

Communist memories by A.G. NOORANI

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HISTORY.PART I

Extracts from interviews of India's first-generation Communist leaders throwing light on some turning points in the history of Indian communism.

LEADERS of the communist movement in India have been prolific writers. P.C. Joshi, one of the ablest pamphleteers the country has known, was general secretary of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the 1940s, right up to the Second Congress in Calcutta in 1948, when B.T. Ranadive took over. Unfortunately, neither of them wrote memoirs, as E.M.S. Namboodiripad did (*How I Became a Communist*, Chinta Publishers, Trivandrum, 1976; and *Reminiscences of an Indian Communist*; National Book Centre, New Delhi, 1987). A.K. Gopalan wrote *In the Cause of the People: Reminiscences* (Orient Longman, 1973). Nor must one forget Muzaffar Ahmad's 'Myself and the Communist Party of India 1920-1929' (National Book Agency Pvt. Ltd, Calcutta, 1970) and P. Sundarayya's *Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons* published by Desraj Chadha on behalf of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), in Calcutta in 1972. It is a most informative book of 592 pages but without an index. A reprint is called for. The CPI leader N.K. Krishnan wrote *Testament of Faith...: Memoirs of a Communist* (New Delhi Publishing House, 1990). He twice mentions P.N. Haksar as a "member of the Communist group" and "a fellow Communist" in Britain; pages (58 and 60). In the eyes of some, Mohit Sen was a lapsed Communist; but no serious student of the communist movement in India can neglect his memoir 'A Traveller and the Road: The Journey of an Indian Communist' (Rupa & Co., 2003).

Nor should one neglect that enormous storehouse of resource for scholarship, the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (NMML) in New Delhi. This writer would like to express his enormous gratitude to the institution and its unfailingly helpful officials. What follows is a mere glimpse of its rich Oral History programme. Two cautions are in order. One must consult the whole record; under the rules, readers are only allowed copies of a part. Secondly, a lot depends on the quality and relevance of the question. No answer can be more intelligent than the question that elicits it. There are some crucial episodes in the record of Indian communism on which much has been written – the Communists' split with the Congress Socialist Party; the CPI's stand on the Second World War; the second party congress in 1948; evolution of the tactical line; the leaders' historic meeting with Joseph Stalin in Moscow; the Telangana struggle and the Andhra Thesis.

EMS Namboodripad

EMS was both an intellectual and an organisation man. His interview to Dr Hari Dev Sharma is of absorbing interest. "Actually I first came in touch with the communist groups in Andhra about February 1935 when M.R. Masani and myself were returning from Nagpur where a meeting of the National Executive of Congress Socialist Party was being held. I was going back home and Masani was to preside over the Andhra State Conference of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) being held in Guntur. I also joined him. At that conference there was a group of Communists. I did not know them. They were putting so many questions to Masani and he was answering them. I was not active in that conference. The person who was putting questions on behalf of the Communist Party was M. Basavapunniah. Even at that stage I did not have any personal contact with him. The only thing I knew was the questions that he was putting.

“The actual personal contact that I had with the Communists in South India or with the Communists anywhere in India was sometime in October 1935 and that was at Madras with P. Sundarayya. At that time also a meeting of the AICC [All India Congress Committee] was held in Madras and, taking that opportunity, the Radical Conference was being held there. The Radical Conference was a forum in which all the radical groups, i.e. the Royists, the CPI, the CSP and unattached individuals and trade unions, had gathered and attended that conference. That meeting was attended by Krishna Pillai and myself. One of the delegates attending that Radical Conference was also P. Sundarayya. After the Conference he wanted to meet us separately. That was the first real discussion held between the authorised representative of the Communist Party and us. That was in 1935.

Sharma: By that time Sundarayya had already become a Communist.

Namboodiripad: Oh yes...

A nucleus of the Communist Party was formed in Andhra. About the same time, a still smaller group was formed in Madras. So for Sundarayya and others it was a question of their becoming Communist first and then joining the CSP, whereas for me, Krishna Pillai and other comrades in Kerala – I am not sure what would have happened had Amir Haider Khan also contacted us; but nobody contacted us, we had no contact – through the press it appeared to us that the Congress Socialist Party was the appropriate body through which we could work towards the Left politics. ...

FROM CSP TO CPI

Sharma: After you became Communist, did you disclose this to the CSP that you had become Communist?

Namboodiripad: No. I had told JP [Jayaprakash Narayan] that I was keeping contact with the Communist leaders and I also told him that on many of these issues on which there were differences, I was with the Communists. I did not disclose the fact that I had become a formal member of the party.

Sharma: Did you keep it deliberately a secret?

Namboodiripad: Yes, because it was an illegal party from the point of view of the government, and politically also it was a party against which one section of the leadership was hostile.

Sharma: After you became Communist, were there many occasions in the discussion in the national executive of the CSP when there were hot exchanges of views?

Namboodiripad: Oh yes. If I remember right, it was after the Faizpur session (1936), of the CSP that Dr Ahmed and Sajjad Zaheer were taken into the national executive of the CSP even before that Soli Batliwala and Dinkar Mehta were in it. They were known to be Communists. Even Masani knew about it. But the addition of Dr Ahmed and Sajjad Zaheer, together with the two who were already known to be Communists, it was known that these four were Communists.

Sharma: But even then they were taken?

Namboodiripad: Oh, yes.

Sharma: It is said that after you became Communist, there were deliberate attempts to capture the organisation with the assistance of other people and make it fully Communist. With this regard circulars were also issued to various Communist-minded people in the CSP in various provinces?

Namboodiripad: I don't know about it. I was functioning in Kerala. For me, it was quite simple and straight. I was transformed from an ordinary Congressman into a Congress Socialist and from a Congress Socialist into a Communist through the sheer process of my practical experience and discussions. Nobody would have been able to capture me, nor would I have been able to capture anybody else. After all, it was a period in which intense discussions intense searching of the minds, was going on among all of us. As a result of that some ideology got the upper hand, some ideology went behind. As a matter of fact, at the time, when I came into the Congress Socialist Party the Royists were probably even stronger than the CPI, but in a few years the Royists got disintegrated. This idea of somebody having some sinister plan to capture that organisation is absurd. People were changing. They had their own independent thinking. People like us who, though much later, could simultaneously resist the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] and the CPC [Communist Party of China], how could somebody capture us unless it was through the process of our own political experience and exchange political views?"

EMS rejected the suggestion that his group sought to capture the CSP. Sharma persisted.

Sharma: If I may put it like this: After you had become Communist, the natural course would have been to resign from the party?

Namboodiripad: Why? Those who were already known to be Communists had been taken by this very JP and Masani into the national executive. The conception at that time was, the Meerut Thesis stated definitely that the CSP should attempt to unite all the revolutionary forces including the Communists. I would, on the other hand, say that Masani and his friends were going against the line laid down in the Meerut Thesis by organising a witch-hunt against the Communists.

Sharma: Then how did this break come about finally between you and the CSP?

Namboodiripad: That was a pure process of political differences. I did not attend the Lahore Conference of the CSP in 1938. Krishna Pillai did; I came to know about the discussions there. By that time the questions of War, Fascism, all these things had become live issues. By 1939 the Second World War, the attitude to be adopted towards it, all these issues came to be forefront. On all these questions the process of discussion within the CSP leadership and, so far as I am concerned, with the leadership of the CPI, was going on. It was not only I personally, but almost the entire CSP in Kerala decided towards the end of 1939 or beginning of 1940, to join the CPI.

Sharma: Was it after the Communists were formally expelled from the CSP by a resolution at Ramgarh or was it before that?

Namboodiripad: Before that. When did the expulsion resolution come?

Sharma: I think at the Ramgarh Congress of national executive of the CSP passed a resolution expelling the Communists.

Namboodiripad: I do not remember that. I was present at the Ramgarh Congress, but I do not remember to have attended this executive meeting. Probably by that time they had known my membership of the CPI and had held a meeting without Dr Ahmed, Sajjad Zaheer and all of us. But in Kerala we held a conference of the leaders of the CSP in the various talukas either towards the end of 1939 or in the beginning of 1940, at which a decision was taken to form ourselves into the CPI with Krishna Pillai as secretary.

Sharma: Where was this conference held?

Namboodiripad: It was in a village near Tellicherry.

Sharma: What remained of the CSP after you decided to join the CPI?

Namboodiripad: Till 1942, nothing.

Sharma: The whole group went to the CPI?

Namboodiripad: Yes....

Sharma: Could you pinpoint the basic difference between the Congress Socialists and the Communist-minded Congress Socialists?

Namboodiripad: If I may put it very briefly, the Communists had an international outlook. They were part of the international communist movement, while the Congress Socialists, by and large, were national. Those of them who had an international outlook had the outlook of social democracy of Western type, like, say, Masani, Asoka Mehta and others.

Sharma: When did the parting of the ways actually come for the Communists and why? What precipitated the situation?

Namboodiripad: It is a process. As a matter of fact, as I told you earlier, probably the idea of the Congress Socialist Party in the beginning was that the Communists being in a small group, which was true in 1934-36, they could contain the Communists but they found that in 1937 to 1938, 1939, as the Communists joined work, the Communists were gaining far more than they had imagined. As a matter of fact, it was at that time that Masani, being the joint secretary, in charge of the office of that organisation, started giving warning to JP that this was happening that the Communists were gaining at their expense and they were carrying on disruptive activities. And then he started all this talk of selection work, etc. Then I had not attended the session that was held....

Sharma: ...at Lahore?

Namboodiripad: Yes, it was probably in 1938. At that session, there was a furious dispute on the representations to be given to various States and Kerala was represented by the State secretary of the CSP, the late Krishna Pillai. He was the sole delegate from Kerala. That was contested by Masani. After a good deal of discussion, the entire membership was not accepted. The membership was relevant in those days because even if only one delegate from a State attended, he could exercise the vote for the entire delegation. So Masani and these people thought that if Krishna Pillai were to exercise the vote of the entire members of the Kerala delegation, then that would go against them. So let us reduce it. I was not present in that session.

Sharma: After that, what was the next stage, which created further gulf?

Namboodiripad: I do not remember the month or the year, it might be some time in 1938 or 1939, Masani circulated the so-called Secret Circular by the CPI among the members of the national executive of the CSP. In that circular the position of the Communists in the CSP in various States was assessed, i.e. the work done, the influence exercised by the Communists. He pointed this out as the clear evidence that the Communists were disrupting and trying to capture the CSP. I was also involved in that because Kerala was mentioned in that circular as a State in which the Communists were exercising predominant influence. Then probably after the Tripuri session – probably the circular was issued earlier – in Delhi, JP called a meeting of those members of the national executive who were original Congress Socialists; that is, those who were original Communists were dropped out. At that time, not in the meeting actually, JP asked me: Where do you stand? I said: You know, I have been working with the Communists. S.V. Ghate and P. Sundarayya are working in Madras.

We have contacts with them and both Krishna Pillai and myself are having long discussions with them, and on most of the issues of policy, I agree with them. But, you know, I am an original Congress Socialist. By that time our relations had become strained. Even at the Tripuri Congress, if I remember aright, with regard to the voting on the crucial Pant Resolution, the CSP was neutral. The Communists voted against the resolution. After that Tripuri Congress, probably there were exchanges between the National Front and the Congress Socialists. As a matter of fact, I remember, on the controversial issues, which arose between Subhas Bose and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the attitude adopted by the CSP and the CPI were different. I do not exactly remember.

Sharma: Were you present at the Tripuri session?

Namboodiripad: Yes.

Sharma: Did you vote with the Communists?

Namboodiripad: No, I voted with the CSP.

Sharma: So, after that, you drifted away from the CSP.

Namboodiripad: Yes. Even by that time also we had come more or less to that position. But we took the final decision after the outbreak of the Second World War. Because the stand of the two parties, on the question of War and the attitude to be adopted towards the British differed from each other and we were with the Communists.”

(This is perhaps the first detailed exposition of the Communists' position vis-a-vis the CSP. EMS and JP had a warm regard for each other. This writer saw EMS with JP in 1976 during the Emergency, in Bombay. JP wanted a united leftist movement through the Congress Socialist Party).

P. SUNDARAYYA

P. Sundarayya was a legend in his own lifetime in Telangana and was one of the pillars of the CPI (M). He spoke to Dr H.D. Sharma in New Delhi on September 14, 1974. Much of what he said supported EMS, of course. But his is a fuller account.

Sharma: Mr Sundarayya, you were present at the Lahore session of the Congress Socialist Party where there was an open cleavage or trial of strength between the communist members and the socialist members of the Congress Socialist Party. Now, what is your version of these events?

Sundarayya: Unless I refer to the documents, I cannot pinpoint what actually happened and what were the differences but broadly the conflict came up on how the programmatic document or policy document should be framed and what issues should be incorporated. Earlier in 1936-37 also, in the course of the discussion, when we were all working in it (CSP) our effort was to have as nearer an approach to the communist understanding of socialism as possible, so that a united socialist movement could develop.

We were very confident that as the movement would develop and as our line was correct, slowly and slowly, the whole socialist movement could be incorporated. We used to be equally conscious of the other section, wherein were Asoka Mehta and Minoos Masani; especially Masani, to some extent [Yusuf] Meherally and Achyut Patwardhan also. They were equally clear that this communist line was a wrong thing and that it should not be allowed. This policy statement of programme should not be enumerated. This is where our main conflict came.

This had been earlier an international question, also: In 1933, the whole German revolutionary movement, the conflict between social democracy and the Communists; the whole question of Stalin, how the movement had been developed during the Russian revolution and especially the Communist trials during (1936-38) and other things, it was bitter anti-communism [concerning] the Soviet Union. But Jayaprakash Narayan and to a lesser extent Narendra Dev and certain other sections were definitely for a united movement though they did not want this full-fledged communist approach. One accusation against us, which we usually used to repudiate, was that the Communists would always follow the instructions they got from the communist international or what they call the Soviet leadership.

So, now I cannot exactly recall, there were documents concerning it. They had presented their thesis, and through our Comrade Sajjad Zaheer and others, we had presented the alternative, which was not our own programme [but the programme] which we thought would be acceptable to the socialists. Even then there was a clash in the Conference. The majority which was with Jayaprakash Narayan, naturally, did not accept some of the issues that were raised, and knowing that we could not get through, we also did not insist too much on it. Once we accepted the majority opinion the question of elections would come. In the elections, our earlier desire was to have more representation on the National Executive than what we had in 1938.

By 1938 E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Dinkar Mehta, Soli Batliwala, Sajjad Zaheer and some other comrades were there. I cannot say whether formal party members were nearer to us, but we wanted some more. The idea that we should dominate was not there, but we wanted to develop stronger contingent so that we could influence the day-to-day work also. But the Masani and Asoka Mehta section was equally clear, that our representation should not be increased, but should be further reduced. If Jayaprakash Narayan had properly understood the discussions, he might not have accepted the full quota as we demanded, nor would he have accepted to reduce [our number]. He might have conceded some more seats while keeping the dominant position with Masani as well as his cadre....

By 1939, when the War broke out, sharp differences arose on what policy to adopt. The question of people did not come up at that time. Whether we should have a mass revolutionary struggle of complete non-cooperation and sabotage the war effect or have some kind of Satyagraha – this was the main difference in approach. Anyway, by that time our party had to go underground also and we showed our proletarian path, how to fight the British War, how to conduct sharp cleavages in the Congress inactivity or later individual Satyagraha. On that again, the [Congress] Socialists differed sharply, and the units in Kerala and Tamil Nadu had to come out openly as the Communist Party. Then Jayaprakash Narayan and other people resented it [and said]: You worked in our party and now you are taking away the whole party. That is nothing but sabotaging and destroying our party. So, the bitterness grew. ...

Sharma: After they formally expelled the Communists, how many people went with you in the South? Was it the whole party?

Sundarayya: Practically, the whole party. Very few individuals might have been left and they were ineffective people. Though from the Congress angle, they might look as leaders, but they were rather ineffective people....

Sharma: Coming back to the Congress Socialist Party. You were working both in the Congress Socialist Party and in the Communist Party. You were secretary of the Congress Socialist Party also.

Sundarayya: I was secretary of the Communist Party in Andhra also.

Sharma: Now, how would you explain that? How was it possible to work in two political organisations which were not ideologically one? You could belong either to the one or to the other?

Sundarayya: No, it was not at all difficult. I belonged to the Communist Party basically and it was my party that asked me to work in the [Congress] Socialist Party. And whatever the [Congress] Socialist Party decisions were, before we could influence them to adopt more and more radical views, more and more the line that we wanted them to adopt, [until then] whatever actions they adopted, even to implementing that would make the large number of socialist cadre come nearer and we would also advance the general anti-imperialist movement. So there was no difficulty....

Sharma: When did the conflict between the Communists and the Congress Socialists become known and what were the issues?

Sundarayya: Right from the beginning, from 1934 itself, this conflict had been there. Because in the earlier period, some of our writings [said] that 'Congress Socialism' was contradictory in words and would pave way to fascism. Such kind of articles were written. The [Congress] Socialist Party leadership also attacked [saying] that the Communists were responsible for fascism coming in Germany by not having a united front. They had their own ideology; Gandhian ideology also influenced that the Communists were anti-national....

Similarly, Sajjad Zaheer, Dr K.M. Ashraf, Dr. Z.A. Ahmed, [Soli] Batliwala were all big Congress leaders; they were all leftists and were in the Congress Socialist Party. They were all pro [Communists]; some of them were party members also. That is why how could Congress Socialists say: You are not a socialist, you cannot be in the [Congress] Socialist Party.

“.... Then they decided to remove us and we also found that it was difficult to convince a good chunk of them. We had to function more and more independently than through the Congress Socialist Party. That phase came towards the end of 1938.”

JYOTI BASU ON PRIME MINISTERSHIP

(AG Norrani:It is on these episodes that, one hopes, the extracts throw some light. The leaders spoke with candour. To be sure a lot happened thereafter, culminating in the party's split in 1964. If I begin with the prince among them all, in a manner of speaking, it is because Jyoti Basu was one of the most level-headed and urbane men in our public life with whom it was easy to interact, with much pleasure and profit always. On behalf of the NMML, Shikha Mukherjee and Usha Prasad interviewed Jyoti Basu at Kolkata on December 18, 2001. His recollections of the past are interesting. More so, his views on recent events):

“The Government of India did not adopt proper policy in regard to giving autonomy and more powers to the Kashmiris. So they became little by little more alienated from India. At that time the rise of the Jana Sangh and the Hindu elements also had their impact. Earlier also when these powers were taken away, the young Kashmiris became pro-Pakistan, anti-India. Now there are various groups.

What some people like Sheikh Abdullah wanted was not to join Pakistan, but independent Kashmir. I once asked Sheikh Abdullah after he was released and became the Chief Minister again: Why, how would you deal with a small State like that? Some arguments he gave me: Why? If I had an independent Kashmir, Pakistan would support me, America and India would support me. Anyway he later on was with India. ... We cannot hand over Kashmir to Pakistan; that is clear as anything. We cannot make Kashmir an independent State, but we stick today to what we have been saying. It is more than ever necessary to give them absolute autonomy and not only autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir, but within Kashmir autonomy should be given to the Jammu part and the other part also. That is how we can get back the confidence of the people, Muslims particularly, in Kashmir. They have been alienated; there is no doubt about that. But the way to do [that] is to really look after their economic interest and probably more than that. At the moment we have to politically satisfy them not only with Article 370, which the present government wants to withdraw, but also the other powers, which they had even during Jawaharlal Nehru's time, should be given back to them. Some of them have been taken away. Then if they want their own Supreme Court or if they want anything, except defence and foreign policy, it should be given to them but, of course, financial help must be rendered from the Government of India. That is how you can get the confidence of the people. Here is the excerpts of his interview to NML Oral History team.

Mukherjee: How can you put an end to the militancy?

Basu: This is to be done both politically and administratively. Army and police operation are necessary, but more than that this, politics, which I am talking, is necessary.”

He was all for a political solution.

It was not just once that he was invited to become Prime Minister. The full account bears quotation in extensor. “You see, when the United Front was there, we got a majority and the Congress said that it would support us so as to keep the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] at bay. So we got together, but who would be the Prime Minister? V.P. Singh would be the best person, but he was ill. So they all, 12 parties, said: You must be the Prime Minister. Why did they say it? It was not because I am God's son, but because, as you said, I have got experience of running a United Front government and the Left Front government. That is why they thought that our party should join the 12-parties government, and I should become the Prime Minister.

“Then what happened was that because before the elections, we had no common programme although we were fighting together against the Congress. We said in the election meetings – I had spoken in so many election meetings: We shall help to form a government, but we will not be a part of it. (That had been our view.) Now since you are requesting 12 parties, including CPI, whose representative Indrajit Gupta became the Home Minister, we have to call a meeting of the central committee. That is the way we function; it is a democratic functioning. So we called a meeting of the central committee on their request: This new situation has arisen and so we have to have a programme that they want us to enter the government and I become the Prime Minister. In the voting there was a division. It was a serious meeting and there was a division. I think by 8 or 10 votes, we lost – our general secretary and I were in the minority. We thought politically it would be excellent thing and the right thing to do to join this government and head it, try to lead it. Even though it may be for few months, it would be politically advantageous. (I am not going into all the arguments.) But the others, the majority thought otherwise that it would be a great risk for us to join with these people, but we said: Already we had worked out Common Minimum Programme for West Bengal.

Now we will have a Common Minimum Programme at the Centre. We said: As people saw in West Bengal United Front government, similarly, on an all-India's scale it will help our party, it will help the Left forces, the democratic forces. This was our argument. Others said: Nothing can be done with leading the government but we can support 12 of them. Some of them, that is true also, were very much against our policies like the then Finance Minister, he was very much against our policy, but our argument was: In the Centre, the Prime Minister is unlike what we have in West Bengal, in Kerala. In the Centre the Prime Minister wields a lot of influence and we can for the time being influence them. Other partners [said], you see the World Bank is there; the IMF [International Monetary Fund] is there; they are blindly accepting all that advice given to them, which we shall not do. The people will have a new experience. Within these limitations so many things could be done. Then if we are thrown out and we shall leave a new experience for the people cannot last for five years. The Congress is supporting. When they will withdraw support, people will judge who is to blame. If it breaks up, then we can leave something behind for the people. As I said, this is how people will understand with whom lies the responsibility. But this argument was not accepted by the majority. So we went back and reported that. But they said: The President is waiting. We have to tell him the name of the Prime Minister. No, once again, you please call your meeting. I said: Eight people have left the meeting already, but we know for whom they have voted.

“So we called a meeting second time. This time also we failed. One or two changes were there, but we failed, majority was there for not participating and we, who were for participating, were in minority. Among the comrades of West Bengal there was division also. Four or five of us were for participating and some others were against participating. So again we went back and reported what had happened. ...

“Once M.J. Akbar of Asian Age asked me: What do you feel personally? I said – this I have not said any time publicly in my life about party differences though I have differed with my party on many occasions: We the Communists don't talk that way, but on this decision of the majority, I think it was a historic blunder, because history does not give such opportunities to the Communists. Knowing who I am, what I am, my belief in Marxism, the 12 parties are asking me to become the Prime Minister; we should accept it. Let people go through the experience. It will be of great help to the people and us. So he wrote all that in Asian Age.

“When 11 non-Communist parties, V.P. Singh and others, asked the CPI(M) – the CPI had decided to join the government – to join the government with me as the Prime Minister, it would be the correct step. I said: In Parliament [sic] democracy, never in the world has such a situation arisen. Again I say, this is a historic blunder. Historic, why, because such opportunity does not come, history does not present you with such opportunities. But anyhow that was that....

Prasad: Were you offered prime ministership earlier too?

Basu: I cannot remember; there was a crisis in the Congress in 1990. For some work, I had gone to Delhi. Then the present Finance Minister, Yashwant Sinha, came to see me – I was staying in 2, Circular Road. He said: As you know there is a crisis in the Congress. But a government has to be formed, and you head it. I said: How suddenly I become the Prime Minister! We have a small number of people there in Parliament. Anyhow it is not just possible. There is no question of discussing such a thing. So he left and then came our Chander [sic] Shekhar – he was a good friend of mine and I used to meet him earlier also – who he said: You become the Prime Minister, we will all be there to help you.

I said: I told your friend (Yashwant was with Chander Shekhar at that time, later he was with the BJP). Then he said: Then I become. I said: Very good. You have all my support, but how long will you last? How many people do you have ? ...

Mukherjee: What is that makes a coalition stick together?

Basu: Some minimum understanding. We know where we differ. We do not bring up all those differences when we draw up our programme, like the Common Minimum Programme also. Of course, many things are there with which the Finance Minister and others disagree.

Mukherjee: Why did the United Front experiments at the Centre not work when the Opposition minus the BJP had a role to play? Of course, the BJP coalition is working.

Basu: No, this is a different thing. The BJP coalition is working because all these States' parties and groups want to become Ministers. We cannot form such a coalition. According to us, if there is no minimum understanding sincerely pursued, we should not have a government, but the BJP does not believe in any principles or policies, it wants to rule, and Hindutva and all this business are there; they are guided by the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh] and the VHP [Vishwa Hindu Parishad].”

Another opportunity arose in 1999. “When lately the President had asked the BJP to take a vote, it lost by one vote. Then we wanted to present an alternative. It could not be like the other time. That alternative could only be the Congress because that was the main non-communal opposition party. We, ‘our party’ do make a difference between the BJP and the Congress. Many communal-minded people may be there in the Congress, but it is a non-communal party. It has become very, very important today but it was not that important in those days. It has become important with the rise of the BJP. So when we were discussing in Delhi, Mulayam Singh said: I cannot support the Congress government. Then I asked him: Why did you vote against the BJP? He said: The alternative is you. (It is ridiculous, that I become the Prime Minister.) I said: Why should the Congress accept me? Those days are over, no more there.

“Then Pranab Mukherjee, Arjun Singh and others came to my house and said: We shall form a government of our own. I asked: How can you form a government of your own, because you have only 120 or 125 MPs. You cannot. (They also had no arguments.) The Left, we, shall support you, we do not want to become Minister or anything, but unless you make an offer to other parties to form a coalition government why should they support you? The Congress also made the mistake. They would not have a coalition government. So we said: As far as the Left is concerned, we do not want to become Ministers; we want to support the government against the BJP. The BJP should not come back. But if you do not do that, then neither the Congress nor you can form a government.

“Now Jayalalitha and Lalu Prasad went to Sonia Gandhi and told her about this alternative, with me as the Prime Minister. Earlier I said: I am not well and all that, why should I take the blame, I will keep quiet. You go to her. Then Sonia Gandhi rang me up and said the same thing. My working committee has already taken a decision, either we form the government or nothing happens. We cannot support the alternative suggested. I said: Very good. Then I do not know why you people voted against the BJP because the BJP is now saying rightly that they (the Opposition) are so irresponsible that they threw us out but could not form an alternative government. They got the political advantage. So this is the story of that event.

People in Delhi and not only Mulayam Singh, even the RSP [Revolutionary Socialist Party] and the Forward Bloc with one or two MPs, also opposed and they could not give me the reason why they voted against the BJP, but then opposed the Congress forming a government.”

ON STALIN AND ALBANIA

Jyoti Basu was critical of Stalin's Soviet Union, where dissent was stifled. “In 1962 I went to the Soviet Union along with Bhupesh Gupta and Govinda Menon. There we had raised a question in our National Council – it was not divided then in 1962: Why is it that the Soviet Union – Khrushchev was in power then – is asking the Albanian people to get rid of the Albanian communist government? What right has it to do that? So the decision was taken that three of us should go and talk to Suslov, their topmost theoretician, and Ponomariov, their topmost historian.

So we met them for about three or four hours and then amongst many other things – I am not going into that – we asked them about Albanian issue. So Suslov and Ponomariov said: You do not know the kind of propaganda they are doing against us in Albania, although Communist Party rule is there. I said: But that is for the people of Albania to decide; you can tell them what Soviet Union wants to say. How can you ask the people to overthrow a government from outside? We got no satisfactory reply from Suslov and Ponomariov.”

ON RATH YATRA

His contempt for the BJP was not concealed.

Prasad: Before the demolition of Babri Masjid, when there was the rath yatra, you were trying to stop it and then Lalu Prasad stopped it.

Basu: Yes, V.P. Singh asked me to go and see L.K. Advani. Once I went to his house and another time to somebody else's place to meet him. We had food together and then had discussions. But I could not convince him.

He was talking about the Moghul days as to how some of them destroyed our temples, this and that. I said: But was it right what they did whoever did it? He said: There is no question about destroying anything. Mine is a peaceful Yatra. I will go from one end of India to the other end and this is my route. But I said: I hear, in the rath you have Ram's photograph. Has he become your party member? You have your election symbol also in the rath. He said: Yes, what is wrong there? But it will be a peaceful rath yatra.

I reported back to V.P. Singh: I could not convince him; he is going through his programme. Then he said that he would have to be arrested. That was almost the break-up of the Janata government. But Advani will pass through West Bengal, Purulia district. V.P. Singh told me: You don't arrest him. He will end his rath yatra in Patna. So I had asked Lalu Prasad Yadav – he was the Chief Minister at that time – to arrest him. So this is what happened. Then you know later on, how thousands of people were killed.”

<http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2825/stories/20111216282509000.htm>

(The second part of this article will carry M. Basavapunniah's interview, which is perhaps the most revealing of them all.)

PARTII

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INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE

HISTORY- Of Stalin, Telangana & Indian revolution by A.G. NOORANI

“Stalin was glad he was trying to help a revolution in India, because... if it succeeds, almost the world revolution has been won.”

(The first part of this article appeared in the December 16, 2011, issue. The article presents extracts from interviews with senior leaders of the Communist movement conducted on behalf of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library as part of its Oral History programme. This part features extracts from an interview with M. Basavapunniah. M. Basavapunniah spoke to Dr Hari Dev Sharma in New Delhi on June 19, 1978, revealingly and with characteristic vigour, on a wide range of topics. He said: “The unit of the Andhra Communist Party was first formed in 1934. The founder-member of that unit was Comrade P. Sundarayya. Along with him, Comrade Rajeswara Rao – Comrade Rajeswara Rao is now secretary of the all-India Communist Party of India [CPI]” besides others).

The CPI was affiliated to the Communist International, like any other Communist Party. “Direct link with Moscow was impossible in those days. So our link could be established through [the] British party and the British party (Communist Party of Great Britain) was looking after our affairs vis-a-vis the Communist International. So whether they have discussed it or not, our lines were being discussed with the CPGB from time to time. [Rajni Palme Dutt was the Chief Mentor.] After discussions with the CPGB, we noted the changes that had come about in the war. The changes were: Hitler, who started the war against Europe and against Britain and was on war with America, after June 1941, had directed his battle against the Soviet Union. When he had started the main war with the Soviet Union he also sent a messenger called Gertrude Hessler to England, asking them: In 1939, I began the war against you, it is true. Now I have started war against the Communism. Why don't you compromise with me? This is what his attempts were. In a world developed of things, the war that was fought in the first phase between the two imperialist blocs, one was led by England, America and others and other was by Germany, Italy and Japan. Then we took our position on that.”

He went on to dilate quite frankly on the differences that grew up with the Congress. “We were under the misapprehension that if our struggle against imperialism was intensified, it might affect the war preparations against fascism. This was exactly a theoretical error that had alienated us from vast mass of the Congressmen who were not bothered about what happened to the Soviet Union but bothered about England. In the first period from 1939 to 1941 until the turn of the war, we were asking them to become active fighters against imperialism. Then they were for individual satyagraha, this and that and not doing anything. When actually this trouble of events came, they became desperate, passed the ‘do and die’ resolution. When we were for fighting militantly, they were for a non-violent, individual satyagraha approach. This was how differences arose between us and the other nationalists.”

Telangana revolt

Basavapunniah described the Telangana revolt in detail. “After the war was over in 1945, this movement in the Nizam's area had taken a very militant form. When we had to fight against the Nizam, his Razakars, his army, his police and all that, then we were compelled to go in for guerilla warfare, armed warfare; and with all these ideas we had to go through Mao's theory of partisan warfare, guerilla warfare, peasant warfare, etc. So it was practical necessities that compelled us to go to a theoretical justification and a theoretical argumentation and learning from Chinese experiences as they came in. So, the other way it is true...

“[The] Andhra unit took the lead in this respect, because it went into action first, a militant form of struggle, and faced police bullets, repression by the armies of the Nizam and all that. Then the alternative was either to surrender or to resist. Resist by what? When they had brought bharmars, we had to go in for bharmars; when they had brought shotguns, we had to go in for shotguns; when they brought big armed forces, then we had to think how to face them. So this partisan armed squads, armed guerilla warfare, this whole development came from 1946 onwards – resistance with sticks, slings, with armed volunteers and subsequently resistance with bharmars – bharmars, you understand? You put gunpowder in the barrel and then press it. Its range is only 50 yards. The primitive weapon, which was used in all the States, was called bharmar. So stage to stage, from sticks it went up to .303 rifles and then some machine guns snatched from the enemy. This was the way how the Telangana movement developed. It was only after the movement developed for two years like this, [in] September 1948 the Government of India decided to march in, [in] what is called Police Action. Three days after the Police Action, they started attacking our bases, attacking the peasantry and asking them to surrender the lands to the landlords and deshmukhs from whom we had distributed the lands. From then on the struggle was directly between” the Indian government and the peasant militants. These are two phases.

M. BASAVAPUNNIAH. ON the Telangana resistance, he said: "Whereas Sardar Patel was thinking that in 30 days everything would be finished, but it took three years."

Sharma: What was the role of the CPI in this? It was obviously the struggle of the people.

Basavapunniah: The CPI was leading it.

Sharma: Do you mean to say that it was forced on you or you took the initiative?

Basavapunniah: We took the initiative in fighting against the Nizam and all his landlords and deshmukhs. The deshmukhs had one lakh, eighty, seventy, sixty thousand acres of land. These were the types of landlords. The peasantry had no rights. Even the tenants serving for eight or nine years had no rights. Anybody could be ejected from anywhere; there was slave labour, forced labour. All these malpractices were going on. We took up the struggle... it landed us in a militant struggle of resistance.

Sharma: What about the second phase?

Basavapunniah: The second phase was after the Indian government had come in. The alternative that had posed before us was either to abandon the whole struggle and leave the land and leave the peasantry to its fate or [to] organise the peasantry and resist and demand that these lands must be with us and not allow the landlords to reoccupy the land. This was the question. Then, the Government of India was trying to suppress it with arms. The other alternative before us was either to resist or to surrender. We decided that we must resist to the maximum. So this resistance went on for three years. Whereas Sardar [Vallabhbhai] Patel was thinking that in 30 days everything would be finished, but it took three years. Meanwhile, Sardar Patel had finished himself but the movement itself was not finished.”

He added: “From September 1948 onwards it was regular armed invasion. It was not a police action. Either the special armed police or the Malabar Police or the Army, nearly 50,000 [personnel] were employed for three full years to suppress the movement. The Indian Army was not more than one and a half lakh or two lakhs [men] in those days. A good part of it was locked up in Kashmir. Other part had to remain somewhere stationary. Then to spare nearly 40,000-50,000 armed forces at one spot was not a small thing. So they concentrated their best and did their worst. Ten thousand people were put as detenus for three-four years; nearly a lakh of people were put in concentration camps for months on end; thousands of women were raped.”

Split in the CPI

Issues of theory and tactics arose and divided the CPI. Basavapunniah's detailed account of what followed is authoritative. "We had to go into a theoretical discussion whether it was a democratic revolution or a socialist revolution or a people's democratic revolution. Then these questions also came up: Who were the classes in it? Who were the enemies of it? What was the role of imperialism? What was the role of the bourgeoisie? What was the role of the rich peasants? All these questions had come up in a sharp way."

Sharma: Did other units of the party agree with the Andhra reading, or not?

Basavapunniah: The Andhra document was submitted in the month of May 1948. The Polit Bureau was keeping its discussions confined to itself until the month of November 1948. So it was only in the months of November and December 1948 that this reached all the State units. The whole of the year 1949 there was an inner-party discussion going on. By March 1950 the whole cycle was complete and the line that was adopted at Calcutta was proved wrong and we were asked to take the responsibility of the central committee leadership. Then came the question of going and meeting Stalin, and then working out all the lines.

"So the party discussion was going on. It was a continuous process. From November and December 1949 when the P.B. document – that is, what is called the tactical line – was released for discussion, it was under discussion between the Andhra document on the one side and the central committee P.B. document on the other side for a whole year and it culminated in [the] Andhra Secretariat coming into the forefront and taking up the responsibility of working out the line. It was this Andhra Secretariat, which had come into the central committee and the Polit Bureau and all that, [that] had to go to Moscow and seek clarification and all that."

Meeting with Stalin

Sharma: Now, the deputation consisted of Ajoy Ghosh, S.A. Dange, representing one view, and yourself and Rajeswara Rao, representing another.... What were the points you placed before Stalin?

Basavapunniah: It was not the question of one point. All the discussions were there on the tactical line: What is the stage of revolution? What are the class alliances? What is the place of the rich peasant? What is the place of landlordism? What is the place of the bourgeoisie? Which section of the bourgeoisie is there? What is the nature of the freedom? Is Independence true or genuine, or otherwise? All these questions which were under discussion were referred to the central committee of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] and Stalin. After some preliminary exchanges and discussions, we arrived at certain conclusions. These were incorporated in the new programme of 1951. So it was not one question, there were many questions.

Sharma: The whole theory of revolution.

Basavapunniah: The entire theory as applied to India: What is the Indian society? What is the Indian freedom that we got in August 1947? Whether it is real or fake? Which classes were interested in fighting for Independence and which classes had already been bought over by imperialism or had compromised with imperialism? What is the role of the Congress party? All these questions were discussed. These were the questions in debate inside the Communist Party of India from 1948 to 1950.

Sharma: But it looks very funny that the Communist Party of India could not decide these issues here and they had [to be] taken to Moscow who had very little touch with the Indian situation?

Basavapunniah: It is not the Indian situation. The Indian situation was the situation known. The whole point was how to apply the Marxist general principles and theory to the Indian situation. It is here that we were short of it. As I told you, and I again repeat, after all India is not the birthplace of Marxism and Leninism; their birthplace is Europe. The Russians were the first to apply it and win the victory of the revolution, and they had the moral and.... Suppose, in our technological field today where do we go? We have to go either to the Soviet Union or to America or to England. Is anything funny about it? If we are serious about our industry and industrial development, we have to go there. There is no other way. If I am serious about my revolution, I have to go and learn from them. Any refusal to learn from those who are well-versed in the theory is ignorance but not any wisdom. So it is not that there is anything wrong in our going there and seeking clarity. We should. If it is available in my country, I would have availed of it. When it is not available in my country, what am I to do? I have to go anywhere wherever I can get it, to the moon or some place. This is the reality.

Sharma: What was the solution which Stalin offered for your difficulties?

Basavapunniah: There is no one solution. The solutions Stalin offered or we accepted were incorporated in the 1951 draft programme.

Sharma: Was it different from your assessment of the situation here?

Basavapunniah: Naturally, the question of Stalin's programme, as you call it, or, why should we call it Stalin's programme, it was a programme discussed between our commission and their commission. There they said very plainly: 'Our knowledge of the Indian conditions is very limited. With the available general knowledge that we have got about some dialectics and some general Marxism and Leninism, we will try to help you. It is for you to accept, amend, reject, do anything as you like. That they said very clearly.' And after that we had a number of discussions and came to these conclusions. These conclusions were again incorporated in the programme and the programme was seen by that commission also. The commission had said: 'If you are satisfied, we are satisfied.' That is how that programme has to be called, the programme worked out by the CPSU. But really the programme was drafted by us after discussions. But the major corrections were the corrections given by them, but those corrections subsequently proved also many things wrong.

Sharma: Who were the members on their commission?

Basavapunniah: Stalin, Molotov, Suslov, Malenkov.

Sharma: Four. Now, what are your impressions of Stalin?

Basavapunniah: In what respect?

Sharma: As a Marxist, theoretician, as a person?

Basavapunniah: It is not a question of my having any impressions of Stalin in those four or five sittings we had with them. My impression of Stalin goes to all the histories, the beginning of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and his contribution to it. Subsequent to Lenin how Stalin had become the Secretary, how he had functioned as the Secretary, what the PBC had done, how Leninism he had codified. All these are substantial grounds on which I could have a picture of Stalin. So my four-day stay with him or conversation with him was not going to make any change that way.

Personally if you ask me what my impressions are, I would say: In the beginning I thought that this would be rather inconvenient to such a big man, the world's biggest authority, should sit in a commission; it restricts our freedom, exchange of views, etc. We may have to accept what all that he says. But in the very first meeting, after 10 minutes the atmosphere he so created in the discussion was such that we could be as free as amongst us and we never felt in the whole conversation, the whole period we were staying, say, in the four or five meetings we were having with him, any difficulty of that nature. So it goes to the credit of Stalin to give that confidence to us: 'You are equal; you can discuss freely; there is nothing to worry.' This is one impression.

The second thing is that he was very glad that he was trying to help a revolution in a country like India because after the victorious Chinese revolution and the Russian revolution, if the Indian revolution succeeds, almost the world revolution has been won. So he was very glad to contribute whatever he could contribute to the success of the Indian revolution. That is why he was very willing to help, and he was happy to help. After all the discussions were over, he again repeated: 'Your party is sovereign. There is no more the Communist International. That is dissolved. From one centre we cannot run the international communist movement. That is why you are at liberty to follow your own independent line. Understand this, amend it, accept it, reject it. That is all for you to decide. You are sovereign.' These are the words he had said. From this, it appeared, to me at least, he was very modest and, in spite of some of the hardest debates we had with him, he was not upset. He argued with us. We counter-argued with him. On many points we had joined issue with him.

So it is not a question of our asking and his giving some advice and then our accepting. No. All of us had very strong discussions with him, and the whole record of our discussions was reported to our central committee. The questions and answers were there. From the questions and answers – these have been also reproduced in Sundarayya's book on Telangana – perhaps you will understand that we did not simply accept what he said. We discussed. Ultimately we might have accepted because he was a big authority on us. That is another thing. But it is not a question of simply, like yes-men, accepting without any discussion. No. This is my impression of Stalin.

Sharma: Was he fluent in English?

Basavapunniah: No. He understood English but he was not doing conversation in English. Because these were very subtle theoretical questions, very appropriate words, appropriate phrases must be used. In a language in which I have no authority and I have no complete grip over it I should not use it. That is why he was speaking in Russian and there was simultaneous translation.

Sharma: All of them spoke in Russian.

Basavapunniah: All of them spoke in Russian.

Sharma: And you spoke in English.

Basavapunniah: We spoke in English. There was a regular translation. But all of them know English. I tell you, working knowledge of English was there for all of them but they could not express; they had not sufficient grip over the language.

Sharma: What was the impact of his personality on you?

Basavapunniah: Impact means?

Sharma: For example, his keenness in discussion.

Basavapunniah: As I told you, our impression of Stalin was not formed in one day by seeing him or discussing with him. Our impression of Stalin was there since 1934, when we had joined the Communist Party and we began to read the literature, began to read his works, began to follow his works in the Soviet Union and began to follow his feats in the war against fascism. All those were our background impressions of Stalin. That is why we were not novices, in the sense, to have afresh in Stalin's assessment; we were having the assessment of Stalin earlier also, but only we were having a personal idea of meeting him, discussion with him.

Sharma: But, you see, a person who reads and listens about one person, forms some sort of an impression. Now, when you met him, did you find that impression correct?

Basavapunniah: What is that correct which you ask, tell me?

Sharma: For example, he was a great leader of the Soviet Union, an eminent Marxist. You have a certain impression of the personality that he must be very intelligent, have full grasp over the situation or Marxism. Now, when you had an opportunity to discuss with him, how did you find him?

Basavapunniah: As I told you, as far as my finding is concerned, he appeared to be very modest. He did not make any pretensions that he knew everything. He said: 'I know very little about India. What we know is general Marxism, Leninism and dialectics. From that general understanding we try to help. It is for you to accept, amend, reject.' These ideas show that he was not presumptuous; he was modest.

Sharma: Did he discuss any other thing also about the Indian situation, apart from the problems of the CPI?

Basavapunniah: The whole question of programme deals with the agrarian question, industrial question.

Sharma: No, other general situation in the country, prospects of the Communist Party.

Basavapunniah: With regards to prospects of the Communist Party, he asked us about the strength of the Communist Party, the movement of the working class, the movement of the peasantry, what was going on in Telangana, how far that movement was widespread, not widespread, etc. All these questions. There was nothing that we left undiscussed; everything was discussed.

Sharma: Did he say anything about the Indian government vis-a-vis the Communist Party?

Basavapunniah: In that very programme, we had given a characterisation about the Indian government and its States....

Sharma: Who had drafted the Andhra Thesis?

Basavapunniah: The Andhra Thesis was drafted by me personally, but subsequently it was the whole Secretariat – Rajeswara Rao, Sundarayya, Chandrasekhar Rao, Hanumantha Rao and myself, all these five or six people who were leading in the Secretariat agreed unanimously.” They did not blindly follow Mao's line, he explained.

Sharma: But, I think, in the thesis you defend Mao and his thesis on democracy.

Basavapunniah: Yes, Mao and his thesis on democracy, his application of Marxism to the Chinese conditions.

I was arguing that our conditions are more akin to the Chinese conditions because of the peasant country, agrarian country, the colonial country, the semi-colonial country, this is the real situation. Whereas Russia was an imperialist country. A revolution in an imperialist country and a revolution in a colonial country are fundamentally different. So the examples taken from the imperialist country may mislead us on a number of questions.

Sharma: And what was [B.T.] Ranadive's stand?

Basavapunniah: That was very clear in the tactical line.

Sharma: And then later on you found when Ranadive was removed, Rajeswara Rao took over.

Basavapunniah: He had resigned.

Sharma: Yes. And Rajeswara Rao took over the party leadership...

Basavapunniah: ... reorganised the whole central committee; the central committee of 1931 was there. Some of them had resigned; some of them were in jail. It was reorganised with some 17 or 18 members.... That was temporary, provisional. That was not the final reorganisation. This provisional reorganisation was done in order to seek clarity from the CPSU and Stalin and after that settle the things. It was a stopgap, transitional arrangement. From the day – we had come here in April or May 1951 – April-May 1951 the new programme had come. This one year our effort was to seek the guidance of the CPSU and get the clarity and the programme, and around the programme the unification of the party to be done. After that part was over, we said, 'We are not anymore in key leadership. The real head is the secretary; the real head is the Polit Bureau'.

Sharma: And then Ajoy Ghosh came.

Basavapunniah: We were in the central committee and in the Polit Bureau.

Sharma: Did you find the new line quite successful?

Basavapunniah: Which line you mean?

Sharma: The line adopted under Rajeswara Rao's leadership.

Basavapunniah: I was telling you, the line adopted at the third party Congress (1951) proved inadequate, wrong, and the corrections we had introduced in the new programme of April-May 1951 too proved inadequate. Again, after two years, we found that the programme itself was inadequate and it had proved quite wrong also in a number of places. So, ultimately, all these programmes had to be revised and the party had a serious rift, one led by S.A. Dange and Rajeswara Rao and the other by us; what is called the Marxist party had come into existence not one fine morning, as some people say, on this quarrel or that quarrel. A whole process of inner-party struggle had developed and two lines clashed ultimately. This is the result of whole inner-party struggle. If there is anything one has to study why there are two communist parties in India, what were the basic understandings and misunderstandings and differences between them, they have to trace the whole history of this period, from 1948 to 1964, a running thread. What culminated in 1963-64, was the two crystallised lines: one represented by that party, the other represented essentially by us, whatever the resolutions.”

<http://www.frontline.in/navigation/?type=static&page=archive>

PART III

Frontline-Volume 28 - Issue 27 :: Dec. 31, 2011-Jan. 13, 2012

INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE

HISTORY

Of Quit India, Nehru & CPI split by A.G. NOORANI

Stalin upbraided CPI leaders for not supporting the Congress on the Quit India Movement.

OF all the Communist leaders interviewed in the Oral History Programme of the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library in New Delhi, Makineni Basavapunniah was the most outspoken. The armed struggle in Telangana, which began in 1946, was directed against the Nizam's government. But "from September 1948 onwards it was regular armed invasion. It was not a police action. Either the special armed police or the Malabar Police or the army, nearly 50,000 were employed for three full years to suppress the movement. Indian Army was not more than one and a half lakh or two lakhs in those days. A good part of it was locked up in Kashmir. Other part had to remain somewhere stationary. Then to spare as nearly 40,000-50,000 armed forces at one spot was not a small thing. So they concentrated their best and did their worst. Ten thousand people were put as detenus for three-four years; nearly a lakh of people were put in concentration camps for months on end; thousands of women were raped." Dr Hari Dev Sharma asked: "By the military?" Basavapunniah replied: "Of course, military and the other armed forces, like Central Reserve Police, Malabar Police, Special Police, like that so many."

He added: "Particularly after September 1948 when the Government of India intervened, as I said earlier, it intervened with very big armed forces. The entire modern military technique was used against us. General J.N. Chaudhuri, who intervened there on behalf of the Government of India, took hardly half a dozen days to manage the army of the Nizam and the Razakars, etc. After that the main direction was against the Communist Party which was leading the struggle."

He explained why he developed reservations over the Ranadive thesis adopted by the Second Party Congress at Calcutta in February 1948. Experience in Telangana flew against the thesis. "The Andhra document was submitted in the month of May 1948. The Politburo was keeping its discussions confined to it till the month of November 1948. So it was only in the month of November and December 1948 that this reached all the State units. The whole of the year 1949, there was an inner party discussion going on. By March 1950 the whole cycle was complete and the line that was adopted at Calcutta was proved wrong and we were asked to take the responsibility of the Central Committee leadership. Then came the question of going and meeting Stalin, and then working out all the lines." The Communist Party of India unit in Andhra disagreed with the leadership. In the earlier articles, we have Basavapunniah's account of the Moscow meeting, which was arranged to avert a split.

Like his colleagues, P. Sundarayya also dilated on the alliance with the Congress Socialist Party in the 1930s and how the Kerala, Andhra and Madras units of the CSP went over to the CPI. Conflict was inherent in the alliance. "Right from the beginning, from 1934 itself, this conflict had been there. Because in the earlier period, some of our writings [aid] that Congress Socialism was contradictory in words and would pave way to fascism. Such kind of articles were written. The [Congress] Socialist Party leadership also attacked [saying] that the communists were responsible for fascism coming in Germany by not having a united front. They had their own ideology; Gandhian ideology also influenced [sic] that the communists were anti-national. They also used to say all these things...."

Similarly, Sajjad Zaheer, Dr K.M. Ashraf, Dr Z.A. Ahmed, [Soli] Batliwala were all big Congress leaders; they were all leftists and were in the Congress Socialist Party. They were all pro [communists]; some of them were party members also.... So, this struggle went on till they found that they could not function in a united way. Then they decided to remove us and we also found that it was difficult to convince a good chunk of them. We had to function more and more independently than through the Congress Socialist party. That phase came towards the end of 1938.”

Dange's role

Sadly, S.A. Dange's recorded Interview ends abruptly before the crises of the 1940s. He was a fascinating character, a brilliant pamphleteer, orator and a supple tactician. He was known to be close to the mill owner Sir David Sassoon. On March 7, 1964, Current, a Bombay [now Mumbai] tabloid, edited by D.F. Karaka, published a letter from Dange to the Governor-General of India dated July 28, 1924, from Sitapur jail in the United Provinces (U.P.) where he was serving a four-year sentence in the Kanpur Conspiracy Case.

It said: “Exactly one year back, the Deputy Commissioner of Police of Bombay, Mr Stewart, was having a conversation with me, in his office regarding my relations with M.N. Roy and an anticipated visit to me of certain persons from abroad. During the course of the conversation the Honourable officer let drop a hint in the following words, the full import of which I failed to catch at that moment. Mr Stewart said, ‘You hold an exceptionally influential position in certain circles here and abroad. Government would be glad if this position would be of some use to them.’ I think I still hold that position. Rather it has been enhanced by the prosecution. If Your Excellency is pleased to think that I should use that position for the good of Your Excellency's government and the country, I should be glad to do so, if I am given the opportunity by Your Excellency granting my prayer for release.

S.A. DANGE. HE was a member of the Communist delegation that met Stalin in Moscow. Here, he is giving a talk on "My visit to Russia" in the weekly BBC Marathi magazine programme "Radio Jhankar". The others in the delegation were Ajoy Ghosh, M. Basavapunniah and C. Rajeswara Rao.

“I am given the punishment of four years' rigorous imprisonment in order that those years may bring a salutary change in my attitude towards the King Emperor's sovereignty in India. I beg to inform Your Excellency that those years are unnecessary, as I have never been positively disloyal towards His Majesty in my writings or speeches nor do I intend to be so in future.

“Hoping this respectful undertaking will satisfy and move Your Excellency to grant my prayer and awaiting anxiously a reply.

I beg to remain, Your Excellency's Most, Obedient Servant, Shripat Amrit Dange.

Written this day 28th July, 1924. Endorsement No. 1048, dated 31-7-1924.

Forwarded in original to I.G. [Inspector General] of prisons U.P. for disposal.

Sd/- W.P. Cook Col. I.M.S. Superintendent of Jail. Seal of I.G. Prisons

13070 Dated 1-8-1924.”

On March 16, Basavapunniah and P. Ramamurthi went to the National Archives in New Delhi and again on March 17 and 19. What they found was set out in a pamphlet published by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) after the split later in the year. It was entitled Dange Unmasked (for a detailed analysis of the texts of the documents, including comments by the formidable Lt Col Cecil Kaye, Director of the Intelligence Bureau, perhaps its most able – “he is personally, a mere worm” – vide the writer's article “Dange Letters”; Survey (London) Spring 1979; pages 160-174).

Years later I sought an interview with Dange. What he said of the famous meeting with Stalin rang true. Stalin upbraided the CPI leaders for not supporting the Congress on the Quit India Movement when they mentioned that their stand had cost them dear. “Why didn't you support it? Do you think we won the war because of the 100 rifles you sent us?” Stalin was informality itself. Dange sat on the armrest of his chair when Stalin pored over the map of India he had sent for. “Is this your Yenan?” he asked with unconcealed contempt. It lay at the very heart of India. What followed the meetings is well recorded but not completely in a single volume.

Significantly, later Soviet writers also criticised the CPI's 1942 decision. Dr Alexander I. Chicherov, Head of the International Relations Research Department and Institute of Oriental Studies, Academy of Sciences USSR in Moscow, was an erudite scholar. He found in the archives a letter from Bal Gangadhar Tilak to the Russian Consulate in Bombay in 1905 outlining his plans for intensifying the freedom struggle. He admired Tilak.

On a visit to Bombay, Chicherov told Indian Express that the CPI's decision to keep out of the Quit India Movement was “tragic” (October 15, 1982).

One question arises. One of the interviewers said that they had no direct contact with Moscow, only with the Communist Party of Great Britain, that is, with Rajani Palme Dutt and Harry Pollit. Was it Palme Dutt, then, who instructed the switch in 1942?

Basavapunniah's interview mentions the disagreement between the Andhra thesis and the thesis of the Central leadership. The party was on the verge of a split. It was averted by Stalin. Like Dange, Mohit Sen supported the Emergency. Both left the CPI, But Mohit Sen's memoir is of absorbing interest. Sadly, it did not receive the review it deserved (A Traveller and the Road: The Journey of an Indian Communist; Rupa & Co.; 2003). The two remained close.

Mohit Sen's account

Mohit Sen wrote: “I was to have the privilege of carrying the ‘China path' document to China. The CPI leadership hoped and expected that the leadership of the CPC would endorse this understanding and back it....

“At that time, I did not know that this line had been challenged by an important section of the CPI leadership headed by Ajoy Ghosh, S.A. Dange and S.V. Ghate. They had produced a joint document which had gone down in the history of the party as the ‘Three Ps' document....

“This document shared the viewpoint that India had not won independence and that the Nehru government upheld the interests of British imperialism, landlords and those sections of the bourgeoisie that collaborated with imperialism. The document also held the view that armed revolution was the only path of advance.

It differed from both the Ranadive line and the China path line [the Andhra thesis] on its insistence that Indian conditions differed in the 1950s from both Russia and China. The strategy of the CPI should, therefore, be that of the Indian path. The armed revolution in our country would be a combination of peasant guerrilla actions in the countryside with working class insurrections in the urban areas. This was an updated version of what S.A. Dange had advocated decades ago in Gandhi vs. Lenin published in 1920, which had caught the attention of Lenin himself.

MOHIT SEN. HE wrote: "I was to have the privilege of carrying the `China path' document to China."

“The other point of difference of ‘the three Ps' document was its realistic appraisal of the actual situation of the CPI. It was on the verge of annihilation. Its mass organisations were shattered and the party itself almost totally disintegrated. The first task was to save the party itself and to reforge its ties with the masses, taking into account the existing civil liberties.

“The proponents of the ‘Chinese path' led by Comrade C. Rajeswara Rao and those of the ‘Indian path' led by Comrade Ajoy Ghosh had set up their own centres and the CPI was on the verge of a split. It was then that the Soviet Communists intervened.

“Four leaders, two from each centre, were brought to Moscow. They travelled, incognito as manual workers on a Soviet ship from Calcutta. They were Comrades Ajoy Ghosh, S.A. Dange, C. Rajeswara Rao and M. Basavapunniah. None of them divulged any details of how they were contacted and what their exact itinerary was. Nikhil Chakravarty, who attended to all the technical details of planning the journey, has also not said anything.

"[Stalin] strongly advised that the armed struggle being conducted in various areas, especially the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, should be ended."

“S.A. Dange and C. Rajeswara Rao have both told me about the meeting with the leaders of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]. The first meeting was attended from the Soviet side by Comrades [Mikhail Andreyevich] Suslov, [Georgy] Malenkov and [Vyacheslav Mikhailovich] Molotov. It was on the third day that it was announced that Comrade Stalin would attend. So he did for the subsequent days. Dange and Rajeswara Rao said that he was an attentive listener though he rarely sat at the table but kept pacing up and down smoking a pipe. But he intervened subtly to turn the discussion beyond dogmatic disputes to assessments of the existing situation and immediate tactical tasks.

Stalin's view on Nehru government

“Stalin's view also was that India was not an independent country but ruled indirectly by British colonialists. He also agreed that the Communists could eventually advance only by heading an armed revolution. But it would not be of the Chinese type. His view on this point coincided with that of ‘the three Ps'. He also agreed with their appraisal of the concrete situation in which the party was placed. He strongly advised that the armed struggle being conducted in various areas, especially the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, should be ended. He said that it was Comrade Rajeswara Rao who should travel to the different camps and see that the arms were surrendered. This would be difficult but it was he alone who could do it. That, in fact, was done and Rajeswara Rao later told me that this was the most difficult task he had ever performed for the party.

“Stalin also cautioned the CPI leaders that the Nehru government was not a puppet government. It had a social base and mass support and could not be overthrown easily. He asked the leaders to unite, work together, save the party and take it forward. He strongly advised them to make the CPI participate in the general elections” (pages 80-81).

The record has him say: “I cannot consider the government of Nehru as a puppet. All his roots are in the people.” He was polite to the visitors, but they did not win his respect. His interpreter and the diplomat Nikolai Adyrkhayev's memoirs, released on Stalin's 118th birth anniversary (December 21, 1879), reveal that later in the year Stalin scolded a delegation of the Japanese Communist Party: “In India they have wrecked the party and there is something similar with you.”

As it happens some interesting documents have surfaced in the pages of a journal, Revolutionary Democracy, published by Vijay Singh. The issue of April 2011 published documents from the papers of Rajani Palme Dutt in the archives of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which are deposited in the Labour Archive and Library, Manchester.

(PHOTO:THE NINE MEMBERS of the first Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) after the 1964 split in the Communist movement: (standing, from left) P. Ramamurthi, Basavapunniah, E.M.S. Namboodiripad and Harkishan Singh Surjeet; (sitting, from left) Promode Dasgupta, Jyoti Basu, Sundarayya, B.T. Ranadive and A.K. Gopalan).

One was a letter dated November 1, 1962, from B.N. Datar, Minister of State for Home, to P.K. Sawant, Home Minister, Maharashtra. It read : “I am enclosing herewith in original a list handed over personally by Shri S.A. Dange, to Home Minister recently giving the names and addresses of CPI persons in Bombay and other individuals who in the opinion of Shri S.A. Dange are pro-Chinese. I would request your immediate comments and action in the matter under advice to me.” The other letter contains charges too scandalous to be reproduced, still less vouched for.

Authentic material on Moscow talks

Three other issues contain authentic material on the Moscow talks from the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History translated from the Russian by Vijay Singh. There is a stenographic record of the discussions between the two delegations on February 4, 6 and 9, 1951 (September 2006; pages 162-200). As one might expect, the Indians did most of the talking on the first two days, explaining internal differences and replying to pointed questions by the hosts. Stalin spoke at great length on February 9 (pages 186-200).

The issue of April 2007 published a record of the discussions with Malenkov and Suslov on February 21 (pages 126-130). The issue of April 2010 has three letters by the CPI leaders; Stalin underlined parts of the letters and gave his comments in the margin. All these documents merit detailed analysis in the light of the CPI's internal debates in 1948-51.

Postscript: Alope Banerjee of Hindustan Times reported from Kolkata on November 26, 2005: “Marxist Patriarch Jyoti Basu had been against a split in the CPI and had urged all his comrades to keep the party united. This was in 1963, a year before some CPI leaders left the party and formed the CPI(M).

“Documents portraying the final days before the CPI split have been made public with the CPI (M) publishing the fourth volume of Communist Movement in Bengal: Documents and Related Facts. The book contains a letter Basu wrote from the Dum Dum Jail on October 9, 1963, titled ‘Save the party from revisionists and dogmatic extremists’. ‘We must stay within the party and continue our ideological struggle against Dange’s revisionism. It will not be right to split the party,’ Basu had said in the letter. ‘Yet, the reckless dogmatists seem to be determined to break up the party.’

“Four decades on, Basu cannot remember having written such a letter. Informed that his party had published his letter, Basu told HT on Friday, ‘I don’t remember having written such a letter. But it’s true that I had tried till the last moments to stop the imminent split. I was of the opinion that it would be incorrect to break the CPI and form a new party. But I failed. There were many differences. We could not stay together any longer.’ The CPI(M)’s book also contains the minutes of a crucial meeting of the party’s working committee.” Unfortunately, the book is in Bengali. An English translation is overdue.

<http://www.frontline.in/navigation/?type=static&page=archive>

ESSAY-MAKING OF A THESIS BY A.G. NOORANI

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INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE

Interviews with two first-generation Communist Party of India leaders provide useful insights into the movement's history in the country. S.S. MIRAJKAR and S.V. Ghate were among the small band of activists who founded the Communist Party of India (CPI). Both were close to S.A. Dange. Both were trade unionists, both were convicted in the Meerut Conspiracy case. Mirajkar was Municipal Corporator, besides. Ghate became the party's treasurer.

They were interviewed as part of the Oral History Project of the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (NMML) in New Delhi, to which this writer is much indebted, not least for the transcripts of such interviews. They were closely questioned by Dr Hari Dev Sharma, sometimes with a prosecutor's zeal. One noticed the first Director B.R. Nanda's uneasiness when the interviewee said things that were not to his liking. This establishment figure fancied himself rather as the defender of the faith. Socialist leaders such as Asoka Mehta, Purshottam Trikamdas and Prem Bhasin were interviewed. One waits in vain for interviews with leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), the Jana Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). How about asking Lal Krishna Advani? Congress leaders of the front rank were also exempted from close scrutiny. H.D. Sharma's interview of the communist leader and man of letters Sajjad Zaheer, on which more later, was shoddy.

India's communist movement is rich in controversies – over its place and date of birth; its disastrous link-up and break with the Congress Socialist Party; its stand on the Second World War, the Quit India Movement and Pakistan; the Ranadive line at the second party congress in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in February 1948 and its reversal in 1950; its stand on Jawaharlal Nehru and the like. There was a continuous debate on the dangers of “reformism” and “sectarianism” (the extreme left line). In 1940-41, veterans like Dange and Mirajkar were interned at the Deoli Detention Camp in Ajmer-Merwara. The underground party outside was led by P.C. Joshi. The “Deoli Thesis” on the “People's War” was smuggled out to instruct those underground. Some Congress Socialists were also detained in Deoli. Stalin was to scold the CPI for its stand on the War.

Mirajkar and Ghate were extremely frank in their interviews to the NMML. Mirajkar said: "The Congress policy was not to have anything to do with the communists and the workers' movement and so on. The Mahatma had already, in 1928, told us, which I have recorded, that he would not allow a single paise to be paid to the strikers led by the communists in Bombay. So that was the attitude. And had we been outside, we would not have behaved in a sectarian manner, as this leadership did in that period.... However, I think, as we also then thought, that mistakes were being committed, and I think we had committed a great mistake in coming into conflict with the 1930 movement. In our own way, [we should have started] some kind of movement which would have run parallel but not in clash and would have ultimately led us together somewhere.

Sharma: Do you think this attitude of the communist leaders who were outside in anyway affected the prospects of the party?

Mirajkar: Yes, it did. For a long time as a result of this sectarian attitude and the attitude which was adopted by that leadership came in our way and created many difficulties for us in the later period. Subsequently, it was corrected. But, while correcting one mistake, we made another mistake. We went to the other extreme of going right. This has been unfortunately the trouble with the Communist Party and its leadership, that they either committed a mistake of going extreme right or extreme left, and the result was that the party suffered, and the party had to pay a big price. For instance, we confessed that we did a wrong thing. However the international situation might demand, the attitude we had adopted was very wrong.

Sharma: Besides [B.T.] Ranadive, who were the other leaders?

Mirajkar: Ranadive and Deshpande were together for some time. Both were brilliant scholars. Ranadive was a first class first in M.A. and comrade Deshpande stood first in the matriculation in those days and had a first class career. He was a non-cooperating student and after non-cooperation, when it was over, he graduated himself from outside. He was a very able teacher. Thus, both were quite brilliant. But, at the same time, they had their idiosyncrasies and this sectarian attitude, which made us to pay a big price.

Sharma: So in your absence, Deshpande and Ranadive controlled the party apparatus?

Mirajkar: Yes. In the beginning they were in the party apparatus. But when we came out Deshpande was not there, Ranadive was there. He was in the party apparatus. He was a member of the polit bureau as well as central committee.

Sharma: After you came out, did you try to tell them that they had done a wrong thing?

Mirajkar: Yes, by that time Deshpande and Ranadive had developed differences. Deshpande controlled the party, whatever it was, a small party. It had one hundred or two hundred members. So they had a split in the party, and Deshpande started the Bolshevik party."

Central committee

Sharma asked, "When was the first central committee of the Communist Party formed?

Mirajkar: In the beginning of 1926. But after our release in 1933 it was reorganised and it started functioning after 1933. P.C. Joshi became its general secretary. At that time Adhikari, P.C. Joshi and other comrades were underground. We were doing most of the work like reorganising and reuniting textile workers and their organisations. When Ghate was taken away, Adhikari became secretary. When Adhikari was taken away, I was made secretary and I continued for some time till I disappeared from the scene. In the meanwhile, it had already started to reorganise and P.C. Joshi became the general secretary.

Sharma: And he continued till 1948?

Mirajkar: He continued till 1948.

Joint front

Sharma: Do you recall under what circumstances the policy of the Communist Party was changed to make a joint front with the Congress and other nationalist parties?

Mirajkar: I cannot tell you in detail because I was cut off more or less. I was not able to follow those years because of my internment. So I would not be able to speak about those developments. Generally, of course, I knew about it. The Faizpur Congress took place. In the meanwhile, comrade Dange was in the AICC [All India Congress Committee] and then led the peasant march. And in the Faizpur Congress our comrades participated in the discussions because Dange was in the AICC. Generally I followed all these developments, but I was not connected with it actively. When I was secretary I had just begun talks with the Congress Socialists and other groups for a united front, but in the meanwhile I was arrested, so the united front tactics were actually carried on by other people in my absence, when I was in internment in Yerwada Jail.

Sharma: When you started this move for a joint front, what was the basis on which you wanted to have such a front?

Mirajkar: We said that we could do mock warfare, for instance, we could cooperate in training in war. Then we could have some kind of programme jointly, and on that basis we could come to some understanding about the programme to be followed by the united front. These were the only talks that were going on. And for the very same purpose I met Jayaprakash Narayan, Minoo Masani, Asoka Mehta and Yusuf Meherally.”

As for the Deoli camp, “In Camp No. II, where Class II prisoners were lodged, Ghate was the leader of that camp. There were about 200 prisoners, mostly Sikh, but there were some from Delhi also. There were about 150 or 160 communists and 25 or 30 socialists – followers of Jayaprakash Narayan. Jayaprakash himself was there.”

There were police informers in the camp, as also advocates of violence against the jailors. B.T. Ranadive (BTR), Dange and Soli Batlivala were transferred. “When the time for transfer came, some of BTR's supporters like Rajni Patel, B.P.L. Bedi, a friend of mine, then Patkar who died – there were about twenty people in the crowd of 150 or 160 – proposed that there should be resistance. There was also a proposal (BTR's proposal) that if there would be any transfer, they would resist it in the same way as the action was proposed; throwing stone, shouting, demonstration, etc., and then there would be firing and some people would be killed. So they proposed that there should be resistance next day. I said: I will take votes from our camp committee members because they are the supreme authority which we have formed here. If they vote for ‘resistance’ or ‘no resistance’, I will carry out the decision. So I took the votes. The barracks were locked and we could not meet but I counted the votes across the barracks, just away from the electric wires. Seven people out of nine voted for ‘no resistance’ and two people voted for ‘resistance’.” In the 1970s, Rajni Patel emerged as Indira Gandhi's ace fund collector with a reputation for “high living” – miles away from his BTR days.

“No party member was instructed, according to the best of my knowledge, to go and join the Congress Socialist Party. We would never do that. We could not ask our members to go and join the party unless there was a special reason for it. We had given permission to certain people, after they had left the party, to join the Congress. But so far as the Congress Socialist Party was concerned, we had some friendly relations with its members and we made no such

attempt of planting our members inside. There were some members of the Congress Socialist Party who had begun to think in terms of communism, communists and communist politics, and if such people decided and expressed their desire to join the Communist Party, how were we to help it? For instance, the whole group of members of the Congress Socialist Party in Kerala expressed their desire to join the Communist Party headed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, A.K. Gopalan and others. So we said: Yes, you are welcome, and they joined our party. In this way, many people joined our party, and that was a shock to Jayaprakash Narayan and Masani in those days that so many people were joining our party, but we did not plant anybody there. And subsequently, as a result of our policies – our policy convinced them that ours was the correct political line – if they said that they wanted to join our party, should we have refused them? We did not refuse them. We told them: All right, join our party. And a large number of them came, and this was interpreted as an attempt to disrupt their party.” In truth, there was never any surfeit of trust between the CSP and the CPI.

Sharma: How far the policies of the Communist Party in India were influenced or directed by the Communist International?

Mirajkar: We were part of the Communist International as long as it functioned. We do not hide this fact but that does not mean that every time, every day we got a telegram from the Communist International to do this or to do that. General directions were there for the communist movement because the communist movement is an international movement. The general directions for colonial people were laid down in the Colonial Thesis. We worked according to the general directions laid down by the Congress of the Communist International but that does not mean that every day the Communist International used to interfere in our affairs and directed us to do this, meet Jayaprakash Narayan and agree with J.P.; nothing of the kind. All the national policies were drawn in the general directions of the Communist International and within those general directions we worked. So we and our central committee were responsible for all the national policies that we pursued in our country and it was so with regard to all other countries and communist parties.

People's war thesis

Sharma: For example, was the People's War Thesis a result of their own thinking or direction of...?

Mirajkar: It was the result of their own thinking. It was a wrong thinking. BTR was in discussion with Dange and others. They discussed it and BTR moved it in Ajmer Jail. After that they came back from Ajmer to the Deoli Camp Jail. When we were together again, we were likely to discuss it. He was drafting the thesis and all. And subsequently, when he came back, our committee discussed it inside the jail.

Sharma: So the first draft was made by BTR?

Mirajkar: Yes, BTR and then subsequently it was taken up when we were released in 1942. Perhaps he placed it before the central committee and the committee accepted it after discussions. But it was a wrong thing.

Sharma: Now, before the resolution, before he came out of jail, were there discussions on the thesis in Deoli Camp? What were the opinions of the other members?

Mirajkar: You see, generally other members agreed. I think one or two dissented. I was also not in hundred per cent agreement. And I expressed my dissent also to some extent.

Sharma: Who were the others holding a different opinion?

Mirajkar: I think Ajoy Ghosh and Ghate. So three of us had some doubts, but ultimately it became a party policy. Therefore, we had to carry it out if we had to remain in the party. We did not want to leave the party.

Sharma: Then it was discussed in the central committee?

Mirajkar: Yes, subsequently, it was discussed in the central committee and became the party thesis and the sole guide of all our actions until it was reversed.

Sharma: Now, looking back, do you think it was a right line for the party to take?

Mirajkar: I think it was a wrong line. Frankly speaking, I felt doubtful then also and now I am confirmed that it was a very wrong line taken up by the party. At that time the party either should have turned it down or should have [adopted] a separate anti-imperialist programme and action but along with the Congress or side by side with the Congress or parallel to the Congress, that would have been much better. Although there were some international considerations also, those considerations should not have weighed with us. They were quite strong enough to take care of themselves. We should have taken care of ourselves and the situation that existed in our country before and on the 9th of August.

Sharma: The only advantage which you got from this was that the Communist Party was made legal.

Mirajkar: Yes. The Communist Party was made legal, and for some time we got all freedom to do whatever we liked, which was not there before.

Sharma: Mr Mirajkar, in what ways did the Communist Party of India cooperate with the government in its People's War effort?

Mirajkar: You see there were various forms of our alleged cooperation. We did cooperate to some extent, I must say now, for instance, we offered our squad led by girls to go and entertain the fighting forces. The government had offered us facilities for training a few people and they were sent for training; guerilla fighting and so on. Then they wanted us, as I told you, the Police Commissioner wanted us to find out the people who were working against them, and, of course, I refused. I said: Nothing doing. We are not your informers. We cooperated with you insofar as the war effort was concerned but we are not your informers to get them arrested. We will not do that and we never did that. We did many other things at that time, for instance, our writings – mainly. Then our whole advocacy was for the war effort. So these were some of the forms of cooperation with the government, but it did not last very long. Of course, it lasted some time but not very long. And ultimately, later on our policy was also changed. For instance, when Leaders' Conference took place and some of the big leaders wanted that the national leaders and the members of the Congress Working Committee should be released, and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, and M.R. Jayakar were trying to bring about some settlement and release of those people, in that conference our representative was also present. BTR was sent there to represent the Communist Party. At the same time it is also true that in 1942-43, we did cooperate in many ways in the war effort of the government.

Sharma: Did the government render some financial assistance to the party during this period?

Mirajkar: I do not think so. I do not know. I do not think any money or anything of the kind was received. It was openly received by M.N. Roy. He had started a separate trade union organisation and it was being paid openly." Wavell's Journal as well as the Transfer of Power documents reveal that Roy asked for Rs.10,000 per month plus a seat on the Viceroy's Executive Council. It prompted Wavell to remark that he was a Viceroy not Vice-Roy. One is not aware of any Royist censuring this after the disclosure.

Sharma: What were the other ways in which the party cooperated?

Mirajkar: Mainly the ideological ways, that is all. The whole damn thing was to do propaganda openly. We were against strikes in that period, we were against the movement that was going on or was led by the Congress, and the Congress Socialists and we were against those people. So, we were carrying on propaganda actively against these things. This is the form of cooperation we gave.

The 1942 movement

Sharma: In what ways did you oppose the 1942 movement?

Mirajkar: In 1942, what happened was we had collected some members of the central committee on the 9th of August. There I was asked to go and stop the strike that had taken place. I refused. I said: Well, I am not going there. I cannot go. I cannot do that. So I was against it. But later on, we did carry out also because we had to carry out the decisions of the majority of the party. I was their spokesman in Bombay. Although my heart was not in it, I used to go and do this and that and negotiate with them.

Sharma: Another idea which was taken up by the CPI was, of the Pakistan thesis as propounded by Dr Adhikari. Now, looking back, what do you think was the opinion of the other members of the party then?

Mirajkar: At that time, of course, we did not pay much attention to it. We all agreed and we supported it. At that time we did not pay serious attention. I do not think we opposed it. At least, I did not oppose much. But looking back and thinking seriously about the whole question, I think it was a sad mistake on our part and on the part of the Communist Party too to have supported the idea. We were here cooperating with the League leaders, the big leaders in Bombay. Jinnah was in Bombay at that time but now I think it was very wrong on our part and we should not have done that. That thesis itself was wrong and the Communist Party had made a mistake in saying and supporting the League at that time, so far as the idea of Pakistan was concerned.

Sharma: What was the norm of cooperation with the League?

Mirajkar: They were not very active in the norms of the cooperation, but we held meetings.

Sharma: Joint meetings?

Mirajkar: No, no joint meeting was ever held. But we held our own meetings and supported it. Whether they wanted our support or not that is a different matter altogether but we held public meetings supporting their idea which perhaps was not liked by the people, naturally. Now, looking back, that was, of course a black chapter in our history. I should say."

P.C. Joshi wrote a brilliant pamphlet after the failure of the Gandhi-Jinnah talks in 1944 entitled "They Must Meet Again". This writer will be most grateful to any reader who provides a copy of the pamphlet or its photocopy.

Gandhi's line

Sharma: One more question about the party's attitude towards Mahatma Gandhi. You know this has changed quite frequently from dubbing him as an agent of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist class to a great leader of mass awakening. Why this change has taken place in the party's attitude towards him from time to time?

Mirajkar: You see, so far as Gandhiji's political line was concerned, I do think even now that he was a spokesman of the capitalist class. So far as the awakening that he had brought about since the Non-cooperation Movement and the Satyagraha in 1930 is concerned, and to some

extent the anti-imperialist role he played, was a correct thing; but, on the whole, if you take Gandhiji's general political line, it was in support of capitalism and he did not want anything else but freedom and freedom for capitalists in this country, that is my firm view. But so far as dubbing him as an agent of imperialism and all that it concerned, this is going too far, which we had done. We had done many good things, many bad things; and this may be one of the bad things certainly. But generally his political thinking was in favour of capitalism and not of socialism. And the same policy and the same line was followed by Nehru also in all these sixteen years or seventeen years which people have witnessed. Even now Indira Gandhi is also carrying out the same policy. After splitting the Congress, for some time hopes were roused that something new was coming, but I do not think there is much new in it and she is also following the same line. Nehru built up capitalism during all these years in this country and it has become monopoly capitalism. The same line is being pursued with little change in talks, in words, during his daughter's regime. This is what I think about Mahatma Gandhi generally.

Sharma: As the years rolled by, you know, your assessment of him has changed. The use of strong words and other things have become a little softer now than before. How do you account for this change?

Mirajkar: That is because in those days we were young and did not weigh the things correctly, see things correctly. Then there were some people amongst us who even now also say and support the same thing. But on the whole, the party has grown, matured, and after maturity the party certainly weighs words while characterising any individual for his actions. And therefore its softening – that is true – in words, etc., is the result of maturity of the Communist Party and communist movement in this country.

Sharma: And the evaluation is also different from what it used to be at one time?

Mirajkar: The main point of the evaluation is there. There I would not compromise. But then other evaluations, that we made sometimes, were childish. We have behaved in a childish fashion sometimes. So that is not to be taken very seriously which was wrong, of course, no doubt. People said many things about Gandhiji and some of our sectarians have said the worst thing.”

As Mirajkar recalled, “The Ranadive period began in 1942 with the People's War Thesis and he went to the extreme. And in all party (meetings) discussions began to take place with regard to the line pursued by P.C. Joshi. It was characterised very definitely as the reformist line and there is no doubt that it was a reformist line but that did not mean, however, that we should go to the other extreme, which Ranadive pursued. The central committee agreed with BTR's line then and P.C. Joshi's line was characterised as a reformist line. Everybody agreed, including Dr Adhikari, who supported Ranadive's line quite actively, Ghate and myself. And while such discussion was going on, it was decided to hold the party congress in Calcutta in 1948, where Ranadive's thesis was accepted. And the Telengana [issue] became the main job because immediately after the congress, the speech which Ranadive made at St. Thomas Mount was on Telengana, Telengana and Telengana – it again carried us to the other extreme.”...

It was a reaction to P.C. Joshi's “reformist” line – a line which, if pursued, would have made the CPI a powerful force in the 1950s. To reverse it, “we met in Calcutta at the second conference of our party, to correct it. At that time, our foreign friends had also come. For instance, the Burmese leader Than Tun had come. Then the Australian leader and the Yugoslavian leader had also come. Recently, the Yugoslav people asked me a question and

took a long statement as to what advice the Yugoslavian leader had given us at the congress at that time. So I made a long statement and sent that to Yugoslavia. And as a result of that action had been taken against him in Yugoslavia. So while correcting one mistake, we went to the other extreme under Ranadive's leadership. Thus, the party was again banned and several people went underground for about two or three years. And while underground it became impossible to hold meetings. Then we – Ghate, Dange, Ajoy Ghosh and myself – were arrested immediately and were all sent to prison. So during these years, considerable amount of sectarian mistakes were committed.

“Huge writings used to come to jail which meant nothing. So we wrote many letters to him (i.e., BTR) and said: These mistakes have been committed, they ought to be corrected. But he would not take any notice. Everybody said ‘yes’ to his point of view in that period. Even my friend Jyoti Basu who subsequently recanted, who is now with him once again, agreed with us. And not only that, you see, in the trade union field also Ranadive interfered too much. He expelled N.M. Joshi as general secretary of the AITUC and appointed his brother-in-law, one Rangnekar, the general secretary of the Trade Union Congress. Several things had happened in that period. The Railwaymen's Federation was formed separately. There were no followers.”

(PHOTOGRAPHS: THE HINDU ARCHIVES At a meeting of the polit bureau of the Communist Party of India in 1945 in Bombay, (from left) B.T. Ranadive, G. Adhikari and P.C. Joshi).

New Delhi, 1958: Members of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti headed by S.S. Mirajkar (facing the camera, third from right), then the Mayor of Bombay, demonstrating before Parliament House.

Lahore, 1939: Mahatma Gandhi (circled) on a train at the railway station on his way to meet Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and other nationalist Muslim leaders following Mohammad Ali Jinnah's demand for a separate state for Muslims. Mirajkar says: “I think it was a sad mistake on our part and on the part of the Communist Party too to have supported the idea [of Pakistan]... the Communist Party had made a mistake in... supporting the League... so far as the idea of Pakistan was concerned.”

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INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE

ESSAY-Origins of Indian communism by A.G. NOORANI

This insider account helps clarify some of the long-held misconceptions about the origins of the Communist Party in India and its evolution. S.V. Ghate, one of the founders of the Communist Party of India spoke to Dr Hari Dev Sharma about the formation and early years of the Communist Party in India as part of the Oral History Project of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. The first part of the essay was published in the issue dated May 4.

S.V. GHATE was asked if he would throw some light on the Communist Party of India's date of birth. “Yes, I will, because this problem came before us when the Indonesian Communist Party asked us: When was the Communist Party of India formed? Then the Polit Bureau or the Secretariat (I don't remember which) met, and we held that the Communist Party in India was formed in December 1925. But we had already heard that when M.N. Roy was in Tashkent, the Communist Party was formed there, much against his will. We said whether it was formed in Tashkent or not, it did not function properly, though it is a fact that the basis

was laid there. But the actual formation of the Communist Party, bringing together all the different communist groups in the country, took place in Kanpur, and that laid the foundation of the Communist Party of India. That is what the Polit Bureau decided at that time.

“Now, Muzaffar Ahmad and others are trying to say that our Communist Party was formed under different circumstances, but the real Communist Party was formed in Tashkent. Now, our statement does not deny the formation of the Communist Party in Tashkent. Our statement says that the Communist Party of India, as an Indian communist party, was formed in Kanpur. It might have been formed in Tashkent. But it did not survive because when some of its members came back to India, they were arrested and put in prison.”

H.D. Sharma: Who were the founders of the Communist Party in India?

S.V. Ghate: The nucleus of the party was in different places and different people were there. But the work of bringing them together at Kanpur was done by a man named Satya Bhakta. He had contacts with M.N. Roy. He wanted to come forward with a new idea of forming a new party. Thus he formed a committee. He got help from Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi and his paper, Pratap. So Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi came forward to help these people. He was also a leftist. Satya Bhakta took an opportunity to call a meeting of all the communists in the country. He issued an appeal and when we saw that we immediately went there.

S.V. GHATE (standing, left), one of the founders of the Communist Party in India, with other party leaders.

When we went there, the whole shape of the thing was changed. He said he wanted to call it the Indian Communist Party. The first wrangling started there. Now, I said that we couldn't call it the Indian Communist Party because the general international form was the Communist Party of this country, that country. So it should be called the Communist Party of India. He said: No, this is a foreign idea. We said that foreign or otherwise, but the Communist Party of India should be the name and we carried the day. We were the vocal people on the platform – K.N. Joglekar, R.S. Nimbkar, and I. I do not think S.S. Mirajkar was there. Dange was not there. So we carried the day and Satya Bhakta was defeated....

Satya Bhakta said he was forming a national communist party – Indian National Communist Party. He told that to Mitrokhin also. Then, at the outset, our old man, Singaravelu Chettiar, presided and made a speech. It was a printed speech. Then Arjunlal Sethi, who was in the Congress in the old days and became a Muslim later on, was there.”

Sharma: Yes, he became a Mussalman and he used to live in the Dargah in Ajmer. He belonged to the terrorist group.

Ghate: Yes. He had come there and there was a tiff between him and Jawaharlal Nehru. Now, when we decided that the Communist Party of India should have its headquarters in Bombay (now Mumbai), Satya Bhakta said that he had started the party and we were taking it to Bombay! Why did we want to take it to Bombay? We told him that Bombay was an industrial centre where the Communist Party should be. The working classes there were more organised.

Hasrat Mohani was there; he was chairman of the reception committee. Then there were some foreign delegates. I do not remember who they were. They called themselves delegates. Anyone could call himself a delegate in those days.”

Sharma: Now, Mr Ghate, one small point. Hasrat Mohani was an eminent Urdu poet, and was a member of the Indian National Congress. He was also a member of the Muslim League and was more of a firebrand. What was his connection with the communists?

Ghate: I cannot say much about him. He called himself a republican, if you remember.
Sharma: He appeared, as a matter of fact, in 1921 at Ahmedabad.

Ghate: He has stated that he wanted complete independence for India.
Sharma: He moved a resolution in the Indian National Congress which was opposed by Gandhiji.

Ghate: Yes. He probably did not agree with the Congress and he took to leftist movement. Probably, our aim also was put up there as complete independence from the British. So that must have attracted him and he came. At that time not much distinction was made as to who was coming and who was not coming....

Sharma: Mr Ghate, what was the relationship between the Communist Party of India and the Communist International?

Ghate: We had absolutely no correspondence with the International. We ourselves held that we were part of the International. At that time there was no possibility of any correspondence between the two. I think when we were in jail, in 1930 or 1931, the Communist Party was affiliated to the Communist International and there were lots of attempts to go to the meetings, but nothing succeeded. Therefore, the relationship between the two was that we read their resolutions and tried to see how far they suited our country's needs, and thus we accordingly shaped the actions. But otherwise there was no correspondence with them. Only for the Sixth World Congress, as I told you, Shaukat Usmani and some three others went there. Saumyendra Nath Tagore also attended the Sixth World Congress. The Communist International magazine, that paper called the International Press Correspondence (Inprecor), published the speeches of these people but they were very small. We could not make out much.

Shaukat Usmani represented India because the British Communist Party wanted somebody to represent India. These people happened to be there at that time. So they said: Why not put them as representatives of India. Then we, from here, wired to British Communist Party that we did not want them as representatives of the Communist Party of India. The telegram was couched like this: 'University gives no powers', which meant that these people should not be our representatives. The wire never reached them because it was intercepted.

Sharma: So they represented you.

Ghate: They were sent there and they represented us.

Sharma: How far the policies or messages of the Communist International influenced you?

Ghate: They influenced a lot. We used to get the Comintern magazine, a weekly or monthly, occasionally. We could not get it all the time, whatever percolated through the post we could get, and occasionally somebody or other would come and we would get information. It was not a regular affair. From the International things which we could get to read, we could formulate our own policies. We considered ourselves a part of the International Communist movement and this continued, till the Comintern was dissolved. Later on, we got more and more connections in that sense, but by that time we, too, had matured a lot after all the imprisonments and reading. But directly we could not establish contacts.

Sharma: Since the united front broke down, it has been generally said by the communists that the CSP [Congress Socialist Party] was not genuinely socialist; they have compared it to

social democrats of Europe. In view of the above why were you keen to have an alliance with them?

Ghate: In the early stages we had to ally with different people who called themselves socialists. In the beginning we thought it [would be] good if we could work together, and Jayaprakash also agreed to the fact that the Congress Socialist Party would be the party where different types of people would come; and that would be a sort of recruiting ground from where the Communist Party would select its membership.

Sharma: Was it not partly due to the fact that the Communist Party had been declared illegal in 1934 and had no platform to work that they wanted to enter this party?

Ghate: You can say that, but we were functioning in different ways. I told you we had Youth Leagues in different places; we were functioning in the trade unions. So it was known that we were communists and there was no question of that. As regards the political platform, probably it was difficult to have one and we thought that this was the best one. It is quite likely that we might have thought of this also, but we had already started the Workers' and Peasants' Party and there was no need for us to go [to anybody]. But here was a party that was functioning within the Congress and we were also within the Congress at that time.

Sharma: And you continued to work in the CSP for some time. Then what led to the breaking up of this alliance? I think, finally, at the time of the Ramgarh Congress in 1940, the communists were expelled by the national executive of the CSP. What led to it?

Ghate: Because they thought that we were there to disrupt the Congress Socialist Party. I think that was the main reason. When the war broke out in 1939, the branches of the Congress Socialist Party in which we were functioning declared that they were the branches of the Communist Party.

Sharma: Mr Ghate, my impression is that from the very beginning, from both sides, it was a marriage of convenience. One was trying to outwit the other. Probably, the CSP thought that they would swell their membership, and the communists, since their party had been declared illegal, wanted some platform for their work.

Ghate: Quite possible. But then, I don't see why we should have gone for that. We had the Workers' and Peasants' Party.

Sharma: Later on, if you remember, some documents were circulated by the communists within the CSP, and Masani has mentioned them in his history of the Communist Party.

Ghate: I don't remember; you must remember that part of the time I was in jail when all these things were happening. So it was very difficult to keep track.

I am talking mostly from my memory and, therefore, I cannot swear that everything that I will say would be exact, but my memory has not cheated me so much. But I don't know what particular document you mean.

Sharma: On the national executive of the CSP, for example, they had Sajjad Zaheer and E.M.S. Namboodiripad as joint secretaries. Two documents were sent by Namboodiripad to various members of the CSP who were communists. So Masani's contention is that the communists were working as a well-knit group within the CSP.

Ghate: I think it is all right, they were functioning as communists. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, as I told you, joined the Communist Party very late. He was also functioning as secretary of the Congress in Kerala, not only of the Congress Socialist Party. Later, one Abdur Rehman, who

became a Forward Bloc man, was also the president of the Congress. Nambudiripad became the secretary of the Congress.

Sharma: And they were trying to capture the CSP and turn it into a communist party.

Ghate: There was nothing to capture in the Kerala Congress because we were a majority in the Kerala Congress.

Sharma: On the all-India basis, they wanted to capture the CSP and turn it in a communist party.

Ghate: You might say that it was coming to that, if at all. But I don't think it could have come to that; essentially, the leadership of the Congress Socialist Party was opposed to us, though, in the beginning, the opposition was rather mellow, but later on they started opposing the whole thing more and more.

Sharma: But why did they do that?

Ghate: It is very difficult for me to answer for them.

Sharma: Is it probably that the communists were becoming too powerful?

Ghate: Maybe. I cannot say. Supposing you try to come and dominate a movement we have started, then it is quite likely that conflicts will arise.

Sharma: So it was a conflict of that sort?

Ghate: Probably that, I think. For instance, Yusuf Meherally and Achyut Patwardhan came to Madras [now Chennai] when I was there. In Madras, there was very little to distinguish between the Communist Party and the Congress Socialist Party workers, but then we never gave them to understand that it was the communist group that was functioning.

Where the party was strong [it] was able to muster itself, and where the working classes were with us, as in so many areas in the South, it could be done; and they [CSP] had no working class [backing] or anything. That is why we were able to come up. In 1939, the signboard was changed; the same people were called the Communist Party. That happened only in the South.

Sharma: Yes, it happened in Madras and Kerala. What was the attitude of the communists towards the Congress movement?

Ghate: We still wanted to function in the Congress until Jawaharlal Nehru got very wild. (They would blame us for everything that went wrong.) For instance, once, some loudspeaker failed. Vallabhbai [Patel] said that it were the communists who had done that."

Sharma: In 1944-45, the party was following a policy. Then suddenly in 1948 they changed the policy. Why?

Ghate: You see, in the second party congress, the policy was changed, if you remember. The author of the second party congress documents was my old friend, [B.T.] Ranadive, and at that time we accepted the thesis without much hesitation. Later on, we had to correct the thing. In 1949-50, we again came out of jail under Morarji. I was then in Bombay jail. So we did change, saying that we wrongly assessed that situation. Independence we should have accepted as independence and gone forward. But we have been making mistakes every time. As somebody said: You are making mistakes and every time you say that you have made mistakes. Of course, it is not every time that we make mistakes. We have progressed also. We

made mistakes, we progressed. We corrected them [mistakes] whenever we had the opportunity. But after the second party congress in 1948 we went to the devil.

Sharma: What were the reasons for the rejection of Joshi's leadership?

Ghate: You see this man [Ranadive] came with a different theory and at that time it was rather attractive to the whole party congress. The party congress accepted his thesis. And Joshi in the party congress accepted that he had made mistakes, that he was wrong. He was wrong. Then like the rising sun, he [Ranadive] came up.

Sharma: What was your personal reaction?

Ghate: Personal reaction? I did not pay much attention [to it] at that time. I myself fell in with the whole thing.

Sharma: What mistakes had Joshi committed?

Ghate: It is difficult for me to say just now. I do not want to say also. Why should I say he has made so many mistakes when I myself have been a partner in them. As a Central Committee member, I must own [my role in] some of the mistakes that he has made. To say that Joshi alone was responsible....

Sharma: I mean the collective leadership?

Ghate: That is right. One of the mistakes was our assessment of the Muslim demand; we were keenly concerned with the Pakistan business. You must have seen Dr Adhikari's pamphlet on Pakistan. So there are so many things like that. For instance, if we had stuck on to the question of imperialist war probably we would not have made so many mistakes in the period. After all, we were in jail. Supposing I say something from jail, it need not necessarily be religiously accepted by everybody. But once the idea comes that you are wrong then the whole thing comes down on you.

Sharma: But did not anyone say that Ranadive's thesis of 1948 was based on certain idea which was unreal in view of the prevailing conditions?

Ghate: I do not think there was much opposition to that in the party congress.

Sharma: Even [P.C.] Joshi did not oppose it.

Ghate: Joshi admitted that it was right and that he was mistaken in so many things. Joshi admitted that.

Sharma: Was the admission a result of depression or was it sincere?

Ghate: I think it must have been sincere. I do not attribute anything insincere to him.

Sharma: Because after that Joshi has not come into his own again.

Ghate: That is true. Probably, in the underground, we had suffered a lot. There was a lot of bitterness against the way of his treatment of things, and that worked on his mind.

Sharma: But as far as I can remember, in the 1950s, say, when the CPI became legal again, Joshi was the first for moderating the ideas. I think he went ahead of other leaders of the Central Committee.

Ghate: You see, that was a period when nobody had confidence in anybody. It was a period of chaos. In 1950, after the big deluge, the party was underground; [certain] things came out so that nobody could say anything, nobody believed any other man and we tried to reconcile to certain facts. Dange, Ajoy Ghosh and myself, by issuing a letter called Three Ps Document circulated on September 30, 1950, tried to reorganise whatever was left of the party. It was then that a delegation went to Moscow and met Stalin.

Sharma: Who were in the delegation?

Ghate: There were four people – two Rightists and two Leftists. I think Basavapunniah, Ajoy Ghosh, Dange and Rajeswara Rao. They were called there. They [Russians] said: You come, and discuss with us things that have happened.

Sharma: The party was still underground?

Ghate: The party was underground. The party conference was held underground in Calcutta [now Kolkata]. I myself was present at that conference. At that time people were being arrested. All these things were blowing up – all the dens and all that – and some people were leaving and coming out on their own. It was a period of great chaos and we are not yet out of that, not even today, even in 1970, 20 years after.

After coming out of jail we had tried to unify the party; we sent out a circular letter called 'Three Ps letter' signed by Prabhod, Purshottam and Prakash, that is, Dange, myself and Ajoy Ghosh. This circular helped to consolidate whatever was left of the party at that time and he was one of those who formulated the idea.

Sharma: Why did you withdraw the Telengana struggle?

Ghate: Telengana struggle I think was withdrawn in 1951 or 1952 by the central committee because at that time the people were being decimated. There were no arms and no place and so we said that the best thing is to withdraw the struggle.

Sharma: But was it launched without much preparation?

Ghate: No, it was launched all right with the knowledge of the second party congress. We knew that we were launching this struggle.

Sharma: But did it go according to your plan?

Ghate: I cannot say exactly; but more or less it was fought according to our ideas at that time and it was successful also. In so many places we were able to give land to so many people in those days, but now I think it has all gone back to the landlords from whom we had taken. [P.] Sundarayya, [C.] Rajeswara Rao, [M.] Basavapunniah were all in the active service in that period and their wives were also underground, helping their husbands, running from forest to forest.

Sharma: Mr Ghate, who has been the most scholarly Marxist in the party?

Ghate: In our party, Dr [G.] Adhikari. In fact, Ranadive thinks that he is one of the scholars, but he interprets Marx in an entirely wrong channel.

The CPI split in 1964 and there seems little prospect now of the CPI and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) kissing and making up.

THE HINDU ARCHIVES - TWENTY-FIVE OF THE prisoners in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, photographed outside the Meerut jail. Back row: (left to right) K.N. Sehgal, S.S. Joshi, H. Lester Hutchinson, Shaukat Usmani, B.F. Bradly, A. Prasad, Philip Spratt, and G. Adhikari. Middle row: K.R. Mitra, Gopan Chakravarthy, Kishore Lal Ghosh, K.L. Kadam, D.R. Thengdi, Goura Shanker, S. Banerjee, K.N. Joglekar, P.C. Joshi, and Muzaffar Ahmed. Front row: M.G. Desai, G. Goswami, R.S. Nimkar, S.S. Mirajkar, S.A. Dange, S.V. Ghate and Gopal Basak.

S.A. DANGE. both Ghate and Ajoy Ghosh were close to him. The three of them issued "a letter called 'Three Ps Document'" in September 1950 in an attempt to reorganise whatever was left of the party then.

<http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2909/stories/20120518290908900.htm>

Sajjad Zaheer -A versatile communist, by A.G. NOORANI in Frontline

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INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE from the publishers of THE HINDU
PART I

Sajjad Zaheer became a communist in Britain, but back in India he joined the Congress in the anti-imperialist struggle against the British. Sajjad Zaheer's contribution to the communist movement, to the world of literature and to the cause of secularism still awaits due acknowledgement. He was born in a prosperous family but chose a life of struggle. He began participating in the freedom movement in 1915 when he was 14. His father, Sir Syed Wazir Hasan, could not have approved of it. He became Chief Judge of Oudh.

Sajjad Zaheer took a Master's degree from Oxford University and became a barrister. In England, however, he not only joined the London Branch of the Indian National Congress but also established the first group of Indian communist students. On his return to India, Sajjad Zaheer worked closely with Jawaharlal Nehru as the general secretary of the Congress Committee of Allahabad. It is little known that even when he was president of the Congress, Nehru took an active interest in its Allahabad outfit. Sajjad Zaheer was a born founder. He founded the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and promoted the All India Kisan Sabha. The Communist Party of India was underground, and communist literature was banned in India though not in Britain. Sajjad Zaheer read it avidly while in England and made contact with the top leaders of the CPI. He also found time to edit the magazine *Chingari* (Spark). When the ban on the CPI was lifted, he edited the party journals *Qaumi Jang* (People's War) and *Naya Zamana* (New Era).

In 1948, the CPI sent him to Pakistan to organise the party there. He was appointed general secretary of the Communist Party of Pakistan. Though he was underground for three years he did a lot to organise workers and students. In 1951 he was arrested and put on trial in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case. In prison he wrote *Zikr-e-Hafiz* and *Roshnai* (The Light). On his release from jail in 1955, he returned to India and resumed work as the general secretary of the PWA. He died in 1973.

Sajjad Zaheer translated Shakespeare, Voltaire, Tagore and Khalil Gibran. There are many accounts of communists' role in the Congress Socialist Party. None better than his. Also, it is fascinating to read how he became a communist in Britain. This writer reviewed in this journal Hasan Zaheer's *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case* (1998) and *The Light* (2006), which is an authoritative account of the Progressive Writers' Movement.

It fell to H.D. Sharma, as in the case of other communist leaders, to interview Sajjad Zaheer for the Oral History Programme of the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library in New Delhi, to which this writer is indebted for the transcript. It ends on page 100. The entire phase of the Calcutta Congress (1948), P.C. Joshi's ouster from office as general secretary, and the Ranadive Line deserve closer study. Worst of all, Sharma could and ought to have acquired from him a full account of his days in Pakistan, including his trial. He did not. His pathetic performance leaves us with little; but the little is very worthwhile on the days in Britain and on the Congress Socialist Party, particularly with a bit on the PWA. Zaheer: I had not read any communist literature before I went to England. It was only in England that it was possible to do so.

Sharma: How were you initiated to Marxism?

Zaheer: I cannot pinpoint any specific time or date, but this was about the time I met those people at the Congress of the League Against Imperialism. It was a most important influence on me. Then, of course, my association with comrade Shapurji Saklatvala and other British communists, specially British intellectuals, was there. I knew Harry Pollitt, general secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Sometimes he invited me to his flat and we had a long talk. That is about all. Then, the British Communist Party helped us to organise a study circle in our group and in this group the person who really taught me Marxism as a teacher was Ralph Fox, the famous writer, who was later killed in the Spanish Civil War, and David Guest, another very brilliant Marxist scholar from Cambridge, son of Dr Haden Guest, Labour MP. This Guest (the son) was a Marxist. He was a philosopher, historian and got a first class first throughout; a very brilliant and very fine man. Actually, it was he who introduced me to Marx' s Capital. Another person who was in touch with the Indian communist group there was Ben Bradley. He was a British worker and was in India. He was also involved in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. After his release he came to England, and used to look after our group there. But this was in the late thirties.

Sharma: Do you remember some of the books which you read at the time of Marxism?

Zaheer: First of all, of course, The Communist Manifesto. Then, I think one of the books that I liked most and I still like Engels' Socialism, Utopian or Scientific. But I think that the most practical influences in the organisation of the communist movement and its basic tenets were through Lenin's books, particularly his 'What Is To Be Done, which sort of lays down the essentials in regard to the organisation of a communist party and a communist movement, the need of a paper, the need of a group, the need of a centralised democratic leadership, discipline, etc. Then apart from 'What Is To Be Done, the two other books which I consider to be among the best which Lenin ever wrote were his Leftwing Communism: An Infantile Disorder (not that we could protect

ourselves from this disorder with which our party suffered in India quite a lot and still does) and State and Revolution.

Then of course, Marx's historical writings. I must say I am not a good economist, but I have made a fairly good study of historical materialism and Marx's historical writings. Then the more recent books. One of the books that influenced us, this was after Hitler came to power in the early thirties, was John Strachey's book on socialism, *The Struggle for Power*, and his another book. John Strachey was also a very fine speaker, and in the great United Front movement in England, which developed after Hitler came to power, he was one of its luminaries, one of its leading lights. Later on, of course, after the [Second World] War, I think, he left political life and became a very respectable leader of the Labour Party. But John Strachey was certainly a very brilliant man.

Sharma: Besides the original writings of Marx and Lenin, do you remember having read some books by other authors?

Zaheer: Well, our main primer, the main book was Rajani Palme Dutt's *India Today*. That was a very small book to begin with, but that gave us an understanding of the Indian political, social and economic situation. We accepted that as our basic book. I must also tell you that Dutt was also one of the most important influences on me personally. I used to know him in England, used to meet him occasionally. He is a very scholarly type of a man, rather cold in his manners compared to Indians. We are warm-hearted people, like to sit down, chat and talk.

Saklatvala was like any other Indian, but Dutt in spite of his Indian name...is not only half-Indian, he is full European and his manners and behaviour are like that of an Englishman, which are a little chilling.

Sharma: Did you read some books about the Russian Revolution?

Zaheer: Yes. Being in England, one of the greatest advantage was the free availability of literature of all kind that one wanted to read. There was a bookshop at 16 King Street (in a room downstairs), which is the headquarters of the Communist Party. We used to visit [the bookshop] almost every week to get the Communist International's weekly, *Inprecor*, *International Press Correspondence*, and the *Daily Worker*. Sometimes I used to buy *La Humanite* also, the French [Communist] Party's paper, and some other journals. *Soviet Literature* magazine was also one of my favourites. It still is. During this time there was a great ferment among writers, specially after Hitler came to power, just before the Second World War. I think this was the period when I really, intellectually and politically, got most involved in all these things. The great French writer Romain Rolland, Maxim Gorky, Henri Barbusse and Thomas Mann were the great figures of European literature at that time. The famous French poet Louis Aragon was still young, but I had the good fortune of

meeting him in Paris. After finishing my studies at Oxford (I took B.A. (Honours) degree) I came to India for a year and went back again to finish my Law studies. I was there again from 1932 to 1935. During this time, while living in London, studying Law, I used to go to Paris quite often because I had very good friends there. Dr Shankatullah Ansari, the Governor of Orissa, and some other Bengali friends were studying in Paris, and most of my holidays I used to spend in France. There, of course, Left radical and communist movement was far stronger and more effective. This was the period of the first successful United Front movement.

I must record this, that at Oxford, during this period, the first communists in the whole university were Indians - one or two others and myself. There used to be three political clubs among Oxford University students - the Conservative Club, the Liberal Club and the Labour Club. They belonged loosely to these three ideologies. In the Labour Club there used to be a few Marxists also, but none was a communist as such. The communist movement among British students was very weak. It has always been weak. It is not so now I believe, but in my days there were no British communist students.

But when the October Club was formed, there was a new leftist swing, Marxist or communist swing, among the West European intelligentsia after Hitler's advent to power, in order to stop Fascism and the Second World War, which was already looming large. At that time there was a ferment among British students and the first organisers [of the October Club], those who decided to form a more radical club than the Labour Club, were the British students whom I knew, who were junior to me, and were friends of mine. We consulted among ourselves, and it was decided by these British friends to form this October Club. Among its leaders, I remember two names very well; one American student, Myer, who later on became a very eminent economist, I believe. I have lost touch with him. I don't know what happened to him in the United States. Another was John Freeman, not the British High Commissioner, who was here, but of the same name. He was also junior to me, and there were some others. But all the students who joined the October Club were not communist, but they were not anti-communist.

One of the meetings, which I will never forget, was the one when the October Club people invited George Bernard Shaw, to come and address it. He had consistently refused [to come to Oxford]. He had never been to Oxford. He said, "This place is too degenerated, too aristocratic and I don't want to go there." But when the October Club was formed, he had just been to the Soviet Union and came back full of praise for her. He came to Oxford and agreed to address the October Club. There was a small group of pro-fascist students among British students and they said they would not allow Shaw to speak. So we decided to defend that meeting and among the chief defenders of

the meeting was my dear friend, B.P.L. Bedi, who was at that time physically the strongest man at Oxford. He still is, I am glad to say, very hefty and powerful person...

After Shaw had finished, the audience was asked if any one wanted to ask questions of Shaw. Shaw's speech was mainly about his experiences and impressions of the Soviet Union, which he had visited a few months earlier. Since he had come back, he had been writing about them and actually there was a controversy between him and H.G. Wells in regard to the Soviet Union. The social and political system of the Soviet Union had impressed Shaw very much. Anyhow, when the president invited questions, we all were naturally overawed by the greatness of Bernard Shaw, but I took courage in both hands and stood up and asked two questions.

You can see from the nature of my questions themselves how youthful and, perhaps, impertinent I was. I asked him, Mr Shaw, you have told us about what you saw in the Soviet Union and how you were impressed by the communist society there. If this is your belief, why don't you work for a communist revolution in England and why don't you join the Communist Party of Great Britain? Bernard Shaw stood up, looked at me quizzically. I was far behind in the hall. He said, 'Young man, you ask me, why I don't join the Communist Party of Great Britain? I want the Communist Party of Great Britain to join me'. This was a typical Shavian answer. Everyone in England knew that the Communist Party of Great Britain was not influential and Bernard Shaw, as a great intellectual and as a great writer, was perhaps far more, at least he considered himself far more important than the Communist Party of Great Britain.

...I think Shapurji Saklatvala was one of those fine Indians to whom we owe a very great deal. He was, of course, a Marxist, a communist, one of the earliest in Great Britain, and the only [Communist] member to be elected in one particular election to Parliament. He was a great orator and a great speaker.

...In private conversations which we, left-wing Indian students, used to have with him, he was very critical of the policies of the Indian National Congress and Gandhiji. That was the policy of the communists at that time, but I never heard Saklatvala do this publicly in any meeting in England. He had the wisdom and the intelligence to see that the national movement was, by and large, led by Gandhiji and the Indian National Congress, and that the radicals, the revolutionaries, the communists also should, therefore, work through this movement, radicalise it if they liked. But it should be a united front against imperialism. This line, later on, was accepted by the Communist International at its seventh Congress, and after the experience of Hitler's fascism.

Sharma: Do you remember what was his criticism of Gandhi and the Indian National Congress when he discussed things with you in private?

Zaheer: He thought that it was bourgeois leadership. He would criticise as all leftists did in those days, that Gandhiji put a stop to the non-cooperation movement after the Chauri Chaura event; that the movement of national independence could have been developed, but Gandhiji got frightened because of the peasant upsurge.

And since Gandhiji had a soft corner for the landlords, the capitalists of Ahmedabad and Bombay and other Indian capitalists, so the movement of Indian liberation led by Gandhiji could not become a real movement of the masses in which the peasants would be involved so as to take them forward to revolutionary actions. I think this was his main and basic criticism. But there was always a difference in the way Saklatvala put these things and certain other communists did. Some of us took very extreme leftist positions which we later on found to be quite incorrect and gave them up when the line of the united national front was developed after 1936\85.

In a way we could say that Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose also, were, more or less, in the same category. They also felt and wrote about it. They criticised the shortcomings of our previous movements, and they were also seeking, in a way, a new way to independence. The socialist band inside the Congress, apart from the communists, men like Jayaprakash Narayan, Minoo Masani, Rammanohar Lohia and others were also in the same category of people who were thinking of new ways and means of achieving our independence. I think, in spite of very big differences in the outlook of these various people that I have named, namely, Nehru, Subhas, Jayaprakash and ourselves - the communists - there was one common factor: we all came to the conclusion that unless the socialist objective was put forward as the goal of Indian independence, that is to say, the abolition of capitalism and feudalism, and the building of a new democratic society based on social justice, and the theories of socialism, we could not involve the masses of our country in our national movement.

Sharma: What made you change your position later on?

Zaheer: To begin with, in the early thirties, the few communist groups that I knew of in London or elsewhere were taking an extreme leftist and unrealistic position, in the sense that we denounced the entire leadership of the Congress as well as the leftist radical elements in the Congress as counter-revolutionary. We thought they would not join a revolutionary struggle for the emancipation of the country and would always work for a compromise with British Imperialism. This, I think, was a wrong estimate of national situation and also of class forces in our country. That is why, I think, it was a wrong assessment. Later in 1935 and 1936, or even earlier, I think, in 1933-34, this position was corrected; that is

to say, we conceived that a national united front could be built within the framework of the Indian National Congress.

...When this policy was put into practice by a very small group of communists in our country at that time, we saw its results and how rapidly we gained in our influence, both inside and outside the Congress, and among workers and peasants. We became quite a strong force inside the Congress.

...Almost immediately, on my coming back from England, I joined the Indian National Congress, in fact, three parties at the same time; it was possible in those days. I got in touch with the underground communist workers in Uttar Pradesh, comrade P.C. Joshi and [R.D.] Bhardwaj. I also almost about the same time joined the Congress Socialist Party. But my main political activity was in the City Congress at Allahabad. I saw Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru; he was not actually in Allahabad when I came back from England. At that time, I think, his wife was ill in Germany. She died there. Panditji was extremely affectionate [to me]. He, of course, knew that I was a communist, but communists were an illegal group at that time, not very strong at all in U.P. At any rate, I started working, more or less, under Panditji's, what shall I say, patronage or his encouragement in the Congress - both in the City Congress Committee and in the All-India Congress Committee office'.

After a few months of my joining the Congress, I was elected secretary of the City Congress Committee of Allahabad. There were three secretaries at that time. Mrs Purnima Banerjee, the younger sister of Mrs Aruna Asaf Ali, was also my colleague; she was one of the secretaries, and another Congressman of Allahabad, Pandit Radhey Shyam Pathak, was also a secretary. We three were secretaries of the City Congress Committee of Allahabad. In the District Congress Committee, the secretaries were the late Lal Bahadur Shastri and Saligram Jaiswal. I think, Keshev Dev Malaviya and Mohan Lal Gautam were also there intermittently. This was the group. Although Panditji was the president of the Indian National Congress at that time, he was, somehow or other, very keen to be also there (Allahabad City and Allahabad District Congress Committee). I liked his this quality of being an active worker of Allahabad City and Allahabad District Congress Committees. He also was the president of the Allahabad City Congress Committee at that time. So I was the secretary of the Congress Committee of which Panditji was the president. In fact, it was through his intervention, I should say, that, a young man, who was practically unknown in Allahabad Congress circles, was made secretary of the Congress Committee.

...I was not the only communist who joined the Congress at that time. With me were Dr Mohammed Ashraf, Dr Z.A. Ahmed, Mahmuduzzafar Khan and some

other people. All these people had taken their degrees in England and had come back. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was very proud of our group and he introduced us to Gandhiji and to Sardar Patel saying, 'People say that Muslims are not coming in the Congress. Here is this brilliant group of young Muslims which went to England and took degrees there and had come back and joined the Congress'. Anyhow, I was saying that this was the time when Panditji started his Mass Contact Movement and from the communist side, we too, were trying to develop the Congress as a sort of united national front of all the anti-imperialist elements in this country. We wanted that more and more workers and peasants should join the Congress and that it should go more to the left rather than be dominated by the middle or the more rightist elements. So, we particularly campaigned, for example, for mass membership of the Congress.

Sharma: Now Dr Ashraf, Dr Ahmed and you were Marxist and Dr Lohia was, I think, not a Marxist. How were your relations with him?

Zaheer: Dr Lohia, of course, called himself a Marxist, but we thought he was not a good Marxist. Our relations with Dr Lohia were extremely good and friendly. On a personal level, they were very very good indeed. We used to be together most of the time in our Congress work and other work. On the political level, of course, we had differences. Both Dr Lohia and myself were members of the Executive Committee of the Congress Socialist Party and there also, during the time, a kind of duel, a debate ensued between the communist members, who were about five or six - E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Soli Batliwala, Dinkar Mehta, myself - on the one hand (and the socialist members) on the other - J.P. Narendra Deva in the centre and Lohia also perhaps in the centre and then on the right [M.R.] Masani, [Achyut] Patwardhan.

Sharma: You were a member of two left-wing parties, that is, the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party. The Congress Socialist Party called itself a Marxist party. But Communist Party also claimed to be a Marxist party. I think, there was not much in common between the two parties. Then, what made you join both the organisations?

Zaheer: I do not agree with you that there was not much in common; there was a great deal in common, at least in regard to the immediate programme of work, and, as you know, there were prolonged negotiations between the leaders of the two parties.

Negotiations went on between P.C. Joshi and J.P. Narayan and a common programme was actually drawn up to which both agreed. I think, but for the sort of very dogged opposition of the right inside the Congress Socialist Party, there would have been no difficulty. As far as the Communist Party was concerned, we had almost agreed to join the two parties. So it is not correct to say that there was not much in common between us. The main thing at that time was how to organise the revolutionary anti-imperialist struggle against the British for Indian

independence. Both the Communist Party and the Congress Socialist Party agreed that the economic and social demands of peasants and workers must be made a part and parcel of the national struggle; only then we could make our movement really a mass revolutionary movement. On this, there was an agreement. I think, disagreement came more in the form of an organisation and in the form of struggle. Actually, as far as the form of the struggle was concerned, any discussion on that was more theoretical than practical; the fact that this unity could not be brought about, which I think, was definitely possible, was because of a hard core of anti-communists, a kind of McCarthyite anti-communists inside the Congress Socialist Party. This is now quite apparent from the role that Masani and Asoka Mehta are playing in Indian politics today. <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/stories/20120810291504100.htm>

PART II

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ESSAY-Socialists and writers by A.G. NOORANI

Sajjad Zaheer was among those who formed the Progressive Writers' Association in Lucknow in 1936.

SAJJAD ZAHEER, a much-underestimated figure in the communist movement and in the world of literature, spoke at length to H.D. Sharma, as part of the Oral History Project of the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library in New Delhi. The first part of the article, "A versatile communist", was published in the August 10 issue of Frontline. This part deals with, among other things, the Congress Socialist Party and the communists and the Progressive Writers' Association.

Zaheer: There were different trends inside the Congress Socialist Party. The most powerful unit of the Congress Socialist Party [C.S.P] was the Malabar unit and the Andhra unit, the former was led by [E.M.S.] Nambudiripad and the latter was led by P. Sundarayya. Jayaprakash Narayan had a very great admiration for both these units, and whenever [M.R.] Masani attacked these units, he defended them.

Now these people did not become communists and then join the C.S.P., as in my case, for example. They were Congressmen, who became Congress Socialists and then later on became communists. So it would be correct to say that in the Congress Socialist Party, there were various socialist trends and I don't agree with the view that the whole party or its leadership, let us say, was bourgeois....

Sharma: You were a signatory, along with Dinkar Mehta and Soli Batliwala, to the draft thesis which was presented to the Congress Socialist Party Conference in 1938 at Lahore. Who had drafted this thesis and what was the purpose of presenting this as an alternative thesis?

Zaheer: It was drafted by Soli Batliwala and myself with the approval of Namboodiripad and Dinkar Mehta and we had, of course, also shown it to our communist colleagues, like Bhardwaj, who was also present in Lahore at that time. This was, I think, to express the views of the Communist leadership inside the Congress Socialist Party.

Actually, I had presented this thesis earlier at the U.P. provincial Conference of the party at Lucknow, of which I was secretary. It was furiously attacked by Acharya Narendra Deva as a sort of an attempt of the communists to take over the party. But that is a long story.

Sharma: Can you tell us something about the controversy that the Communists wanted to capture the C.S.P. at Lahore? What was its history and what was the intention of the communists in this regard?

Zaheer: I would say that the Communists wanted to capture the Congress Socialist Party at Lahore is not correct. Of course, inside the Congress Socialist Party, there were different views in regard to the nature of the Congress Socialist Party: how we were going to develop it in regard to its programme and tactics. This was constantly under discussion although we had commonly accepted programme, which had been earlier accepted by it and that we had also accepted; I mean, those of us who were communists inside the Congress Socialist Party. The idea of the communists inside the Congress Socialist Party at that time was not to capture or disrupt, or to drive out of the party such people who were not of the same views as they were.

As a matter of fact (we wanted) to develop the Congress Socialist Party, as a broad socialist united party, in which communists as well as those who were not communists should be united. In fact, shortly after the Lahore Conference, a definite proposal was made by the (P. C. Joshi of) Communist Party of India, to Jayaprakash Narayan, General Secretary of the Congress Socialist Party to have discussions between the two parties on the possibility of a merger of the two parties. But that is another story. There was opposition to it, I may tell you, both from inside the Communist Party as well as from the Congress Socialist Party. So it was not as if the communists were united on this question. At that time I was not a member of the Congress Socialist Party, and Yusuf Meherally asked me to join it. I had already joined the Congress at Allahabad. I told Yusuf Meherally, "Look, Yusuf, I do not want you to be under any misconception. I am a communist and I don't know whether you would allow communists to join your party." He patted me on the back, and said, 'Look, I know all about you; many people have told me. We have all to be together. I don't think, there is any harm in your joining the party'. In fact, he was the one who enrolled me as a member of the Congress Socialist Party. He was very friendly, emotional, and an extremely good man; I always liked him even when we have serious differences.

So the idea that it was a plot of the communists to infiltrate, the very favourite word used by our opponents, into the Congress Socialists organisation and to capture it from inside is altogether wrong. Similarly, if you would ask Jayaprakash Narayan and if he remembers this, he would tell you that it was he who had requested E.M.S. Namboodiripad and Sundaryya both, when they were not members of the Congress Socialist Party (to join the Party). I don't think they had become, later on, members of the illegal Communist Party. I don't know, exactly when they became (the members of the C.P.I.). It was the Congress Socialist leaders, who asked us to join the Congress Socialist Party. When I say, I mean, some of the communists who later on were elected to leading positions in the Congress Socialist Party. So, this thing has to be borne in mind.

Secondly, on the eve of the Lahore Conference of the Congress Socialist Party, some of us-the names that I have mentioned - were provincial leaders. I was Secretary of the U.P. Congress Socialist Party. Obviously, you could not be secretary of the Congress Socialist Party in U.P. without the consent, cooperation and patronage of Acharya Narendra Deva, who was senior to me and was extremely considerate to me. He had asked me to become secretary (of the party). Similarly, Sundarayya became Secretary (of the party) in Andhra, E.M.S. Namboodiripad in Malabar, as it was called in those days, and probably, Dinkar Mehta in Gujarat. The organisational state of the Congress Socialist Party was so loose that it was not a properly organised party. We had no proper lists of our members; our meetings were not properly held.

Our Central Office (was not properly organized). Although I must say, Masani as (General) Secretary (of the party) was very efficient. Jayaprakash Narayan, of course, a great man that he is, is well-known for his inefficiency as an office worker; I don't mean to denigrate him. He has, of course, many great qualities. In those days, he was a sort of uniting force behind the socialist movement in our country. So those of us who were working in the Congress Socialist Party in responsible positions, as secretaries of various state units or the provincial units, made serious efforts to enroll new members of the party, to hold socialist study circles, forums to bring together ideologically the new left socialist element that was developing inside the Indian National Congress. Now there is a Persian saying: 'Ai Roshnu-Tuba to Burman Bala Shudi' - Perhaps it is an illumination of my mind which became a disaster for me. That is to say, it was because we worked hard and enrolled new members, organised socialist forums and, of course, we had a policy, which was not opposed to the socialists, (that we became suspects in the eyes of the Socialists).

In our view (this) should (have been) the policy which all socialists and communists in India should (have followed). We were working for (the acceptance of) this policy by the Congress Socialist Party in a democratic way.

Now at Lahore, the actual position was that there were elements inside the Congress Socialist Party whom I would blame for this splitting up activity, for the intrigue, for all the things which they attribute to us. Really, they were the guilty people, that is to say, Masani and with him another small group, probably Asoka Mehta and one or two others, who had all the time Communist phobia of the McCarthy type. (Their attitude) was quite different from the attitude of, let us say, Jayaprakash Narayan or Acharya Narendra Deva, who were, I think, genuinely working for a united socialist movement as we were. Now these people started this scare at Lahore, that member from U.P., member from Andhra, member from Malabar, member from Gujarat and from many other places were all communist members and that these people had maneuvered this and they were in a majority. So if a vote was taken in Lahore, they were going to have a majority of communists in the National Executive of the Congress Socialist Party. This was the scare. The whole thing was totally manufactured because there was no question of majority. Five or four of us i.e. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Dinkar Mehta, Batliwala and I were inside the Congress Socialist Party. What we were working for was a true reflection of the newly organised Congress Socialist Party, in which we had taken a leading part. Now, these people, I mean, Masani and Asoka Mehta and one or two others created this scare that we were going to capture the party. And then what happened in the end, we have talks with Acharyaji, with Jayaprakash Narayan and others. There were free and open discussions, in our conference. And when we realised that these people were so very scared, we did not insist on this and we said, "All right, we do not want a split on this issue, let Jayaprakash Narayan and Acharyaji present a list". In the end that list was accepted, I think, unanimously and we withdrew our list. This, of course, was considered a big victory by the Masani* group inside the leadership. But we made this conscious retreat, if you like, in order to see that the communist phobia did not take hold of the entire leadership of the party.

*He (Masani) presided over the Lahore Conference of the Congress Socialist Party held in 1938.

Sharma: Would it be correct to say that the communist members of the Congress Socialist Party worked as a well-knit group apart from the other members, maybe, because of their like mindedness or common outlook?

Zaheer: Yes, we did occasionally, before the meetings of the National Executive or during it. We used to sometimes meet informally, just as I dare say, Masani, Asoka and Achyut Patwardhan used to meet. It was a fantastic experience for me. I had come from England and had all the goodwill and feeling of friendship for my socialist comrades and friends whom I had joined. Almost since my first meeting of the National Executive, I found that there was a small group, led by Minoo Masani, which did not seem to take interest in any damn thing, except

anti-communism, that is to say, in such and such a place, in such and such a group, the communists were intriguing, and how to throw out these communists from the Party. They would not take interest in the building up of the party, building of the mass movement, in Kisan Sabhas, in trade unions. They would sit there sleepily and as soon as some such issue was brought up, such as the recognition of membership made in Andhra, in Kerala or in U.P. , then Masani would start opposing it by saying, \ldblquote All this is bogus membership. All this is not membership at all, let Jayaprakash Narayan go and find out.\rdblquote And then Asoka Mehta, who would generally be half asleep on all the other issues, would wake up and with fire and thunder speak, supporting Masani.

So I was so unhappy and disgusted with this show that I still, after, thirty or forty years, feel the anguish that I used to feel in those days, because there were so many other important things which we had to discuss the problems in the Congress, the national movement as a whole, the international situation. But this was what hurt me very much. So to come back directly to your question, we did certainly occasionally consult together. But we also consulted with Jayaprakash, Narendra Deva and even with Masani. It was not a sort of properly organised group as it were, that used to meet before or after the meetings. We would meet in the National Executive, and sometimes we would sit in a corner and discuss.

When we went out of the Congress Socialist Party - we were all in prison - a rump met at Lucknow and decided to expel us from the party illegally, unconstitutionally, because the National Executive of the Congress Socialist Party could not, according to the constitution of the party, expel its own members; they could only be expelled by the party conference.

Sharma: Did you organise some office of the Provincial Congress Socialist Party?

Zaheer: No, I am afraid, not. It was partly in the pocket of Acharya Narendra Deva and partly in my pocket.

Sharma: How did you manage the finances for your tours? Were you managing on your own?

Zaheer: Actually, in those days, I was invited to various districts for some conference, student's conference, Kisan conference, or even a Congress political rally. So our expenses were paid by the people who invited us. This was the general practice and the arrangements were not very luxurious. We used to travel in third class and stay with our friends wherever we went. I had no money of my own. I used to get a meagre allowance from my father and, of course, this

was also spent in this work. But there was no fund of the Congress Socialist Party as such at that time.

Sharma: Do you think that your party made any impact on Congress policies?

Zaheer: That is very difficult to gauge. I do think that it did. For example, the big issue in those days was of office acceptance. In this, I think, one does not know because Pandit Jawaharlal himself was among those who were against office acceptance. Then, there was the question of organisation.

I must say that I cannot exactly say whether it was the influence of the Congress Socialist Party. But I do think that the fact of Congress Socialist Party working in a more or less organised way, though being a loosely organised party, did give a more radical turn to the national policies as a whole.

Sharma: You have been closely associated with the formation of the Progressive Writers Association. How was it first started?

Zaheer: That is a long story. The first group, which called itself the Progressive Writers Group of young Indian writers, was formed in England in 1935, and in this there were five or six of us. Mulk Raj Anand, Promode Sen Gupta, Dr. M.D. Tasir of Lahore, one or two other Indians who were in England at that time, and were interested in literature and myself. I had only written a few short stories, one or two poems, a few essays. So we got together and we said, "We should have a progressive writers' movement in our country and we should write down our views in a manifesto." So after a great deal of discussion and several drafts having been made, the first manifesto of the Progressive Writers was finalised. We formed the Indian Progressive Writers' Association in London and we held several meetings on behalf of this. One of the earliest meetings was addressed by Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, who happened to be in London in those days.

Then, in subsequent meetings, we used to meet in a cellar of a Chinese restaurant near Tottenham Court Road. The proprietor was very sympathetic to Indian revolutionaries and he used to give us quite cheaply, his cellar, where thirty to forty people could meet. In our meetings, ten to twenty people used to come. Now, soon after that, I came back to India. But even when I had not come, we had sent copies of our manifesto to our friends in India. Then I came back home in December, 1935, and was living in Allahabad. There I discussed this idea of starting a progressive writers' movement with some friends, in the university, like Raghupati Sahai 'Firaq', Ahmed Ali, Bishamber Nath Pandey, Miss Shyam Kumari Nehru and some other people. And we decided to form a Progressive Writers' Association in Allahabad. I remember, its first meeting was held in my house, when I say my house, I mean my father's house where I was living. And for the first meeting, you will be, perhaps, amused to know, Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit also came and some other thirty or forty people in

Allahabad, who were not themselves writers but who were interested (in literature) also came.

But the real big push forward, I should think, was given to our movement, by Prem Chand and from the Urdu side by Josh Malliahabadi and Maulana Abdul Haq, who also came to Allahabad to attend a conference organised by the Hindustani Academy. Now Firaq, my other friend, Ahmed Ali, then some young people who were in M.A. at that time also joined - men like Shivdan Singh Chauhan, Narendra Sharma, Harash Dev Malaviya and Ramesh Sinha. So, we approached our big leaders, and to our great joy, Prem Chand looked at the manifesto and so did Josh Maliahabadi. They entirely approved of it, but only expressed doubt whether we would do anything about it, or whether it was just a youthful exuberance, and the whole thing would end there. But they signed our manifesto.

I had also started working in the Congress, the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party. At this time, I was quite close to Pandit Nehru and I talked to him also about this and he also liked the idea. Acharya Narendra Deva, Jayaprakash Narayan and Rambriksha Benipuri of Bihar also liked it. So, naturally we started expanding, as it were, from Allahabad. At Calcutta, there was my friend Hiren Mukerjee to whom I sent the manifesto and he took it to other Bengali writers. Rabindranath Tagore was also approached; similarly Sarojini Naidu was approached; so was Maulana Hasart Mohani and in that way we contacted even some of our greatest writers as well as younger writers, who were, more or less, patriotic minded and who believed in this kind of literature. That is to say; that literature must serve the cause of the people and the biggest cause at that time was the liberation struggle of the Indian people. So we got general sympathy and support from our political leaders, I mean, the Congress leaders, like Panditji, Mrs. Naidu and Maulana Azad. These were the three people who, one can say, took interest in matters of culture and literature. Then the Congress Socialist leaders, I must say, with emphasis, took a deep interest in it, particularly, Jayaprakash Narayan, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Asoka Mehta, and Achyut Patwardhan. So at Allahabad, we decided to hold the first Conference of the All India Progressive Writers' and to form an All India Progressive Writers Association at Lucknow at the same time as the session of the Indian National Congress. That was in April 1936.

Now we approached Prem Chand to preside over this session at Lucknow, which was held in the Rafai-am Hall, the place where many historic meetings were held, where the Non-cooperation movement and Khilafat meetings had been held earlier.

Prem Chand presided over this meeting and he read out a brilliant address, which, I think, is still probably the best manifesto of the entire Progressive Writers Movement, even upto now, because it lays down clearly the main

objectives of the literature generally and of the progressive writings particularly. In this Conference, I remember, I specially approached Sarojini Naidu. She promised to come, but at the last moment, she could not come. So she sent a message. But Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay came and I think, she spoke also. Asoka Mehta attended. Jayaprakash Narayan, I am not sure whether he came. Jayaprakash Narayan and Narendra Devaji were, probably, at that time either in the Working Committee meetings, or were very busy with other things. So that is the beginning of the Progressive Writers movement.

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India's Muslim socialists -Author: Khizar Humayun Ansari.Publisher: Oxford University Press, Karachi. Pages: 504-Price: Rs.295

An encyclopaedic account of the intellectual ferment among the Muslims of India. By A.G. NOORANI

THIS is a work of amazing research, rich insights and commendable objectivity. The author is Professor of Islam and Cultural Diversity and Director of History at Royal Holloway, University of London. Socialism always had a hold on the Muslim mind, secular or Islamic. The religious-minded talked about "Islamic socialism" and drew on Islamic concepts such as revolt against oppression, cares of the needy, besides the institution of the bait-ul-maal (a common fund for those in need). The secular drank at the fountain of Marxism and were either members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) or participants in the front bodies. Many others were sympathisers with a strong leftist orientation; pioneers in the Progressive Writers' Movement and the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA)—on which Rakshanda Jalil has written an able study, *Liking Progress, Loving Change: Literary History of the Progressive Writers' Association in Urdu*.

Ordinarily, one does not begin a book review with comments on the appendices. This exceptional work demands exceptional treatment. The 126 pages of Appendices 1 and 2 contain brief but fairly detailed biographies of Muslims in the socialist movement, with full references that testify to the pains Prof. Ansari has taken. Appendix 1 contains the biographies of Muslims who became socialists or sympathised with socialist ideals. It comprises those who left India as pan-Islamists and became socialists, often returning via the Soviet Union, or those who remained in India but became politically active as a result of pan-Islamist anti-British agitation. Pan-Islamists were fiercely anti-British. Some in this group were disillusioned Khilafatists. Appendix 2 includes "Muslim socialists and Muslims sympathetic towards socialist ideas". They were associated with the PWA or other like-minded bodies.

Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) was then a hotbed of socialism. Many personalities mentioned in these appendices either studied or taught at the AMU. Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew, who led the Amritsar agitation against the Rowlatt Act, was one of them. He supported Bhagat Singh, opposed Pakistan and, though he belonged to a landed family, died in impoverished circumstances. He had returned the Stalin Peace Prize of a lakh of rupees to the Indian Peace Committee. In this list figure men such as the great poet Maulana Hasrat Mohani, Qazi Abdul Ghaffar, Ali Sardar Jafri, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, K.M. Ashraf, Israrul Haq Majaz, Saadat Hasan Manto, Saghir Nizami, Ismat Chughtai, and

Professor Mohammed Habib, Aligarshians all who were opposed to the Muslim League and its demand for Pakistan. None remembers them now. For that matter, Muslim contribution to the freedom movement has been ignored; not least by the Congress. This book fills a void.

As an American writer remarked, it is an unnoticed theme in the narratives of Indian nationalism. Behind the story of the defeat of Muslim socialists lies the tragic episode of Jawaharlal Nehru's defeat at the hands of communal-minded colleagues in the Congress, led by Vallabhbhai Patel. Nehru was the president of the Congress then. Its general secretary was the communal-minded Acharya Kripalani. Rajendra Prasad and G.B. Pant were among those who ensured the failure of Nehru's Muslim Mass Contact Movement and, with it, the marginalisation of Muslim socialists in the Congress. Some of them drifted to the CPI. S. Gopal has censured in his biography of Nehru the role of Patel's cabal after Independence. This sordid stratagem is laid bare in a well-documented essay, "The Failure of Nehru's Mass Contacts Campaign and the Rise of Muslim Separatism" by Lt Col. James E. Dillard at the University of Maryland. (*Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*; Vol. XXXI, No. 2; Winter 2008).

He notes that in 1937, students at the AMU "voiced enthusiasm for the campaign". From the university, Jamiluddin Ahmed wrote to Jinnah in near panic about it. So did the Raja of Mahmudabad.

"Muslims who advocated a socialist position appealing to unity and solidarity of the masses were numerous and represented a powerful ideological strand among the Muslim intelligentsia—a largely unnoticed theme in most accounts of Indian nationalism. Prominent among these leaders were K.M. Ashraf, who rose to political prominence in the 1930s as a member of the Congress Socialist Party; Z.A. Ahmad, an Aligarh graduate who joined the Economic Information Department of the All India Central Committee as secretary in 1936; Hayatullah Ansari of Firangi Mahal in Lucknow, a graduate of the AMU and editor of the pro-Congress *Hindustan Weekly*; and young poets and writers such as Kaifi Azmi, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and Ali Sardar. The adherence of such men gave the mass contacts campaign in U.P. [United Provinces] a radical orientation and an ideological thrust lacking in earlier Congress attempt at popular mobilisation. ...

"The Muslim University at Aligarh, a premier educational centre and focus of intense intellectual and political activity, mirrored trends among the Muslim intelligentsia. The University remained in the forefront of the nationalist struggle all through the 1920s and 1930s. Many students, including leaders of the influential Students Union, voiced support for Congress. Pro-Congress students spearheaded the 1936 students' strike against the university's repression of nationalist activities and opposition to a move by the Students Union to initiate an All-India Muslim Students Federation. The mass contacts campaign also struck a favourable chord in wider Aligarh circles.

"The political climate in the country in general and U.P. in particular remained highly conducive for the success of the mass contacts campaign. Despite mounting communal pressures and increased Hindu-Muslim strife, Congress could still count on the support of powerful Muslim groups in NWFP [North-West Frontier Province], U.P. and Bihar. Indeed, the progress of the mass contacts campaign in 1937 and 1938 caused veritable panic in Muslim League circles and led Jinnah to launch a counteroffensive to turn the tide."

Within two years after Nehru launched the mass contacts campaign, it ran into trouble, not so much because of the Muslim League's opposition or the lack of Muslim support but because of the Congress' own reluctance to pursue it with any sense of purpose. By the early summer of 1939, the Congress scrapped the mass contact committees, signifying the unhappy end to a campaign started with much fanfare and enthusiasm (pages 58 & 63).

The idea "was Nehru's and he alone... pressed it". The Patelites disagreed and, worse, feared that induction of Muslims would rob them of their majority in the Congress.

Exposure of Muslim socialists' prominence once upon a time is just one of the merits of this book, which covers the aftermath in Pakistan as well. In Pakistan, the liberal/socialist opinion became "utterly marginalised" and Islamist fundamentalism got a boost in the Zia-ul-Haq era.

But secularists are also to blame. Their dogmatism blinded them to the real significance of religion and its role in highly religious societies:

"What they failed to do was to engage fully with the intricacy of Marx's understandings of religion. Crucially, they ignored the fact that he also recognised in religion an active moral agency, especially for the degraded and the despised—the essence of religion, in his view, was its voicing of passionate suffering, its cry against the realities of exploitation and degradation. Likewise, the essence of being human was the struggle for humanity to take back into its own hands a world that it had made but which has been taken away from it. ...

"It is this recognition of the continuing depth of the religious dimension present within human life, and the close connection between religion and politics in human affairs—particularly the moral and ethical components combined with the social activism and welfare community interventions of the Islamist in social life—that secularly inclined Muslim socialists in colonial India, in post-colonial Pakistan, and even perhaps in Muslim societies more broadly, failed to incorporate sufficiently into their consciousness and political understanding."

The historical resume since the 1857 mutiny deserves to be read closely for its own sake. Hitherto the writings of Muslim socialist writers were studied from the literary aspect rather than as contributions to political debate. This book fills the gaping void. "It sets out to uncover which kind of Muslims in British India were drawn to socialist ideals. It looks at the different ways in which they came into contact with socialist ideas, how they responded to these ideas, and by what means they disseminated them. Finally, it examines the various political and cultural strategies adopted by these Muslim socialists in order to achieve their objectives. In this way, it hopes to shed light on a major strand in Islamic responses to the modern world by examining the two phases of Indian Muslim reactions to socialism which took place between 1917 to 1947." The period between 1937 and 1947 was the most active and productive time for these Muslim socialists, and was when they achieved a level of popularity that remains unsurpassed.

Intellectual and political failure

The later decline was as much an intellectual failure as a political one. Intellectually, Muslim socialists' error was similar to the European socialists' error in 1914. They fancied that the workers of the warring nations would unite to foil the war plans of their capitalist leaders. The workers, in fact, turned out to be even more jingoistic nationalists. Socialists led by

Nehru committed as grave an error in 1937. Muslim Peasants and Workers were as susceptible to the appeal of religion and as resentful of the Congress' policies as others.

This work is an encyclopaedic account of the intellectual ferment among the Muslims of India. Consider just one case. Maulana Shibli Nomani (1857-1914), for instance, although educated as an alim, was sympathetic towards Saiyid Ahmad Khan's modernist ideas.

“Helped by T.W. Arnold, Professor of Philosophy at Aligarh, he acquired a sound understanding of Western ideas of literary criticism and historiography, which he subsequently applied to his own writings in Urdu. Having studied English historians, Shibli was greatly impressed by their methods of research and analysis, especially their objectivity which he felt contradicted the sentimentalism of Muslim historians: ‘A historian,’ he declared, ‘should never go beyond the bare transcript of events. He should cultivate perfect detachment like Ranke who rejected the imagination, had no sympathies, religious or political, and whose narrative leaves one in doubt as to his likes and dislikes and personal opinions’.

“Even more important from the point of view of later progressive writers was Shibli's emphasis on extending the scope of history to embrace the lives of common people. He observed acutely that history in the past had been mainly an account of the lives of rulers and their courts. Little attention had ever been paid to the social and cultural concerns of the ordinary people: ‘the history of the rulers is there ...’ he declared, ‘but of the morals, manners and culture of the people there is not the slightest mention’.

“Politically, Shibli himself gradually moved from a position in which he called upon the Muslims in 1908 to support the colonial authorities in suppressing ‘polytheists’, to a strong anti-British, pan-Islamic nationalist stance. In 1912, he wrote his famous article which called on the Muslim League to make the demands of the poor its own, and to establish unity with the Hindus.”

True to form, the Modi regime disgraced itself by denying visas to Pakistani intellectuals who wished to participate in a function at the Shibli Academy in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, to commemorate the death of Shibli Nomani at which Vice-President Hamid Ansari delivered a thought-provoking address.

Other figures receive as informed an analysis from Prof. Khizar Humayun Ansari. The chapter on “Themes in Muslim Socialist Literature” is particularly illuminating. Not one socialist figure of any significance is omitted; whether poet, writer, journalist or politician. The references are thorough.

Those socialists who blindly supported the CPI fell into the same ditch in which the CPI leaders fell; especially on the policy on the switch after Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union. S.A. Dange told this writer that in 1951 Stalin scolded him for not supporting the Congress' Quit India resolution. “Do you think we won the war because of the 200 rifles you sent?” Stalin asked. In truth the line was sold to the CPI by Rajni Palme Dutt and Henry Pollit of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

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