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The Communists and the Indian Freedom Struggle

Today we celebrate the 50 years of our independence from the shackles of British colonialism.¹ 15 August 1947 marked the culmination of a long and arduous quest for India's national liberation. Much has been written on national movement both by professional historians and political activists. But we are yet to have a holistic picture of the various facets of freedom struggle. The present celebration of the 50 years of the Transfer of Power should provide us with a new opportunity to recapture the anti-colonial struggle. At the same time we should not shy away from assessing what we have achieved in the 50 years of our independent existence. This is particularly important for us who have lived through the struggle for independence, participating in the struggle in the hope for a just and equitable society once the Union Jack would no longer be governing us. In this submission I propose to highlight the Communist role in India's freedom struggle and speculate on how the post-colonial Indian state has been able to fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the rank and file of the Indian society.

EARLY PHASE

Although the Indian national movement is usually traced from the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, the intrusion of British colonialism had evoked popular opposition from the very initial stage. The tribal revolts and the intermittent peasant upsurges of are cases in point. The Revolt of 1857 — rightly characterised by Karl Marx as the First War of Indian Independence - provided the first major jolt to the English power in India. We need not also undermine the role played by the 'Politics of Associations' of the pre-Congress period in developing nationalist consciousness, at least amongst the English educated Indians. But it was through the Indian National Congress that Indian nationalism gradually acquired an organised shape.

Nationalist struggle under the aegis of the Congress — considered as mainstream nationalism — developed in stages. The first generation of Congressmen were not interested in converting the Indian National congress into a mass organisation. Relying on the strategy of Prayers and Petitions, they primarily sought to expose to the British public the 'un-British' character of the British rule in India. In the process the early generation of Congressmen developed the first systematic economic critique of British colonialism. Dadabahi Naoroji, for instance,

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drew our attention to the fact that the transformation of Britain into the first workshop of the world was linked to the drain of wealth from India. In fact, economic nationalism that was generated from the treatises of the first generation of Congressmen prepared the ground for the future radical phase of Congress nationalism.

The Swadeshi movement that developed against the infamous Bengal Partition of 1905 marked the next important phase in the mainstream Indian nationalism. To a large extent it presaged the 1907 split in the Congress between the Moderates and Extremists. But the strength of the anti-Partition struggle was such that the Partition of Bengal, once proclaimed as the settled fact, had to be repealed in 1911. It was, however, the entry of Gandhi in Indian politics in the second half of the present century that marked a new and decisive point in the Indian struggle for freedom.

POLITICAL VS. SOCIAL

By adopting the strategy of passive resistance and Satyagraha Gandhi made the Indian freedom struggle a people's struggle. Mobilising all sections of the society — the middle class, peasantry, working class, youth and women — he converted the Congress into the largest anti-colonial organisation in the whole of the British empire. Through the Champaran, Kaira and Ahmedabad Satyagrahas Gandhi made his first effective mark in Indian nationalist politics. The Rowlatt Satyagraha was his first confrontation with the 'satanic' British Raj on a national level. The anti-Simon Commission stir, the Khilafat-Non Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement and finally the Quit India Movement successively eroded the moral basis of the British Raj and rendered the Transfer of Power inevitable.

This format of Gandhian nationalism is well-known and its contribution to the process of decolonisation in the subcontinent cannot but be acknowledged. But it is also true that Gandhian nationalism had a negative trait. Gandhi did not believe in class struggle. Instead, he reposed faith on social trusteeship between landlord and tenant and between capital and labour. At the same time he wanted the Congress to be a broad united front against the Raj, comprising landlord and peasant, worker and capitalist, upper caste and lower caste, literate and uneducated. Accordingly, he remained alert that his mass movements did not betray any class overtones. Whenever any of his agitation tended to be more radical than he wanted to be he withdraw it on the plea that it was going against the basic premise of non-violence. But actually he imposed such breaks on movements to curb either labour or peasant militancy that developed in the wake of nationalist upsurges, lest his idea of a united front against the Raj got disrupted. This was clearly seen in his sudden withdrawal of both the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements which even provoked adverse reaction from the Left within the Congress. Gandhi thus deliberately avoided the telescoping of political and social revolutions which had adverse implications for nation-building process in India, a theme to which I shall return later.

FORMATION OF COMMUNIST PARTY

Besides, it would be wrong to contend that Indian independence struggle was

characterised only by Gandhian nationalism. Instead, there was a whole range of protest politics which operated outside the institutional ambit of the Congress — revolutionary nationalism, working class and peasant outbreaks, tribal revolts, student and youth movements — which continuously strengthened and sustained mainstream Congress nationalism. The Communist Party of India played a significant role in keeping alive this protest politics and linking it to the main nationalist stream.

The Communist Party of India was formed at an important historical conjuncture when in the context of the frustration of Extremist politics, failure of the Khilafat movement and growing discontent of the working class and peasantry, there was a search for a new ideology and leadership. The Party was established in October 1920 in Tashkent at the initiative of Manabendra Nath Roy, Abani Mukherjee and two Khilafat activists. Thereafter, four communist groups were established in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Lahore. Initially they worked independently, propagating the cause of left nationalism. But in December 1925 representatives of these four groups met at Kanpur to constitute a Central Committee for imparting a co-ordinated and united shape to left politics in the country.

COMMUNISTS FOR COMPLETE INDEPENDENCE

The British government viewed the spread of communism in India with great alarm and took recourse to all possible repressive measures for combating it. This meant that from the very beginning the Indian communists had to work in the face of great odds. Most of those who had been trained abroad by M. N. Roy and sent to India were arrested immediately upon their arrival in the country. In 1923 many of them were indicted in the Peshawar Conspiracy Case and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. In 1924 the colonial authorities staged the Kanpur Conspiracy Case in which four leading communists of the time — Muzaffar Ahmed, Shaukat Usmani, S.A.Dange and Nalinibhusan Dasgupta were convicted on a charge of conspiracy against the King Emperor. But the trial created considerable consternation amongst the working class and intelligentsia. Questions of socialism and communism were now brought to the fore. In Bombay was formed the Indian Communists' Defence Committee which organised a campaign to secure the right of Indians to form a communist party. Throughout the greater part of the British rule the Indian Communist Party, however, had to work underground as a banned political organisation.

In their early years the communists worked through the Congress, trying to link the nationalist organisation with agrarian and working class struggles. During this initial phase the Indian communists also used the platform of the Workers' and Peasants' Party, units of which had been established in different parts of the country. In 1928 was held the all-India conference of the Workers' and Peasants' Party to bring together the various local units. The same year saw a crowd of 50,000 — comprising of millhands and subordinate members of Indian society — marching under the leadership of the Left to the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress demanding the adoption of complete independence as the Congress goal at a time when the dominant nationalist leadership still thought in terms of Dominion Status. On this occasion Subhas Chandra Bose also supported the demand for complete independence. It need not be forgotten that the proposer and seconder of

the resolution on Complete Independence at the 1921 Ahmedabad Congress session were both communists. Again, when in the 1927 Madras session of the Congress Jawaharlal Nehru moved the Purna Swaraj resolution it was seconded by the Communist delegate Joglekar.

NATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

The end of the 1920s witnessed significant increase of communist influence amongst the working class of India. The working class under communist leadership participated in the nation-wide anti-Simon Commission movement. In 1928 alone more than 200 labour strikes were organised all over India in which about 5 lakh industrial hands participated. The most significant among them was the textile mill workers' strike in Maharashtra under the leadership of the Communist controlled Girni Kamgar Union. When this movement began in 1928 the membership of the Union was 324; by December of that year the figure rose to 54,000 and in the beginning of 1929 it stood at 65,000.

Interestingly enough, the dominant Congress leadership either disapproved of this labour unrest or kept silent when the government adopted brutal repressive measures. The strength of labour insurgency was testified to by a government report of 1928-9: 'Communist ideas ... spread among various sections of the industrial proletariat, and also, to some extent, in rural India ... It is significant that several youth associations have adopted communist symbols and doctrines. The communist movement continues to be a source of anxiety and to demand constant vigilance on the part of the authorities.'

What is significant is that the communists never lost the perspective of nationalist struggle while organising working class politics. In 1930 the CPI thus published the 'Platform of Action' — later elaborated in the 1934 party plenum as the 'Programme of the CPI' — which presented a complete programme for achieving independence. Basing on Marxism-Leninism, it broke away from the bourgeois-feudal outlook of the Congress and linked the success of the national anti-imperialist struggle with an agrarian revolution. It noted: In order to destroy the slavery of the Indian people and emancipate the working class and peasants from the poverty which is crushing them down, it is essential to win the independence of the country and to raise the banner of the agrarian revolution which would smash the system of landlordism surviving from the middle ages and would cleanse the whole of the land from all the medieval rubbish. An agrarian revolution against British capitalism and landlordism must be the basis for the revolutionary emancipation of India.

MEERUT AND AFTER

To counteract, what was perceived as the 'communist threat' the Raj resorted to large-scale arrests of revolutionary leaders and radical trade unionists. In March 1939 33 prominent labour leaders — which included three English communists and such front ranking Indian communists as Muzaffar Ahmed, S.A. Dange and P.C. Joshi — were charged with waging a conspiracy against the Raj. Known as the Meerut Conspiracy Case, the trial dragged on till 1933. The conduct of the

communists during the trial received wide appreciation. They used the occasion of self-defence to propagate the principles of Marxism-Leninism and assert their commitment to nationalism. Meanwhile, outside the court the trial provoked popular anger which was manifest in a series of labour strikes all over the country. A Defence Committee was formed with Motilal Nehru as President and Jawaharlal Nehru as Secretary. Committees were also formed to raise fund for defence lawyers and provide the prisoners with food, newspaper and books, although Jawaharlal later lamented that it was not easy to raise funds for the defence of the communists. The Meerut defence movement received considerable support from the Soviet Union and the labour movement in Great Britain itself. Celebrated intellectuals of the age like Einstein, Romand Rolland and Harold Laski condemned the Meerut trial. The court sentenced the accused to harsh doses of imprisonment. But the Meerut Conspiracy Case proved the growing strength of communism in India.

GROWTH OF MASS FRONTS

By 1934 the communists started recovering from the Meerut shock and began reorganising the Indian labour with a new vigour. In that year the communists and other leftist groups joined hands to organise a massive all-India textile strike. The strikers demanded amongst others release of political prisoners. During this period the communists developed contacts with the Congress Socialist group and jointly opposed the acceptance of the 1935 Government of India Act. But when the Congress formed provincial governments in 7 out of the 11 provinces after the 1937 elections the CPI adopted a dual approach to the new political scenario. On the one hand, the communists stood by the Congers ministries to forestall bureaucratic and central government's intervention. On the other hand, the CPI confronted the Congress governments when they opted for a policy of repression against protest politics.

Meanwhile, the communists made a headway in organising the Indian peasantry and the youth. With the co-operation of left nationalists the communists established in 1936 All India Students' Federation. Almost simultaneously the communists took the initiative in organising a national forum of progressive writers. This was also the year when the All India Kisan Sabha was formed which under communist leadership became particularly strong in Bengal, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and the Punjab. I would in this connection like to recall the significant role played by peasant leaders like Sahajananda Saraswati. The Kisan Sabha not only voiced peasant grievances but lent support to mainstream nationalism which had already attained a matured shape under Gandhian leadership.

The Second World War constituted a new turning point in the growth of communist politics in India. The CPI initially characterised the War as an imperialist War and along with the Congress opposed the British move to unilaterally make India a party to the War. It was the communists who led a propaganda campaign to expose the adverse economic consequences of the War. On 2 October 1939 90,000 mill workers of Bombay struck work for 24 hours. The CPI also organised anti-War demonstrations in other parts of the country. Perturbed by the activities of the communists, the British government imprisoned all leading communists of the time.

Nevertheless, the spirit of defiance and protest which had been ignited by communist activity could not be stamped out.

ANTI-FASCIST PHASE

The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union transformed the character of the Second World War. What was originally an imperialist War now became a People's War. In tune with the principle adopted by the communists all over the world the CPI now considered its primary international duty to help the democratic forces fight Nazism and Fascism. Accordingly, when the congress gave the call for August Revolution in 1942 the CPI officially stayed away from it. But it continued to organise people's movements for democratic and economic rights and communal harmony. The CPI also agitated for the release of Congress leaders who had been imprisoned following the Quit India Movement. Even at local levels many communist activists individually participated in the nationalist upsurge, ensuring support from the peasantry, working class and the tribals for the nationalist upsurge. During the man-made 1943 Bengal famine the communists won popular appreciation for its relief and rehabilitation work. This was also the time when, thanks to communist persuasion, the middle class intelligentsia — especially in Bengal — came to be deeply influenced by Marxism-Leninism. The imprint of the work of cultural organisations like the IPTA is still felt. Not surprisingly, the membership of the CPI rose significantly in 1942-43. This was the time of great political difficulty for the CPI. The Party's attitude to the Quit India Movement had resulted in its isolation from the nationalist mainstream, the situation being rendered particularly difficult for us by the perverse publicity campaign of the Congress to characterise us as 'traitors'. But we remained determined to stay with the people and it was because of this that the CPI was able to retain its political standing.

NEW UPSURGE

The victory of the Allied front in the Second World War, the economic crisis in the post-War Britain and the sharpening of contradiction between imperialism and Indian nationalism rendered decolonisation of South Asia inevitable. In the context of this new correlation of political forces there occurred in India the post-War upsurge in which the communists played a leading role. What now took place was a convergence of various strands of protest politics with mainstream nationalism. The working class, peasantry and the youth combined economic with political demands in developing an anti-British upsurge. The communists enthusiastically participated in the popular outbreak that burst forth against the trial of the INA prisoners in the Red Fort. When sentence was pronounced on the Azad Hind soldier Abdul Rashid Calcutta exploded in anger. A general strike called by the CPI paralysed the city on 12 February 1946. The predominant feature of insurgent Calcutta was a unique demonstration of Hindu-Muslim unity. The Congress leader Aruna Asaf Ali was so impressed with the communist-led student and youth movements in Calcutta that she urged the nation to imitate it as a model of action. In his confidential report the then Calcutta Police Commissioner frankly acknowledged the communist as the most dangerous force.

NAVAL MUTINY

An important feature of the period was the involvement of the British Indian armed forces in the anti-British upsurge. In January 1946 the Indian members of the Air Force in Bombay went on strike against racial discrimination and demanding employment in the event of demobilisation. But the most impressive happening occurred in Bombay in February 1946 when the RIN ratings revolted, replacing the Union Jack with Congress, League and Red flags. What was particularly disturbing for the Raj was the solidarity of the civilian populace for the naval mutineers. This convergence of naval and civil revolts was largely possible because of the CPI.

On February 21, Bombay observed a hartal at the call of the communists to demonstrate solidarity with the rebellious naval ratings. On the next day workers of most Bombay factories downed their tools to join meetings and processions in support of the RIN revolt. A massive public rally was held in the Kamgar Maidan, addressed amongst others by Dange. The naval mutiny in Bombay soon spread to Karachi, Calcutta, Visakhapatnam and other ports where the mutineers too received instant support from the general populace. I still remember the day when the employees of Bengal Assam Railway enthusiastically responded to our call for a strike in protest against the government threat to bomb the RIN mutineers unless they surrendered within 24 hours. This was the first political strike organised by the Bengal Assam Railwaymen's Union with which myself and Md. Ismail were then deeply involved. This conjunction between civil and military unrest constituted a historic chapter in our glorious struggle for freedom. Unfortunately, the dominant Congress leadership did not appreciate the revolutionary situation. Gandhi condemned the violence. Maulana Azad and Sardar Patel personally intervened to persuade the ratings to withdraw the strike. Jinnah of the Muslim League was also not favourably disposed to the political climate created by the RIN mutiny.

PEASANT MILITANCY

The period constituting the prelude to Independence also witnessed peasant unrest reaching a climactic point. The major motivating force behind this was again the CPI. In 1946-47 the Bengal Pradesh Kisan Sabha organised the Tebhaga movement demanding two-thirds of the crop for the sharecroppers. 'Nij Khamare dhan tolo', 'Langal jar jami tar' and 'zamindari pratha dhansa hauk' became the rallying cries of the rebels. It is pertinent to point out that although the communal carnage that afflicted Calcutta and Noakhali in August 1946 had dampened secular politics in the short term but in the long run the protest politics could not be stultified and it surfaced at the proper historical conjuncture. In the same period two other peasant insurgencies occurred outside Bengal. In 1946 took place the communist inspired Punnappra-Vayalar uprising in Travancore. Almost at the same time the peasants in Telegana rallied under the red flag to rise up against feudal exploitation. This revolt, lasting for five years between July 1946 and October 1951, was the longest guerrilla peasant uprising in modern India. This revolt took away at least 4000 peasant lives. Such peasant uprisings for a better social order will continue to inspire us in building a society devoid of exploitation of man by man.

POLITICS OF PARTITION

The point I am trying to make is that the communists did play an important role in Indian freedom struggle by working for a convergence of nationalist and Left inspired protest politics. Besides, the communists had consistently worked for Hindu-Muslim amity and fostering secular political culture. As early as 1926 the CPI issued a manifesto against Hindu-Muslim riots and for communal unity. At the height of the 1946 Calcutta and Noakhali communal carnages it was the CPI which took a determined secular stand. While in Calcutta the communist-led Tramway Workers' Union played a constructive role in combating the communal fury, the Kisan Sabhas remained ever vigilant in checking the spread of communal virus. Mention may be made of the way in which 10,000 lathi-wielding communist volunteers drove back the a group of rioters when they tried to enter Tripura from Noakhali. On the eve of independence when Gandhiji came to Calcutta to assuage communal temper we met Gandhi and on his advice organised Peace processions.

Yet, the question needs to be asked why did we fail to prevent the Partition. Certainly the British Government had a hand in it. In the wake of the post-War radical and militant upsurges, affecting even the armed forces, it was convinced that it could no longer rule India and was perturbed at the spread of communist activities. This is clear from the Viceroy Wavell's memoirs and the confessions of V.P. Menon, the senior bureaucrat. But the communist and Left movement were strong enough to present an alternative leadership. At the same time the Congress Party was no more confident of leading a prolonged mass struggle by uniting the Hindus and Muslims. It was also afraid of the radical and Left nationalist prominence. Hence, it fell a prey to the British Government's machinations. Meanwhile, the Muslim League for various reasons had become a powerful force among large sections of Muslims and it took advantage of the situation to strike a deal with the British Government for the Partition.

What followed was the truncated settlement of 15th August 1947.

POST-INDEPENDENCE DEVELOPMENTS

The Transfer of Power that took place on the midnight of 15 August was, however, an incomplete transfer of power. For, the political transformation was not accompanied by a radical socio-economic transformation. In many ways the administrative structure retained a continuity with the colonial age. The Congress which became the new ruling power essentially governed the state in the interests of the big landlord and the indigenous capitalist class. Consequently, class polarisation became accentuated both in urban and rural sectors. The Indian polity increasingly assumed centrist overtones, resulting in serious regional imbalances. The Indian state failed to generate the basic conditions of civil society. In fact, some sections of the otherwise democratic constitution were utilised by Indira Gandhi to proclaim Emergency under which all liberties were obliterated. But the people carried on the resistance and Jayprakash Narayan played a key role in rousing the people against it. We kept contact with him throughout and helped him. At the same time the successive Congress governments at the Centre failed to strike decisive secular blows to the

forces of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism which today have assumed a ghastly form. Even the Nehruvian stance on self-reliance was eroded when the last Congress government at the Centre submitted to the pressures of world capitalism and threw open the floodgates to multinationals in the wake of its New Economic Policy.

All these do not imply that India has not attained anything in the fifty years of its independent existence in the comity of nations. Amongst all the states which won freedom in the wake of the decolonisation process of the 1940s India has been able to sustain a stable democratic polity. It has been able to build up an industrial base, despite the fact that certain negative features developed due to mistaken policies. Production in agriculture has increased, but much more could have been achieved with land reforms which would have also helped the vast masses and created a firm industrial base. In international relations India has also played a distinguished role. It is one of the founding members of the Non-aligned Movement and has intervened in resolving international disputes, particularly through the institutional apparatus of the United Nations Organisation.

LEFT'S ROLE

Yet, the dream of a better equitable order which had prompted the freedom fighters to sacrifice their lives has remained unfulfilled. What we need today is an alternative nation-building strategy which would ensure a restructuring of Centre-State relations, greater democratisation of the polity, eradication of socio-economic discriminations and flowering of all that is best in our pluralist cultural tradition. In West Bengal the Left Front government with limited powers has been experimenting with such a system of governance for the last 20 years and it has been able to meet some of the unfulfilled demands of the people within the existing constitutional framework. By empowering the people, bringing justice to the doorstep, introducing fundamental land reforms, strengthening local self-government and promoting industrialisation in tune with provincial needs and without sacrificing the interests of the working class, the West Bengal Government has presented a new model for governing India. With the end of Congress hegemony, its loss of faith in the people, its inability to change its policies, and its compromise with communal forces the emergence of a Third Front with all-India and state popular parties became inevitable in Indian politics. Its necessity has increased with the rise of the communal party like the BJP. What is required is a strengthening of Left and Democratic forces to make this a reality. The CPI(M) and the Left parties have now the opportunity to help in the establishment of a Secular and Democratic alternative in the Centre with a common minimum programme and to carry on an ideological battle all over India against communalism and fundamentalism. The Indian freedom struggle — especially the difficult years of 1942-44 — has taught us that if we can firmly remain with the people we would ultimately be able to maintain our political ground despite temporary setbacks. When today India stands on the cross-roads of a new chapter of her history we have to remember this political maxim.