

Introduction

This year marks the beginning of the 100th year of the formation of the Communist Party of India. The Party was set up in October 1920 in Tashkent. This publication is the first of what we hope will be a series of publications on different aspects of the hundred year history of the Party in relation to its ideology, its work, its struggles, its public service and its fight for the defence of India's sovereignty and the interests of our people.

This first publication covers some of the major events in the life of the Party and its work as part of India's national struggle to free itself from the yoke, the loot and plunder of British colonialism. It roughly covers the period from 1920-1947.

The booklet highlights the sustained efforts by the Party to strengthen India's freedom movement through the organisation of the oppressed, the exploited, the workers and peasants. The linkages of class struggle and struggle on social issues with the national movement, mobilising the people against the British raj for a change in their material conditions with the ultimate aim of socialism, was a distinctive trend, led by communists, in the national movement.

Readers will find in these pages details of the sweep of working class and peasant struggles and the huge numbers involved in strike actions against the British linked directly to the horrible material conditions of the people. Most of these mass actions had either been initiated, organized or supported by the communists. The very first working class anti-war strike in the whole world, after the declaration of the Second World War took place in Bombay at the initiative of communists.

Though there were twists and turns in the relationship and cooperation between the Party with the Congress led mainstream, which was the

main force in the national movement under the leadership of Gandhi, the direction against British rule always remained steadfast. It was no coincidence that it was the communists who first raised the slogan of complete independence at a time when other nationalists including under the leadership of Gandhi had limited their demand only for dominion status.

And it was not just as a slogan.

The work of the communists brought upon them the most ferocious attacks and repression by the British raj, from the very early years after the formation of the Party. Just one fact, mentioned in this booklet is startling and inspirational evidence. In the first Party Congress held in 1943, there were 138 delegates present. Cumulatively, the jail sentences they had undergone added upto 414 years, and this was the record of just the 138 delegates present, not of the entire membership. It shows the death defying patriotism and sacrifices made by the Communist Party, its leadership and cadre for India's independence.

The goal of Socialism, the inspiration derived from the Bolshevik revolution was a critical factor in the development of the communist movement in India. Communists were accused of being "foreign agents", of working at the behest of "foreigners" and so on. This false propaganda tried to distort the spirit of internationalism and solidarity with the movements of the oppressed people across the world against the common enemy of colonialism and imperialism. Communists are proud of their heritage of an internationalist spirit in their work based on the universal goal for human emancipation from systems of exploitation of man by man. It is worth recalling that it was the internationalist solidarity of the British Communist Party at that time, which brought it to the forefront of the fight in their own country against their own Government and its colonial raj. They were in support of India's independence struggle and the values of freedom and democracy it represented. In fact as mentioned in this booklet, two British communists were co-accused in the Meerut conspiracy case against the British raj.

The booklet does not dwell, except in passing, on the debates on various

issues within the Party which are a part of its history. Nor does it go into details of the stand taken by the Party on some of the issues which were retrospectively reviewed by the later Party leadership in various phases. These political discussions are available in other publications for those who would like a more detailed political study.

In a publication such as this it is not always possible to mention all the names and the contributions made by individuals and any such omission in this booklet is entirely unintentional. However it must be noted that there is a gap in almost all the reference material of certain periods of the names of communist women who had emerged as leaders and made big contributions. This is a weakness in the writing of history which needs correction.

Much of the material in this booklet has been published earlier as can be seen in the list of references cited at the end. What it attempts is to gather the material available and bring all the various aspects together so as to provide the reader with a snapshot of the Party's early history, partly in chronological order and partly theme based.

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Brinda Karat

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Formation of CPI, 1920

When we look at the history of the Communist Party in India in the first two decades of its formation, we see that it was a confluence of several influences and revolutionary movements. At different stages various revolutionary currents and fighters joined the party. Among them were the Ghadar heroes of Punjab, the colleagues of Bhagat Singh, the revolutionaries of Bengal, the militant working class fighters of Bombay and Madras presidencies, and the radical anti-imperialist Congressmen from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and other parts of the country. Thus the Party was enriched by the entry of the best anti-colonial fighters from all over the country. This strengthened the Party in its early years and helped it emerge as a fighter for the working class and the peasantry, the economically exploited and socially oppressed, and to bring in a radical content with an alternative socialist vision to the historic freedom struggle for India's independence.

It is also to be noted that in the initial years, the Comintern, that is, the Communist International with its headquarters in the Soviet Union played a role. Communist parties were being formed throughout the world and were guided by the Comintern. This role may seem strange to readers today when the nature of internationalism is bound by the sovereignty of different communist parties across the world to decide and take forward their own path and there is no such international organization. But there was a specific context of Soviet support to the national liberation struggle of India for freedom along with the goal of establishing Socialism in India, which formed the basis of the bonds forged in the pre-independence years. When the context changed so did the relations between the different communist parties. The Comintern existed from 1919 to 1943, when it was dissolved.

Founding Meeting

On October 17, 1920 a group of seven people met in Tashkent, the capital of the then Turkistan Republic of the Soviet Union, to form the Communist Party of India. Coming from different backgrounds, they were united in the idea of getting rid of the hated British rule over India and were all inspired by the October Revolution of 1917 that had established the first ever workers' state in the world. Their aim was to free India from British rule and to work towards the establishment of Socialism in India.

These intrepid revolutionaries were: MN Roy, Evelyn Trent-Roy, Abani Mukherjee, Rosa Fitingov, Mohd. Ali, Mohd. Shafiq and MPBT Acharya. Evelyn was an American communist and wife of MN Roy while Rosa Fitingov was a Russian communist married to Abani Mukherjee. Mohd. Shafiq was elected as Secretary of the Party. They also decided to adopt the principles of international unity of workers and the struggle for overthrow of capitalism and all other forms of exploitation. They still did not have a strategic programme to achieve their aims, but resolved to work it out taking into account the conditions prevailing in India.

It was not unusual for the Communist Party to be set up by a small group. In China, the Communist Party was formed after a meeting of 13 delegates, including Mao Zedong, in Shanghai in July 1921. The Indochina Communist Party (which unified communist groups of what later became Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) was formed in 1930 by a group of 20 people, many of whom had embraced Marxism while living in France, the colonial power which controlled Indochina.

It was also not unusual to have foreigners as part of the initial



M.N. Roy



M.P.T. Acharya



Abaninath Mukherjee

group. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, individuals and groups inspired by the liberation of Tsarist Russia crossed national borders to join the international struggle for Socialism. The British Communist Party at the time took a strong stand against its own Government and the British raj, openly supporting the movement for national liberation in India.

MN Roy, Abani Mukherjee and MPBT Acharya were already involved with the communist movement, though outside India. They had dreams of mobilizing help from elsewhere in order to launch a strong resistance against the British in India. All three had attended the Second Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in July 1920. Mohd. Shafiq and Mohd. Ali were muhajirs who went to Tashkent with the aim of seeking help to fight the British after the Khilafat movement broke out in India. Many muhajirs left India to fight the British after the breakup of the Caliphate following the defeat of the Ottomans in the First World War.

Thus, behind the formation of the Communist Party of India at Tashkent lie the intertwined currents of the Indian national liberation struggle and the struggle for socialism inspired by the October revolution. Let us look at these two trends more closely.

Inspiration of Freedom Struggle

In India in the period immediately preceding the formation of the Communist Party, mass movements were gathering momentum. Workers and peasants took part in mass meetings, strikes and demonstrations that increasingly took on an anti-British character. Between 1905 and 1918, peasants in many parts of the country opposed subscribing to the War Fund, refused to be recruited to the army and deserted the military training centres. Significant peasant struggles – including no-tax campaigns - took place in the eastern districts of the United Provinces, in Bengal, in parts of Bihar (notably in Champaran district), in parts of Gujarat (notably in Kheda district), and in parts of Andhra of Madras Presidency (such as Guntur district).

It was in this period, in the year 1920, coinciding with the formation of the Communist Party that a most significant development took place. As a result of the upsurge in working class struggles, the All India Trade Union Congress was formed in 1920. It had in its leadership different sections of the national movement from moderates to radicals,

including many Congress leaders. Its first President was Lala Lajpat Rai. Communists started working within the trade unions and with their ideological commitment and practical activity, within a few years they soon emerged as the natural, popular leaders of the working class and the trade unions. Communist work within the trade unions gave a big boost to the participation of the working classes in the national movement.

Dissatisfied by the slow progress in the anti-British movement, many small revolutionary groups and secret societies also sprang up in several states including what is now Maharashtra and Bengal. These groups tended to adopt tactics like individual armed attacks, bombings, armoury raids, etc. in order to fight the British.

It was this gathering momentum and coalescing of mass discontent that was channelized by Mahatma Gandhi through his call for the Non-Cooperation movement in 1920. He also extended support to the demand of Muslims for the restoration of the Caliphate after it was dismantled by the British when they removed the Ottoman Sultan (who was also the Caliph). This gave a huge fillip to the anti-British feelings with a mass appeal to Muslims. There was deep anger among Muslims against the British on this issue and the Khilafat movement demanding restoration of the Caliphate was launched by the Muslim leadership in India. Many Muslims were moved enough to travel abroad to continue to fight the colonial oppressors. These were referred to as muhajirs, an Arabic word meaning immigrants or those who have left their country. Many of these muhajirs tried to reach Turkey by the overland route through Central Asia, thus coming in contact with Soviet Communists and other Indian revolutionaries. Many of them became communists.

Impact of October Revolution

The October revolution in Russia in 1917 had an electrifying world-wide impact and its ripples were felt in all corners of the world, though delayed because communication and travel was much slower in those times. The reason why it had such an impact was that for the first time in the history of humanity the concrete possibility of throwing off the yoke of exploitation and oppression permanently was witnessed by people. For the first time, colonized people, including India, had a rock-steady ally in their struggle against the seemingly unconquerable British.

In the period 1905-07, circles of Indian revolutionaries who had

been forced to leave India in the face of relentless British repression, were set up in London, Paris and Berlin. They already had links with the Russian communists and were keenly following the gathering revolutionary storm there. The group of revolutionaries in Berlin included Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, the leader of the group, Bhupendranath Dutt, Mohd. Barkatullah, Nalini Gupta and others.

After the success of the October Revolution, contacts between the émigré revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks increased. Many of them visited the Soviet Union between 1918 and 1922, met Lenin and other leaders, visited Moscow, Petrograd, Baku, Tashkent and other cities and were deeply impressed by the vigour of the revolution and the sweeping changes being ushered in, even as the Soviet Union faced an invasion by armies of 13 countries bent upon overthrowing the revolutionary government.

Many of these Indian visitors later published pamphlets that described what they saw, inspiring others to absorb Marxist-Leninist ideas. In particular, a Persian brochure written by Md. Barkatullah on the Soviet policy regarding nationalities in Central Asia, played a role in prompting over 200 muhajirs to cross the Soviet-Afghan border in 1920 in search of support for fighting the British. The muhajirs were welcomed by the Soviet authorities who were prepared to help them in their fight against British rule. Some returned, while 30 of them stayed back and set up the Tashkent branch of the Indian Revolutionary Association. Many muhajirs embraced communism and over 25 of them joined the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow when it was started in 1921.



Baba Santokh Singh

In the United States, revolutionaries such as Santokh Singh and Ratan Singh founded the Ghadar Party in 1913. Under heavy surveillance, these revolutionaries nonetheless made contact with revolutionaries from different countries (including the Irish Fenians). Their pamphlets were sent to Indians who were working in plantations in the Caribbean and in Fiji. After 1917, many Ghadaris, or Ghadar Babas, went to the Soviet Republic and later the USSR to

train as revolutionaries. Their attempted revolt was crushed after the Komagata Maru episode.

It is interesting to note that the Berlin group of revolutionaries led by Virendranath Chattopadhyaya finally reached Moscow in 1921 to meet the Comintern leadership. They were of the view that India should first get rid of British rule and thereafter form the Communist Party. They wanted the Comintern's assistance for the national liberation struggle. They did not want MN Roy and his group to be recognized as the Indian Communist Party. A commission of the Comintern, after hearing all the views, decided to recognize the Party formed in Tashkent as the Indian Communist group.

The Communist Party originating in Tashkent could not finalise a programme which was an essential condition for it to get affiliated as a Party to the Communist International, but this group and in particular MN Roy played an important role in disseminating communist views reaching out to the fledgling communist groups being formed in different centres in India.

Why 1920, not 1925

Readers may be aware that there is a dispute about the date of formation of the Communist Party of India. The CPI (M) which separated from the CPI in 1964 holds that the formation should properly be ascribed to the Tashkent meeting in October 1920, as discussed above. The current CPI believes that the formation should be marked from December 1925 when a meeting of various communist groups was held in Kanpur and a resolution adopted announcing the formation of CPI.

This may seem like an obscure and futile controversy but there are reasons why the CPI (M)'s understanding is historically justified. Neither of the two meetings – Tashkent in 1920 and Kanpur in 1925 – adopted a clear and comprehensive programme of action for work in India which as has been stated was a condition for recognition by the Communist International. Therefore, on this count there cannot be any significance attached to either of the two dates.

However, the participants in the Tashkent meeting did go about actively pursuing the task of building the communist movement in the country primarily through getting in touch with various existing

communist groups, bringing out Marxist literature and propagating it in India despite severe colonial restrictions, and approaching the Indian National Congress with a document that laid out a new perspective for the national liberation movement. Many of the exiled communists in Central Asia, specially Tashkent and Baku, returned to India and started working among trade unions, peasants and other organisations.

The five years between 1920 and 1925 thus were dedicated to fruitful and growing (even though limited) activity by those who met and formed the Communist Party in 1920 and those who were influenced by it. Moreover it is during this phase that the first manifesto of the party was issued. It was also during this period that the first cases against communists were lodged by the British. Therefore it should naturally be regarded as part of the Communist Party's history, and hence the conclusion that 1920 is the historically justified date for formation of the Party. In the next section we will see what the small, new party and its handful of members did in these years.

Communist Groups within India and British Crackdown

Pioneering the Demand for Full Independence

The first impact of the formation of the Communist Party was seen within a year of its formation through its manifesto sent in the shape of an open letter to the Ahmedabad session of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1921, and also subsequently to the Gaya session in 1922. The manifestos raised the demand for complete independence, exhorting the Congress to take a firm and open position on this slogan. This was the first time that any significant statement for full independence from the British colonial rule was expressed.

The Congress, of course, was not yet ready for such a demand, limiting itself to the demand for "Home Rule". It took them another eight years before it could get around to expressing the demand for Swaraj at its Lahore session in 1929. The letter from the Communist Party signed by Roy and Mukherjee created a stir and prompted a delegate Maulana Hasrat Mohani to move a resolution for defining Swaraj as complete independence from foreign rule. A similar resolution was moved by Swamy Kumaranand. Both were influenced by socialist ideas and Mohani became a member of the party a year later. At that time Gandhi opposed the resolution dubbing it as impractical.

It is a proud chapter in communist history that the communists were far ahead of the Congress in their thinking on the question of full independence. From its very inception, the CPI raised the slogan of complete independence, before any other political party or group in India.



Hasrat Mohani

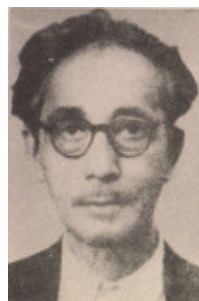
The manifesto also urged the INC to radically alter its programme to address the urgent issues of workers and peasants so that these sections would be roused and mobilized for the freedom struggle. It exhorted the Congress to “make the minimum demands of the trade unions its own demands; let it make the programme of the kisan sabhas (peasant unions) its own programme; and the time will soon come when the Congress will not be stopped by any obstacle; it will be backed by the irresistible strength of the entire population, consciously fighting for their material interests”.

Taking this message forward, Singaravelu Chettiar, leader of the communist group in Madras attended the Gaya Congress session in 1922, greeted it and as a declared Communist addressed the Congress session urging adoption of the slogan of complete independence.

In the period 1922 to 1924, the publication of the *Vanguard of Indian Independence* by Roy, the first declared organ of the Communist Party of India from Berlin, helped to spread communist propaganda and ideas in India. The British government understood the threat posed by such propaganda and prohibited the entry of *Vanguard* into India. Between 1925 and 1927, Roy and his comrades published *Mass of India*. Both were smuggled into the country and distributed underground.

Meanwhile communist groups were springing up in many places within India. They were active in bringing out publications, and organizing or participating in struggles of workers, peasants and various sections of the people. They were active participants in the non-cooperation movement led by Gandhi.

Under the leadership of S A Dange, an active communist group



Muzaffar Ahmed



Singaravelu Chettiar



S.A. Dange

emerged in Bombay, which was a major centre of textile industry. Other members in this group included S V Ghatge, K M Joglekar and R S Nimbkar. In 1923, they started publishing a journal titled *Socialist*. Their main work was among the working classes, particularly the textile mill workers in Bombay and also the workers in Solapur.

Shaukat Usmani, who had studied in Moscow, formed a communist group in Varanasi. In Lahore, led by Ghulam Hussain, a communist group started work. They published an Urdu newspaper entitled *Inquilab*.

In Calcutta, Muzaffar Ahmed formed a group who included the great poet Kazi Nazrul Islam and also published a Bengali paper titled *Ganavani*.

In Madras, Singaravelu Chettiar set up a group and started publishing the *Labour Kisan Gazette*. In May 1923, the first May Day celebration in India was organized under his leadership.

A few years later, in 1928, Amir Hyder Khan, an Indian revolutionary who had trained at the Moscow University of Toliers of the East returned to India. He also started working in South India and developed as a key organizer and over the years bringing in many young recruits into the Party. Among them was a student- P.Sundarayya.

The untiring work of these small groups and the propaganda and organizing effect of their publications led to a steady expansion of the communist influence in these cities. In fact, their influence was felt beyond too, and soon active communist groups sprang up in Kanpur and Karachi too.

MN Roy, with the help of the Comintern, sought to contact leaders of the various communist groups springing up in India. He wrote letters to SA Dange (Bombay), Muzaffar Ahmed (Calcutta), Singaravelu Chettiar (Madras) and others offering suggestions on how to form the party and organise activities.

The main effort was to establish links between the different groups and to set up an all India revolutionary Centre within the country.

British Crackdown and Reorganisation of CPI

The British rulers were acutely aware of these activities and regular intelligence reports in colonial records suggest that they were deeply

worried about the spread of what they referred to as 'Bolshevik' ideas. So, it was not surprising that they cracked down on the fledgling party.

Here it must be stated that from its inception for the most part of over two decades till India's independence, the Communist Party had to face severe repression. It was declared illegal, its literature banned, its leaders had to face arrest and externment and had for the most part to work underground.

Peshawar Conspiracy Cases

In 1921, just a year after its formation, the first group of communists returning to India from the Soviet Union was arrested as they entered Peshawar in June 1921. The British arrested them on grounds of conspiring to spread 'Bolshevik' ideas in India. The first arrest was of Md. Akbar accused under the notorious sedition laws. From 1921 to 1927 five cases, known as the Peshawar Bolshevik Conspiracy cases were manufactured and foisted on the early communist revolutionaries, all of whom happened to be Muslim, converted from participants in the anti- Khilafat movement to communism. The charges against them were mainly of conspiring to overthrow the British government, and for acting as emissaries of the 'Bolsheviks'. The trials were a mockery of justice and the punishments handed out were severe, ranging up to seven years of rigorous imprisonment.

The Congress and Muslim League ignored the trials, voicing no protest although the accused were all freedom fighters. The only protest came from the Comintern and Roy.

Kanpur Conspiracy Case

As already noted, the influence of communist work was spreading especially among workers and peasants. British repression and the Peshawar cases did not prevent this work. The British rulers thus decided to arrest the main leaders. Just as the main Peshawar cases were concluding, the British started arresting several other leaders of communist groups from various parts of the country. This was the second major attack which came to be known as the Cawnpore (now Kanpur) Conspiracy case.

Thirteen leading communists representing all the major communist groups in India and abroad were named in the papers submitted: M N Roy, Muzaffar Ahmed, Shaukat Usmani, Ghulam Hussain, S A Dange,

Singaravelu Chettiar, R C Sharma, Nalini Gupta, Samsuddin Hassan, M P S Velayudhan, Dr Manilal Shah, Sampurnananda and Satyabhakta. Cases against the last five were withdrawn, leaving eight charged. Of these, Roy was in Germany and Sharma was living in French-ruled Pondicherry, both out of reach of the government.

From the papers submitted at the trial (now available at the National Archives, Delhi) it became clear that virtually all the correspondence between Roy and other revolutionaries abroad with Indian communists and Comintern was intercepted. Thus, the government had a mass of material in its hands to "prove" that the communists wanted to overthrow the colonial regime. Ultimately, the sessions trial started in April 1924 before British judge Holmes, who had already acquired notoriety for handing out death sentences to 172 peasants in the Chauri Chaura case. A month later, the accused were handed out four years of rigorous imprisonment each.

Unlike the Peshawar cases, the Kanpur case evoked solidarity and support both in India and in Britain. It became known to the people that communists were fighting for India's freedom.

However, a fall-out of this case and the punishment was that since the main leaders were arrested, an important conference of different communist groups proposed to be held in Lucknow on June 23, 1923 had to be cancelled. This conference could be held only two years later.

Kanpur Communist Conference, 1925

In December 1925, the first meeting of almost all communist groups active in British India took place in Kanpur where the Congress was also holding its annual session. The move was initiated by one Satyabhakta, an activist working within the Congress party who belonged to Rajasthan but was active in UP. He had been named in the Kanpur case but omitted due to lack of evidence. He claimed to be the founder of the "Indian Communist Party".

It is said that some 500 delegates, mostly local workers and peasants, reportedly attended the conference. The Congress session was also being held at the same time and quite near the venue. Several radical activists of the Congress who were attending their session also came over to the communist conference.



S V Ghatge

The conference passed a resolution sharply criticizing the “foreign and native capitalists and landlords” for the prevailing inhuman condition of the people and resolved to work for the emancipation of workers and peasants.

Among other decisions, it was specifically stated that no member of any communal organization would be admitted to the Communist Party, the first time that such a condition was put by any political party in India.

The conference elected Singaravelu Chettiar as President and S V Ghatge and J P Bagerhatta as General Secretaries. It decided to set up its central office in Bombay. Satyabhakta unhappy with the proceedings left the conference.

Following the conference, the re-organised CPI tried to move forward and coordinate the work of various communist groups.

Mass Struggles and Anti-Communal Campaign

Communists Fight against Communalism

A most significant contribution of the re-organised party was the manifesto on the communal problem issued in May 1926. Between 1922 and 1927, 112 communal riots broke out, leaving 450 dead and 5000 injured, as per official records. The last phase of the Non-Cooperation Movement, which had seen Muslims and Hindus unitedly fighting like never before, was poisoned by this division. It was prompted by the British, but many nationalist leaders walked into the trap. Madan Mohan Malaviya and Lala Lajpat Rai joined the Hindu Mahasabha while many Muslim leaders joined the Muslim League. It should be recalled that it was in 1923 that Hindu Mahasabha leader V D Savarkar wrote his book Hindutva and it was in 1925 that the RSS was also set up.



Fight against communalism a cycle demonstration in Lahore

Like on many other issues, the CPI's stance on the communal issue was unprecedented. It had already taken the decision not to give party membership to any individual who belonged to a communal organisation. This is significant because, on the contrary the Congress was allowing many of its leaders to join communal organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha.

In the manifesto on 'Hindu-Muslim Problems' written by Muzaffar Ahmed and J P Bagerhatta, it was said that Hindu and Muslim masses were united because they are equally exploited by foreign and Indian capitalists and landlords and their economic interests are the same. "Religious propaganda is an indigenous method of exploitation by the able doctors of Divinity", it asserted. It called for a united and common struggle for building a classless society. It also linked this common economic struggle to the anti-colonial struggle. Communists were enjoined to prevent communal violence and worked actively for communal harmony.

Building Mass Struggles

After communist leaders were released from British jails, activities of the CPI picked up. An important meeting of CPI leaders was held in Bombay in May 1927 which adopted a new Constitution, although it was still a work in progress. The meeting contributed to the building of an effective central body that was to play an important role in the upsurge of mass activity that followed. It reiterated demands for complete independence, universal suffrage, abolition of landlordism, nationalisation of public utilities, etc. It declared three publications as Party supported organs –Ganavani (Bengali weekly), Mehnatkash (Urdu weekly from Lahore) and Kranti (Marathi weekly from Bombay).

The CPI's presence at that time was felt in five areas: Bengal; Lahore, where work was being done mainly in the trade unions; Bombay; Rajputana; and Madras. In UP also a group had been set up. Communists were active in workers' and peasants' parties, within the Congress or in trade union bodies.

Due to the earlier work of communists in trade unions, SV Ghate, communist leader in Bombay, was elected as the first communist office bearer of the AITUC at the latter's Delhi conference. May Day was observed across India at the call of the AITUC. This was the beginning

of a process by which communists were prominent in the leadership of the AITUC in the coming years and were successful in ensuring more radical working class actions under the AITUC.

Workers' and Peasants' Parties (WPP)

In this period, where legal work was being rendered almost impossible, communists were active in the formation of workers and peasants parties set up in the different States. What were these workers' and peasants' parties (WPP)? These were seen as organisations that represented a united front of the working class, peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie to carry through the "national democratic revolution", that is, for the programme of ending feudalism and getting rid of British colonialism, while establishing rights of a bourgeois democracy for the people.

In Bengal, the WPP emerged in 1925 from the coalescing of various progressive trends within the Congress and the Labour Swaraj party, which was part of the Congress. In Bombay, the WPP was formed in 1927 at the initiative of the CPI. Most of the prominent communists were its executive committee members. It circulated a programme of action at the Bombay session of the Congress. A WPP was also founded in Rajputana. In Punjab, it was formed in 1928, closely followed by one in UP.

In 1928, the influence of WPP expanded considerably. The year started with February 3 being observed as an all-India protest day, at the call of the Congress, against the Simon Commission which landed in Bombay on that day. Meetings and demonstrations were held in all major cities. Bombay witnessed a hartal and a massive workers' demonstration where WPP came out with red flags with the emblem of the hammer and sickle. Calcutta saw a similar demonstration when the Simon Commission visited there in October. The WPPs also organised youth wings in Bengal, Bombay and Punjab, to mobilise the youth into class politics. By the end of 1928, various provincial WPPs combined together to form the All India Workers' and Peasants' Party.

It is relevant to note here that the Comintern in its 6th Congress in September 1928 came up with the second Colonial Theses which exhibited symptoms of a sectarian approach as far as the anti-colonial struggles were concerned. It called for a rejection of the united front against colonialism in the colonial countries and instead argued for

struggles led by communist parties representing the vanguard of the working class. It did so on the assumption that the bourgeoisie in such colonies was tending to compromise with imperialism and also the assumption that communist parties were potentially strong enough to lead the national liberation struggle. Perhaps this analysis emanated from the experience of China where the Kuomintang (representing the national bourgeoisie) had betrayed the united front and turned against the Communist Party of China which was in retreat. The Sixth Congress also advised Indian communists to practically wind up the WPPs and start working openly as a Communist Party.

However, a mass upsurge in the national movement – the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-34 – and the Meerut Conspiracy Case against all communist leaders of the country – overtook these ideological and organisational issues.

Rising Tide of Struggles: 1928-32

The untiring work of communists, and the resurgent tide of the national movement (after the setback of withdrawal of Non-Cooperation earlier in the decade) contributed to 1928 witnessing a great wave of working class struggles. A unified leadership had emerged that had close contact with workers in factories and bastis, and which was guided by the principles of class struggle. This first became evident in the mass participation of workers in the anti-Simon Commission protests early in the year. As the year progressed, the tide of struggles kept on increasing. An official report recorded that between April 1, 1928 and March 30, 1929, “the total number of strikes were 203 involving no less than 506,851 people compared with 129 strikes in 1927-28 in which 131,655 people were involved. The total number of working days lost was 31,647,404 which is greater than the total number of working days lost in the five preceding years taken together.”

The industrial city of Bombay, a major centre of the militant working class movement, saw a six-month long textile workers’ strike (April 26 to October 6, 1928). The main demand was withdrawal of the so-called rationalisation scheme of the mill owners, which was a ploy to throw thousands out of their jobs. The Girmi Kamgar Union (Lal Bawta) was formed in May that year and its membership jumped from 324 to over 65,000 in one year. In Bengal, railway workers went on strike for over four and a half months (March to July 1928) while jute workers

struck work for six months (July 1928 to January 1929). In Madras, railway workers went on strike for ten days in July, leading to arrest of communist leaders. Women workers and families of striking workers participated in the struggle in big numbers.

At the Jharia session of the AITUC held in December 1928, a call for a one-day general strike was given to demand withdrawal of two notorious Bills, the Public Safety Bill and the Trade Disputes Bill. In case the Bills were passed, the session warned, there would be an all-India strike. The session also saw closer relations being forged with several international organisations of workers.

The year ended with the Calcutta session of the Congress where yet again the communists pushed for complete independence and criticised the Congress for demanding only Dominion Status and not fighting for more radical changes within the country. An unprecedented event took place on the second day of the session, when over 50,000 workers, including hundreds of women, led by the WPP marched to the session’s venue and into the pandal. Several Congress leaders including Mahatma Gandhi addressed the meeting, which separately adopted a resolution calling for complete independence, quite contrary to what was happening in the official session!

In the early 1930s the trend continued. In 1931, the government recorded 166 industrial disputes involving 203,008 workers and in 1933 there were 146 disputes involving 164,938 workers. Even as the struggles increased, the trade union movement was grappling with a right wing attempt to demobilise the class struggles. Taking advantage of the absence of many key communist leaders who were in jail because of the Meerut Conspiracy Case the right wing split off from the AITUC, temporarily weakening the movement.

Different peasant movements also gathered pace, coalescing with the national movement. In some places, the Congress played a dubious role as it sought to curb the radical trends among peasants. Thus it failed to speak out against the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill of 1928 and it was the communists who led the struggle of tenants for secure rights. In Punjab too, the Congress along with the Hindu Mahasabha opposed the movement against Hindu money lenders. This role of the Congress became clear in the peasant movement led by Swami Sahajanand (who became one of the founders of the All India

Kisan Sabha) in Bihar's Champaran, Saran and Monghyr districts. In other parts of the country, like Andhra and Bardoli in Gujarat, the Congress did lead peasant struggles but in a limited way.

What is important to note is that the independent and militant struggles of the working class and the peasantry challenging the exploitative policies of loot and plunder of the British rulers were an intrinsic part of the freedom struggle, adding a most important dimension to it.

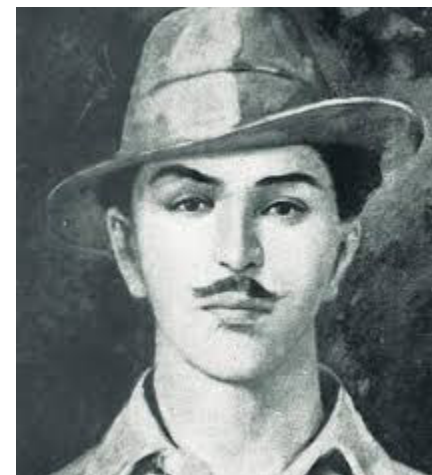
Civil Disobedience Movement and British Repression

After the Lahore session of the Congress adopted the *Purna Swaraj* (Complete Independence) resolution in December 1929, the whole country anticipated and readied for a decisive thrust to the freedom struggle. Adding to the ferment was the deepening economic crisis as the Great Depression hit the world with a severe impact on the Indian people.

Although the movement was planned and led by Mahatma Gandhi in his characteristic style, it was brimming with revolutionary currents. There was a sudden spurt in what the British termed 'terrorist' incidents like the famous Chittagong armoury raid and subsequent armed confrontation in the nearby hills in April 1930, the assassination of IG police in Dacca and the subsequent attack on Writers' Building in Calcutta, the uprising in Solapur and the imposition of Martial Law in May 1930, and most famous of all, the heroic activities led by Bhagat Singh and his associates, for which Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were hanged on March 23, 1931.

Heroes who Joined the Communists

It is a matter of record that most of these revolutionaries turned ideologically from belief in individual acts of armed attacks on British targets, to Socialist



Bhagat Singh

beliefs and in communism. From his writings it is clear that Bhagat Singh considered himself a communist and many of his comrades like Pt. Kishori Lal in the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army later became members of the CPI. One member of his group Shiv Verma who was deported and spent years in the hellhole called the Andaman Cellular jail, gave details of Bhagat Singh's belief in the socialist revolution and his deep regard for Lenin. Shiv Verma himself like many of his fellow inmates became leaders of the communist party on their release from jail.



Shiv Verma

In the large number of cases of “terror” scores of young men were sent to the Andamans. It is estimated that between 1922 and 1941 there were 415 political prisoners locked up in the most inhuman and barbaric conditions in the Andaman jail. A large number of these heroes joined the Communist Party. Within the jail, particularly in the period of the thirties, a communist group, known as the Communist Consolidation started working within the jail. A study group was formed in the jail. After a heroic hunger strike, the political prisoners won certain demands such as provision of literature including literature relating to communist ideology.



Bijoy Kumar Sinha

There were scores whose names adorn the history of the Communist Party. Among them was the youngest participant in the Chittagong armory raid Subodh Roy. He and others in their writings give more details of their times in jail and how they became communists. They include Ganesh Ghosh, Satish Pakrashi, Gopal Acharya, Bangeswar Rai, Ananta Singh, Sudhansu Dasgupta, Hare Krishna Konar, Dr Narayan Roy and Niranjana Sen Gupta. The latter two were the pioneers in leading the study circles in teaching communist ideology with Bejoy Kumar Sinha as the Secretary of the Study Board.



Kalpana Dutta

Many of the young women who had been involved in such activities



Three distinguished young revolutionaries of Chittagong on the left: Ananta Singh, Ambika Chakraborty in centre and Ganesh Ghose on Right

also joined the party including Kalpana Dutt who spent seven years in jail and Kamala Chatterjee who was incarcerated for six years.

It is indeed an indication how inspiring the role of communists was in the freedom struggle which encouraged these brave young men and women who faced such acute repression and torture to transform their beliefs in individual acts of heroism into belief in the class and mass struggle to achieve socialism.



Accused in the Meerut Conspiracy case

The British were gravely concerned about the growth and influence of the communists and once more targeted and arrested communist leaders in what is known as the Meerut Conspiracy case.

Meerut Conspiracy Case 1929

On March 20, 1929, 31 key communist/labour leaders were arrested by the British government from different parts of India in a planned move, which involved simultaneous raids across the country on multiple offices and homes, and charged with conspiring to overthrow the colonial rule. Thirteen of the accused were members of the CPI while some were affiliated to communist parties elsewhere, including two British communists Philip Spratt and Benjamin Bradley. Others were leaders of trade unions. Their trial, which lasted till August 1933, was held in Meerut (UP). It became a rallying point not just for the communist and trade union movement but also for the whole freedom struggle. It also announced to the world that the communist movement had struck deep roots in India.

The British prepared a detailed case presented in 25 folio-size printed volumes along with 3,500 exhibits and 320 witnesses. However, the evidence was only to show that these people were engaged in normal activities of organising the working class and peasants, a right that would be available in any other democratic country.

The prisoners decided to use the trial as a forum to publicise their ideas and for that 18 communists issued a joint 'General Statement' which created a sensation in India and abroad. The statement characterised the trial as an "episode in the class struggle" and gave a comprehensive analysis of the national situation, issues of working class and peasants, of women and the communist understanding of women's



A poster of drama in England by the workers theatre movement on the Meerut Conspiracy case

emancipation, tactics for achieving national liberation and even basic ideas about communism. In fact this was the first statement that committed the party to the Marxist understanding of the women's question and the road to women's emancipation.

The proceedings of the trial and the statements of the prisoners evoked widespread solidarity, with many national leaders including Mahatma Gandhi visiting the prisoners and writing protest letters to the British, solidarity actions even in Britain, strikes and protests in several Indian cities, fund collections for legal defence, etc. Rajni Palme Dutt a leading communist historian and member of the CPGB and a guide for Indian communists played an important role.

In 1933, the sessions court announced a harsh judgement, which gave transportation (for various periods) to 16 of the accused and rigorous imprisonment to 11 others. All convicted persons appealed to the Allahabad High Court, which ruled that the "the conspiracy was impracticable, one might even say impossible of achievement" and dismissed charges against 11 of the accused while reducing the punishment for the others. Since the accused had already been in jail for four years, they were all released in November 1933.

Far from finishing off the communist movement, as the British had wanted, the Meerut trial gave a fresh impetus to communists in India and proved to be a stepping stone for rapid expansion – both organisational and agitational – in the ensuing years.

Draft Platform of Action 1930

In spite of the arrested communist leaders being in jail, many notable struggles continued like the textile strike of 1929. Publication of newspapers too continued, with the Ganashakti Publishing House being set up in Calcutta in 1933, under the aegis of the CPI's Calcutta Committee. Meanwhile, in 1930, the CPI published a Draft Platform of Action that addressed the problems of various sections of people, and argued for the necessity of a revolutionary transformation. It also linked India's revolutionary struggle with the international struggle of the working class. It, however, continued with the understanding of fighting against national reformists and thus rejected the united front against imperialism. It was this mistaken understanding that caused many communists to remain isolated from the mainstream in those days.

Next Generation of Communist Leaders

A noteworthy aspect of this period of several years of intensified struggle was that many emerging communist leaders participated in them, went to jail, interacted with other revolutionaries and thus was forged a new generation of communist leaders who were to play a vital role in the coming years. Among them

were P Sundarayya, C. Rajeswar Rao, Kambhampati Satyanarayana in Andhra; EMS Namboodiripad, AK Gopalan and P Krishna Pillai in Kerala; Harkishan Singh Surjeet, Sohan Singh Josh in Punjab; Jeevanandan, P. Ramamurthy in Tamilnadu; Bankim Mukherjee, Abdur Razzak Khan,



P. Sundarayya with Harkishan Singh Surjeet



Sohan Singh Josh



R.D. Bharadwaj



B.T. Randhiva



C. Rajeswara Rao



A.K. Gopalan



EMS Namboodiripad



S.S. Mirajkar



Ajoy Kumar Ghosh



Dr. Gangadhar Adhikari

Benoy Choudhury, Somnath Lahiri, Bhupesh Gupta, Saroj Mukherjee in Bengal; BT Ranadive, SG Sardesai in Bombay; Ajoy Ghosh, PC Joshi, G.Adhikari; Irrawad Singh, Achintya Bhattacharya in the north east, and many more. Jyoti Basu returned to India from Britain where he was a student and joined the party in 1940.

CPI Banned in 1934

In December 1933, an all India conference of communists was convened in Calcutta in which the released Meerut leaders as well as those who had continued work outside met for a stock-taking. The Conference elected a provisional Central Committee, and adopted a Draft Political Theses which stressed the building of a centralised party to guide the movement and accepted that the national bourgeoisie had some contradictions with imperialism and considerable influence on the masses, something that earlier formulations were not admitting. With this, a new phase of struggles was inaugurated.

Just a few months after the Calcutta Conference, the British government decided to once again crack down and declared the Communist Party illegal in July 1934. Despite this ban, communists continued to expand their organizational network and reorganize existing centres.

Congress Socialist Party

The Congress Socialist Party was formed in 1934 at Patna. Even before this conference, communists, socialists and other sections of the Left formed provincial units of the Congress Socialist Party in Bombay, Calcutta, Kerala and other provinces. In Kerala, EMS

Namboodiripad, P Krishna Pillai played a leading role in the functioning of the CSP. The legendary woman communist leader of Tamilnadu KP Janaki Amma was part of the CSP in Tamilnadu and Dinkar Mehta in Gujarat.

The policy statement of the CSP declared that it was a party of socialists working within the Congress and striving to push the Congress to the path of socialism. Jayaprakash Narayan was the first General Secretary of the CSP.

Broad Anti-Imperialist Front

It was at this time that a reorientation of work was effected and it was decided that communists would work within the Congress in order to build a broad anti-imperialist front. The Party started publishing a paper called “National Front.”

This change happened because worldwide, fascism was rising and the need for forming a united anti-imperialist front was emphatically felt so that this challenge could be met. Mussolini and Hitler had come to power in Italy and Germany. The historic 7th Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) was held in 1935, with representatives from major countries. It discussed their experiences and noted the struggle against fascism in Germany, Italy, Spain, France etc. It also took stock of the national liberation movements. And it gave a clarion call to build a united front against fascism worldwide. The CPI had by then been affiliated to the Comintern.

This understanding of the global situation was interpreted and adapted to Indian conditions. Following this, several party cadres and leaders became influential leaders in the Congress and the Congress Socialist Party, which was a left-leaning block within the Congress.

Formation of Mass Organisations and Social Reform

Armed with a new strategy and equipped with a more organized and disciplined party, the communists plunged into extensive work in different spheres. Even as war clouds were gathering and militarization was underway across the world, a new upsurge in people’s struggles got underway, with communists playing a prominent part.

In 1936, two important organisations were formed – the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) and the All India Students’ Federation (AISF).

All India Kisan Sabha

The activities of communists and the growth of the Left exerted considerable influence among the peasants. They began to work with the perspective of forming an independent class organisation of their own and fight against British imperialism. Communists were in the forefront in taking up the issues of the peasantry by organising them



Leaders of All India Kisan Sabha Bottom centre : Muzaffar Ahmed On left Jamaluddin Bukhari

under Kisan Sabhas. Various state level organisations were formed, before the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha in 1936. This phase saw huge peasant struggles against the oppressive tax regime and exploitation in Bihar, Bengal, Punjab, Sind, Andhra, Malabar (Kerala), Surma Valley (Assam), etc. As with other peasant struggles, women participated in large numbers and played an active role. Communist leaders joined hands with socialists to organise peasants and lead them in various struggles.

The founding conference of the All India Kisan Sabha set its objective as 'complete liberation of peasants from economic exploitation and achievement of economic and political power to peasants, workers and other exploited sections of people'. It elected Swamy Sahajanand Saraswati as its first President and Socialist NG Ranga as its first General Secretary. The conference also adopted two important resolutions. The first, demanding the abolition of landlordism existing in all its different forms and conferring land ownership on the cultivating peasants. The second resolution demanded radical change in the land tax system in the ryotwari regions and the introduction of a graduated system of tax, exempting poor peasants from payment of land tax. Clearly the influence of communists and socialist ideas led to the adoption of these objectives and resolutions. Communists were guided by the tactics that the working class would rise as a class capable of strengthening the anti-imperialist movement only by building a strong worker-peasant alliance in this struggle. Within a few years, AIKS membership had expanded to 5.5 lakh.

All India Students Federation

All sections of students from different political streams joined the AISF, the first conference of which was inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1936.

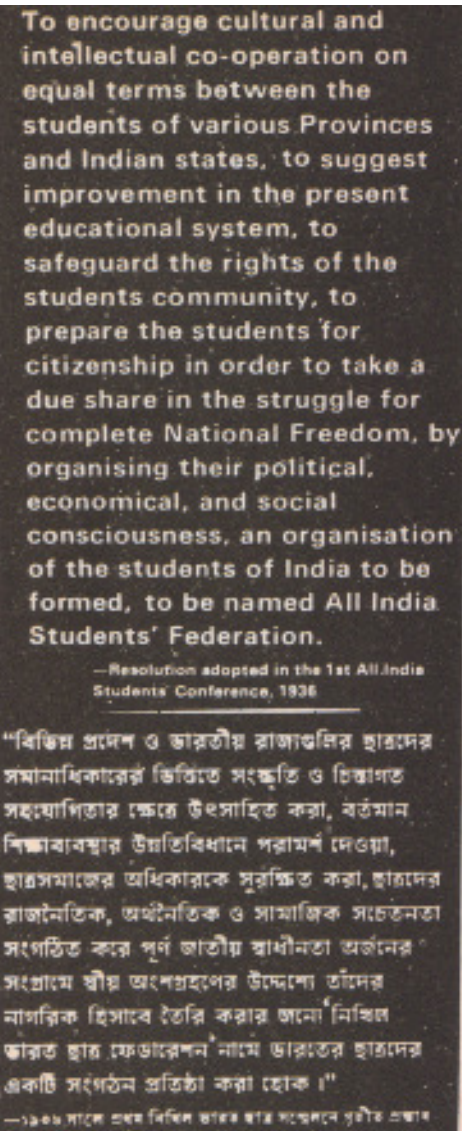
Literature on the Russian revolution, the advances made by socialism, the activities of Indian revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh had a tremendous influence among the youth. The influence of communists was a fact grudgingly accepted by the Congress and with a lot of anxiety by the British.

Even before the formation of the AISF in 1936, communists were actively organising students and youth through various district and state level organisations.

The Naujavan Bharat Sabha, founded by Bhagat Singh and his compatriots attracted large sections of youth and students in the Punjab region.

In the Madras Presidency, Radical Youth Conference was held in 1935 with the objective of attainment of complete independence. Committees were formed to organise regional leagues in Andhra, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamilnadu and Madras city. Home Department reports noted this phenomenon and issued an alert to all its forces stating that 'considerable quantity of Communist literature was seized from various students in Madras presidency. Amir Haider Khan led the formation of Young Workers Union. P Sundarayya was instrumental in the formation of Sodara Samiti (Brotherhood Organisation) to organise students and youth in Madras. He was later elected as the joint secretary of Andhra state youth organisation in 1935.

Leaders like C Rajeswar Rao, along with his comrades formed the Young Communist League in 1931, in the Benaras University. They



Resolution adopted in the All India Student Conference

used to organise regular study circles in that university and also conduct physical training. On many occasions they had to confront the RSS and its communal politics.

Another important step was to organise the girl students through the formation of a separate girl students' convening committee in 1939. Kanak Dasgupta (later Mukherjee), was one of the first convenors and leading members of the girls committee along with Kalpana Dutt.

The outlook as well as the policies of the AISF reflected general anti-imperialist views and also the influence of socialist and communist ideologies. Apart from the demand for complete independence and the solution of the various problems confronting the student community, sports, study classes, night schools, libraries, observing anniversaries, volunteers band, educational development, and pressurising the government to eliminate unemployment, struggles for the rights of scheduled caste students, constituted some of its important activities.

Women's Sanghams Formed

This period also marked the increase in numbers of women revolutionaries joining the party. It was Gandhi who had inspired mass participation of women in the national struggle in unprecedented numbers, making huge sacrifices, facing police lathis and bullets. At the same time the class struggles of workers and peasants and of young people had seen a substantial participation of women workers. One of the earliest was Santosh Kumari Devi who organized jute workers in Bengal and became a leader of the AITUC soon after its formation in 1920. Most of the early women communists were inspired by these movements. One of the first to join, it is said in 1930, was Suhasini Chattopadhyaya, younger sister of Virendranath. The heroines in many



Shanti Ghosh



Lila Roy



Bina Das (Bhowmilk)



Suniti Chowdhury (Ghosh)



Uijala Majumdar (Rakshit Roy)

of the armed groups also joined the party including Kalpana Dutt, Shanti Ghosh, Suniti Choudhury, Bina Das. In the decade of the thirties and early forties, women inspired by communist ideals took the lead in forming Mahila Sanghams in different States. The 'Release Political Leaders' campaign was a significant initiative taken by women communists which gathered popular support.

The Atma Raksha Samity in Bengal, the Women's Self Defence league in Punjab, the All Kerala Mahila Sangham in Kerala were formed. It should be noted that in Kerala many of the anti-caste



Women leaders of
Leftist and labour
movement
Top row from left:
Dr. Prabhabati
Dasgupta, Ranga,
Bottom row:
Kamala Devi
Chattopadhyaya,
Suhasini
Jambekar, Bimal
Prativa Devi

movements within communities such as the Namboodiris and the Ezhavas and among Dalit communities saw the radicalization of scores of women who later joined the communist party. In Andhra Pradesh study schools run by the communists included girl students and women and many of them initiated the formation of the Mahila Sanghams. In Tamilnadu, the Jananaayaka Madhar Sanghams were set up and women's groups in Maharashtra also played a big role in mobilizing the mass of women on their demands and as part of the freedom struggle.

Women activists who joined the Communist Party were from all religious groups and communities. In all the periods when the party was underground, or in the long years when the party was banned, communist women played a heroic role in defending the party. Communist women were also working within the All India Women's Conference which was formed in 1929. It is communist women in the decade of the forties who were in the forefront in the campaign for Hindu Law reform.

All India Progressive Writers Association

Some of the most brilliant intellectuals, historians, scientists, writers, poets, cultural artistes were drawn to the communist movement. Some remained life long supporters and others became active members of the communist party.

Formed in 1936, the All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) was a broad based platform in which communist influence



Some Delegates at the All India Progressive Writers Association



A scene from a drama on Bengal famine staged by central IPTA squad

grew rapidly. The inspiration for its formation came from the organisation of anti-fascist writers led by Maxim Gorki and other progressive writers in Europe. Formed with the initiative of the communists, it had the blessings of Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Munshi Premchand and other top ranking writers in the country. The first Lucknow conference of Indian writers was presided over by Premchand. Another platform formed later was the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA) which drew the very best talent from the theatre and the film world, with many leading actors becoming members of the communist party. Its first General Secretary was Sajjad Zaheer.

Apart from this, communist men and women created numerous cultural squads which performed plays and songs which also became an attractive feature in workers colonies and in village centres. Many of these squads used traditional folk forms to put forth a revolutionary message which was highly appreciated and was very popular.

Social Reform: Communists in Anti-Caste Struggles

Communists in India have from the early days denounced the caste system with all its barbaric expressions and shown that its destruction is integral to the agrarian revolution. The 1930 Platform of Action, one of the first programmes of the fledgling Communist Party, said, "British imperialism, the system of landlordism, the reactionary caste system,

religious deception and all the slave and serf traditions of the past throttle the Indian people and stand in the way of its emancipation. They have led to the result that in India in the twentieth century, there are still pariahs who have no right to meet with their fellow-men, drink from common wells, study in common schools etc.” It goes on to say, “The CP of India fights for the complete abolition of slavery, the caste system and caste inequality in all forms.”

Spanning this whole period, communists established unity of all oppressed peoples including Dalits and Adivasis in diverse struggles, whether anti-feudal or anti-capitalist or against British colonialism. But in addition, communists also initiated specifically anti-caste struggles in many parts of the country. Unlike Gandhi’s approach based on reform within the caste system, communists fought for its abolition.

In **Kerala**, communist leaders actively participated in and led struggles for equal rights for Dalits in all public places, including entry in temples, which was prohibited at the time. In fact, they were drawn to Marxism while participating in such radical social reform movements including the historic Vaikom struggle. Thus, AK Gopalan and P Krishna Pillai led the satyagraha in Guruvayur as young men. The struggle in Kandoth was led by AK Gopalan and KA Keraleeyan. The Paliyam Road struggle was led by the Communist Party, including TE Balan. Many leaders were physically attacked by casteist goons. These struggles forced the ruler of Travancore to issue the Temple Entry Proclamation in 1936. At the Koddakad conference of the Kisan Sabha in 1939, over 15,000 people participated in Panthi Bhojan or collective dining by people of all castes.

In **Andhra, Telangana and Rayalaseema**, the struggle against caste discrimination was integral to the Communist movement. P Sundarayya and led organised people in villages against caste oppression. They organized common meals for agricultural labourers from Dalit and non-Dalit castes, fought for the common use of public wells, started libraries and primary schools for children of agricultural labourers and Dalit families who were not allowed to study in the main village schools. Several struggles for entry into temples, freedom to use water from wells and tanks, right to burial grounds and for allowing Dalit children in village schools have been recorded. Communists also ran adult education centres and set up hostels for Dalit students. Labour protection

leagues were widely established. In those days, Congress used to taunt Communists as “Dalit’s party”.

In **Maharashtra**, R.B. More who became an important Communist leader in Maharashtra, was one of the main organisers in two famous movements launched by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar - the Chavdar Lake Satyagraha at Mahad in March 1927 in which Dr. Ambedkar led thousands of Dalits to drink water from the lake, and the burning of the Manusmriti, also at Mahad on December 25, 1927. Communists participated in the agitation led by Dr. Ambedkar for Dalits entering the Kalaram Mandir at Nashik in 1930. The Communist-led Girni Kamgar Union (textile union) in Bombay launched an agitation against the system of separate public taps for Dalits in BDD Chawls, demanding common public taps. After prolonged agitation, the demand was accepted.

The combination of the two seminal strands of the class struggle and the anti-caste struggle was seen in the historic working class strike in Bombay on November 7, 1938, against the anti-working class Black Act proposed by the newly elected Congress state government. The Communist Party and the Independent Labour Party of Dr. Ambedkar jointly led this massive strike. It was also seen in the march of over 10,000 peasants, who had come in boats from the Konkan region to the assembly at Bombay in 1938, against the Khoti system of landlordism. The march was led by Dr. Ambedkar and Shamrao Parulekar, who later became a noted leader of the Party and AIKS.

In **Tamilnadu**, P Jeevanandan who became a prominent Communist leader was an active worker in the self-respect movement led by Periyar. Another communist leader B.Srinivasa Rao organized the Dalit agricultural workers in Thanjavur and took up their fight against caste oppression under the landlord system.

World War II and Quit India Movement

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 brought severe hardships to the people of India as the colonial rulers imposed a huge burden on them to finance the war effort. Hoarding, corruption and criminal policies led to the most tragic famine in many States. The Bengal Famine of 1943 was the worst. Millions died from hunger. Communists threw themselves into relief work and did whatever possible to help the starving people.

In other parts of India, wage cuts, food shortages and increased work caused innumerable struggles to break out. These were met with repression. The Party despite being underground due to the ban, was in the forefront of organizing and leading these struggles while criticizing the Congress for its compromising and opportunistic policies.

Initiated by the Communist Party, the working class of Bombay recorded its unequivocal stand against the war. It organised an anti-war strike in Bombay on October 2, 1939, in which 90,000 participated. This strike was the first of its kind in the world during the Second World War.

Subhash Chandra Bose, fighting a battle within the Congress to take more militant actions, at the time extended his full support to the strike. In his statement he said, "I greet the action of the Bombay working class as giving a lead to other classes for action in this hour of crisis." He had represented that section of the Congress which was for mass struggles against the British and unifying with the workers and peasants struggles. Earlier, the communist party had called the victimization of Bose and his removal by the Congress national leadership led by Gandhi as "a serious blow to the unity of our people."

Even as the differences within the Congress manifested, peoples



Sholapur women beedi workers' demonstration, 1945



Women volunteers picket General Mill gate. Indore, during a strike in 1945

struggles continued.

The October strike in Bombay was followed by over 1.75 lakh textile workers going on strike on the dearness allowance question on March 4, 1940. In solidarity with the striking textile workers, a one-day strike was observed in the city on March 10 in which 3.55 lakh workers participated. A spate of strike actions followed across the country, including 25,000 textile workers in Kanpur, 20,000 municipal workers in Calcutta, jute workers in Bengal, oil workers in Digboi (Assam), coal miners in Dhanbad and Dhadra, iron and steel workers in Jamshedpur,

and so on. A notable feature of these strike struggles was the participation of women, both as workers and also as supporting the struggle, mobilizing support and running collective kitchens for workers. In Kayyur (Kerala), an ongoing peasant struggle against the landlords led to brutal police repression and the hanging of four young communists in 1943.

The British rulers seized the opportunity to launch a ferocious attack on the Party. Out of 700 people detained under the Defence of India Rules, 480 were communists. The Party organ was banned.

Quit India Movement

In 1941, the War took a new turn. Till then, fascist Germany and Italy had been busy conquering Western Europe and they were being resisted by other imperialist countries like Britain. But with the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, and the Japanese declaration of war on the USA after Pearl Harbour, the danger of a worldwide victory of fascism loomed large. The Soviet Union was the real bulwark against fascism and the Party felt that its defence was of paramount importance as it was the world's only socialist country built by the sacrifices of toiling people. So, the Party revised its strategy towards the War, declared it a 'People's War' and called upon the British to form a national government in India to mobilise for the defence of India from advancing Japanese forces in the North-East and the possibility of Nazi forces advancing beyond Iraq towards India. It also called for the release of all leaders of the national movement. This was the time when the Congress announced the Quit India Movement in August 1942. Although later it was accepted by the Party that there were certain mistakes committed for which it had to pay a price, the communists continued to work among the people in this period.

There is a lot of propaganda by some to tarnish the work done by communists and the heroic role played by communists during the freedom movement by pointing to the political stand taken regarding the Quit India movement. This is not the place to assess the call for Quit India but it must be emphatically stated that the people of India never accepted the propaganda against the communists. This is why some of the prominent figures of the Quit India movement like Aruna Asaf Ali, later joined the communist party. In fact it was the British who in a dispatch from the British Home department on September 2,



Anti-war strike, Bombay, 2 October 1939

1942 to the Secretary of State London reported that, "the behaviour of many of the CPI members proves what has always been clear, namely, that it is composed of anti-British revolutionaries."

Another confidential assessment of the then British Government (quoted in the publication 'Communism and Nationalism in India') on September 20, 1943 states, "It (CPI) is primarily a nationalist party working for Indian independence notwithstanding its lip service to internationalism, a large proportion of its members are attracted to its fold because it stands for the overthrow of British rule."

Earlier the same Home department referring to the RSS had said, "The sangh has scrupulously kept itself within the law and in particular has refrained from taking part in the disturbances that broke out in August 1942."

First Party Congress, Bombay, 1943

After the ban on the Party was lifted in 1942, the First Party Congress was held in Bombay from May 23 to June 1, 1943. The Party had 15,000 members at that time, 700 of whom were women. The number of party members continued to rise and reached 30,000 in 1944 and 53,000 in 1946.

The first Party Congress was attended by 139 delegates of whom 13 were women. A report dated June 13, in the special number of the

party paper 'Peoples War' describing the background of the delegates stated that, "about 70 per cent of the delegates had served one or more terms behind bars and the aggregate worked out to 411 years. The longest term of 27 years was Baba Sohan Singh's." Such was the inspiring record of the Party's delegates.

The Congress elected a Central Committee and PC Joshi was elected the General Secretary. The concluding rally held at the Kamgar Maidan was attended by 25,000 people, most of them workers.

Thus from the small group of communists who met in Tashkent to the first Party Congress 23 years later, through severe repression, arrests, and work in the most difficult circumstances, the communist party emerged as the champion of the working people as part of India's struggle for freedom.

Massive Struggles Lead Up to Independence

The end of the Second World War in 1945, the defeat of fascist Germany and its allies and the victory of the Soviet Union saw a worldwide upsurge of people's movements, with the revolutionary movements of China and Indo-China (Vietnam and neighbours) surging ahead and inspiring millions all over the colonial world, including India.

The Communist Party and its affiliated organisations, led several heroic and historic struggles of the people as the sun set on British rule in India. They displayed their extensive and deep rooted work among peasants, workers and other sections of people and boldly raised before the country the path that should be taken for complete liberation. Even in these twilight years of the colonial rule, the British responded with ferocious repression and thousands lost their lives.

Many peasant struggles took place in India, including the revival of the bakasht movement in Bihar; the struggle for rent reduction and against high water rates in Punjab; for conferring ownership rights in PEPSU; for more share of crops in Kerala; against evictions in Andhra; against evictions of bataidars (share croppers) in UP.

There was also a wave of working class strikes in 1946. In Madurai, Jabalpur, Dehradun, Allahabad, Delhi, Bihar and other parts of the country, sepoy and policemen struck work for better wages, inspired by the RIN (Royal Indian Navy) mutiny in February. In May, North-West Railway workers observed a four-hour strike. A massive strike of over one lakh postal workers took place in July, with four lakh industrial workers observing a solidarity strike on July 29. In 1945, 7.47 lakh workers had gone on strike but in 1946, the number more than doubled to 19.6 lakh, showing the extensive discontent among workers and their resolve to fight.

Some of the struggles reached unprecedented heights because of their sweep and militancy, and also because they brought into sharp focus the agrarian question as never before. All of these struggles played a significant role in the departure of the British from India in 1947. Among the many heroes of these struggles special mention must be made of Major Jaipal Singh, an officer in the British Army who exposed a British plot to assassinate leaders of the freedom struggle. A true communist patriot, he went underground and was deputed by the Communist Party to train many of the fighters in some of the major struggles.

Telangana People's Revolt (1946-1951): In this heroic revolt that encompassed 3,000 villages and 3 million people in the Telangana region, an armed struggle was launched by the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha for abolishing landlordism. In the course of the struggle, about one million acres of land was seized from the hated landlords and distributed among the people. The autocratic ruler, the Nizam of Hyderabad, unleashed his army of razzakars on the fighting peasants who in turn fought back with a powerful militia of 10,000 villagers backed by 2,000 guerilla squads.

Women played a major role in the struggle, participating in land seizures, participating in and even leading political and military squads like comrades Swarajyam, Ramulamma, Rangamma, Savitamma, Venkatamma Lachhakka and others, and serving as agitators and organisers. They faced repression, molestation, rape, beatings and jails, while many lost their lives. For a period of about 18 months, the entire region was liberated and governed by people's committees.

Ultimately the struggle was defeated by the entry of the Indian Army sent in by the Nehru government, which had taken over after the British left in 1947. The Army brutally suppressed the revolt. In the



The peoples army of Telengana

whole period, over 4,000 Communists and peasant activists were killed including women, and over 10,000 were put in jail. Thousands were beaten, tortured and terrorized. But the Communists displayed

their indomitable spirit and fought till the end.

The Telangana revolt brought the agrarian question to the forefront and set an example of the fighting spirit and strength of the peasant struggle for land.



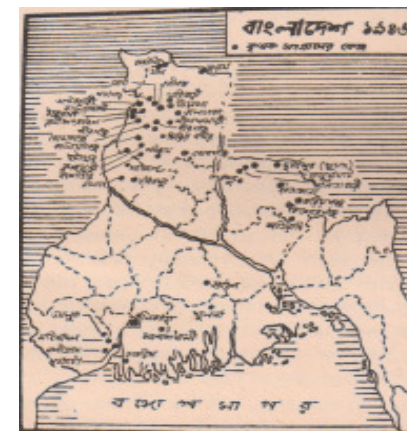
Tebhaga Struggle

(1938-1949) This was a massive movement for over a decade in different phases, of tenant farmers (bargadars) against the sub-landlords (jotedars), who exacted half the produce besides other appropriations, charged 50% interest on loans and violently imposed their order on the poor bargadars. The Communist Party led AIKS spearheaded the movement which spread to 13 districts of West Bengal, demanding a threefold division of produce (hence tebhaga) with only one-third going to the jotedar.

Thanks to the painstaking efforts of the Communists of building class unity, Hindu and Muslim peasants fought together in this struggle, despite communal



Tebhaga Movement in Balurghat, West Bengal



Area under Tebhaga Struggle



Struggling women picketers of Tebhaga

riots in other parts of Bengal. Women played a heroic role, not only as guards and couriers but also in organizing women's brigades to resist police, like Saralabala Pal of Jessore, harvesting crops while resisting landlords' goons and fought against landlords as well as communal rioters, like Ila Mitra in Santhali areas. There was a violent reaction from the landlords backed by the Muslim League provincial ministry.

In all, 72 Communist fighters were killed in 22 police firing incidents across the districts. Among them were women martyrs like Hiranmayee Bannerjee, Laksimoyi Dasi, Manorama Roy, Sarojini, Kunti Haldar. Over 3,000 people were arrested. Demands of the peasants were partially met only in 1949. The compulsory registration of bargadars to prevent eviction was brought in only in 1979 by the Left Front government.

Punnapra-Vayalar Struggle (1946): Led by the Communist Party, coir workers, farm workers, fish workers and other sections of the



The Communist leader of Vayalar-Punnapara agitation K.C. George with the released convicted workers



A scene at Vayalar Punnapra



The mass uprising in Vayalar-Punnapra (artist Chittaprosad)

working class in Allapuzha district of the princely state of Travancore (now part of Kerala) launched an uprising against the Dewan, Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer, who had proposed that the kingdom should not merge with India and an American model of government be adopted. The workers' revolt was the product of the brutal and autocratic manner in which the Dewan had run the kingdom over the years, and also the famine of 1939-43.

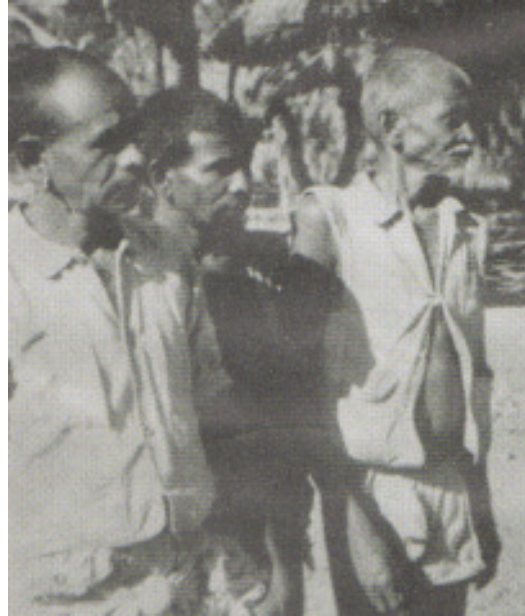
Communists had organized and led several movements of coir workers in the region. This militant section took the initiative in leading the struggle in the district, gathering various other sections of people. There were repeated clashes between squads of Communist led workers and the army/police contingents. Despite repeated attacks by the army, workers continued to fight back valiantly, even counter attacking army and police camps. Over 1,000 Communist fighters and militant workers died in the relentless police retaliation.

Tripura Tribals Struggle: Particularly noteworthy was the militant struggle of tribals in Tripura against the cruel rule and exploitation of tribals by the then Maharaja. Led by the legendary tribal leader Dashrath Deb Barma this militant struggle against both the monarchy and the British laid the foundation for the building of the communist party in the state. The Tripura Upjati Ganamukti Parishad, in association with the AIKS, led a massive movement of tribal peasants in the name of Gana Shiksha Andolan and against land alienation, the hated "titun" system and other demands.

Revolt of the Warlis, Maharashtra (1945-47): In Thane district of Maharashtra, Warli Adivasis revolted against the inhuman exploitation by landlords. The movement initiated and organized by the Communist Party led by the legendary communist woman leader Godavari Parulaker who had spent years along with her husband Shamrao Parulekar to set up the Kisan Sabha in the region, spread like wildfire in the forests of Thane district and saw thousands of men and women revolt against the inhuman exploitation of slave labour, bonded labour and very low wages.



Irabat Singh- Manipur



Warli (Maharashtra) tribal peasants who rose in revolt

— Godavari Parulekar leader of Warli uprising

There was intense police repression which was resisted and fought back by the Adivasis.

In one brutal incident on October 10, 1945, the landlords in leagues with the British administration sent a fake message that Godavari Parulekar's life was in danger, and when thousands of red flag waving people had collected, they surrounded and opened fire on them. The Adivasis held their ground for 15 hours despite the firing, although many were killed. The Warli Adivasi struggle forced the landlords to raise wages, curbed their inhuman atrocities and to an extent, succeeded in giving them land.

Surma Valley Struggle (1936-1948): The tenants of Surma Valley, stretching across Cachar and Sylhet districts (then in Assam, now Sylhet is in Bangladesh) had no rights over the land they lived on or cultivated. They could not build a pucca house, dig a tank, nor were they entitled to cut a tree on the land. The tenants were forced to perform free labour (nankar), pay nazrana during festivals and were



Surma Valley (Sylhet) Kisan Conference

not even allowed to wear sandals or carry an umbrella. Communists took the initiative, formed the Surma Valley Kisan Sabha in 1936 and conducted struggles against the economic extortion and social oppression. The government machinery colluded with the landlords and sent elephants to demolish the houses of tenants and also armed forces, who unleashed severe repression.

In 1937, an unprecedented demonstration was conducted in Shillong, where thousands of kisans and nankars marched 86 miles scaling many hills en route. The post Second World War period saw further intensification of these struggles, which reached their height in 1946. The Tebhaga struggle also had its impact. Many leaders of the Kisan Sabha were killed in police action, including Imachou Devi a Manipuri woman agricultural worker. Ultimately, the government was forced to enact the sharecroppers act in 1948 and accept many of the demands.

RIN Mutiny (1946): On February 18, 1946, ratings (sailors) of the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) went on strike in Bombay initially demanding better food and end to abuse by officers but soon escalating to political demands including Quit India and release of political prisoners and INA detenus. Responding to rumours of an impending British attack, thousands of on-shore ratings gathered raising slogans like Inquilab Zindabad and Down with Imperialism. The Communist Party's influence was evident with many ratings carrying red flags along with the Congress flag and that of the Muslim League.

Within two days, the strike had spread to the whole RIN, encompassing men posted in Karachi, Calcutta and Madras spanning



Martyr Kamal Donde



Balai Dutt a distinguished leader of Naval revolt



Martyr Sripad Maruti Jadav

74 ships and 20 shore establishments. For the first time, inspired by Communists, the armed forces had been drawn into the Freedom Struggle. The British Army was deployed in the ports and it fired indiscriminately on people and the ratings. Solidarity actions including street battles broke out in Bombay as the working class and the common people came out in support.

The general strike called by the CPI in support of the revolt was a total success, although over 400 people died on the streets of Bombay as the Army roamed about firing at protestors. These included many Communist activists, including Kamal Donde, a young woman



Scene on Bombay thoroughfare during the naval revolt



Rebellious naval personnels on Bombay road

This jeep was set on fire at Chittaranjan Avenue on 21st February 1946 when 500 sailors at Calcutta called a strike in support of the Naval Revolt



communist. Instead of taking the struggle further, both Congress and Muslim League urged the ratings to withdraw their strike.

While people of India were uniting in the common struggle against the British and towards fulfilling their dreams for an independent India which stood against exploitation, the communal forces like the RSS, Hindu



Massacre at Bombay under cover of Marshall Law

Mahasabha and the Muslim League, within both Hindu and Muslim communities, were inciting the most horrific kind of communal violence which ultimately led to the bloody partition of India.

It is a clearly established fact that not a single of these three communal bodies ever fought against British rule right since their inception. The RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha topped this treachery when their activist Nathuram Godse and his accomplices assassinated Mahatma Gandhi on January 30, 1948 - less than six months after the country attained its freedom.

In stark contrast, not only were the Communists in the thick of the freedom struggle against British rule, but they were also active in protecting communal harmony and saving lives of innocent people from both communities before and during the holocaust of Partition.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the British quit India on August 15, 1947 and handed over power to the Congress.

Four major strands were an integral part of the freedom struggle of India - the Congress, the Communists, the armed revolutionaries and the social reformers. The struggles led by Communists over the years, and especially the last few years before Independence, contributed to ensuring the end of British rule. Unfortunately, the Congress played into the hands of the British by agreeing to the partition of India, which took a staggering toll of human lives.

A new phase had begun with the handover of power to the Indian ruling classes. The stage of a national united front chiefly directed against foreign imperialist rule was over.

From the early years of its existence India's Communists and the Communist Party had written a history of patriotism in blood and struggle, and had championed a socialist vision through the challenging work of mobilizing and organising India's working people for a better future and for the establishment of an India free from both class exploitation and social oppression.

We pledge to redouble the struggle for these lofty ideals in the year of the centenary of the Communist movement in India.

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