



ESCALATION AND PROGRESS OF COMMUNIST MOVEMENT DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD OF BRITISH INDIA

Dr. Pravat Ranjan Sethi

Assistant Professor, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Rajasthan.

The colonial period witnessed the emergence of various political and socio-religious forces in the country. India was rising from the apathy of the medieval times into active nationalism. The Bengal renaissance contributed to the development of the social and political consciousness of the people. The diverse movements that spearheaded the awakening gradually began to rally against British repression and exploitation. The anti-imperialism became a macro-ideological canopy for these forces of diverse socio-political hues. For instance, on the one hand there were socialists who indoctrinated the people for an egalitarian social order and, on the other, there were cultural nationalists who sought to awaken the masses to India's rich cultural heritage, common history and the glorious past, and articulate a civilization context for Indian nationalism. Through the 18th and 19th centuries there were a series of skirmishes against the British regime, and all of them carrying cultural components as their creed, whether it was the Sanyasi Rebellion (1763-1800) around which centered Bankim Chatterjee's famous novel *Anand Math* or Birsamunda's Rebellion (1890-1900). Slowly but steadily nationalism was growing for the simple reason that there was a commonality of culture and outlook throughout the length and breadth of the country. BT Ranadive, a veteran Marxist himself, said,

"There was a history of common culture, outlook, ideological traditions and the firm idea that India extended from one end of the country to another."

Such ideological and sub-ideological groups were conscious of their activism that their role should not disrupt the anti-imperialist unity, struggle and mobilization of masses.

The fight against the British and transformed the Indian National Congress from a moderate to an aggressive anti-British platform. The Congress split at the Surat session (1907), where the evolutionary moderates parted company with the revolutionary extremists, marked a change in the course of the party's politics. However, it was the *JalianwalaBagh* massacre (1919) that proved a defining moment in the history of the freedom struggle. That was the end of the road for those who still hoped for a change of heart on the part of the colonial rulers. Thereafter, the history of the freedom movement had been a ceaseless anti-imperialist campaign, mobilization and struggle.

In the 1920's the repositioning of modern political and ideological forces both within the Congress and outside began. These ideological groups influenced the course of political and socio-economic discourse and also the pattern of struggle against the foreign rule. At least three of them, the Communist movement, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Muslim leadership (post-Khilafat), had also been actively participating and influencing the ideological and political dispensation in post-Independent India. Such movements of the colonial period naturally influenced historians and social scientists, distorting their assessment of the roles, ideological moorings and positioning of these political forces. The past came to be studied, interpreted and evaluated in the shadow of the present. And that has been the biggest crisis of modern Indian history. As it would, various ideological predispositions decided history. This is also true in the case of the Communist movement in India.

Establishment and groundwork of Communist Party of British India

EMS Namboodiripad traced the beginning of the socialist ideas in India back to the year 1912 only when, within a few months of each other, Hindi and Malayalam biographies of Karl Marx were published. The former was written by the well-known revolutionary, Lala Hardayal, and the latter by Ramakrishna Pillai. Namboodiripad uses semiotic methodology to ferret for the date of birth of socialism in India. And he found translation of biography of Marx as the origin of socialism in the country! But the fact which was chosen to be left out is that since long, long before these Indian philosophers and social reformers had begun to consistently call for the social and economic emancipation of the downtrodden and exploited classes of people.

There is a controversy in the Communist historiography over the formation of the original Communist Party of India. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) takes the position that it was formed in October 1920 while the Communist Party of India considers December 1925 as the time of its formation. Harkishan Singh Surjeet and Jyoti Basu of the CPI (M) assert that the party was formed by MN Roy, Abani Mukherjee and two Khilafat activists in October 1920. However, Hiren Mukherjee of the CPI considers that the party was finally established at the Conference held in Kanpur from December 26 to 28, 1925. The CPI (M) regards that the only significance of the Kanpur Conference was the formation of the party's central committee, "for imparting a coordinated and united shape to Left politics in the country."



Among those prominent leaders at the Kanpur meet were HasratMohani, Ajoy Ghosh, B.T.Ranadive, P.C. Joshi, M Basavapunniah, Z.A. Ahmed, S.A.Dange and A.K.Gopalan.M.N. Roy played a substantial role in the formation of the Indian Communist party and he was credited for organizing the Communist party in Mexico and leading a successful revolution there. He was in Moscow and was considered a theoretician par excellence. He indoctrinated Khilafatis who migrated from India. They became the forerunners of the party in India. M.R.Masani wrote, "The earliest recruits, apart from a few political exiles and wandering intellectuals, were made by the Communists from among muhajirs, fanatical Muslims who had left India, an unholy land, in protest against the Afghan war of 1919. It is understood that something like a hundred of them got to Tashkent, where MN Roy and others indoctrinated them. They were then sent back to India in ones and twos, some overland and some by sea, from 1921-22 onwards."

The Indian Communists followed the line and tactics decided by the Communist International and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Both of them played a decisive role in guiding the Indian Communists in organizational and ideological matters. The Indian Communists lacked the initiative to take their own decisions or see the Indian reality for themselves. They were completely dependent on the Russians. MadhuLimaye wrote that it was natural for a young and inexperienced party to receive guidance from experienced comrades abroad. He further observes, "But the guidance is one thing but to surrender judgment and accept the position of a vassal is another; the surprising thing about Indian Communists is that they never outgrew their adolescent stage. In the beginning it was through MN Roy that the Comintern tried to guide and direct the activities of its Indian adherents...Roy gradually fell from grace and after 1927...for nearly twenty years the Communist Party of Great Britain –CPGB - presided over the fortunes of the Indian Communists."

Initiation of Meerut Conspiracy Case

The Meerut Conspiracy case of 1929 was the result of the anti-imperialist actions of Indian nationalists who included a large number of communists. The charge was that the accused conspired with the help of the Russian organization, i.e., Communist International, to deprive the king of the sovereignty of British India and to set up a government in India on the Russian model through armed struggle. The 32 accused who were arrested included well-known Communists like S.A.Dange, ShaikatUsmani, Muzaffar Ahmed, Philip Spratt and Benjamin Francis Bradly. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote that among these accused, "The majority knew little about Communism. People connected with any kind of labour or peasant activity have been arrested and tried."

However, the Communists highlight the Meerut Conspiracy case as an instance of their role in the freedom movement. But there has been a sensational disclosure by a party colleague that at least one of the top leaders accused in the case had acted as a spy of the British government. The communist leader S.S.Mirajkar of the CPI (M) confirmed that the controversial "Dange letters of 1924 to the then Governor General offering his services to the British government was genuine." He also said that "he had known of the existence of the letters written by Dange for 40 years but kept quiet in the larger interests of maintaining party unity."

In an interview to the Malayalam daily, *Deshabhimani*, an organ of the CPI (M), Comrade Mirajkar challenged, "If Dange has the courage, let him prove that what I have stated is a lie. In fact, I do challenge a whole lot of them to disprove what I know is the truth." The seven-member committee of the CPI which examined the letters alleged to have been written by Dange, chairman of the party, to the British government had arrived at the conclusion that Dange was not a "British spy" and the letters were forged.

Beginning and approach of Workers and Peasants Party (WPP)

The Communists were not able to systematically organize their party even by late 1920s or by early 1930s as their Comintern connection was under close British surveillance. Socialism or Communism as such was not particularly under British watch, but what placed the Indian Communists under British screening were their Soviet loyalty and covert operations under Comintern orders. Thus the new political formation which was grown as an internal organization of the Indian National Congress and the Workers and Peasants Party in several provinces was virtually a cover for the Communists. That is, the Indian National Congress unknowingly became the surrogate mother to the Indian Communist Party. The WPP was overtly seen and set up as a Congress labour group. The inaugural conference of the WPP was held in Calcutta on December 24, 1928. At its first national executive of 16 members 10 were either members of the CPI or avowed Communists.³³ The party criticized the Congress as a reactionary party and vowed to play an independent role as it felt strong enough to do so. Obscurity and confusion protected them from the British surveillance. MN Roy was of the opinion that the WPP should be used as a legal instrument for the Indian Communists. Roy suggested that "an illegal organization should be built side by side with the legal apparatus."



Expansion and Class Analysis of Communist Movement in British India

The Marxists were able to bring to light much evidence of inequality and conflict in the countryside. The greatest threat to the victory of Indian revolution is the fact that great masses of our people still harbor illusions about National Congress and have not realized that it represents a class organization of the capitalists working against the fundamental interests of the toiling masses of our country. The Congress was described as a reactionary bourgeois organization. "The most harmful and dangerous obstacle to victory of the Indian revolution is the agitation carried out by the Left elements of the National Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru, Bose, and others." They instantly criticized Congress Socialist as social fascist. The Thesis of the Sixth Communist International known as Third Period Line was based on the assumption that the period of capitalist stabilization has ended, that the world capitalism has entered into the last phase and the victory of international revolution is imminent. The thesis says, "International social democracy of all shades has become the last reserve of bourgeoisie society and its most reliable pillar of support." The mainstream Communist ideologues and academicians do not accept that it was a blunder the party had done during the Movement. However, the CPI (ML), a splinter group of the CPI (M), does not subscribe to the logic of the CPI and its pen-pushers in academics. The CPI (ML) document unambiguously condemns the role of the CPI during the Movement and believes it as a destructive and unwise role of the party. It says, "Perhaps the worst of sectarianism on the part of the CPI during this period was split away from the AITUC at its Calcutta session (July 1931) and the formation of the Red Trade Union Congress." Thus the Calcutta committee of the CPI declared in its organ in July 1934, "The revolutionary unity of the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie can be effected only outside the Congress and in opposition to it...the same committee organized a Gandhi Boycott Committee which staged a demonstration against Gandhi and proudly regarded this as an evidence of the anti-imperialist and anti-Congress unity."

The Rise of Congress Socialist Party and its various National Interests

The change in the dynamics of international politics led the Russian Communists to amend their strategy in order to safeguard their own national interests. Their new thesis was intended to mobilize maximum forces in their favour. On August 1, 1935 the 7th congress of the Communist International met in Moscow. It directed the Communists to work for the creation of anti-fascist people's front of all democratic parties in all democratic and peace-loving countries. The Comintern forthrightly suggested the Indian Communists to work with the Indian National Congress. The report on colonial countries, including India, was made by a Chinese leader, Wang Ming, under the title, *The Revolutionary Movement in the Colonial Countries*. He reported about the Indian Communists:

"Our Comrades in India suffered for a long time from 'Left' sectarian errors; they did not participate in all the mass demonstrations organized by the National Congress or organizations affiliated with it. And at the same time the Indian Communists did not possess sufficient forces independently to organize a really powerful and mass anti-imperialist movement ... The Indian Communists should in no case disregard work within the National Congress."

The Indian Communists were a little confused and hesitant. They also lacked both initiative and confidence. They were facing practical problems to transform their role from anti-Congress to pro-Congress. The CPGB conjectured their problem. Thus the two prominent leaders of the CPGB – R. P. Dutt and Ben Bradley - in an open letter to the Indian Communists directed them,

"What is needed is, without impairing the degree of unity that has been achieved through the National Congress, to strengthen and extend this unity to a broader front, and to develop to a new stage the organization and leadership of the mass struggle against imperialism ... It is essential that all Left wing elements in the Congress should fight in union on a common platform for their vital needs. The Congress Socialist Party (CSP) can play an especially important part in this as the grouping of all the radical elements in the existing Congress." Madhu Limaye says that Dutt-Bradley thesis marked a turning point in the relations between the Communists and Socialists on the one hand, and the Communists and the Congress on the other.

Conclusion

Serving the interests of the Soviet Union in the War, the Indian Communists theoretically and operationally played a role disruptive to India's unity and integrity. They didn't mind balkanizing India to prove themselves Leninists and Stalinists which even the latter would have disapproved. They were the first people to support and theoretically legitimize the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan. The CPI declared that the slogan for Pakistan was neither communal nor separatist but "the democratic urge of newly-awakened Muslim nationalities for self-determination." One of the reasons for their support to Muslim separatism was the League's opposition to the Quit India Movement. As BT Ranadive says, "The Muslim mass refused to participate in the August Struggle and was almost hostile to it. The League leadership was not in the least interested in embarrassing the British government or helping the Congress to advance the cause of the anti-imperialist struggle." The Indian Communists applied the Leninist-Stalinist principle of "right to self-determination" to India where the



situation was different. They propounded the theory of „oppressed Muslim nationalities“. According to them, the Muslims formed a separate nationality on the basis of their religion and had been historically victims of Hindu majoritarianism. Harkishan Singh Surjeet admitted that “they accepted religion as a basis for a new nationality”.¹⁵⁰ At the Central Committee meeting in September 1942, G Adhikari, the party’s theoretician, presented his Thesis, „Pakistan and National Unity“. It was included in the party resolution. The Adhikari thesis was reaffirmed at the first party congress in 1943. Thus it became an official and authoritative strategy for party men to actively support the demand for Pakistan. Adhikari’s report said, “Every section of the Indian people which has contiguous territory as its homeland, common historical tradition, common language, culture, psychological make-up, and common economic life would be recognized as a distinct nationality with the right to exist as an autonomous State within the free Indian Union or federation and will have the right to secede from it if it so desires.”

It further asserted that India was not one nation but had been composed of many nations, that there were nationalities within a political unit known as India. Thus the Adhikari report stated, “nationalities of Pathans, western Punjabis (Muslims), Sikhs, Sindhis, Hindustanis, Rajasthanis, Gujaratis, Bengalis, Assamese, Biharis, Oriyas, Andhras, Tamils, Karnatakis, Maharashtrians and Keralisns, etc” were reality and they should be legitimately and politically recognized and supported. The report categorically stated, “This means that these States whose boundaries could be determined by the people later, can be autonomous and sovereign and form the federation within an Indian Union or they may secede from their federation without.” They were greatly romanticized to quote Lenin and Stalin without understanding the meaning and context. They lacked creativity. Subordination was full and spontaneous. Practically they were mesmerized by Stalin’s cruelty which they considered true application of Marxism. He was a god for the Indian Communists. BhogendraJha explains the mental attitude of his colleagues in the party, “The Communist party had blind faith in the Soviet Communist party and its leadership, i.e., Stalin. They believed Soviet Union and Stalin could not do any wrong, they could not be wrong.” He gave his own instance, “When I opposed Soviet and Stalin’s decision to withdraw Red army from Tehran, then the leadership asked, „What are you speaking? Mistake by Communist Party and Stalin?”

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