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## **The Left and the National Movement**

### MARX AND INDIAN LIBERATION<sup>1</sup>

What has come to be defined as the “Left” in the historiography of the National Movement and current political discourse is essentially the assemblage of all elements as owed allegiance to the socialist world-outlook. It is an area in which Marxism exercised the dominant influence. While it is true that, as a standard-bearer of the working-class in the struggle against capitalism, Marx’s main theoretical writings were concerned with the ‘laws of motion’ of capitalism and the capitalist exploitation of labour, it is important to remember that his commitment to the cause of India’s national liberation predated any recognizable beginnings of our own National Movement. In 1853 he wrote in an American newspaper, the *New York Daily Tribune*:

The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the new ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or *till the Hindus [Indians] themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether* (our italics).

When the Great Revolt of 1857 broke out, Marx and Engels were consistent in their defence of the rebels and in condemnation of British atrocities in their writings in the same newspaper.<sup>2</sup> This needs to be particularly stressed because some radical writers such as Edward Said have been taking Marx to task for an alleged lack of sympathy for the Indian people.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following text was prepared for the P. Sundarayya Memorial Lecture, Hyderabad, May 1998. It was included in the SAHMAT’s volume, *Indian People in the Struggle for Freedom*, New Delhi, 1998. It is now reprinted with some slight attempt to improve presentation.

<sup>2</sup> The crucial 1853 article “Future Results of British Rule in India”, from which I have just quoted, and the entire corpus of writings on India during the 1850’s are brought together in *Karl Marx on India*, ed. Iqbal Husain, New Delhi, 2006, the 1853 article being printed on pp. 46-51.

<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, 1979, pp. 153-57. Said’s reading of Marx turns out to be as limited, as his remarks are self-assured. He does not, for example, appear to be aware of Marx’s writings on the 1857 Revolt, for which there was absolutely no excuse in the 1970’s since these were all published in a Moscow publication of 1959 (Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence*), and in a ‘Western’

There is no evidence of any direct personal contact between Marx and any Indian opponent of British rule. In 1871, the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association, in which Marx was the moving spirit, received a letter from an unidentified supporter from Calcutta, drawing attention to the "great discontent ... among the people" and "the wretched conditions of the workers" in India; little is known about the sequel, though the General Council advised the correspondent to open a branch of the International with special attention to "enrolling natives".<sup>4</sup> An indirect contact with Dadabhai Naoroji, India's indefatigable spokesman in London, could have developed through H.M. Hyndman, one of England's early social democrats. He maintained good relations with Marx until the summer of 1881, and was also a friend of Dadabhai Naoroji, who describes him as a 'friend of India'.<sup>5</sup> Some statements by Marx in a letter of early 1881 echo Naoroji's calculations of the enormous burden of the tribute on India as well as his suggestion of the existence of popular conspiracies against the British, feeding on mass unrest.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, Hyndman's break with Marx later that year seems to have precluded the possibility of any personal association of Marx with Naoroji.

#### WORLD SOCIALIST MOVEMENT AND NATIONAL LIBERATION

Karl Marx died in 1883. Within a few years of his death two important developments took place, giving organisational forms to both Indian nationalism and international socialism. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 at Bombay; and the Second International in 1889 at Paris, the latter uniting under its banner the most advanced sections of the working class movement of Europe and America. Unfortunately owing to the very moderate constitutionalist politics of the Congress and the growing dominance of right-wing Social Democracy in the Second International, the two movements remained distant from each other. Nevertheless, Dadabhai Naoroji, who had presided over the Congress at Calcutta in 1886 (and was to do so again in 1906), appeared at the Amsterdam Congress of the International in 1904, proclaiming the

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edition by Shlomo Avineri (in *Karl Marx: On Colonialism and Modernization*, New York, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P. C. Joshi and K. Damodaran, *Marx Comes to India*, Delhi, 1975, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, Delhi, 1962, p. 184.

<sup>6</sup> See Marx's letter to N.Y. Danielsen, 19 February 1881 in Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, p. 408; it will also be found in Marx and Engels, *On Colonialism*, 4th (enlarged ed.), Moscow, 1968, p. 304. Compare Naoroji's statements in his memoranda of 1880, published in *Poverty and Un-British Rule*, pp. 176, 182-3.

confidence of the Indian nationalists in the support of the British working class; and Madame Cama, friend of revolutionary exiles, unfurled the tricolour (red, white, and green) of Free India at the Stuttgart Congress of the International (1907). But these were, as yet, just episodes. Indeed, at Stuttgart itself an alliance of the left and centre only barely managed to delete from the resolution on the colonial problem a reference to the current civilizing mission of colonialism that would be taken over by the metropolitan socialist regimes after capitalism had been overthrown!<sup>7</sup>

It was the revolutionary Marxists within the Second International, who began to build a vision in which the proletariat's struggle for socialism would have an indispensable ally in the colonial peoples struggling for their national liberation. Lenin gave expression to this understanding in his article "Inflammable Material in World Politics" (1908).<sup>8</sup> Surveying recent events in Iran, Turkey, India and China, he identified Japan as a model (and, therefore, a non-socialist or bourgeois-nationalist model) towards which the nations of the East were feeling themselves drawn.<sup>9</sup> Yet this did not prevent him from enthusiastically greeting the colonial people as allies against the common enemy, capitalist imperialism. His remarks on India were particularly important, with their reference to the demonstrations and strike that took place in Bombay in July 1908 in protest against the sentencing of "the democrat" Tilak to six years' imprisonment. The event drew from him the confident assertion that "class-conscious workers of Europe now have Asiatic comrades and their number will grow by leaps and bounds".<sup>10</sup>

## SOVIET REVOLUTION AND THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL

It was not until after the Soviet revolution of 1917 that there came into existence a socialist component within any national liberation movement in Asia. Even in 1914, Lenin was speaking of "the possible correlations between the bourgeois liberation movements of the oppressed nations and the proletarian emancipation movement of the oppressing nation,"<sup>11</sup> as if the former process had

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<sup>7</sup> William Z. Foster, *History of the Three Internationals*, I, Delhi (1956), pp. 216-18.

<sup>8</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1943, IV, pp. 297-304.

<sup>9</sup> One is reminded of Lenin's observation to be made six years later (1914) that "the bourgeois movement of emancipation in Ireland [when it] grew stronger and assumed revolutionary forms" helped to persuade Karl Marx to take a position of unqualified support for Irish independence ('The Right of Nations to Self-Determination' in *ibid.*, p. 278).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 278.

to be necessarily bourgeois in character. But "the salvoes of the October Revolution" broke the separation; they did not only bring Marxism-Leninism to China, as Mao Zedong acknowledged,<sup>12</sup> but began to spread socialist ideas in all the major enslaved countries of the world. Once this happened, the socialist movement would no longer be an outside sympathetic spectator of the national movement, but a distinct part of it; and its relationship with the hitherto dominant 'bourgeois-democratic' component consequentially became a crucial question of Left revolutionary strategy on the world scale.

At the Second Congress of the newly founded Communist International (Comintern) in July 1920 Lenin dealt with the new perspective both in his Preliminary Theses on the National-Colonial Question, and in his speech presenting the Theses.<sup>13</sup> He acknowledged that in the circumstances of the time "every nationalist movement [in the colonial countries] can only be a bourgeois democratic movement, for the bulk of the population in backward countries are peasants who represent bourgeois-capitalist relations". The reality also was that "very often, even in the majority of cases, perhaps, where the bourgeoisie of the oppressed countries does support the national movement, it simultaneously works in harmony with the imperialist bourgeoisie, i.e., it joins the latter in fighting against all revolutionary movements and revolutionary classes". Thus within the bourgeois-democratic movements "the revolutionary" elements were to be distinguished from the "reformist". Communists were "to support bourgeois liberation movements in the colonial countries when these are really revolutionary". But the term "revolutionary" was given a surprisingly moderate meaning: it would apply wherever the bourgeois nationalists "do not hinder us in training and organising the peasants and broad masses of the exploited in a revolutionary spirit". This complemented the call to "form independent cadres of [Communist] fighters, of Party organisations in all colonies and backward countries", who would come forward to organise the masses. But what vision of the future were the Communists to present to the oppressed people? Could they project the inevitability of capitalistic development, of which Lenin himself had spoken earlier in his speech? On the contrary: they were required by him to strive for the backward countries' passing, through a form of "the Soviet system", "to Communism," without undergoing the capitalist

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<sup>12</sup> Mao Zedong, 'On the People's Democratic Dictatorship', *Selected Works*, Peking, 1969, IV, p. 413.

<sup>13</sup> The theses are published in Lenin, *Selected Works*, X, London, 1946, pp. 231-8, and his speech in *ibid.*, pp. 239-44.

stage of development.<sup>14</sup> In other words, while supporting revolutionary bourgeois nationalists in a kind of alliance of mutual tolerance, the Communists would still project a rival blue-print for the nation after its liberation.

This was, in fact, what Stalin was to say specifically for India in 1925, calling upon the Communist Party to “enter into an open bloc with the revolutionary wing of the bourgeoisie in order, after isolating the compromising [section of the] national bourgeoisie, to lead the vast masses of the urban and rural petty-bourgeoisie in the struggle against imperialism”.<sup>15</sup>

The call for the formation of Communist organisations in colonial countries encouraged M.N. Roy to travel to Tashkent, where a number of Muslim exiles (*muhajirin*) from India had gathered. Upon some of the *muhajirs* being persuaded to come over to communism, a Communist Party of India was formed in October 1920 at Tashkent. Its headquarters moved with Roy, who constantly made an effort to send Communists trained abroad to India. Here, unluckily, they were rapidly tracked down, and received barbarously heavy sentences, notably in what came to be known as the Peshawar Conspiracy Cases (1921-23).

These early efforts, however abortive, have their place in the formation of a Left movement in India and the names of the early Communist freedom-fighters (Muhammad Akbar Khan, sentenced to seven years’ rigorous imprisonment, and others similarly sentenced, but to shorter periods) need to be gratefully remembered. But the real impetus for the emergence of the Left came from within the country.

## EMERGENCE OF SOCIALIST AND LEFT IDEAS IN INDIA

Over the issue of Indian independence, as well as solidarity with Turkish resistance during the Khilafat Movement (1920-22), Indian nationalism and Soviet Russia were on the same side. This fact alone could not but have spread sympathy for the Soviet cause in large sections of nationalist opinion. But there was one profounder reason which provided a fertile ground for socialist ideas in India,

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<sup>14</sup> All quotations here are from Lenin’s speech, op. cit. M.N. Roy’s supplementary theses, also adopted by the Comintern, presented a rather more critical view of bourgeois-democratic national aspirations than did Lenin; but, as E.H. Carr observes, these did not command much attention in actual practice (*The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-23*, Harmondsworth, 1953, III, pp. 253-60).

<sup>15</sup> J.V. Stalin, *Works*, Moscow, 1954, VII, p. 151. Stalin had, indeed, called for the formation in the colonies of “a workers’ and peasants’ party” representing the bloc of Communists and the revolutionary elements of the petty bourgeoisie (ibid., pp. 149-51). The text is not correctly represented by Aditya Mukherjee, in *Studies in History III* (1-2, 1981), special issue (hereinafter cited as *The Left in India*), ed. Bipan Chandra, New Delhi, 1981, p. 28 & n., despite the caveat in the footnote.

viz., the nationalists' concern with India's poverty.

In their critique of British rule, the founding fathers of the Indian National Congress had made the Indian people's poverty a central issue. Dadabhai Naoroji, from 1876 wrote papers, memoranda and pamphlets, statistically presenting the state of misery and tracing its causes to the tribute rendered to Britain, to the de-industrialization generated by Free Trade, and to the over-taxation and currency manipulations by the British regime. Naoroji's writings were assembled and published in 1901 through Swan Sonnenschein & Co., London, who were incidentally also the publishers of the Engels-edited English translation of Marx's *Capital*, London, 1887. In 1901 Romesh Dutt also published his *Economic History of India under Early British Rule*, followed two years later (1903) by its companion volume, *The Economic History of India in the Victorian Age*, the whole work constituting a narration of the processes of Britain's exploitation of India. How massive the nationalist literature was on India's impoverishment by the beginning of the 20th century can be judged from Bipan Chandra's very comprehensive study of it.<sup>16</sup> Simplified versions of the nationalist perceptions of British exploitation were widely circulated: one example is offered by Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, written in 1909. It is true that the nationalists trained their guns mainly on British rulers, and were largely silent on the travails of labour in the Indian-owned factories and on peasants oppressed by the increasing rent-extraction by land-owners. Yet once poverty of the masses was made a criterion for identifying the oppressor, it was inevitable that the Indian capitalists and land-owners could soon be so identified. The early peasant mobilization initiated by Gandhiji in 1917-18, in Champaran and Kheda were carefully selective in that the Indian land-owners were not involved. But the Ahmedabad textile workers' agitation of 1918 brought Gandhi in confrontation with his own supporters, the cotton mill-owners. Clearly, the barriers would go down further if the masses were approached to support the National Movement in order to alleviate their own misery. It cannot entirely be an accident that the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22) was accompanied by scattered, but determined, mass actions against the zamindars on an unprecedented scale: the peasant agitation in Darbhanga, Bihar (1920), the anti-taluqdar peasant riots in Awadh, U.P. (1921-22), and, despite its religious covering, the Mopla (Mappila) uprising in Malabar, Kerala (1921). Working-class aspirations too found expression, though a moderate one, in the formation of the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1921, attended by

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<sup>16</sup> Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880-1905*, New Delhi, 1966.

practically all the principal nationalist leaders, except Gandhi.

The new awareness of the necessity of bringing workers and peasants into the National Movement was stressed in C.R. Das's presidential address to the Gaya session of the Congress (1922), and his address to the AITUC, the same year, where he spoke of Swaraj for "the 98 per cent". Gandhi, on his release from prison in 1924, sufficiently shifted to egalitarianism to demand optional universal suffrage; he now also claimed to be a "Socialist" in so far as he advocated state ownership of such machine industry as might be permitted in the idyllic India of his vision. In 1925 he gave space in his *Young India* to M.N. Roy, unmindful of British official indignation. Despite Gandhi's opposition, a resolution for condolence on the death of Lenin was lost in the AICC by just 63 votes to 54.<sup>17</sup>

The vote indicated the growth of sympathy for socialism and Soviet Russia in the ranks of the radical sections of the National Movement. From 1923 onwards Jawaharlal Nehru's espousal of "Independence", replacing the vague concept of Swaraj or Home Rule, drew him to the Communists; and by 1927 his participation in the Communist-led Congress of Oppressed Nationalities at Brussels, led to his accepting a position in the newly-founded League against Imperialism; and he also visited Soviet Russia. At the close of this year, along with Subhas Bose, he sponsored a successful resolution at the Madras Congress demanding complete Independence; and in 1928 both of them helped to found the Independence for India League. In 1934-35 Nehru wrote of his having "long been drawn to socialism and communism", and spoke of how "Marxism lighted up many a dark corner of my mind". He was obviously speaking of his experience of the late 1920s.-<sup>18</sup> A similar inclination towards socialism was found among the "revolutionaries". Already in March 1926 Bhagat Singh's attachment to socialism was clear when he founded the Nau Jivan Bharat Sabha; and in 1928 when revolutionary groups from all over the country met at Delhi under the leadership of Chandrashekar Azad and Bhagat Singh, they rechristened their organisation as the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army.

These trends must be regarded as having genuine socialist elements within them, and many of M.N. Roy's criticisms of these groups during this period, often sharply expressed, must be regarded as the products of a far too demanding attitude towards those who, by Lenin's definition, were basically bourgeois

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<sup>17</sup> See G. Adhikari, ed., *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India*, II, Delhi, 1974, pp. 431-35.

<sup>18</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, London, 1942, pp. 362-3.

democrats.<sup>19</sup> Yet it was initially from their ranks that the founders of the Communist movement within the country came.

### COMMUNISTS AND NATIONAL MOVEMENT, 1922-29

By 1922 Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta, S.A Dange in Bombay, M. Singaravelu Chettiar in Madras and Ghulam Husain in Lahore had begun, in varying degrees, to spread Communist ideas. The formation of the Swaraj Party undoubtedly suggested the notion of a left-wing party within the National Movement. In 1922 Dange floated the idea of an 'Indian Socialist Labour Party of the Indian National Congress'; the next year Chettiar published a manifesto of the Labour and Kishan Party of Hindustan. In April 1923 Ghulam Husain, editor of *Inquilab*, Lahore, proposed a conference at Lucknow to form a Labour Peasant Party of India. But before these efforts could bear fruit, the British government arrested the leading Communists and arrayed them in the Cawnpore Bolshevik Conspiracy Case. In May 1924 Muzaffar Ahmad, Shukat Usmani, Dange and Nalini Gupta were sentenced to four years' rigorous imprisonment. Chettiar "was exempted from trial only owing to ill-health."<sup>20</sup> These heavy punishments, as those of the Peshawar cases, drew no perceptible protest from the rest of the nationalist camp – a curious attitude of indifference to civil liberty, if not the cause of national freedom. This fact is one among many which present-day critics of subsequent Communist hostility to moderate nationalism tend entirely to ignore.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of the Cawnpore Conspiracy Case, two developments took place, which were to strengthen Left elements considerably. One was the conference of Indian Communists at Cawnpore (Kanpur) itself, held openly in December 1925 at the invitation of a local "National" Communist, Satyabhakta. The conference elected M. Singaravelu Chettiar as President, Janaki Prasad Bagerhatta, a member of the AICC, as General Secretary, and put Muzaffar Ahmad (released from prison owing to serious illness) and S.Y. Ghate and others on its executive committee. The defiantly open

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<sup>19</sup> With this, in 1935, Nehru too concurred: "The Indian National Movement is obviously not a labour or proletarian movement. It is a bourgeois movement, as its very name implies, and its objective has been not a change in the social order, but political independence" (*Autobiography*, p. 366). A more generous view than Roy's was taken by Stalin in 1924, when he spoke of the national movements of "India and China, every step of which along the road to liberation, even if it runs counter to the demands of formal democracy, is a steam-hammer blow at imperialism, i.e., is undoubtedly a revolutionary step" (*Foundations of Leninism* in J. Stalin, Works, VI, p. 149).

<sup>20</sup> Ghulam Husain apparently accepted conditions as to his future conduct and was released.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Aditya Mukherji in *The Left in India*, ed., Bipan Chandra, pp. 1-40.

attempt to organise the conference was matched in its resolution by firm expressions of solidarity with thirteen named Communist victims of the Peshawar and Cawnpore cases. The definition of the Party's "Object" in its constitution was framed without equivocation in the following words:

the establishment of a workers' and peasants' republic based on the socialization of the means of production and distribution, by *the liberation of India from British imperialist domination.*

In a significant statement on the declaration form, it was added:

No one who is a member of any communal organisation shall be admitted as a member of the Communist Party.<sup>22</sup>

The Communist Party was, perhaps, the first political party of any significance to exclude persons belonging to communal organizations from its ranks.

The second important development was the formation of a broader-based Left-oriented party in Bengal just preceding the Communist conference at Cawnpore in November 1925: this was 'The Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress', which in 1926 was renamed the 'Peasants and Workers Party of Bengal'. Though its initial inspiration came from left Swarajists like Hemantakumar Sarkar and the revolutionary poet Nazrul Islam, Muzaffar Ahmad worked as the editor of its organ *Langal*. The Party called for "complete independence of India, based on economic and social emancipation", and, while popularising Communist ideas, the *Langal* was especially stout-hearted in expressing solidarity with Subhas Bose incarcerated in Mandalay jail since 1924. The Party also took up issues of peasant rights, and began organising workers. With it as the model, the Bombay Workers and Peasants Party was founded in January 1927, and, with similar parties formed in U.P. and the Punjab, an all-India Workers and Peasants Party was constituted in December 1928. A universal feature of these parties was the participation at all levels of Congressmen, along with Communists. The new Party's strength was shown on 30 December 1928, when about 20,000 industrial workers marched on the Congress pandal at Calcutta demanding that the Congress, then in session, should pass a resolution for complete independence, and reject the goal of Dominion Status adopted in the Motilal Nehru report. They were welcomed and addressed by Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru also had presided on 27 December at a Socialist Youth

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<sup>22</sup> *Documents of the Communist Party of India*, ed. G. Adhikari, II (1923-25), pp. 661-70.

Congress at which Communism was declared "the (only) way out".

#### MEERUT REPRESSION AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, 1929-34

Ground was thus clearly being laid for cooperation between the radical nationalist elements and the Communists when the British government, anxiously watching the growth of this cooperation, struck.<sup>23</sup> On 20 March 1929 thirty-one persons including practically all important Communist and Left-inclined trade-union leaders were arrested in different parts of the country and brought to Meerut to stand trial for entering "into a conspiracy to deprive the King [of England] of the sovereignty of British India". Two more were added later to be arrested and tried. Three of the Meerut accused were British Communists, including Ben Bradley.<sup>24</sup> The trial dragged on till January 1933, when harsh judgments were pronounced: Muzaffar Ahmad received transportation for life; five, including Dange and Spratt, 12 years; Bradley, Mirajkar and Usmani, 10 years; the remaining seventeen, 4 to 7 years. The heavy sentences were reduced on appeal in 1933 August; but even by the end of 1933, Ahmad, Dange, Spratt and Usmani were still in prison. On 23 July 1934, the British government declared the Communist Party and all its organisations "unlawful", and their membership a criminal offence.<sup>25</sup>

The Meerut Conspiracy Case deprived the Indian Communist movement of its leadership for full four years (1929-33) and more. It occurred on the eve of the Congress launching its Civil Disobedience Movement immediately after its Lahore session at the end of December 1930, a session made further memorable by Nehru's open espousal of socialism in his presidential address. While by the Meerut trial, the British government succeeded in neutralising Communists, and breaking up the Communist-led Workers and Peasants Party, the more radical national elements were won over by the Congress leadership through its new mass movement. Under constant repression, the Communists could not even restore a centralised leadership: the Bombay and Calcutta

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<sup>23</sup> On 21 February 1929 the Government of India addressed a policy letter to the Provincial Governments voicing the suspicion that "Congressmen like Jawaharlal Nehru" might enter into "temporary alliance with Communists, who have been active among the industrial workers of Calcutta and Bombay" (text summarized in Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 60).

<sup>24</sup> For papers preparatory to the Meerut trial, see Subodh Roy, *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents, 1925-1934*, Calcutta, 1972-1980, pp. 89--163. Of Lester Hutchinson, one of the three British prisoners, it is not established that he was formally a member of the British Communist Party.

<sup>25</sup> See documents in *ibid.*, pp. 470-76, and pp. 445-59, for imprisonment of Communists at Ahmedabad in 1935 under the ban.

Communists functioned separately and in 1932 even the Bombay group split up. M.N. Roy's return in late 1930, and his attempt to form a rival Communist Party further destabilised the Communist ranks. Immediately after the 1929 arrests, Motilal Nehru had chaired, and Jawaharlal Nehru had joined, a committee for the defence of the Meerut accused; but the Congress enthusiasm on their behalf soon waned, especially after the Delhi Statement of 2 November 1929 issued in praise of Lord Irwin by Mahatma Gandhi, the two Nehrus and other Congress leaders. Neither the release of Bhagat Singh and his comrades (soon to face death sentences) nor of the Meerut accused had figured in Gandhi's Eleven Points, that were declared to be the basis of Civil Disobedience in 1930; nor were the two groups of prisoners brought within the ambit of the Gandhi-Irwin Agreement of 4 March 1931.

Under the circumstances, the new position taken by the Comintern after its sixth Congress at Moscow, closing on 1 September 1928, could not but find ready response from the embittered ranks of Indian Communists. In line with its rather sectarian assessments in general, the Comintern now held Indian "bourgeois nationalism" to have "already betrayed the agrarian revolution" and to be "likely to play a counter-revolutionary role" in future. The "first task" of the Indian Communists was to form a strong Communist Party, and the "second" to "unfold the agrarian revolution" under its leadership, thereby breaking the alliance of "the imperialists, landlords and the compromising bourgeoisie".<sup>26</sup> It followed from this that any political alliance with the Congress was not to be thought of. Nor was the Workers and Peasants Party (WPP), a "dual" class party of a type expressly endorsed by Stalin in 1925, now thought deserving of so much attention as had been paid to it by the Communists at the cost of building their own party.<sup>27</sup> The latter advice was easy to follow, since with the jailing of the Communist leaders at Meerut, the WPP could hardly function and practically died a natural death. As for the warnings about trusting the Congress, these too fell on receptive ears among Indian Communists. The Delhi Statement of the Congress leaders of 2 November 1929, which tormented Jawaharlal Nehru's conscience,<sup>28</sup> and the termination of the Civil Disobedience Movement in "a whimper", in Nehru's own description,<sup>29</sup> drew much scorn. When

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<sup>26</sup> *Documents of the History of the CPI*, III(c) (1928), p. 628.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. John Patrick Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy*, Princeton, 1971, pp. 108-28, for a summary of the Comintern's Sixth Congress debates on the question.

<sup>28</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 197 ("a bitter pill").

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

Gandhi addressed a "labour meeting" at Parel, Bombay, on 16 March 1931, to explain his agreement with Irwin, Communist hecklers taunted him for forgetting the Meerut accused, his own Eleven Points, and "the substance of Independence".<sup>30</sup> In their defence statements the Meerut accused strongly criticised Gandhiji's subsequent participation in the Second Round Table Conference in London later in 1931, and his compromising stance there. The bitterness went so far that in Calcutta in 1934 the Communists helped to organise a 'League against Gandhism'.<sup>31</sup>

In his *Autobiography* Nehru sums up in a few pages what appeared to him in 1934-35 to be the position of the "orthodox Communists". As one may expect, he dismissed as "fantastic" the Communists' belief that the Congress leaders, tied to the capitalists and landlords, "do not want the British to go away". He, however, does admit that "many of their [Communists'] theoretical criticisms were able and pointed and subsequent events partly justified them".<sup>32</sup>

#### SOCIALISTS AND OTHER LEFT FORCES IN CONGRESS, 1930-34

The Civil Disobedience Movement in so far as it brought large masses into the National Movement for the first time, quickened the germination of socialist and Left ideas within the Congress, at the same time as the concessions and compromises occurred on the part of the national leadership. Nehru held in 1934-35 that "some people in the Congress, and they are a growing number, want to change the land system, and the capitalist system", though "they cannot speak in the name of the Congress".<sup>33</sup> The claim was not baseless. Nehru had himself done much to further socialist ideas; and at the Karachi Congress in March 1931, he drafted and Gandhi introduced a Resolution on Fundamental Rights which promised substantial rent and debt reduction and the state's control of key industries and ownership of mineral resources, along with promises of such 'bourgeois-democratic rights' as universal suffrage, equality for women, and abolition of caste disabilities.<sup>34</sup> It was elaborated

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<sup>30</sup> For Gandhi's own conciliatory, though rather patronising reply, see *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, LXV, pp. 298-300.

<sup>31</sup> Subodh Roy, *Unpublished Documents*, pp. 389-91.

<sup>32</sup> *Autobiography*, pp. 361-9, esp. , pp. 365-6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367.

<sup>34</sup> For the original resolution and Gandhi's speech, see *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, LXV, pp. 370-74. In his *Autobiography*, p. 166, Nehru is right in saying that the resolution did not envisage "socialism", but perhaps overstates the disclaimer when he adds: "a capitalist state could *easily* accept almost everything contained in this resolution" (italics mine).

and made into a full-scale programme by the AICC in August 1931. By and large, it could serve as a 'minimum' programme for the Left as well.

In July 1931 Jaya Prakash Narayan helped found the Socialist Party, whose counterparts were established in different provinces in the next few years, mainly by those working in the Congress. These groups coalesced into an All-India *Congress Socialist Party* (CSP) in 1934, its members ranging from avowed Marxists like Narayan and Narendra Dev to supporters of the British Labour Party like Minoo Masani. They were drawn initially to M.N. Roy, who having returned from his exile after his expulsion from the Comintern, was arguing that Communists should work within the Congress and by so doing bring about a change in its leadership.<sup>35</sup> The significant growth in the influence of the CSP within the Congress was another sign that there was considerable potential for the acceptance of socialist ideas in its ranks; and this could not but help bring about a change in the Communists' attitude towards the Congress.

#### TOWARDS "NATIONAL FRONT", 1936-37

From the 1929 Meerut arrests onwards the Communists were faced with a persecution in which there was hardly any let-up until 1933.<sup>36</sup> Just being a Communist was itself an act of "civil disobedience", though it may not have been ever so called. Despite their formal disavowal of the Gandhi-led Civil Disobedience as being far too limited and passive, a number of Communists, such as S.G. Sardesai, went to jail as Satyagrahis; and other Communists such as Bankim Mukherji, Abdur Razzaq Khan and Moni Singh received severely heavy sentences for agitational activities against the government.<sup>37</sup> The Communists' position in the trade unions was weakened not only by repression, but also by the economic crisis of 1929-32, and growing unemployment, which made working-class response to strike calls increasingly tepid. The Moderates split away from the AITUC in 1929 (with Nehru supporting the Communist position); and in the rump AITUC there was another split in 1931 with Communists now seceding to form the "Red TUC".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy*, pp. 164, ff., esp. pp. 225-30.

<sup>36</sup> A fact ignored by critics such as Bhagwan Josh, *Left in India*, p. 169, who forgets that the Communists were facing a degree of persecution unimaginable for any section of the Congress.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Gautam Chattopadhyay, *Subhas Chandra Bose and Indian Communist Movement*, New Delhi, 1987, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. J.P. Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India*, pp. 160-63, 180-84; an account with a distinct bias in favour of Royists who opposed the Communists in order to bring about the second split. For an account

In such circumstances, the exhortations made to Indian Communists in the Three Parties' (Chinese, British, German) Letter of 1932 and the Chinese Party's letter of 1933, to build their Party and take lead in powerful anti-imperialist actions, independently and on their own, were surely unrealistic. But the letters did recommend a greater resort to the united-front strategy, and a re-unification of the trade-unions. To this extent they were certainly a helpful factor in the Communist Party's partial recovery.<sup>39</sup>

The situation began to change with 1933, when most of the Meerut prisoners were released, following reductions of their sentences on appeal. The fragmented groups were reunited, and a provisional Central Committee of the Communist Party formed. By late 1934 much revival had taken place, and the Party's work in trade unions was spreading; contacts had been made too with the newly formed Congress Socialist Party (CSP), within which some Communists (like Ajoy Ghosh and P. Sundarayya) had begun to work. The controversy with the followers of M.N. Roy (himself the victim of a harsh sentence given out at Cawnpore, and in prison till 1936) no longer prevented common action with the Royists in the trade unions, leading, in 1935, to the return of the Communists to the AITUC. All these were creditable achievements made in the face of the government's ban imposed on the Communist Party and its organizations in July 1934, and of the regular cycles of imprisonment to which Communists remained subject.

### "NATIONAL FRONT", 1935-37

It was during this phase of recovery that the Seventh Congress of the Comintern met in August 1935 at Moscow. Recognizing the emergence of fascism as a world-wide phenomenon of extreme danger, especially after Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933, G. Dimitrov, in his report to the Congress, called for an extensive, "people's united front", which was to include Social Democrats and other anti-fascist forces.<sup>40</sup> As a corollary to this, Wang Ming in his report on the colonial countries at the same Congress, asked Indian Communists not to "disregard work within the National Congress", in effect treating the Congress as a genuine part of the anti-

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from the opposite point of view, see *Previous Splits in the AITUC*, CPI(M) publication, Calcutta, 1970, pp. 11-14.

<sup>39</sup> Bhagwan Josh's analysis of the contents of these letters (*Left in India*, pp. 167-74) is heavily one-sided; Haithcox, pp. 207-8, is more balanced.

<sup>40</sup> For the text of Dimitrov's report, see G. Adhikari (ed.), *From Peace Front to People's War*, Bombay, 1944, pp. 142-49. As one can now see, Dimitrov's report represented much more than just "a new tactical line" which it was held to be at that time.

imperialist united front. The specific implications were worked out in an important article ("The Anti- Imperialist People's Front in India") by R. Palme Dutt and Ben Bradley (of the British Communist Party), which came to be known as the Dutt--Bradley theses (February, 1936).<sup>41</sup>

The theses contained the following major propositions: (1) The most broad-based unity was desirable on the basis of (a) "a line of consistent struggle against imperialism", and (b) "struggle for the vital needs of the toiling masses". (2) The Congress was "the principal existing mass organization of many diverse elements seeking national liberation". (3) Several previous actions of the Congress leadership had been "disastrous" and "equivalent to surrender to imperialism". (4) There was thus need to criticise Congress leadership, but only with the purpose of assisting the Congress to play its true role, and not to weaken the unity of the elements already in the Congress. (5) The Congress had the potential "by the further transformation of its organization and programme" to "become the form of realization of the Anti-Imperialist People's Front". (6) "Mass organizations of workers and peasants", of youth, etc., should be developed and their affiliation to the Congress striven for. (7) Democratization of the Congress (e.g., elected Working Committee) should be demanded. (8) A minimum programme should be presented to the Congress, based on "complete independence", civil liberty (including right to strike), repeal of repressive laws, release of political prisoners, protection of rights of workers (including 8-hour day), 50 per cent rent reduction for peasants and security from seizure of their lands by landlords and moneylenders. (9) The question of whether "Non-violence" should be a requisite dogma for the Congress should be raised, but the issue "should not be allowed to split the national front". (10) There should be a consolidation of the left-wing comprising "Congress Socialists, Trade Unionists, Communists and Left Congressmen", in which "the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) can play an especially important part". (11) The Left Wing should try to have a number of its candidates run in the ensuing elections [under the Act of 1935], while preventing "a splitting of the National Front [votes] in the elections". (12) The slogan of a Constituent Assembly to make free India's own constitution was to be presented as a central slogan.

The Dutt-Bradley theses were rapidly accepted by the Indian Communists, and began to bear fruit almost immediately.<sup>42</sup> Already

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<sup>41</sup> The full text of this article is printed in *The Marxist*, Oct. 1995-March 1996, pp. 53-66.

<sup>42</sup> Bhagwan Josh's criticism of the Communist policy following the Dutt-Bradley theses is characteristic. No success could arise out of "the policy of building a separate, independent mass CP [Communist Party] and a united front simultaneously" (*Left in India*, p. 101). In other words, suicide by the Communist Party was the

under the influences of the Seventh Comintern Congress, the CSP National Executive, meeting at Meerut in January 1936, had decided to withdraw the earlier formal ban on Communists' entry into the CSP, originally imposed in 1934, and henceforward Communists were allowed to seek admission to CSP on an individual basis.<sup>43</sup> Communists thereupon began to enter the CSP from April 1936 onwards; and this gave them effectual entry into the Congress as well.

When the Congress met for its general session at Lucknow in April 1936, once again under the presidentship of Jawaharlal Nehru, the Left was able to make its presence felt in a significant manner. Nehru spoke of socialism, of the need for "ending private property, except in a restricted sense", and of "the new civilization" represented by the resurgent Soviet Union. Though the Left-sponsored resolutions for affiliation of mass organizations, rejection of ministerial office after elections under the 1935 Act, and a proportionally elected Working Committee, were rejected, the votes in favour were respectable in number.<sup>44</sup> Nehru included three CSP leaders in the Working Committee (including J.P. Narayan) for the first time. Simultaneously, the All-India Kisan Congress (afterwards, Sabha) and the Progressive Writers' Association were founded at conferences held in Lucknow about the same time.<sup>45</sup> In both these organizations, the Communists rapidly became the main force, rallying peasants and writers behind the National Movement, while also expanding their own ideological influence. The Royists and Communists in the AITUC achieved conciliation with the right-wing National TU Federation, though the expected merger at the Nagpur session of AITUC in 1936 did not take place: it came two years later.

The spurt in the strength of the left that followed is indicated by the expansion in the membership of the All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) and the rising tide of the strike movement. By the time of its congress at Camilla (Bengal) in May 1938, the membership of the All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) had crossed half a million; by its Gaya congress in April 1939, it had reached 800,000. In 1938 the AIKS adopted the red flag for its banner. As for the working-days lost through industrial disputes, an index of militant trade-union strength, these had fallen to below one million in 1935, but now

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only way to further the united front! Josh also ignores the successes which the CPI obtained in 1936 and subsequent years, while pursuing the new "tactical line" of a United Front.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *How I Became a Communist*, Trivandrum, 1976, pp. 204-6.

<sup>44</sup> For example, 225 members of the AICC voted for the rejection of ministerial office, and 487 against.

<sup>45</sup> E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *How I Became a Communist*, pp. 207-10.

climbed to 2.4 million in 1936, almost 9 million in 1937 and above 9 million in 1938.<sup>46</sup> When the Congress ministries took office in eight out of eleven provinces in 1937, the ban on the Communist Party ceased in practice to be implemented, and this too helped the Communists to expand their areas of influence.

#### THE NATIONAL FRONT IN CRISIS, 1938-39

The growth in the mass influence of the Left found its reflection in the increasing strength of the Left within the Congress, especially the AICC. When the Congress began preparing for the 1937 elections, the election manifesto endorsed at the Faizpur Congress (December, 1936) was based on the Karachi resolution and had a manifestly Left orientation. In 1939 there were 20 avowed Communists in the AICC within the much larger CSP contingent of AICC members. Communist influence within CSP was on the rise as well, with E.M.S. Namboodiripad and Sajjad Zaheer becoming joint secretaries of the CSP. The greatest triumph of the Left was the re-election of Subhas Bose as Congress President early in 1939. Subhas Bose had been a radical Congress leader who had for long suffered for his views. His earlier fascination with fascism now seemed to be a past chapter, and, succeeding Nehru as President of the Congress in 1938, he continued the left-leaning policy of his predecessor. In January 1939 he decided to seek re-election, and, confronting Gandhi's own candidate Sitaramayya, won by 1,580 votes to 1,375. Newspapers proclaimed it a victory of the Left, and it may be regarded as the high tide of its influence in the Congress.

The triumph proved to be short-lived, however. As early as 1934 Gandhi had declared socialist ideas to be "distasteful" to him; and though he admitted that the socialists had a right to be represented in the Congress, he declared it unacceptable that they should "gain ascendancy" there. As the Left grew within the Congress, Gandhi's sympathies with the right-wing became more open, though he took care to nurse his relationship with Nehru, who to many appeared to be the leading figure on the Left side. When the Congress opted for elections and ministries, the work of choosing candidates and controlling ministries was left to a parliamentary board with Vallabhabhai Patel as chairman, and Azad and Rajendra Prasad as the other members — a purely right-wing body. There were few Leftists chosen as candidates, and the support to even a single AITUC candidate (K.N. Joglekar) was refused, leading to Dange's resignation from the Congress.<sup>47</sup> Once the Congress ministries were

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<sup>46</sup> Figures from R.P. Dutt, *India Today*, Bombay, 1947, pp. 228, 337.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. B. Josh in *Left in India*, pp. 194-5.

formed, the CSP refused to join them, with the result that the Congress ministries were mainly dominated by representatives of the right-wing. (It is now a matter to be considered whether such self-denial was a correct decision on the part of the Left.)

Once the ministries began to function, the tension between them and the Left-led mass organizations, notably the Kisan Sabha and the AITUC, became increasingly sharper. The crisis came in Bihar: the famous peasant leader Sahajanand resigned from the working committee of Bihar PCC to free himself for leading peasants' struggles against a government which was felt to be supportive of the landlords despite certain pro-tenant measures. Even Nehru joined Gandhi and the right in expressing suspicions that the Kisan Sabhas were undermining the Congress organization. In September 1938 Gandhi proposed a "purge" of the Congress, clearly aimed at the Left; and the Delhi AICC during the same month asked Congress ministries to act strongly against those who pursued "class war by violent means". About the same time, acting under the influence of the mill-owners, the Bombay government introduced the Bombay Industrial Disputes Bill against which the trade unions unitedly organised a general strike on 7 November 1938.<sup>48</sup>

Those conflicts led to increasingly sour relations between the Left and the Right, which enabled Subhas Bose to mobilise support for his electoral victory ahead of the Tripuri session of the Congress (March 1939). But the Communists as well as the Socialists were not prepared for a total break with the right, for such a break would have meant the end of the National Front. Thus when the right moved a resolution at Tripuri to bind Bose to the "wishes" of Gandhiji, the CSP and the Communists tried to avoid a split by not opposing the resolution. Subhas Bose, faced with non-cooperation from both Gandhi and Nehru, resigned. Thereafter he and his followers, organised in the Forward Bloc, were isolated (-despite a short-lived Left Coordination Committee consisting of FB, Royists, CSP and Communists) and were hounded out of the Congress on disciplinary grounds after July 1939.

Under the pressure of the Right, the unity of the Left began to break still further. M.N. Roy could have justifiably maintained that his argument for working through the Congress had in part anticipated the "tactical line" approved at the 7th Congress of the Comintern; but he now shifted increasingly to the right, asking his followers to resign from the CSP in 1937 and opposing the Kisan Sabha. After witnessing the fate of Bose's followers, the CSP leadership became afraid of suffering a similar fate, and began a

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<sup>48</sup> On Congress ministries' labour policy, "dominated by the fear of Communist infiltration", see Claude Markovits, *Indian Businessmen and Nationalist Politics, 1931-39*, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 175-6.

purge of the Communists, after Masani, Lohia and others pressed the issue in May 1939. By May next year the Communists had been expelled; but the result was a loss of very large CSP membership: The CSP in Andhra (led by P. Sundarayya and Rajeshwar Rao) and Kerala (led by E.M.S. Namboodiripad and A.K. Gopalan) practically turned directly into provincial units of the Communist Party.<sup>49</sup> The Communists gained control of the leadership of the major mass organizations, the AITUC, AIKS and the All-India Students Federation, hitherto regarded as being under CSP's influence.

Though the Communist Party now emerged as the major force among all the groups of the Left, the anti-imperialist "national front" was certainly gravely weakened by the dissensions. And these dissensions, we must remember, came clearly from the Right's firm resolve to risk everything in order to stem the rising influence of the radical forces.<sup>50</sup>

#### FROM IMPERIALIST WAR TO PEOPLE'S WAR, 1939-42

When World War II broke out on 3 September 1939, opinion in the Indian National Movement was divided: on the one side was the antipathy to the British as masters of India, on the other, hostility to the Nazis as upholders of everything offensive to human dignity. The Congress ministries were directed by the Congress high command to resign, because the British government had made India a belligerent country without consulting the representatives of the Indian people. Direct rule was, thereupon, proclaimed in the Congress-ruled provinces. The Congress nevertheless offered to cooperate with the British government in its pursuit of war, if some substantive concessions were given. These offers were met by vague promises as in the Viceroy's statement of 17 October 1939 and in his 'August Offer' of 8 August 1940. Such responses fortified the view that the empire was what the war was about, and concessions would not, therefore, be made at its cost. The Congress leadership was compelled to begin "an individual civil disobedience campaign" under Gandhiji's leadership from October 1940. The Government replied by large-scale arrests; and by May 1941 some 20,000 were in prison.

The Communist Party, in line with the Comintern positions<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For the transformation of CSP in Kerala see E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *The National Question in Kerala*, Bombay, 1952, p. 149.

<sup>50</sup> I share the sense of reserve entertained by Utpal Ghosh, *The Communist Party of India, 1937-47*, Calcutta, 1996, pp. 78-81, towards Bipan Chandra's criticisms of the Communists in *Indian National Movement: The Long-term Dynamics*, Delhi, 1988, for not taking a still more conciliatory stance towards the Congress leadership at this time.

<sup>51</sup> Authoritatively expounded by G. Dimitrov in his report 'The War and the Working Class', 1939, in *From*

treated the war as an 'inter-imperialist' war, having been preceded by the Munich conspiracy (1938) and the Soviet response thereto through its Non--aggression Pact with Germany (1939). This being so, it was essential that the "National Front" policy should be continued in the interest of opposing "one's own" imperialist power. A restoration of the old Left unity was no longer possible because of the increasing anti-Soviet stance of the CSP leadership. With Subhas Bose some relations continued to be maintained and there is evidence that individual Communists were involved in his escape from India to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1940.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, with the imposition of direct British rule after the exit of the Congress ministries, the Communists became subject to the 1934 ban, and their hide-and-seek with arrests and imprisonments began once again. By May 1941 almost the entire Communist leadership was in jail, along with a very large number of the Party's 5,000 membership. The result of all this was, as the General Secretary of the Party, P.C. Joshi, was to note in 1942, that though "the National Front remain[ed] intact... it did not move forward".<sup>53</sup> There could be doubt too, whether it was really "intact", except from the side of the Communists.

Nazi Germany launched its attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. This brought about a change in the complexion of the war; but unlike other Communist parties, the Indian Communist leadership, most of it in prison, found it difficult to turn away from the long-established position of hostility to British imperialism, and to begin to treat it as an ally in a world-wide coalition. There were naturally overtures from the British Communist Party for a change in Communist policy, an article from R.P. Dutt, 'A Policy for the Indian People', appearing in October 1941. At last, Communist leaders held in the Deoli camp prepared their 'Jail Document' in December, in which they argued forcefully for a change of policy to one of 'People's War'.<sup>54</sup> The entry of Japan in the war in the same month and its quick successes in South-East Asia brought India closer to the theatres of war and made the shift of policy still more urgent.

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*Peace Front to People's War*, ed. G. Adhikari, pp. 328-46.

<sup>52</sup> G. Chattopadhyay, *Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian Communist Movement*, pp. 15-16. It appears from the account in Leonard A. Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj*, New York, 1990, pp. 417-28, that members of the Kirti Kisan Party, 'linked to the CPI', were involved, not Communists directly.

<sup>53</sup> *From Peace Front to People's War*, ed. G. Adhikari, p. 368.

<sup>54</sup> For a summary of this document see Utpal Ghosh, *The Communist Party of India and India's Freedom Struggle*, pp. 145-50. This six-month delay was to be much criticised later as a sign of the lack of internationalism in the CPI (Editorial in *Communist*, No.2, February 1949, p. 63).

There was already a similar shift of position in the Congress leadership. The British Government was compelled to release the principal Congress leaders in December 1941, whereafter they met at Bardoli to pass a resolution, noting "the new world situation which has arisen in the war and its approach to India", and offering to join the Allies ('United Nations') on behalf of "a free and independent India". The resolution, ratified by the Congress, prepared the ground for the Cripps Mission (March-April 1942), which offered dominion status, with power to secede from the Empire, a Constituent Assembly, self-determination for provinces, minority protection — but all after the War. For the moment the transfer would be withheld. The negotiations with the Congress broke down on the last issue.

It was from this point that the Congress leadership, without expressly reneging from their animosity to Germany and Japan, shifted to a policy of confrontation with the British government, leading to the "Quit -India" resolution of the AICC (8 August 1942). The Communists' opposition to the resolution secured only 13 votes in the AICC. Their case rested on the pre-eminent need to defeat the Axis powers, and thus invoked the call of internationalism. Jawaharlal Nehru admitted that in Gandhi's pressing on for a new movement against British authority "nationalism had triumphed over internationalism".<sup>55</sup> It seems that with the Germans seemingly poised to break through the Soviet defences on the Volga, and the British empire menaced on the borders of Egypt by Germany and on Indian's eastern frontier by the Japanese, Gandhiji felt that the British, as part of a seriously endangered coalition, could soon be compelled to come to terms with the Congress.<sup>56</sup> The resolution itself stated that the Congress was "anxious not to embarrass in any way the defence of China and Russia"; and Nehru tells us that both Gandhi and Azad (as President) in their final speeches stressed "a desire for settlement" and contemplated negotiations, rather than immediate action.<sup>57</sup> It was the British government, which precipitated matters by carrying out large-scale arrests and then violently suppressing spontaneous protests against the arrests. In an ironical twist to events, the Red Army's historic victory at Stalingrad in the winter of 1942-43, freed the British government from any anxiety over the safety of its Empire and so: from any

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<sup>55</sup> A few lines later, he writes: "Gandhiji's general approach also seemed to ignore important international considerations and appeared to be based on a narrow view of nationalism" (*Discovery of India*, 4th ed., London, 1956, p. 483).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. William L Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, New York, 1983, p. 1193: "By the end of the summer of 1942 Adolf Hitler seemed to be once more on the top of the world".

<sup>57</sup> *Discovery of India*, pp. 487, 489.

need to give in to any Indian demands under the pressures of war. This ruled out any immediate gains coming to India out of the Quit-India Movement.

The Communists' opposition to the Quit-India resolution was made the reason for their post-war expulsion (1945) from the Congress, and the issue has been raised at various times since then to question their patriotism; but there is no doubt that, if one concedes that the defeat of Fascism was the primary need of the world at that hour, then the position the Communists adopted was unexceptionable.

#### UNITED FRONT FOR PEOPLE'S WAR. 1942-45

The Communist Party's position, after its legalization on 22 July 1942 (for which there had to be negotiations with the British Government) and the passage of the Quit-India resolution, left it the only Party out of the old National Front, which was not facing repression. Its position with regard to the British government while not confrontationalist, was independent. It never relented on its demand for the release of Congress prisoners and the formation of a national government. The Party's central committee's resolution of 19 September 1942 demanded that the British government agree:

to stop this [post-Quit India] offensive of repression against the people and the Congress, to release Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress leaders, to lift the ban on the Congress and to open negotiations for the establishment of Provisional National Government.

The Communists strongly rejected a proposal by Amery, the British Secretary of State for India, for a coalition of non-Congress parties (*People's War* editorial, 18 October 1942).

The Communists thus opposed both the Congress' decision to go in for non-cooperation and the British Government's provocative policy of repression. These were political positions: in practice the Communists avoided open cooperation with British officialdom,<sup>58</sup> built up trade unions and Kisan Sabha organisations, and fought in a restrained manner for the people's day-to-day demands and reliefs. In the situation they became practically the sole legal spokesmen for the common man. While a "no-strike" policy was declared, campaigns were organized against hoarders and for

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<sup>58</sup> In this the Communists' self-respect offered a sharp contrast to M.N. Roy and his Indian Federation of Labour, established in November 1941, as rival to the Communist-led AITUC: it was revealed in 1944 that the Royist body subsisted on a British government subsidy. See Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India*, p. 297n.

proper food distribution; and "grow more food" campaigns, appealing directly to peasants, were also attempted. Relief activities were organized, the most important being those during the Bengal famine of 1943-44. Mass work of this nature, combined with a large circulation of Marxist literature (the ban against it having been removed), resulted in a very considerable growth of the Communist Party. In June 1945 a secret official report estimated the Party's membership at 30,000 (up from 5,000 in 1942) and its trade-union following at a quarter of a million. It now published 10 weekly journals, and its main organ *People's War* had a circulation of 25,000 to 30,000 copies. The same report notes increasing Communist influence among students; and, it might have added, peasants.<sup>59</sup>

These gains had to be set by the side of the Party's isolation from practically all the segments that had comprised the "National Front" of the late 1930s. The bulk of the Congress was estranged by the refusal of the Communists to follow, in Nehru's words, "the national forces in whatever they are doing", i.e., the Quit-India movement.<sup>60</sup> Particularly bitter were the relations with the erstwhile Left allies, the CSP, whom the Communists now regarded as "saboteurs" for their harming the cause of people's war by their resort to violence and acts of terror in the name of attacks on British authority; and the "Forward Bloc", workers too were deemed potential "traitors" for their support of Subhas Bose, who was now trying to reorganise the Indian National Army in collaboration with Japan. As for M.N. Roy, regarded as a "renegade" even in the best of times, he fulfilled expectations by moving over entirely to the British side. Such isolation impending even before the Quit-India resolution, inspired in the Party a new-version of the National Front; this was to be a Congress--Muslim League alliance, in friendly cooperation with the Communist Party. The first important statement of the new position came in an article "National Unity Now" published in *People's War* on the very day of the Quit-India resolution.<sup>61</sup>

We should remember that the Communist position on the

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Shashi Bairathi, *Communism and Nationalism in India, A Study in Inter-relationship, 1919-47*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 199-200.

<sup>60</sup> Nehru's conversations with the Communist leader Z.A. Ahmad on 28 June 1945, pub. in *Secular Democracy*, XXV (3), 1997), p. 19. Subsequently in September 1945 the Congress formally framed charges against the Communists to which the Party replied at length. (See P. C. Joshi, *Communist Reply to Congress Working Committee's Charges*, 2 Parts, Bombay, December 1945. A summary of both parts was then published in March 1946). The Communists were expelled from the Congress.

<sup>61</sup> Reprinted in *National Question in India: CPI Documents, 1942-47* (hereafter *National Question*), ed. T.G. Jacob, New Delhi, 1988, pp. 16-28.

communal problem until now had been practically indistinguishable from that of the Congress Left. As early as 1928, the Communist-led Workers and Peasants Party, while accepting "the solution proposed to the communal question" by the All-Parties' Report (rejected by M.A Jinnah), had argued that the question hardly merited "such excessive amount of attention," since "experience tends to show that there is little communal feeling among the masses".<sup>62</sup> Alternatively, it was thought that communalism would wither away as the people's economic demands were achieved through common struggles. The Muslim League was not considered a suitable party in which Communists should work: Hasrat Mohani had been expelled for that reason. In 1937-38 the Communists were active in the Muslim Mass Contact campaign of the Congress, which immediately provoked bitter opposition from the Muslim League.

It was now argued by G. Adhikari that conditions had changed. Ever since the Muslim League's campaign against the alleged ill-treatment of Muslims under the Congress ministries, the League's influence among Muslims had grown enormously; and with the Lahore resolution of 1940, which became the basis for the Pakistan demand, the League had made Partition a necessary element of any further constitutional development acceptable to it. With due encouragement from, and in collaboration with the British Government (which, for example, made minority League ministries possible in NWFP and Assam), the League was meeting little organized ideological or political opposition from the Congress, whose leadership, at all levels, remained incarcerated for the larger part of the war period.<sup>63</sup> Clearly, once the League had grown in strength, there had to be negotiations with it; and to this extent, Communist proposals that the Congress and League leaderships should come together, and certain concessions be given to the League, as a party, were unexceptionable. This was a position which the Congress in fact adopted from the Gandhi-Jinnah talks of 1944 onwards.

But Adhikari's article and subsequent CPI policy statements went much further than this. It was held that the Muslim League had undergone a transformation: since 1938 it had become the spokesman of the "anti-imperialist sentiment" of the Muslim petty-bourgeois masses; and the League leadership had been

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<sup>62</sup> *Documents of the History of CPI*, ed. Adhikari, (1928), p. 218.

<sup>63</sup> There are however, important nationalist Muslim critiques of the Pakistan demand from Tufail Ahmad in later editions of his book *Musalmanon ka Roshan Mustaqbil* (orig. pub. 1937), down to the 4th ed. (1944), now translated by Ali Ashraf as *Towards a Common Destiny*, New Delhi, 1994. Shaukatullah Ansari published his critique *Pakistan: the Problem of India* in 1944.

transformed from a "feudal reactionary" to an "industrial bourgeois leadership", playing an "oppositional role vis-a-vis imperialism". In effect, therefore, the class character and anti-imperialist credentials of the League were equated with those of the Congress. The two parties were asked to come together in a new "national unity". For such unity the previous Congress programme of freedom of religious worship and protection of minorities was insufficient. The Congress must agree to the right of self-determination; it was "just and right" in the Pakistan demand that "nationalities", such as those of Sindhis, Baluchis, Pathans and Punjabi Muslims, should have the right to secede. In a further report (September 1942), Adhikari invoked the Marxist-Leninist positions on national self-determination, especially quoting Stalin's 1925 reference to the "scores of hitherto unknown nationalities, having their own separate languages and separate cultures, [that] will appear on the scene" in India "in the event of a revolutionary upheaval".<sup>64</sup> This was now to be often quoted in justification of the Pakistan demand, though the fact that Stalin had never contemplated a religious nationality arising out of a linguistic one (e.g. Punjabi Muslim, or Bengali Muslim), was simply glossed over.<sup>65</sup>

This theoretical position ('the Adhikari thesis'), which was confirmed in comparatively cautious language by the political resolution of CPI's first congress in May 1943,<sup>66</sup> had immediate practical implications. Communists (i.e. such as were Muslims) were now to work in the League, as they had done in the Congress. They were expected to spread progressive ideas in the League ranks; and in June (May?) 1945, Z.A Ahmad, perhaps on this basis, was assuring Jawaharlal Nehru of "the rapidity with which popular forces are growing in the League".<sup>67</sup> How the "nationality" fig leaf could slip is shown by the fact that in the 1946 elections the Communist Party decided to support "the League against all rivals [i.e. including Congress]" in "all those Muslim seats" in which the CPI's own candidates were not contesting, irrespective of whether the seats were in the areas of the so-called "Muslim nationalities" of the North-west or anywhere else in India.<sup>68</sup> Everywhere, therefore, the

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<sup>64</sup> Stalin, *Works*, VII, p. 141, quoted in Adhikari's report, reprinted in *National Question*, p. 54.

<sup>65</sup> Shri Prakash's criticism of Stalin's definition (*Left in India*, pp. 235-7) is also, therefore, off the point. It was not a "blind allegiance" to this definition which led to the formulation of CPI's sympathetic position on Pakistan; it was the latter, which, once taken, was sought to be bolstered by a wrong interpretation of Stalin's definition. For a rather restrained criticism of the Party's policy during this period, see E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, Calcutta, 1972, p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., *National Question*, p. 98.

<sup>67</sup> *Secular Democracy*, XXV (3) (April 1997), p. 22.

<sup>68</sup> *National Question*, p. 117.

Communists and their supporters would be divided among Muslims and non-Muslims. Such a situation was disastrous for the growth of progressive ideas among Muslims; and in fact a number of Communists and progressive people working in the League at the Party's behest were now permanently lost to the Communist movement.

It was, perhaps, merely a logical extension of the Adhikari thesis that in December 1945 the Party released a scheme for a "Sikh homeland", thus further dividing the Punjab into three nationalities.<sup>69</sup> Fortunately, this was a much briefer aberration than the position with regard to Pakistan.

#### ANTI-IMPERIALIST AND ANTI-COMMUNAL STRUGGLE, 1945-47

As World War II drew to a close and the fall of the Axis Powers became a matter of time, it became obvious that Communists must shift from the strategy of people's war back to the strategy of anti-imperialist struggle. In December 1945 the CPI Central Committee described "the post-war period in India" as "the period of unprecedented opportunity to make the final bid for power."<sup>70</sup> The moral and material strength of imperialism had greatly suffered owing to the successes of the Red Army, the detachment of East European states from the imperialist system, the strength of the People's Liberation Army in China, the armed struggle for independence in South-east Asia, and, not the least, a great erosion of the grip of imperialism on the popular mind in the metropolitan countries. There was, therefore, every justification for showing a greater degree of militancy in the fight against British rule in India. Since there was now a return to the established Marxist view that the landlords and princes were inextricably linked with imperialism and the bourgeoisie was prone to compromises ("an alliance between British big business and their Indian brothers" was thought to be impending), the national agitations could be accompanied by economic struggles of workers and peasants (the period of "no strike" being declared to be over). In this the role of the Communists was emphasized by speaking of the United National Front of this phase as that of "Congress-League-Communist Unity"

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<sup>69</sup> *National Question*, pp. 126-57.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159. P. Sundarayya says of this meeting that "in fact it revised its [the Central Committee's] reformist policies pursued during the war period" (*Telangana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, Calcutta, 1972, p. 39).

instead of just "Congress-League Unity".<sup>71</sup> The Communist Party showed its mettle considerably in the agitation over the INA trials. Putting aside its opposition to the INA during the People's War period, it treated INA men as fighters for freedom in line with the general national sentiment. Students' strikes were combined with industrial strikes in February 1946. Almost simultaneously came the RIN mutiny (18-23 February) at Bombay: Congress, League and Communist flags went up on the naval ships and establishments. An industrial strike called by the Communists in sympathy with the ratings paralysed Bombay; and hundreds were killed in clashes with British troops and police. These events have an indelible place in the annals of the National Movement, since they helped immeasurably to bring independence closer.

The Communist-led economic struggles were also intensified. The Tebhaga movement in Bengal, initiated in 1944 to reduce the rent to a third of the produce, spread to many parts of Bengal during the subsequent three years. In 1944-46 there were strikes by the tribal Warlis in Maharashtra, against forced labour, high rents and usury. A sharper political character was assumed by the coir and other workers' movement in Travancore-Cochin: in a state-wide strike in October 1946, army firing claimed lives of hundreds of the volunteers, now known from the two places concerned as the Punnappa-Vayalar martyrs. In July 1946 began the great uprising of the Telengana peasants against the Nizam and the landlords, which was to continue till 1951, constituting the greatest armed struggle of the peasantry in Indian history.<sup>72</sup> The Communists also participated in the Quit-Kashmir movement of Shaikh Abdullah's National Conference (May 1946).

These actions, with some exceptions (INA agitations and Quit-Kashmir), were entirely under Communist leadership, unsupported by the Congress or the Muslim League. The Congress leadership was interested in negotiating for freedom on the strength of its massive support among the Indian people. The Muslim League just concentrated on its slogan of Pakistan. The 1946 elections (on restricted franchise) led to a situation in which the Congress dominated the 'general' and the League, the 'Muslim' constituencies; the Communists polled just 2.5 per cent of the vote in Provincial Assembly elections. The plans and counterplans that emerged from the Simla Conference and the Cabinet Mission (1946) made it increasingly difficult for the CPI to support the Muslim League's positions. It became clear that the League leadership was

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<sup>71</sup> *National Question*, p. 177.

<sup>72</sup> The most detailed narrative of the uprising is set out in Sundarayya's *Telangana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, Calcutta, 1972.

of the same reactionary hue as before. This was recognized in an important article "Freedom for India" by R.P. Dutt (July 1946), when he described the current League leadership as of "big Muslim land-owners",<sup>73</sup> this being at total variance from Adhikari's description of the same leadership in 1942. The facts on the ground began to demand a reconsideration of the entire question of Pakistan. R.P. Dutt examined the issue with his customary thoroughness in the 1947 edition of *India Today* and found no justification for the concept of Pakistan on the basis of any theory of nationality.<sup>74</sup> He had apparently put these views earlier in *Labour Monthly* (March 1946), and though initially received with some reserve in the Party,<sup>75</sup> his writings must have begun to exercise their influence in time, being at least partly reflected in a Central Committee resolution of August 1946.<sup>76</sup>

The communal riots that preceded and accompanied the Partition could not demarcate the Congress and League better. Despite the undoubted growth of communal sentiments in the Congress, which the CPI constantly pointed out, Gandhi's valiant fight to protect both Hindus and Muslims from communal slaughter had no counterpart on the League side. The Communists had no large mass influence of a similar kind, but their fight against communalism during this period forms an epic chapter in their contribution to the National Movement: it has seldom received the recognition it deserves.

When the Mountbatten Award was announced, the Party's Central Committee offered to "fully cooperate with the national leadership [of the Indian Union] in the proud task of building the Indian Republic on democratic foundations". The programme that it put before the "national leadership" demanded that there be —

Full protection to religious and cultural rights of Muslims.

No discrimination against Muslims in services or in any other sphere of life. Open repudiation of elements [RSS, etc.] which preach that Muslims are alien inside the Indian Union.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *National Question*, p. 190.

<sup>74</sup> *India Today*, Bombay, 1947, pp. 378-91.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Javed Ashraf in *Secular Democracy*, March 1997, pp. 15-16. Reservations about the Dutt article were expressed in *Party Letter No. 4* (May 1946) from which J. Ashraf gives some quotations in *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>76</sup> The CC now described Pakistan as the outcome of "the Muslim bourgeois feudal vested interests, who are seeking for a compromise with imperialism for a share of administration in a divided India" (quoted by Shri Prakash, *Left in India*, p. 254).

<sup>77</sup> *National Question*, pp. 218-19. The document left no one in doubt that, compared to India, "a very difficult and dangerous situation" confronted "the freedom-loving anti-imperialist masses" in Pakistan (*ibid.*, p. 220).

Confronted with the rising communal tide in India, and the growing strength of the right-wing headed by Vallabhbhai Patel, the CPI gave its support to Nehru, "the voice of the people" and called for a front with him and the Socialists (October 1947). The next month, alarmed at the deteriorating situation, the Party offered its cooperation to Nehru again and asked for a "progressive reorganization of government". On Gandhi's murder on 30 January 1948, the Communists were foremost among the mourners and firmest in demanding action against the communal forces.

This phase naturally closed, as after independence (15 August 1947) the Nehru Government stabilized, and the larger issues of struggle against the big bourgeoisie, landlords and the remnants of imperialist control presented themselves. At the Party's Calcutta Congress in March 1948, a new radical line was charted under B.T. Ranadive who had replaced P.C. Joshi as General Secretary. In a sense this reflected the need to adjust to the new situation, where, the National Movement having mainly fulfilled its objectives, a new policy had to be framed.

Thus when independence came, but much of the power went to the propertied classes, with considerable imperialist influence still remaining, the Communists resolved to continue the struggle for attaining the full vision of a free India that the united National Movement had promised to the Indian people. The continuation of the struggle tended to cloud the memory of the contribution they had themselves made to achieve national freedom. It is, therefore, all the more necessary to put the record straight, and to recall the sacrifices rendered by countless members and friends of the Communist movement as part of the great struggle that ultimately made India free.

#### POSTSCRIPT

This year in October marked the centenary of the formation of the Communist Party of India in Tashkent. From small beginnings it became a radical component of the Indian National Movement and it is with this part of its past from 1920 to 1947 that the above article has dealt.

The Communists had their own vision of a Free India, for which they took part in the freedom struggle: an India where people would attain freedom from all exploitation, with a democracy that would lead to socialism. Now, seventy-three years have passed in constant and complicated struggles for that cause.

A great change in the national situation has come about in the last two or three decades. Till the late 1980s those whom the people chose to rule over them had in theory shades of the same objectives that the Communists espoused: land reform, building a

public sector, in industry, promotion of a scientific outlook and secularism, all of which went in semi-official usage by the name of socialism. Much was, indeed, done, in respect of labour protection and food availability for the poor. The Communists too had a role to play in this, not only directly as in Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura, where they formed governments, but also generally by their constant popular mobilisations and theoretical contributions.

The West's triumph in the Cold War, with the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe (1989-92), however, led to a world-wide resurgence of capitalism, and neo-imperialism. Its direct reflection in India has been the emergence of the open dominance of corporate capital and the resurgence of communal chauvinism as the ruling ideology of the state. Those, whose ideological and organisational ancestors never lifted a finger in opposing British rule, are now pursuing majoritarian "nationalism" as their main populist anchor. Already, civil liberties are being severely undermined under cover of suppression of sedition, or separatism.

This is undoubtedly a critical moment for the nation. Communists have much to invoke, and learn from, their past. If they stand firm and are able to build an expanding unity of democratic forces, the winter will surely pass and spring ensue.