managing both the fronts, LDF and UDF, is not an easy task. There are conflicting interests of balancing internal dynamics and aspirations of each constituent. In the process, the political class forgets their responsibility to govern and address developmental challenges. For both the fronts, what matters is indulging in a blame and claim game.

Smaller parties like Kerala Congress represent community interests and they promote communal politics as well. They are in fact dividing Kerala society on religious lines. However, within the twin front model, this kind of politics gets the needed sustenance, backing and patronage. Kerala society is yet to realize how poisonous the threat such smaller parties pose to secularism, as some of them are overtly communal.

Under twin front model, smaller communal parties are well protected. There is a climate conducive for them to thrive. Votes they get never matter. For instance, take the case of Tiruvalla and Kallupara assembly constituency in Central Kerala. Kerala Congress candidates contest from these constituencies under UDF banner. It is said that during the days of E John Jacob, Kerala Congress used to have some influence in Central Kerala, which was due to his personal network and influence at that point of time. However, even today, UDF nominations for these two constituencies go to Kerala Congress although much has changed in these constituencies and many here are unwilling to support candidates from such a communal party.

Is it possible to have an escape from this twin front model? It is impossible would be the immediate reaction. A disintegration of twin-front model is crucial for Kerala's development and progress as secular federal society. Such communal elements and politics of divisiveness can be defeated only if they are left alone to showcase themselves independently. But under the UDF/LDF umbrella such divisive groups can thrive and hide under safe shelter of twin front status quo-ism.

Politicians, political parties and both fronts live out a life of blame and claim. When it comes to actual delivery everything has a party colour attached to it. Party politics has come to influence police, bureaucracy and all facets of life.

There is a considerable transition in the mindset of Keralites over the last couple of decades. There is a transition from working and peasant class mindset to an entrepreneurial

and middle class mind set. Middle-class segment of Kerala society has enlarged considerably, says CK Vishwanath, a social activist. Doing business is no more being considered a bourgeois venture. Interestingly, Kerala stands 3rd in the country, as far as number of registered working micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), followed by Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh (as per the latest available MSME census, ministry of MSME, GOI). Further, Kerala is home to one of the most flourishing IT & tourism industries in the country. Close to 17 million Keralites have purchasing power matched with rest of India's middle classes. Close to 3 million people are working in different GCC countries. They send home an annual remittance US\$ 6 billion to Kerala.

In the UDF-LDF front based politics, in their attempt to keep up with the present model, both fronts always take care to see to it that no other force emerges within Kerala politics, which could be a challenge to them. Civil society aspirations in politics are not much welcomed. Both the fronts consider it as a threat. A UDF leader has stated that, "it is not a good idea to vote for independents. S/he may be your neighbor/teacher or an acceptable person but make sure to vote for a party symbol".

People these days are a lot dissatisfied with narrow focus of electoral politics nurtured by the twin front model, says C K Vishwanath. A more healthy development oriented politics is what is needed for Kerala. Let the smaller parties grow. Today, they have no space to grow if at all they want to grow within the existing political dispensation, which is dominated by LDF and UDF. Middle class voters of Kerala are no more committed to any political front as such. They prefer to vote for a good candidate.

Vishwanath feels that large number of single agenda movements in different parts of Kerala, can really pose a challenge to Kerala's twin front model of political democracy, as they begin their journey where both these fronts have failed. They can address developmental challenges and local development better. RTI activist P Sherafudin says, there is a third group slowly emerging, as a civil society political front. Though with limited success, civil society groups, NGOs and local single issue based movements attempted to showcase their political clout in the last Panchayat elections.

Governance and development are the key words. Affiliation to any political party or any front is no more that important for the burgeoning middle class of Kerala. There are visible cracks already appearing to the twin front model. Competition for the second place in the UDF between Kerala Congress and Muslim League is just a beginning. □□□