

Fascinating Fifty Five Faces of the Indian Freedom Struggle

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This article was written by Anand Kumar as an introduction to Qurban Ali's book, "Founders of the Socialist Movement in India". Qurban Ali is a tri-lingual journalist who has covered some of modern India's major political, social and economic developments. He has keenly followed India's freedom struggle and is now documenting the history of the socialist movement in the country.



Socialism has been one of the most enlightening systems of values, principles and programs for the victims of capitalism and imperialism everywhere in the modern world system. It promises togetherness of political freedom, social justice and economic progress. It is a socio-historical advancement towards an egalitarian future for the whole humanity. It is contingent upon putting an end to imperialist colonization, feudal domination and capitalist exploitation. It offers hope of victory for the countless under-privileged men and women around the world in their battles against destitution, deprivation and discrimination. Equality and cooperation have been two great inspirations for the socialists in the modern societies. But most of the collective initiatives for a socialist future have emerged in the societies which have gone through industrial revolution and capitalist development. Therefore, the birth of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in colonial India in 1934 has been an astonishing phenomenon. It gets more interesting as the Congress Socialist Party was an organic part of the Indian National Congress which was main vehicle of the anti-colonial movement.

Freedom from foreign rule is an epoch-making achievement of the people of India. It gave birth to the Republic of India and Pakistan. It also inaugurated the era of de-colonization in Asia and Africa. The Indian freedom struggle was a century long protracted process which went through several stages between the First War of Independence of 1857 and the Quit India Movement of 1942. If the rebellious Indian soldiers of the East India Company led the first war of Independence, it was the rank and file of the Congress

Socialist Party (CSP) which courageously came forward to lead the Indian peoples' revolt against the British empire on the clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress – 'Do or die!'.

Congress Socialist Party was founded by an all India conference of freedom fighters in 1934 at a critical turn of the Indian national movement which needed infusion of new inspiration and energy. It came into being in embryonic form on the initiative of a group of freedom fighters imprisoned in Nasik Jail for taking part in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1932-33. It was preceded by coming together of patriots in different parts of British India between 1931 and 1933 resulting into formation of organizations like Bihar Socialist Party (Patna), Socialist Party of Bombay Presidency (Poona), Punjab Socialist Party (Lahore), Utkal Congress Socialist Karmi Sangh (Cuttack), Socialist Party (Delhi) and U. P. Socialist Party (Banaras).

II

What were the defining features of the Indian setting when CSP was founded? First of all, it was a phase of 'great disappointments' for the Indian freedom fighters. Indian National Congress had declared 'Complete Independence' as its objective at Lahore Conference (19th December 1929) followed by observing Independence Day on 26th January from 1930. But no visible gains were made by the salt Satyagraha (6th April 1930) as the Gandhi – Irwin Pact (5th March 1931) failed. The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1932 was withdrawn unilaterally (7th April 1934) after going through imprisonment of thousands of men and women for more than two years.

Secondly, there was deepening of the communal divide between the Hindus and Muslims and widening of mistrust between the political bodies of the untouchable communities and the Indian National Congress. Both problems surfaced again and again at the Round Table Conferences in 1931-32 in London.

There was large scale destruction and killings in a Hindu – Muslim riot in Bombay on 16th May 1932. Publication of 'Pakistan Plan' by Rahmat Ali in London (28th January 1933) further fuelled the politics of separatism.

The dalit question got national attention by Gandhi fasting (20th September – 24th September 1932) against the Communal Award. It brought together eminent public personalities leading to 'Poona pact'. Gandhi again resorted to fasting again for three weeks (from 8th May 1933) about the lack of commitment among the caste Hindus, particularly the Congress members, about eradication of untouchability.

Thirdly, there were sacrifices made during the Chittagaon Uprising (Bengal; 14th April 1930). It was followed by martyrdom of Chandrashekhar Azad (Allahabad, United Provinces; 27th February 1931) and followed by the hanging of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev (Punjab; 23rd March 1931). There was nationwide mourning about all these tragic episodes. They caused cumulative disappointment about the Gandhian way and the Congress strategy.

Globally, this was a period of unprecedented systemic crisis in capitalist countries termed as 'the Great Depression'. Rise of Nazism in Germany led by Hitler and fascism under Mussolini in Italy with support from the capitalists as well as the church at the cost of democracy and rule of law was traumatising. Turning away of the Soviet leadership under Stalin from the ideal of internationalism and building of an industrial state at great social cost were quite disappointing too.

III

Given the depressing setting of the national politics and great depression in the capitalist system, the foundation conference of the Congress Socialist Party proved to be a very meaningful event. It provided an opportunity of historical convergence of two generations of courageous freedom fighters who had come forward to confront the British Raj in different ways. It appointed a committee to formulate the aims, objectives, policies and programmes for promotion of socialist ideals with Acharya Narendra Dev as chair and Jayaprakash Narayan as secretary. The Congress Socialist Party presented a 'draft' for re-orientation of the national movement which included 15 specific political, economic and socio-cultural goals as well as a new organizational strategy. It offered a new road-map for de-colonizing the Indian economy, polity and society for creating a new India through socialist way. It proposed to enlarge the social base of the Indian national movement by establishing class-based organizations of the peasants in the villages and workers in the cities. It initiated a cadre based organization to cultivate a better trained body of dedicated men and women from every walk of life to strengthen the national movement for freedom from the British Raj.

The Congress socialists were committed to promote socialist changes through cultivation of peoples' power in peaceful ways. They also vowed to ideologically confront the anti-people triangle of three C's – colonialism, capitalism and communalism. The CSP program emphasised complete end of the colonial rule and 'all power to the producing masses' through provision of three new policies – i. universal adult franchise, ii. right to work, and iii. land to the tillers. It specifically called for eliminating the princes and the landlords to eradicate the complex colonial system of political domination and economic exploitation.

In the economic realm, it was proposed to follow the principle of 'to everyone according to his needs' as the basis of reconstruction after achieving freedom. There was call for 'development' through economic planning and control by a democratic state. The economic component included a) socialization of key industries, b) state regulated foreign trade, c) cooperative and collective farming, d) liquidation of the debts of peasants and workers, e) repudiation of the Public debt of India, and f) overall organization of production and distribution on the basis of cooperatives in the un-socialised sector of the economy.

It is important to point out that 'no discrimination by the State' on the basis of a) sex, b) religion, c) caste or d) community (ethnicity) was the main thrust of the social agenda. It made them engaged in promoting organisation and mobilization of women, the deprived castes and communities, and victims of communalism.

The 'draft' was approved by the Congress Working Committee with a few modifications. The drafting committee presented the policy document to Gandhi and asked for his opinion about the CSP approach. Gandhi found it 'intoxicating' and advised the Congress Socialists to make efforts to understand the 'realities' of the Indian setting. Gandhi was particularly concerned that the Congress Socialist document must pay attention to the four most urgent problems for any significant impact – 1. Hindu – Muslim unity, 2. Eradication of untouchability, 3. Menace of alcohol and other intoxicants, and 4. Khadi work to address wide-spread destitution. The Indian socialists' attachment engagement with Gandhi began in 1934 with mutual scepticism. Soon it began to evolve towards mutual trust through increasing cooperation. Gandhi proposed the name of Acharya Narendra Deva for the presidentship of Indian National Congress in 1939 and 1946. It is well known that the Congress Socialists did their best in response to the 'Do or die!' call of Gandhi during the Quit India movement and later joined in his historical efforts to save India from flames of communal violence.

Social revolutionary Baba Saheb Ambedkar also advised a more meaningful approach for ending caste-based discriminations in the policy statement of the Congress Socialist Party. His famous thesis about 'annihilation of caste' (1936) contained a full section about the socialist orientation regarding the caste system. There was increasingly close cooperation between Independent Labour Party headed by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Congress Socialist Party between 1937 and 1939 in Bombay Presidency. There was electoral alliance between All India Scheduled Castes' Federation established by Dr. Ambedkar and the socialists in the first General election of 1952.

But the conservative forces and the Communist Party were equally alarmed about the emergence of a socialist nucleus. The communal bodies blamed it to be a foreign ideology based import by a handful of 'Westernised' minds. The call for equality between men and women and no respect for the caste system and religious customs will be an attack on the foundations of culture and civilization. The Communists questioned the authenticity of 'ideological bases' of the CSP which refused to accept the Soviet Union as the model for India. It considered CSP as an Indian version of European Fascism where there was a dangerous mix of nationalism and socialism. The identification of the Congress Socialist Party with the Indian National Congress, a 'bourgeois political party' and refusal to denounce 'anti-revolutionary leadership' of Gandhi and his insistence on non-violence were pointed out as the indicators of anti-revolutionary character of the CSP by the Communist critiques.

The colonial authorities were most disturbed by the emergence of a socialist forum within the Indian National Congress. They considered it 'a Bolshevik trend'. There was strict vigilance of the socialist rank and file all over India. They adopted several direct and indirect repressive measures against them at every opportunity. It made Gandhi intervene several times against ill-treatment of the socialist freedom fighters, particularly Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) and Rammanohar Lohia, by the colonial rulers.

IV

There was a total of six national conferences of the Congress Socialist Party after its foundation at Patna. The first national conference was held at Bombay (21-22 October 1934) and presided by socialist thinker Dr. Sampurnanand. The second conference took place at Meerut on 20th January 1936 with eminent social reformer Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in chair. Faizpur (24-25 December 1937) and Lahore (12-13 April 1938) hosted the third and fourth national conferences respectively. The fifth national conference of Congress Socialist Party was presided by one of the heroes of the Quit India Movement Dr. Rammanohar Lohia at Kanpur (23rd February -1st March 1947) after a gap of nine years on the eve of independence in February 1947 which debated the issue of coming out of the Indian National Congress. The last national conference of CSP took place at Nasik on 19-21 March 1948 which resolved to leave Congress and establish Socialist Party of India. It was presided by one of the founding leaders Purushottam Trikamdas.

The first conference at Bombay elected Jayaprakash Narayan as General Secretary and Mohanlal Gautam, E.M.S. Namboodripad, Minoo Masani, and N. G. Gorey as Joint Secretaries. It elected a 15 member national executive committee which paved the way for popularising of the socialist ideas and programs for all the years till India became free of the foreign rule. In the next 14 years of its evolution, the Congress Socialist Party was found to have developed into an all India political platform as evident at the sixth national conference in Nasik in 1948. Legendary Jayaprakash Narayan (Hero of the Quit India Movement of 1942 and kept behind the bars till 1946) was re-elected as the General Secretary who shouldered this

critical responsibility continuously since the first conference held at Bombay in 1934. In the last phase, J.P. was assisted by legal luminary Purushottam Trikamdas as Treasurer and K. B. Menon ('Gandhi of Kerala' who resigned faculty post at Harvard University and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930), N. G. Gorey (an outstanding social reformer and popular Marathi author), Suresh Desai (eminent trade unionist from Gujarat) and Prem Bhasin (prominent youth leader from the Punjab) as the Joint Secretaries.

The organisational framework was strengthened by establishing 11 special 'Departments'. Each departmental team was headed by an eminent socialist leader. They were – 1. Labour (Ashok Mehta), 2. Kisan (Ramnandan Mishra), 3. Inter-state Committee (Rammanohar Lohia), 4. Student Council (B. P. Sinha), 5. Parliamentary Committee (Narendra Dev), 6. Parliamentary Sub-committee (Rammanohar Lohia), 7. Security Committee (S. M. Joshi), 8. Cooperative Department (Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay), 9. Hyderabad Action Committee (Aruna Asaf Ali), 10. Non-Resident Security (Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay), and 11. Volunteers Department (S. M. Joshi).

The national executive committee of CSP in 1948 had nineteen members reflecting the national diversity. Furthermore, they were among the most respected warriors of the recently concluded freedom struggle due to their being jailed several times which made them iconic role models – Acharya Narendra Dev, Yusuf Meharally, Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, Dr. Rammanohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan, Aruna Asaf Ali, Asoka Mehta, Ramnandan Mishra, Munshi Ahmad Din, Ganga Sharan Sinha, Shibnath Bannerjee, Maganlal Bagdi, Hareswar Goswami, Chhotubhai Purani, Surendra Nath Dwivedi, Narendra Nath Das, Moinuddin Harris, B. P. Sinha, and Madhu Limaye.

V

Soon after coming into existence in 1934, the Congress Socialist Party became known for the brilliance, passion and courage of its illustrious members. They overwhelmed others in the interest group organisations as they represented togetherness of critical participation and selfless cooperation. They were present everywhere – from political debates and intellectual discourses to class organizations and mass mobilizations; from literary associations and student unions to the jails of different provinces; among women, Kisan, urban labour force, and the professional classes.

It was an attractive confluence of experience and youth; wisdom and courage; knowledge and sacrifice; national independence and anti-imperialism; democracy and socialism. It included the eminent 'Non-cooperationists' who had sacrificed lucrative careers in response to the clarion call of Non-cooperation in 1920 like Narendra Dev, Sampurnanand, Charu Chandra Bannerjee and Purushottam Trikamdas. They were occupying important positions in the Congress organization.

It had a galaxy of young stalwarts with excellent intellectual training from some of the best institutions of India and abroad. These younger socialists had a good understanding of the Indian and Western thinkers including Plato, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Tolstoy, Jefferson, Mills, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Tilak, Tagore and Gandhi. They were aware of the successes and failures of the French Revolution (1789), India's first war of independence (1857-60), the first World War (1914-18), and the Russian Revolution (1917). They were moved by the martyrdom of Bismil, Ashfaqulla, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev, Chandrashekhra Azad and other revolutionaries. They were inspired by the campaign for 'total independence' by India Independence League led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose. They used their intellectual power and challenged the advocates of colonialism,

communalism and capitalism. It created echoes among the students at some of the best institutions in India and abroad including Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Delhi, Lahore, Nagpur, Ahmedabad, Allahabad, Banaras, Lucknow, Patna, Aligarh, London, Oxford, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Geneva, Moscow, Boston, Madison, Berkley, and New York. Most of them were not only dedicated fighters and effective social organisers but also engaged intellectuals who contributed to awareness building and political education through numerous articles and books on a variety of issues in English and Indian languages.

Thus, the Congress Socialist Party functioned as a socialist platform within the framework of Indian national Congress for 14 eventful years and performed many roles. There are, at least, five valuable contributions of CSP in the Indian freedom struggle and the global quest for socialism:

1. It was the primary vehicle of socialist ideals with unwavering commitment for total independence. It made invaluable intellectual contribution in the anti-imperialist discourse which challenged the British imperial hegemony in the south Asian part of the modern world system. It reached out to one fifth of the humanity as it influenced the people of British India (later divided into India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sikkim (later merged in India), the princely states of the Indian sub-continent and the Indian Diaspora.
2. Since its inception in 1934, the Congress Socialist Party functioned as the vanguard of the Indian national movement, through Indian National Congress. It was respected by all sections of the freedom movement for pursuing a framework about the idea of India where the working men and women in fields and factories were recognised as the key constituent of an independent Indian nation-state.
3. It contributed a set of goals which helped in evolving the egalitarian vision of Swaraj. The Congress Socialists were consistently uncompromising against all forms of traditional and modern disparities and discriminations based upon i. Caste, ii. Class, iii. Gender, iv. Region and v. Religion.
4. The leaders and activists of Congress Socialist Party played a catalytic role at all levels from the grass-roots to the provincial and national working committees. This 'ginger group' functioned with twin focus – i. the making of a concrete socio-economic and political program of decolonization and democratic re-construction, and ii. Establishing associations of the Kisan, industrial workers, women, intelligentsia, students-youth and the democratic forces in the Indian princely states.
5. Finally, the Congress Socialist Party proved to be an incredible ideological incubator which brought together various shades of progressive freedom fighters through 'unity in action'. It also proved to be a disciplined constituent of the Indian National Congress which earned them enduring support of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. It shaped not only progressive political icons but also critical thinkers, social reformers, spiritual seekers, creative writers, legal luminaries, academic scholars, and journalists.

VI

This is an outstanding contribution by Shri Qurban Ali who is one of the most knowledgeable experts about the socialist movement in India. He is uniquely placed for such a special work on three grounds. Firstly, Shri Qurban Ali is intimately connected with the socialist lineage as the son of Captain Abbas Ali who was a leading socialist and a close associate of Jayaprakash Narayan and Dr. Rammanohar Lohia. Secondly, he has spent years in research and documentation about the history of Indian socialist movement. And finally, he is a well known journalist in Hindi, Urdu and English media about various aspects of politics in India for the last three decades.

This volume brings us face-to-face with fifty five fascinating faces of the founders of the Congress Socialist Party and their contributions without burdening the text with too many footnotes and references. At the same time, there are all essential references about the ideological interactions between the Marxist, the Gandhian socialists and post-Marxist socialists. It is a satisfactory primer about the engagements of the Congress Socialists with Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad, Dr. Ambedkar, Swami Sahajanand and other prime movers. It engages us about changing orientation of the socialists towards the Indian National Congress, Communist Party, the communal parties and the caste-based parties. There are interesting details about the socialist leaders who contributed in broadening the social base of the national movement through All India Trade Union Congress, All India Kisan Sabha, All India Women Conference, Youth League, All India Students Federation, etc.

But the place of pride is occupied by the citations about heroic roles of the Congress Socialist leaders of 'Quit India Movement'. This selection also invites attention about controversial issues like the partition of India, boycott of the Constituent Assembly, the peoples' movements in the Princely states, liberation of Goa from the Portuguese, mobilization for entry of the Dalits in Pandharpur temple, the murder of Mahatma Gandhi and the decision of leaving the Indian National Congress to establish a separate Socialist Party.

I am sure that this work will prove to be indispensable for anyone who wishes to understand the making of socialist movement and its trajectories in modern India. It is also going to be an invaluable guide about the makers of the socialist way of freedom struggle and nation-building. Shri Qurban Ali deserves gratitude of not only socialists but also all those who seek inspiration from the Indian national movement and the quest for a just and humane society beyond the hierarchies of gender, caste, class, faith, and ethnicity.

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