

Communism in the Indian Sub-continent

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The Communist Party of India (CPI) was initiated in exile in late 1920 by M.N. Roy, legendary Comintern emissary before the reign of Stalin. It remained insignificant, however, until the mid-thirties when the new anti-fascist popular front doctrine enabled activists to link up with the left wing of the Congress Party. Communists were thus able to take over the popular mass movement in what is now Kerala and to strengthen their influence within the all India trade union movement. They also constituted the major revolutionary nationalist force among the peasants in present Andhra Pradesh and among the tenants, workers and occasionally ex-terrorist radical aristocrats in undivided Bengal.

Further advances were constrained in 1942 when the CPI had problems of combining its commitment to the international anti-fascist movement with Gandhi's nationalist 'Quit India' policy, and in 1948, when the party adjusted to Moscow's new cold war hard line and opted for sustaining its revolutionary activity even though the British had left. This was also when a separate Communist Party of Pakistan was founded, within which the east Pakistan section was the most active, thus forming a separate party already in 1968, before the independence of Bangladesh. Meanwhile the Communist party of Nepal was also formed from India (1949); and during the period of harsh British repression in Sri Lanka, several of its primarily anti-Stalinist communists worked in India also.

By the early fifties, Moscow approved of the CPI members who wanted to return to a more cautious strategy of co-operating with the Congress Party (deemed to represent the 'national bourgeoisie') on issues related to anti-imperialism, the building of an

independent national economy and the favouring of anti-feudal land reforms. Meanwhile, the CPI should retain its independence and mass organisations.

On the one hand, the new strategy enabled the central leadership to influence the ‘tall national leaders’ in New Delhi and in advancing its own importance in Kerala, West Bengal and later on Tripura. Similarly, the communists in Sri Lanka (most of whom were Trotskyites organised in the *Lanka Sama Samaja Party*) were also able to retain their leading role from the struggle against the British.

On the other hand, while the Sri Lankan activists lost out in the sixties to their new populist coalition partner (the Sri Lanka Freedom Party), the Indian communists did not regain their dominant position in Andhra Pradesh after the brief policies of insurrection in the late forties, lost much of its influence within the trade union movement (most dramatically in Bombay/Mumbai), and still remain largely confined to their additional strongholds.

Four major issues have been subject to intense debate within the communist movement in the sub-continent. The first is the conditional co-operation with nationalist parties like the Indian Congress or the Awami League in Bangladesh and the related question of what parties represent the ‘national’ or ‘big-bourgeois and landlord’ interests. In conjunction with the Sino-Soviet conflict in the sixties, the disputes ended in splits. The majority of the CPI members formed the CPI-Marxist party under widely respected West Bengal and Kerala leaders such as Jyoti Basu, Harekrishna Konar, A.K. Gopalan and EMS Namboodiripad. While the CPI held on to Moscow, intensified its co-operation with the Congress and supported state-led ‘non-capitalist development’ by even defending Mrs.

Gandhi's infamous state of emergency between 1975 and 1977, the CPI-M leant towards Beijing, denounced the Congress as siding with the big business and the landlords and talked more of class struggle. Remarkably, however, the CPI-M also defended democracy through a broad front against the centralist Delhi rule in general and the emergency regulations in particular. This fitted well with the party's then strategy of expanding in strongholds like Kerala and West Bengal, turning them into showcases and thus gaining more influence in other states as well as finally in New Delhi.

While the protection of India's democracy was vital for the country as well as CPI-M's reputation, the strategy of advancing from strongholds in a few states did not prove successful and the debates over the character of the bourgeoisie and related parties have become less relevant. The deterministic class analysis was simply not very helpful in understanding neither the increasing importance of corruption and general abuse of state and politics in India's combination of primitive and advanced accumulation of capital, nor the expansion of neo-liberalism and caste- and religion based identity politics.

The second major debate is that of peaceful and democratic means versus armed struggle. The latter tendency lost out after the aborted insurgencies in the late forties but gained prominence again with Beijing's critique of Moscow. The brief Maoist-led revolt in the small Darjeeling village of Naxalbari in 1967 was the symbolic starting point and a significant number of CPI-M activists formed a new Marxist-Leninist party. Rather than widespread uprisings however, this was followed mainly by new splits, the multiplication of rival groups and parties, limited campaigns in some particularly harshly exploited tribal areas of Bengal, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, and a much less heroic urban terror campaign in Calcutta/Kolkata. There were similar developments in the neighbouring

countries. The major Maoist arguments about the primacy of 'semi-feudalism', and the major importance of a 'bureaucratic' version of the old colonial comprador bourgeoisie that rests with imperialism rather than a basis of its own, rarely made sense on a general scale, neither in India nor in the other countries on the sub-continent. In spite of being much more feudal and having a more conservative Congress Party, this may partially hold true of Nepal as well. An impressively broad and effective people's movement succeeded in using peaceful means to introduce multi-party democracy in 1990 and to build a broad communist party ('Unified-Marxist-Leninist'), which continues the struggle along similar lines against the restored royal dictatorship and thus builds bridges to the Maoist insurgents as well.

Meanwhile however, there has been little improvement in backward areas and among severely oppressed sections of the population, in India, Nepal and elsewhere. It has not always been possible for the downtrodden people to make use of democratic reforms. The mainstream Left has often been unable to address complicated forms of subordination and exploitation, including the importance of caste. Hence, revolutionary Maoist perspectives sustain on the sidelines. In India for instance, those who prefer legal work include the Marxist-Leninist Liberation group, while the major factions that prioritise armed struggle recently came together under a similar Communist Party-Maoist banner as their insurgent counterparts in Nepal.

The third major problem has been the work within the broader movement of workers, peasants and other social movements. The major tendency is still to 'provide leadership', i.e. party-politicisation. This has generated immense problems of co-operation among various activists as well as clientelistic favours to various party followers, especially after

the splits in the sixties. Hence, the mainstream Left has also been accused of being party to ‘dirty politics’ and to indirectly contribute to the negation of politics among many new civic organisations and social movements.

Moreover, while the broad support for the communists in West Bengal (where they have been in office since 1977) and Kerala (where they have led several governments since 1957) is largely due to land reforms to promote human development, it has proved difficult to follow up the reforms to fulfil the development aim. The most downtrodden sections of the populations were never fully included and one may discuss the human development outcome. In post-land reform West Bengal, agricultural production has increased with modern inputs, new investments and co-ordination thanks to impressive political and administrative decentralisation, but vital problems remain with regard to equality, democracy and the character of growth. In Kerala, the reforms were more consistent but neither accompanied by improvements of the productive forces nor related to decentralisation to promote co-operation and thus improve production on scattered pieces of land. At times, the new owners of land even developed unproductive divisive interests. This adds to the previously mentioned combination of old party-politicisation and new dissident negation of politics in making the current impressive attempts in Kerala at democratic decentralisation and peoples’ planning very difficult. Similarly, communists in the sub-continent at large have additional problems of relating to a series of other ‘secondary conflicts’ in society (in addition to class contradictions over land, labour and capital) with regard to cast, ethnicity, religion, gender, environment, transparency, corruption, and further democratisation.

Yet, the fourth and ultimate communist dilemma is more conventional. It is about the need to reconcile the immediate need of contributing to the widest possible democratic unity against ethnic and religious chauvinism with the long-term aim of fighting exploitation and inequalities in favour of socialism. And it is about doing this on both the national level where communist tend to be weak and in the specific contexts where they are strong. While much of the old-style communism is likely to disappear in this process, the mainstream parties and activists with this background are still among the actors that might make a difference in the sub-continent.

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