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CONGRESS SOCIALIST PARTY'S SEPARATION FROM THE CONGRESS (1946-48): A SOCIALIST POINT OF VIEW

**Narendra Kumar Singh &
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Right from the outset the rôle of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) within the Indian National Congress (INC) was a debatable one. However on the eve of independence the relationship between the two became incompatible on different issues. For this reason both parties decided to part ways. The present paper deals with Rightist-socialist relations alongwith the socio-economic factors responsible for the separation of the CSP from the INC. The object of the paper is chiefly to analyse the role of Jayaprakash Narayan regarding the break.

Jayaprakash Narayan (J.P.) was released from Agra jail on 10 April 1946. Immediately after this he discussed the functioning of the party within the Congress with Acharya Narendra Dev and other leaders. Sardar Patel also desired to discuss the matter with J.P. Nevertheless due to busy programme of J.P. this was not possible. An Augusters' conference was organised at Bombay on 18-20 May 1946, in which a number of prominent leaders from different parts of India who played an active role in the Quit India movement, participated. In this conference, there were three main trends regarding the reorganisation of the CSP.²

- (i) There was no need for a party separate from the Congress.
- (ii) An Augusters Party should be organised.
- (iii) The Party may be reorganised and vigorously pushed.

The first trend had little support. The second had vociferous support, but it was realised that a jumble of individual could not make a political party with hardly any positive programme. Thus, inspite of sufficient support, this idea was dropped. The third trend found general acceptance and the responsibility for reorganisation of the party was given to leaders like J.P., Narendra Dev, Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan and Aruna Asaf Ali.

Meanwhile, after being elected the Congress president in 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru offered J.P. and Ram Manohar Lohia the membership of the Working Committee, but the CSP leaders placed three conditions for membership:-

(i) None of the Working Committee members will be a minister in the government.

(ii) Congress members will be allowed enlightened criticism of the govt.

(iii) The Congress President shall not hold any post in the government.

In spite of lengthy talks Jawharlal Nehru refused to accept the first two demands and accepted the third partially. J.P. and Lohia, therefore, refused the membership of the Working Committee.³ Subsequently J.P. accepted the membership on the request of Nehru. J.P. later justified his change of stand by saying that within two months the circumstances had totally changed and it was therefore necessary for each and every Congressman to fight the coming danger unitedly. He assured that if his working committee membership created any hinderance in the revolutionary struggle, he would not hesitate to leave this membership.⁴ In fact the object of his acceptance of Working Committee (WC) membership was to mould the opinion of Congress in favour of the socio-economic programmes of the C.S.P.⁵

After the Meerut Conference of the Congress in November 1946, Jayaprakash Narayan was very disappointed. In his letter to the new Congress President, J.B. Kripalani, he expressed his despair over the W.C. list.⁶ J.P. reminded the president about their Meerut discussions in which Kripalani gave an assurance that the person commanding the confidence of the Socialists would be appointed the general secretary of the Congress. He was specially upset with the exclusion of Mridulaben and Ram Manohar Lohia from the W.C. In these circumstances he resigned from the W.C.⁷ He also pressed for the acceptance of his resignation because he did not think he could have been of any use for the type of work that was before the Committee in those days.⁸

On 28th February 1947, the Working Committee of the CSP decided to drop the prefix 'Congress' and opened its door for non-Congress members.⁹ This change in the name of the Party was a turning-point in the history of Indian socialist movement as well as its relations with the Congress. Now J.P. was of the opinion that the Indian National Congress should be disbanded so that a new Party could emerge on a socio-economic programme.¹⁰ Thus the CSP marched one step further in the direction of separation from the Congress.

Meanwhile, Sardar Patel appealed to the Socialists to hold their

hand for just one year more and then they could do what they thought best. But he accused the socialists of trying to disrupt the Congress, of discrediting it in order to capture power.¹¹ In response J.P. addressing a meeting at Calicut said that Sardar's advice was unnecessary, as socialists Patel had no intention of leaving the Congress till independence was achieved. He also said that Patel was trying to suppress the growth of the Socialist Party.¹² In his reply to J.P. Patel argued that since his release he had tried his best to bring about a fusion between CSP and the Congress. Unfortunately he had failed to convert J.P., although he succeeded in convincing other important members about their views. He assured J.P. that he had done nothing either in thought or in action to injure the cause of CSP or to do any harm to any individual member. He regretted that at a time when there was a need to stand together, J.P. was 'consciously or unconsciously trying to divide our forces'.¹³

It was the assumption of the Socialists that after the formation of the Interim government, the Congress would be totally centred on government. Thus the common or united front character of the Congress was naturally weakening and a struggle for power within the Congress was growing daily in intensity. In these circumstances said J.P. 'The Party shall endeavour to push the Congress towards socialism and to prevent its capture by the vested interests. If this endeavour succeeds, the Congress will rise to greater heights of influence, effectiveness and service. If it fails, the Congress must split.'¹⁴

In his efforts to minimise their differences, Congress President J.B. Kripalani proposed to J.P. to discuss the points of difference, and if possible arrive at a solution which may bring about solidarity and strength in Congress organisation.¹⁵ After this proposal, J.P. wrote a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru in which J.P. accepted that he did not exactly know what to do in this matter since he personally felt very diffident towards Kripalani. However, he was prepared to do whatever Nehru advised.¹⁶ In another letter to Kripalani, J.P. suggested that casual conversation with one or the other of the leaders was not fruitful and that it would be better for two or three top-ranking Congress leaders to thrash out the matter with a few socialist representatives. He also referred his discussion with Nehru in Delhi on this problem.¹⁷ Kripalani regretted that his invitation was misjudged and was given little value, even though it was sent in his official capacity as Congress President. He also referred to the complaints from Congress workers in every province that they did not receive any cooperation from the socialists and that the socialists

exploited every situation to harass and discredit them and the Congress ministries. He complained that as J.P. had found it more convenient to discuss this matter with Jawaharlal Nehru, so he had nothing to say.¹⁸

On the question of differences, Sardar Patel wrote that no useful purpose would be served by raking up the past in which he may have much more to say against J.P. than J.P. may have against him (Patel). Actually it might have all been due to lack of contact or misunderstanding or other reasons. He clarified further that if he had done anything against J.P. and his Party, it had always been done in self-defence. He defended himself by saying that 'I have made earnest endeavours to make reconciliation and to secure cooperation from you and your party, but everytime we have met with a rebuff. It is my sad experience that although often you have agreed with our decision or our policy when you were with us. You disagreed afterwards on ground of party discipline or party interest'.¹⁹ Accordingly, Patel was dissatisfied that much of the indiscipline in the Congress was due to the existence of CSP in the Congress and also of the party members working solely in its interest. He also referred the naval rating incident in Bombay created by some CSP leaders with the cooperation of the Communists, as well as some of J.P.'s charges against the Congress ministries.

Regarding Patel's reconciliation and cooperation move, J.P. responded that it was rather an astounding statement. He had never known of any serious attempt made to secure CPS's cooperation. He also stated that his cooperation had not been accepted even when offered at a critical time. Nevertheless he pointed out that as socialists were not a power group in the Congress, so their cooperation depended on political adjustment between the ideologies and programme of the High Command and their group.²⁰ He also believed that such an adjustment was not impossible though it depended more on Patel than on anyone in the Congress.

On the occasion of the Congress Working Committee meeting at Delhi, a series of talks took place between leaders of the Socialist Party, members of the Congress Working Committee. Mahatma Gandhi attempted to resolve differences between Socialists and Congress. In the meeting the Socialists demanded that during the transitional period Congress should dissolve itself into a Liberal or Labour or Labour Party. Accordingly Congress was advised to move in a socialist direction: "The transformation of the National Congress into Socialist Congress will help to galvanise the country into a new mood of creative adventure".²¹

The Congress was neither prepared to dissolve itself nor to accept the socialist programme and policies. Sardar Patel was not present in the discussion. He talked to Narendra Dev and Ram Manohar Lohia regarding the matter. On 14 June 1947, Sardar Patel reiterated in the AICC meeting that unity of the Congress was essential, but there was no place for different groups in the Congress.²² Here what is important in understanding Patel's role in forcing the socialists out of Congress is not that he had differences with them but that he had decided now that the socialists either had to disband their organisation within the Congress or get out.²³

In 1947 when Kripalani resigned from the presidentship, Gandhi suggested that either J.P. or Narendra Dev may be elected as a president. As J.P. closer to Nehru and played a historical role in the revolutionary movement of 1942, so he discussed the idea with him (Nehru). Strangely enough, said that many other senior members were present in the Congress. Then the name of Narendra Dev was proposed. This time Sardar Patel and Shankar Rao Dev opposed. They were of the opinion that until and unless Narendra Dev was associated with a minority Party within Congress, it would not be fair to make him the President of the Congress.²⁴ Thus even Gandhi's personal influence and efforts failed to resolve the issue.

The Mountbatten Plan of India's partition was also a bone of contention between CSP and the Congress. The offensive role of Muslim League and its 'Direct Action' compelled Congress leaders like Nehru and Patel to accept the plan of partition of India, while socialists like J.P. and other leaders were not prepared to accept the partition of India and were preparing for final and decisive struggle. In fact their strategy depended on the assumption that Congress would not accept partition of India at any cost and then final struggle will be inevitable.²⁵ Thus the differences between the Congress and socialists were broadened. Addressing a group of socialists, J.P. declared that in the coming AICC session if the Congress accepted their programme the socialists would be there, but if not they would have no place in it.²⁶ The resolution passed by the general council of the socialist party at Nagpur on 30-31 August 1947, declared that the Socialist Party and the Congress differed not only in aim but also in policies, action and in organisational forms. It said further that in the next meeting of the AICC, these three groups of differences would be discussed. The decision taken by the Congress on these vital issues would determine the Socialist Party's relations with the Congress.²⁷

Meanwhile Congress General Secretary Shankar Rao Dev blamed the socialists, especially J.P., for non-cooperation towards Congress. He warned that if the socialists had to non-cooperate, they should leave Congress membership. He reiterated that the Socialist Party was openly criticising the Congress leadership and its administration as well as launching an election campaign against the Congress.²⁸ In a circular issued to all the Provincial Congress Committees, Congress members were prohibited from attending the meeting organised by the socialists. Accordingly, it was directed that Congress members should not participate in the welcome meetings and functions of the socialist leaders, since in such meetings socialists propagated the policies and programmes of their party and always criticised Congress leadership.

In spite of all these controversies and differences, the socialists were indecisive and followed a policy of wait and see. The Socialist Party weekly *Janata* advised the party: "The wiser course in these circumstances for the Socialist Party seems to be, for the time being at least, to stop thinking of separation from the Congress and for its leaders to assume actual responsibility for government wherever possible in association with Congress".²⁹ However, a year earlier Aruna Asaf Ali was clearly of the opinion that if the socialists were unable to make the Congress move out of its ruts, they must not remain rooted in them.³⁰ In January 1948, the National Executive of the Socialist Party decided not to have representation on the Working Committee of Congress.³¹ At the same time Aruna Asaf Ali strongly advocated the Socialist Party's separation from the Congress. She said that for achieving socialist ends, socialists would need to break with the Congress and strongly advocated the Socialist Party's separation from the Congress. She said that for achieving socialist ends, socialists would need to break with the Congress past and direct their steps single-mindedly towards a socialist future.³²

In March 1948, Congress amended the party constitution according to which no member of any other party could be a member of the Congress Party. The sole object of this amendment was to create such a condition in which the parties working within or outside the Congress should dissolve themselves or merge with the Congress or be compelled to break with the Congress. In these circumstances, there was no other opinion for the Socialist party. The Socialist Party finally decided to quit the Congress. The new constitution, as well as the inner logic of development, ended the long period of organic association of the socialists with the Congress.³³ After the Nasik decision the Socialist Party directed the party members to withdraw

from the Congress. The party members were to resign from the primary membership, elected Congress Committees, local bodies and the legislatures also.³⁴ Thus ended a historical Chapter of CSP Congress association and cooperation during pre-independence era.

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