

The Communist Activities in India and Indian National Congress

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ABSTRACT

The communist ideology, rooted in Marxist thought, has played a transformative role in shaping political and socio-economic structures worldwide. In India, Marxism influenced nationalist movements, labor struggles, and post-independence political ideologies. This paper explores the evolution of communist thought from classical Marxism to its adaptation in the Indian context, analyzing how socialist and leftist movements shaped the nation's political discourse. The focus remains on how ideology transitioned from theoretical Marxism to practical mobilization in colonial and postcolonial India.

Keywords: *Marxism, Leninism Communism, Indian Politics, Socialist Movements, Left Ideology.*

Introduction

The genesis of communist ideology can be traced back to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' seminal work *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), which advocated for class struggle and the abolition of private property. The movement aimed to replace capitalist exploitation with a classless society. In India, communist ideas arrived through intellectual exchanges, trade union movements, and revolutionary nationalism during the early 20th century. As India grappled with colonial oppression, Marxist theory found fertile ground among students, workers, and peasantry, laying the foundation for organized left movements.

Communist and Socialist ideas appeared among enlightened intelligentsia in Western Europe at the beginning of nineteenth century and these soon acquired adherents among working class and began to develop into social and political movements. In the fourth decade of nineteenth century Karl Marx and Frederick Engels espoused the communist cause and they made substantial theoretical contribution to these movements. Their contributions were of so much decisive importance that by the second half of nineteenth century Communism and Socialism became synonymous with Marxism.

One of the chief contributions of Marxism to social and political thought is the idea that historical development is a law governed process and the determining role in the social development is played by mode of production. Socialism, according to Marxism is the objective result of class antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat existing in the modern capitalist society.

Though Marxism is opposed to social voluntarism which says that society can be restructured basing purely on man's will power, still Marxist ideology has been widely used by social Volunteers who wanted to build society on egalitarian principles.

Russia was a backward country with a very low development of productive forces. However, a section of Russian revolutionaries trying to overthrow Tsarist autocracy came under the influence of Marxism and drew heavily from it. The result was the development of a new ideological system namely, Leninism, blending the vision of Marxism with Russian Narodnic traditions of terrorism and fanaticism. No doubt, the autocratic political conditions of Russia contributed towards these terrorist and fanatic characteristics. By a fortunate combination of powerful will power with dexterous manipulation of economic and political situations this section of revolutionaries were able to capture political power in Russia in 1917. Judged by the motive force behind this political event and radical change it tried to bring,

it was a great revolution. Lenin, the leader of this revolution was a man who combined in himself the vision of Marx with the fanaticism of Russian Narodnics. To realise his vision, derived from Marxist ideological sources, he founded the Communist International or shortly Comintern in 1919 with headquarters at Moscow. The avowed goal of this body was to realise world revolution.

Inspired by the Leninist strategies for world revolution, delegates from various parts of world assembled in Moscow in 1919 for the first Congress of the Comintern. Representation from colonial countries at this Congress was negligible. However when the second Congress of the Comintern was held in 1920, colonial delegates were well represented. From India, M.N. Roy represented the Congress as a Mexican delegate. History of the Communist movement in India and cardinal issues that the Party had to solve begin from here. The problem which arose in connection with India can be summed up as three:

The question of Communist attitude towards national liberation movement under Indian National Congress.

The Role of Gandhi

Lenin specifically answered these questions and later in his Colonial Thesis and Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions, both submitted to the second Congress of the Comintern, he generalized these formulations as principles applicable for colonial countries general¹. Later Communist leadership in India from M.N. Roy onwards had only misinterpreted, distorted or ignored Leninist formulations altogether.

Leninist Strategy in Colonial Revolution

In India Communist Party developed from nationalist movement and not from labour movement as it had been the case in Western Europe. The Communist Party itself had acknowledged this fact:

The Communist Party of India arose in the course of our liberation struggle as a result of the efforts of Indian revolutionaries who under the inspiration of the great October Revolution were seeking new paths for achieving national Independence.

Indian Communists Fight against Indian National Congress and Gandhi

M.N. Roy was a top official of the Comintern and so he had behind him the whole authority and prestige of that body. Though he was clearly acting against Comintern principles, in India his utterances and writings were taken as the official word of the Comintern. So when communist groups began to develop in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Lahore under the leadership of Dange, Muzafar Ahmed, Singaravelu Chettiar and Gulam Hussain respectively these groups were nourished in anti-Congress and anti-Gandhi feelings and ideology. Roy's journals and other publications indoctrinated the first generation of Indian communists in a quite false direction. After the official line of the Comintern was changed for the worse in 1928, in India no change was felt at all as there was no previous experience of Leninist political policy of practice in India.

Roy's first criticize of Gandhi and the Indian National Congress appeared in the official organ of the Comintern, International Press Correspondence in December 1921. In this article he said that the INC and Gandhi (i) have no scientific understanding of the social forces they lead, (ii) have no comprehension of the tactics, (iii) are neglecting proletariat and peasantry. The above points turned to be the perennial stereotypic image of Gandhi and INC in the communist mind throughout the history of the CPI. In the same year in the Manifesto to the 36th Indian National Congress, Ahmedabad, 1921 he again criticized the programme of the INC: "Overthrow of foreign domination alone is not sufficient motive for the people to participate in the non-cooperation movement". In 1923 in the introduction to his book 'One Year of Non-cooperation' Roy wrote: "Our repeated assertion that non-cooperation movement was reactionary movement was clearly vindicated". In 1925 Roy's paper 'The Masses of India' described "Gandhism as politically bankrupt" and policies of the INC as "counter revolutionary".

R.P. Dutt, the famous British Communist of Indian origin, who was the all time mentor of the CPI criticized Gandhi and the INC on the same lines of Roy. Referring to calling off of the 1920-22 non-cooperation movement, Dutt wrote: The Congress leadership called off the movement because they were afraid of the awakening mass activity, because it was beginning to threaten those propertied class interest with which they themselves were closely associated.

About Gandhiji he again wrote that "Gandhi failed as a leader of national struggle". He found out the reason for his failure too: "Gandhi failed because he defended upper class interests". Spirituality of Gandhi according to him "was only the expression of his class interest".

This Communist criticism was not confined to the Right wing leaders of the INC alone; even the Left wing Congress men like Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose etc., were also mercilessly attacked. A CPI document of 1930 said:

The most harmful and dangerous obstacle to the victory of India revolution is the agitation carried on by the Left elements of the Indian National Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru, Bose and others.

It should be particularly noted that Jawaharlal Nehru was associating himself with communist sponsored organizations like League the Against Imperialism during this time. Still he was not spared.

In 1934 the CPI attacked the INC

The Indian National Congress is the class organization of the capitalists working against the fundamental interests of the toiling masses of our country.

It described Gandhi's phrases of love, meekness etc., as "cloak to defend the interests of Indian capitalists". According to the CPI documents of the period the Indian National Congress opposed the peasantry in their struggle against the money lenders, big landlords and the native princes". This confrontation with the INC and Gandhi was given a respite for a brief spell of 3 years from 1936 to 1939 under the policy of "United Front against Facism". Even during this period of truce hostilities were not fully stopped. However, the Congress was described to same extent as an anti-imperialist organization:

The National Congress has undoubtedly achieved a gigantic task in uniting wide forces of Indian people for national struggle, and remains today the principal existing mass organization of many diverse elements seeking national liberation.

This new description of the INC given by R.P. Dutt and Ben Bradley in February 1936 became a turning point in the history of the CPI. But the tragedy is that this new approach was not a perception based on the intrinsic quality of the INC itself rather it was an attempt to find new allies for Soviet Union besieged by a Fascist circle. The Soviet cry for help came out in the form of the policy of United Front Against Fascism enunciated by George Dimitrov in his report to the seventh congress of the Communist International in August 1935. Dutt and Bradley introduced this new thesis to the Indian Communists. This "Dutt - Bradley Thesis" initiated deep changes in the CPI and as a result of this, the CPI for the first time in its history began to work in co-operation with the INC and the Congress Socialist Party to a certain extent. This organizational access gave them opportunities to establish wide contacts, which were otherwise impossible as a banned organization. Through these contacts they were able to identify and forge relationship with kindred individuals and through them they effectively used the INC and the Kerala CSP machinery very effectively. Moreover the CSP admitted confirmed communist leaders and activists within its own ranks. But this was done without defining its own differences with the CPI as it had done in the case of the INC itself. The differences between Gandhism and the CSP ideology was unambiguous, whereas differences between the CSP and the CPI were quite undefined. This ambiguous position helped the CPI with its own well organized in group cohesion, dogmatic fervor and messianism to offer its own explanation on the differences and thus outwit the CSP leadership who were caught unaware in the conflict. This period of cooperation with INC was particularly fruitful for the CPI and thus proves the correctness of the Leninist perspective. But the Lenin's idea of co-operation was not for a brief period of three years (1936-39) but for a whole historical period, the period of colonial domination. Moreover only political united front was advised by Lenin and no organizational sabotage of united front partners as done by the CPI in Kerala. Though the Stalinist dictatorship had ignored and misinterpreted true Leninist ideals to suit their needs, this did not in any way hinder Indian Communists from correctly perceiving the needs of their own country and objectively responding for the solution of those needs and problems. It is clear that Indian Communists activities were guided by Stalinist ideology alone and they did not such care to use their own judgements. So the responsibility for not using the head lies with them alone. In this connection the line taken by the CSP is valuable: they were practically and unconsciously carrying out Leninism. Leninist ideas on colonial questions that they carried out can be summed up as follows:

- Movement for national liberation is essentially a bourgeois democratic movement and communists (and socialists) should practically help this movement.
- Communists while uniting for the overthrow of imperialism should have their own organization.
- Communists should independently work among class organizations of workers and peasants and educate them.
- No Communist colouring' should be given to the movement for national liberation.

The even during the united front period of 1936-39 above ideological positions derived from Stalinism were kept in tact. The international leadership however allowed some allowances like co-operation with the Congress and the CSP as a tactical move under the threat of a war against Soviet Union. As soon as the threat of war was removed following Stalin-Hitler Pact of 1939, the tactics also changed. Thus the Communist movement in Kerala since its very beginning has been strictly adhering to the Stalinist positions with astonishing loyalty.

The communist ideology continues to shape India's political and social landscape. Despite internal schisms and ideological challenges, Marxist thought remains embedded in India's democratic framework. The evolution of Marxism in India demonstrates a continuous process of reinterpretation to suit historical realities, bridging global ideals with local struggles.

References

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2. Engels Frederick: Anti-Duhring, Moscow, 1962, p. 22.
3. For a full discussion on the Narodnic roots of the Leninism see Leonard Schapiro. The Communist Party of Soviet Union, London, 1970.
4. Lenin: Selected Works, Vol. III, Moscow, 1967, pp. 422-427 and 456-460.
5. According to K. Damodaran, a veteran communist leader since 1937, communists in India were ignorant of Leninist formulations on colonial questions till the end of nineteen fifties. (Damodaran, K. Memories of an Indian Communist, New Left Review, London, September – October 1975. Malayalam Edition, Thiruvananthapuram, 1990, p. 21. 6Constitution of the Communist Party of India, A CPI Publication, 1958, p. 1.
6. Lenin: Selected Works, Vol. III, Moscow, 1967, pp. 422-427 and 456-460.
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8. Adhikari, Documents, Vol. I, p. 332.
9. Adhikari, Documents, Vol. III, Part-A, p. 119.
10. Adhikari, Documents, Vol. III, Part-A, p. 119.
11. Draft Platform of Action of the CPI, 1930, p. 9. Democratic Research Service, Bombay, 1957.
12. Draft Political Thesis of the CPI, 1934. Archives on Contemporary History, INU, New Delhi, File No. 29/1939. 12. Ibid.
13. Dutt, R.P. and Ben Bradlay. "The Anti-Imperialist Peoples Front", International Press Correspondence, Vol. 16, No. 11, 29 February, 1936.
14. The CPI was banned in 1934. Even before this formal legal ban its existence was never tolerated by the British Raj. The British tried to suppress the CPI through the Peshwar Conspiracy Case of 1921, the Cawnpore Conspiracy Case of 1923 and the Meerut Conspiracy Case of 1929. It was not the British suppression that isolated them but their opposition to the INC led by Gandhi which was the chief anti-imperialist force enjoying popular support.
15. Adhikari, Documents, Vol. I, pp. 198-205.

