

SOCIALISTS AND THE PARTITION OF INDIA

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I

1.1. The Socialist position on the communal problem was elaborated in detail by Socialist leader Ashoka Mehta and Achyut Patwardhan in 1942 in a monograph entitled, *The Communal Triangle in India*. They analyzed the three aspects of the communal problem. These according to them were political, sociological and the irrational pulls "working in our society for the last hundred and fifty years."¹ The three parties to it were the Hindus, the Muslim and the British. The "third party" namely the British according to them "has played a great and often a decisive part in Hindu-Muslim relations."² "The problem as it confronts today", they held, "is largely a creation of the British." The peculiar character of their rule in India compelled them to pursue certain policies which helped to widen the gulf between the two communities.³ Although, the first and the foremost step for solution of the problem, they suggested, was the elimination of the British rule, the problem had also a socio-economic basis. The Muslims agitation for Pakistan was really a struggle for power in the government of the country. While admitting that the Muslims "must be given a status in the country" they rejected the agitation for Pakistan as a "harmful movement which should be tackled without resorting to partition". Also admitting that no community can be concerned to live in India against its wishes, the Socialist contended that the new Indian nation should be founded not upon religious but economic realities.⁴

1.2 The Hindu-Muslim question became acute after the adoption by the All-India Muslim League of its Pakistan resolution at Lahore on 26 March 1940 demanding division of India before transfer of power and subsequent British Government's posture that no future constitutional scheme would be sanctioned except with the consent of the League. The League opposed the Quit India movement and propagated among the Muslims that it was injurious to the Muslim community since it aimed at establishing a sovereign state of United India which would be dominated by the caste Hindus. Henceforth any

congress move to increase pressure on the British to transfer power without references to the League hardened the attitude of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, President of Muslim League who began to assert that the Muslims cannot be treated as a mere religious minority but they constituted a nation separate from the Hindus.

1.3 In September 1944 talks were held between Gandhi and Jinnah in the hope of solving the communal problem through negotiations as a result of the letter's correspondence with C.Rajagopalachari in July 1944 on the basis of his famous formula.⁵ The C.R. Formula offered communal privileges to the Muslims league in return for the League's endorsement to the demand for independence and co-operation with the Congress 'in the formation of provisional Interim Government for transitional period'.⁶ The talks started off with the first meetings of Gandhi at Jinnah's residence at Bombay on 9 September and continued through correspondence till 27th. While the talks lasted for eighteen days the whole country waited in suspense "hoping for the best and fearing the worst". Gandhi was guided in the talks by his vision of a non-violent society which as he wrote to V.S. Srinivasa Sastri could not be built except "with free and willing consent of all its component parts".

1.4 Jinnah protested against Gandhi's claim that "Independence does mean as envisaged in the A.I.C.C. Resolution of 1942." In his letter of 21 September he wrote to Gandhi "it is, therefore, clear, that you are not prepared to revise your policy and you adhere firmly to our policy and programme....which culminated in your demand..in terms of the August 8, 1942 Resolution....You know that the August 1942 Resolution is inimical to the ideas and demands of Muslim India". Jinnah disagreed to independence and establishment of any provisional Government as envisaged in the August Resolution or in the C.R.Formula before creation of a sovereign homeland for the Muslims i.e., Pakistan.

1.5 Towards the end of the talks Gandhi became much disturbed at the intransigence of Jinnah. He wrote to him on 23 September "last evening's talk has left a bad taste in the mouth..We reached breaking point" Gandhi was given the cold shoulder by Jinnah when he requested on 26 September for an opportunity to address the Council of the All-India Muslim League and if they feel rejecting it he would want Jinnah to advise the Council to put it before the open session of the League which he would seek permission to attend. The talks thus solved no problem and left a trail of bitterness.⁷

1.6 Socialist leader Jayprakash Narayan who was incarcerated in the Lahore Front jotted down his reaction to these developments in his prison diary. From the beginning of the talks J.P. was of the belief that Jinnah would never be

sincere in negotiating with Gandhi since he wanted "vivisection of the Country". He wrote "In fact knowing Mr Jinnah and the League, in case we accept Pakistan, I fear, we shall have both division and slavery"⁸ J.P. was in favour of agreeing to full provincial autonomy for Muslim majority provinces with residuary powers and minimum agreed powers for Central Government. On the failure of talks J.P. accused Jinnah of "pettifogging lower-court manner" of a quarrel-some self-seeker bent upon destroying Indian nationalism for selfish end. According to J.P. even if it was accepted that Hindus and Muslims constituted two nations on the basis of difference in religion and culture as claimed by Jinnah that in itself be no reason why they should not live under one state, that no communal problem could be solved by partition of the country. "I do not believe", wrote J.P. 'that without division of the country we cannot be free. Division will solve none of our problems and will create others more serious than those existing today". A Pakistan created in the way demanded by the Muslim League in the opinion of J.P. would be no better than a British protectorate and that after Pakistan was created in these circumstances Jinnah would seek written assurance for protection from Britain. That, according to J.P., would nullify any political justification for Pakistan.⁹

1.7 J.P. was most critical of Rajgopalachari's proposals which he considered came out of a desire to appease and placate Jinnah with a view to reaching a compromise with the British Government. Thus, there was basic difference between the attitude of Gandhi and the Socialists to the Hindu - Muslim question. Gandhi took religious and even sentimental factors behind the problem into his consideration and was prepared to yield and accommodate communal demands to a great extent if that could restore goodwill among the two communities. J.P. and his Socialist colleagues on the other hand approached the whole problem from Marxian scientific and secular point of view in which although historical factors were to be taken into consideration religious and sentimental factors were not material. These according to Socialists were factors which even if had some force, they were created by "the third party". Once the third was removed from the scene the whole problem of Hindu-Muslim communalism would melt away in the face of socio-economic realities.

1.8 In an interview to the Associated press of India on 22 June 1945 at Lucknow, socialist Leader Narendra Dev elaborated the Socialist position vis-a-vis the issue of partition. He said that the unity of communities is a slow and painful process. ... "Pakistan without mutual transfer of population is no solution of the communal problem. Pakistan or no Pakistan the communal problem will have to be tackled only by laying emphasis on the economic issues which equally affect Hindu and Muslim masses.' Later, when the communal situation deteriorated and the Muslim League's demand for partition

stiffened, the pro-socialist party paper *Janta* lamented on the day of arrival of the Cabinet Mission in March 1946 :

"... Pakistan is primarily an economic problem capitalism allied to imperialism has provoked the demand for Pakistan. If the socialist party programme had been given due consideration, Indian politics would have been different today. "¹⁰

1.9 In the period after the war nationalism was a more rational and organised force than communalism which was based on imaginary fears of the minority community aggravated by the policy of the British whom the Socialists called the 'third party' in the Communal Triangle of India. The Socialists, therefore, mainly concentrated themselves on efforts to liberate the country. They were of the view that with the removal of the British rule the Hindu-Muslim question would be easily solved under the impact of social and economic struggle for establishment of socialism after independence.

II

2.1 The Socialists saw in the proposal for the formation of the constituent Assembly an Interim Government made by the Cabinet Mission in May/ June 1946 an attempt on the part of the British to prolong their domination. Reacting to these proposals which were far short of the Socialist demand of a unified independent India and encouraged by Nehru's fiery and provocative" statements immediately after assuming Congress Presidency in July that a clash would be inevitable if the British delayed transfer of power,¹¹ the Socialists prepared a comprehensive plan of revolution to overthrow the British.

2.2 The plan was prepared by J.P. in consultation with his colleagues in his party and found a detailed exposition in his "Third Letter to All fighters for freedom" published in Socialists to the J.P. plan of revolution became an irritant to the British circles. This is revealed from a brief account of personal talk of Sir A. Waugh, a member in the Viceroy's Executive Council with League Leader Liaquat Ali Khan, which the former conveyed to the Viceroy on 7 August identified the Socialist plan of revolution with that of the Congress. He is reported to have remarked on the occasion, "while the Congress gathered physical strength it was better for the Muslim to resist now even if it means bloodshed".¹²

2.3 This was the time when the Muslim League withdrew its earlier acceptance of the Cabinet Mission had announced its programme of "direct action" which led to country-wide bloodshed. Nehru's unrestrained and provocative

statements about Congress acceptance of the Cabinet Mission plan had already created suspicion in the mind of Muslim League leaders, the Socialists by their plan of revolution for creating an independent united Indian democratic republic without reference to any Indian political party other than the Congress inadvertently contributed to stiffening of the League's demand for a sovereign Pakistan.

III

3.1 Reaction of the Leaflets in India to the British prime Minister's announcement of 20th February 1947 that the British Government would take necessary steps to effect transference of power into responsible hands by a date not later than June 1948, was one of distrust and misgivings. P.C. Joshi, General Secretary of the CPI declared that "there is no reason to hail but every reason to be suspicious of Premier Attlee's statements in the House of commons. It is not a British pledge to quit India, but an imperial manoeuvre to gain time".¹³ Socialist leader Narendra Dev characterized the statement as "going back up on the Cabinet Mission's decision of May 1946. It seems that Mr. Jinnah's slogan 'divide and quit' is going to be realized, while the Congress wanted the British to quit and leave us to our fate without deciding anything".¹⁴ Among the Socialist leaders Narendra Dev had been able to look to the political developments in the post-war period in a more dispassionate and detached spirit. He had seen in the Cabinet Mission's scheme of confederation of three zones and a loose Center having control over limited sphere of action and legislation as the last hope of getting India's independence as a united country. Dev, therefore, favoured to make concessions which could have averted partition, for he felt that if Pakistan was accepted that would not bring peace "without mutual transfer of population".¹⁵

3.2 After the announcement of 20 February on optimism about attainment of independence through negotiations was perceptible even in Socialist circles. They gave up their previous revolutionary programme. On the occasion of the fifth conference of their party in February/March 1947 at Kanpur, the greatest concern of the toiling masses. One of their resolutions adopted on this occasion demanded; "every care must be taken that power passes not merely into Indian hands but into the hands of the toiling masses."¹⁶

IV

4.1 In March 1947 Viceroy Lord Wavell was replaced by Lord Mountbatten. The interim Government and the Constituent Assembly were hamstrung by the Muslim League tactics. The way was paved for the so-called Mountbat-

ten plan of partition. The date of transfer of power was advanced to 15 August 1947.

4.2 A meeting of the Congress Working Committee was held on 3 June to consider the plan. Socialist leaders, J.P., Lohia and Patwardhan were special invitees to this meeting. They were opposed to the plan but found that the congress leader for their own reasons were, "stubbornly united for acceptance of partition".¹⁷ Although the Socialists were unequivocally opposed to partition, their attitude was marked by confusion and indecision. The National Executive of their party which met from 8 to 10 June 1947 to consider the matter described the reactionary communalism. The NEC expressed the hope that the "proposed division of the country is not yet a fact nor will it have been finally accomplished with the formal established dominions. In the belief that the ulcers once created are difficult to destroy, the search for possibilities to avoid partition must continue and no effort should be spared to undo the mischief ... In fact the division of the country can at no stage be final hoped that the division of the country would be temporary as its basis was only religious fanaticism fomented by the British and stated, the first essential in the fight for a United Republic of India is never to surrender in the mind to the idea of division and its implications no matter what temporary arrangements may have been accepted".¹⁸ But the closing paragraph of the NEC's resolution betrayed a sense of defeatism; when it said, "The Socialist party must also record its own failure and that of the wider revolutionary movement in working out an alternate and positive policy."¹⁹

4.3 When the AICC met on 14-15 June at Delhi to ratify the working committee's decision of 3 June, the Socialists remained neutral in voting. Lohia argued in the meeting that members themselves must accept the responsibility for the situation since they had lacked courage to oppose their leaders and that if they had taken a strong line, the Mountbatten plan would have never been accepted by the working committee. This being so, he further pleaded that the members of the AICC would be carefully justified in opposing the working committee's resolution. But as the Socialists were not in agreement with the partition plan it would be equally wrong for them to support it.²⁰ The Socialist members accepting Lohia's arguments in favour of neutrality abstained from voting and the CWC's resolution was passed by a large majority of 29 to 157.²¹

4.4. Lohia latter claimed that only such leaders as Nehru and patel were "guilty men" of India's partition and the Gandhi was opposed to the plan up to the end. According to him , Gandhi was, in fact not informed of the plan till the working committee meeting of 3 june 1947. He belittled the role of Socialists saying that their opposition "could not have moved mountains".²² In a tone

of self-criticism Lohia has, at another place, regretted that the Socialist party had been busy only in spreading an idea that the partition was bad. The ideals and aims of a United Indian Republic were propagated vigorously. But no steps were taken to tie the ideal to a poll end on a solid base so that when that ideal was broken the people had sufficient strength to oppose and rebel.²³

V

5.1 The socialist leader Narendra Dev has contended that "our neutrality was not the result of indecision but came from a mature thinking. The most important fact was that the partition plan was placed before that AICC after all concerned parties had accepted it and implementation of the scheme had already started. In these circumstances, the Socialists were not prepared to shoulder the responsibility for the outcome of the rejection of the plan by the AICC as they had no requisite strength. The socialist leader strongly refuted charge of lack of a stable policy on an important issue against the socialist party. According to Narendra Dev even leaders like Nehru and Patel had become tired of dealing with the difficulties created by the Muslim League in the day to administration. Dev quoted Nehru once saying, "whether Jinnah wants partition or not we want it" Referring to an earlier resolution of the congress working committee, Dev pointed out that the congress itself, had in some form accepted the principle of self-determination as such. But that principle according to them was to be applied after the British had quit and not with their help and under their aegis. The socialists believed that once the British left India, nationalism would have triumphed over the forces of communalism and partition averted. J.P. later explained this stand of the Socialists:

It is true that the congress had accepted with the concurrence of its socialist wing, the principle of self-determination. But that principle was to be applied after the British had quit and not with their help and under their aegis. When the congress accepted partition, it accepted partial and not complete independence....

J.P. admitted that the course advocated by the socialists would have led to a civil war and acceptance of Pakistan was one way to avoid it. But according to him that risk was worth taking because acceptance of Pakistan did not remove that risk but accentuated it. "Easily gained power," according to him, "was too much a temptation to be resisted with that tragic results history has already shown."²⁵

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ashoka Mehta and Achyut Patwardhan *The Communal Triangle in India* Allahabad 1942 p 8
2. *Ibid* p 7
3. *Ibid* p.222
4. *Ibid* p.233
5. Gandhi to Jinnah 25 September 1944 *The Hindu* 29 September 1944 The genesis of the talks can be traced to Jinnah's Presidential address to the Annual session of the Muslim League at Delhi on 24 April 1943 wherein he had said "Nobody would welcome it more than myself if Mr. Gandhi is even now really willing to come to a settlement with the Muslim League on the basis of Pakistan.... what is there to prevent Mr Gandhi from writing direct to me?" N.Mansergh (ed) *The Transfer of Power* III p 982.
6. For details of the C R Scheme see *Indian Annual Register* 1944 II pp. 129-30.
7. For the Correspondence between Gandhi and Jinnah see *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* Vol 78
8. Jayaprakash Narayan *Inside Lahore Fort Madras* 1959 p 59
9. *Ibid* p 86
10. *Janata* 24 March 1946
11. Banerjee and Bose(ed.) *The Cabinet Mission in India* Calcutta 1946 314-22
12. Mansergh (ed) *Op cit* . VII p 199
13. *Indian Annual Register* 1947 I p.39
14. *Ibid* .
15. "Interview with the Associated press of India" Acharya Narendra Deva *Socialism and the National Revolution in India* Bombay. 1946 pp 158-9.
16. *Janata* ` 21 March 1947
17. Rammanohar Lohia *Guilty Men of India's partition* Allahabad 1960 pp. 9-10
18. *Janata* 15 June 1947
19. *Ibid*
20. *Indian Annual Register* 1947 I pp. 132-33
21. *Indian National Congress* Report of the General Secretaries (November 1946-December 1948) . Jaipur 1948 p.18
22. Lohia *op cit* pp. 10-11.
23. Lohia *Samajvadi Andolan Ka Itihas* (Hindi) Hyderabad 1969 p.72
24. Narendra Dev "All India Congress Committee Ka prastav" *Janavani* (Hindi) June 1947 pp. 76-78.
25. "Annual Report of the General secretary" Socialist party *Report of the Sixth Annual Conference* Nasik March 1948 Bombay 1948.