

**A SAGE
White Paper**

Capturing the nature and genesis of the Left in India

Leftism in India, 1917–1947

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Leftism in India emerged out of the matrix of the Indian national movement. The starting point, therefore, for any attempt to elucidate its ideologies and orientations must be the fact that it was both a nationalist and a revolutionary movement. The Leftist movement was historically linked with India's struggle for freedom under the INC and the ideologue leadership that sprang within it was naturally shaped by the ideas and modulations of the early nationalist leaders. The Left-wing leadership within the INC concentrated its entire attention on national liberation and propagated radical socio-economic changes only as a means of strengthening the nation. They believed that national independence could be restored and the nation could flourish only through a radical socio-economic transformation. They were disillusioned with the conservative socio-economic ideas of the early nationalist leaders as well as with the 'anti-modern' philosophy of M.K. Gandhi who was not only opposed to any drastic change in the traditional social hierarchy, but also set his face against modern science, technology and industrialism. The growing number of intellectuals within the INC was intent upon radical socio-economic transformation of the country, but they did not want to cast off the intrinsic values of Indian life and society. Their response to the Marxian doctrine of class struggle was, therefore, lukewarm. They were attracted to the socialist ideology because it offered not only a programme of rapid socio-economic advancement but also provided an alternative to conservatism and capitalism. With the emergence of these intellectuals, therefore, Indian nationalism promised a more dynamic content, a more purposeful orientation and a more positive role in the liberation movement.

The communist variant of the Left wing, on the other hand, gave its attention more to propagating class struggle and proletarian internationalism than national liberation, thus neglecting a cause which would have been far more likely to fire the imagination of the mass of Indians. The First World War, it was believed, created the objective conditions for the overthrow of imperialism as a step towards the ultimate goal of world proletarian revolution, a goal more revolutionary and uncompromising than that of the radical nationalists. During the early years of the communist movement, their overriding concern was to form a revolutionary party—a vanguard of the proletariat—and to bring about a revolution under its leadership. But under the existing circumstances, this could hardly be done without identifying themselves with the nationalist cause and forging a common platform of struggle with the national bourgeoisie. Thus, the most crucial question that confronted them since the formation of the communist groups in the early 1920s was how to fit the precepts of proletarian internationalism into the ethos of Indian nationalism.

In short, although Leftism in India, in all its ramifications, whether inside the INC or as a projection of the international communist movement, had shared roots in the conditions of imperialism and as a reaction against the ideologies of the orthodox leadership of the INC, the various Left-wing groups

differed from one another with respect to their tactics and ideological orientations towards India's struggle for freedom.

LEFT INSIDE CONGRESS

The Left wing inside the INC was, however, an amorphous body with leaders who were more attracted to socialist ideas than to the orthodox liberalism of the INC itself. Having found themselves in such a position, they did not consider themselves disloyal to the party. On the contrary, they believed that their departure from the orthodox INC ideology was an indication of the proud fact that the INC represented not only a broad cross section of the people but also different shades of political opinion. If they drew sustenance from socialist ideology, they believed that they did not betray the INC but endeavoured to redeem its objective of a fuller life for the people. To them, the INC symbolized the nation's aspirations for a fuller life and they owed themselves a duty to strengthen it for the fulfilment of this aspiration. Thus, the Left wing of the INC tended to express itself in two ways, one which might be termed an orthodox strain, and the other a radical strain, the former tending to uphold and preserve the existing ideals of the party and the latter tending to fit it with a revolutionary ideal which was to develop out of the prevailing order. But as Nehru confessed, the Left elements did not quite know how or when this new order would come to India. He, however, thought that every country would fashion it after its own way and fit it with its own genius keeping the essential basis of that order that would emerge out of the existing chaos. This doubt and hesitation notwithstanding, there was a growing awareness among the radical elements of the inadequacy of the INC ideology in the context of the far-reaching revolutionary ideas all over the world. As pointed out by Nehru, the whole world was face-to-face with a vast question mark and every country and every people were in the melting pot. The age of faith was past and old certainties were under pressure. Everywhere there was doubt and restlessness and the foundations of the state and society were in a process of transformation. Old established ideas of liberty, justice, property and even the family were being attacked and the future hung in the balance. He said: 'We appear to be in a dissolving period of history, when the world is in labour and out of her [its] travail will give birth to a new order.'

Thus, Leftism inside the INC was a complex phenomenon, an osmosis, which tended to develop along the mainstream of Indian nationalism and expressed itself through such ideas as socialism, anti-imperialism, internationalism, democracy and constitutionalism. National independence had been intended to serve as the basis for the realization of far-reaching socio-economic changes, which were not to be merely moderate reforms but to be so radical as to entail a revolution. In other words, Congress Leftism was bound up with a national ideal which required a broad-based socialistic environment for its fulfilment. Although the Congress socialists were walled in by the traditions and organization of the party, their radical ideas had grown organically in the prevailing political climate of the country. This was, indeed, one of the most significant developments in India's struggle for freedom.

The programme of socio-economic transformation contemplated by Left-wing Congressmen was to be based not on Gandhian socialism, which synthesized the philosophies of John Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy with the *vaishnava* ethics of non-possession and human equality, but on socialism in the Marxian sense of the term. According to Nehru, the theory of trusteeship advocated by Gandhi was 'barren' because it meant that the power for good or evil remained with the self-appointed trustee who could exercise it as he desired. The sole trusteeship, he pointed out, that could be fair was the trusteeship of the nation and not of one individual or a group. Many Englishmen honestly considered themselves the trustees for India and yet to what condition had they reduced the country! Therefore, the INC must decide for whose

benefit industry must be run and land produce food. He lamented that in India the abundance that the land produced was not for the peasant or the labourer who worked on it and that industry's chief function was to produce millionaires. However golden the harvest and heavy the dividends, the mud huts and hovels and nakedness of the people testified to the glory of the British empire and the Indian social system. The economic programme of the INC must, therefore, be based on a human outlook and must not sacrifice man to money. If an industry, Nehru declared, could not be run without starving its workers, then the industry must close down and if the peasants had not enough to eat, then the intermediaries who deprived them of their full share must go.

The Left-wing elements in the INC, most of whom belonged to the urban intelligentsia, were sceptical about Gandhian socialism which discarded the methods of industrialization and advocated the establishment of self-governing village *panchayats* (administrations) as the basis of an ideal society. And as they believed that only industrialization could improve the economic condition of the masses, they were deeply impressed by the Russian example of revolutionary socio-economic transformation brought about by a determined political leadership committed to the ideology of socialism.

The Congress socialists were attracted by Marxism, because it provided them with a philosophy, a dogma, a scientific method of studying the socio-economic problems and above all a concrete programme of action all of which contrasted with the traditional religious–metaphysical way of looking at things. Marxism taught them that all political phenomena were the reflection of economic forces and imperialism was the inevitable product of the economic system in which it originated, that is, capitalism. They were now convinced that the long course of history showed a succession of different forms of government and changing economic forms of production and organization. The two shaped and influenced each other and when economic change went ahead too fast and the forms of government remained more or less static, a hiatus occurred, which was bridged over by a sudden change called revolution. In conformity with the Marxian analysis of history, the Congress socialists diagnosed the political subjection and economic degradation of India as the direct result of the capitalistic system of production and distribution. As Nehru pointed out, the question now was whether the capitalist system had outlived its day and must give place to a better and saner ordering of human affairs which was more in keeping with the progress of science and human knowledge. And it was clear enough, he said, that the capitalist system, whatever its services in the past might have been, was no longer suited to the present methods of production. Technical advance had outrun the existing social structure and this lag was responsible for most of the existing disorders. Until the lag was made up and a new system in keeping with the new technical advance was adopted, disorders were bound to continue. But this change to a new system was opposed by those who had vested interests in the old system and although this old system was dying before their eyes, they preferred to 'hold on to their little rather share a lot with others'. The Left-wing intellectuals also came to realize that the capitalistic system of production and imperialist expansion had inevitably brought in their train a serious challenge from the growing forces of labour all over the world. This challenge, Nehru opined, had induced the possessing classes to sink their petty differences and band themselves together to fight for their survival. This had led to fascism and, in its milder form, to the formation of so-called national governments. In fact, these were the last-ditch efforts of the possessing classes to hold on to what they had. The struggle was becoming more and more intense and the forms of nineteenth-century democracy were being discarded. But fascism or national governments offered no solution to the fundamental economic inconsistencies of the capitalist system and so long as they did not remove the inequalities of wealth, they were doomed to fail.

Unlike some early nationalists who believed that the continuation of the British connection in a progressively liberalized and mutually cooperative form was of great advantage to India, the radical intellectuals refused to have any truck with Britain and for that matter with any other imperialist power.

While the former sought evolution of the British Raj into a mutually advantageous political order—a commonwealth—the latter believed that there could be no true commonwealth so long as imperialism was its basis and the exploitation of other races were its chief means of sustenance. India could never be an equal partner of the commonwealth, Nehru argued, unless imperialism and all that it implied was discarded. So long as this was not done, India's position in the empire was bound to be one of subservience. The embrace of the British empire, he said, was a dangerous thing since it was not a life-giving embrace of affection freely given and returned, but an embrace of death. So long as there was the domination of one country over another or the exploitation of one class by another, no stable equilibrium could be achieved. Out of capitalism and imperialism, he declared, peace could never come. And it was because the British empire was based on the exploitation of the colonial people that India could find no peace in it. No gain that might come to India was worth anything unless it helped in removing the grievous burdens of the masses. Nehru concluded: 'The weight of a great empire is heavy to carry and long our people have endured it. Their backs are bent and down and their spirit has almost broken. How will they share in the commonwealth partnership if the burden of exploitation continues?'

Taking lessons from the Marxian analysis of colonialism, the Congress socialists now came to realize that political freedom without economic emancipation of the masses was meaningless and that the national movement should be directed towards the liquidation of all vested interests, whether indigenous or foreign. Leaders and individuals might come and go, said Nehru, they might compromise or betray, but the exploited masses would carry on the struggle, for their drill sergeant was hunger. *Swaraj* for them was not a paper constitution or a problem of the hereafter. It was a question of here and now, of immediate relief. According to Nehru:

Roast lamb and mint sauce, may be a tasty dish for those who eat it, but the poor lamb is not likely to appreciate the force of the best of arguments which point out the beauty of sacrifice for the good of the elect and joys of close communion, even though dead, with mint sauce.

India's immediate goal, therefore, could only be considered in terms of the ending of the exploitation of its people. Politically, this meant complete independence and severance of the British connection, and economically and socially it meant the liquidation of all class privileges and vested interests. The whole world was struggling to that end and India could do no less. And it was in that way that India's struggle for freedom linked up with the world struggle. Nehru asked:

Is our aim human welfare or the preservation of class privileges and the vested interests of pampered groups? The question must be answered clearly and unequivocally by each one of us. There is no room for quibbling when the fate of nations and millions of human beings is at stake.

The one and only way of emancipating India from capitalist-imperialist exploitation and of creating a healthy political, economic and social order was to build a new India on the foundations of democracy and socialism. It was only through democratic socialism that the three principal maladies of the Indian body politic—political subjection, economic exploitation and social maladjustment—could be cured. As Nehru pointed out, the only key to the solution of the world's problems, including India's problems, lay in socialism, which was not only an economic doctrine but also a philosophy of life. There was no other way of ending the poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and subjection of the Indian people except through socialism, which involved revolutionary changes in the sociopolitical structure and the ending of vested interests in land and industry. It also meant the ending of private property, the replacement of the profit system by the higher ideal of cooperative service and a change in the human instincts, habits and desires. In short, it meant a new civilization, radically different from the existing capitalist order.

In their anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and revolutionary stance, the Congress socialists were clearly influenced by Marx; but their adherence to Marxism was only to a degree for, if the inspiration for a socialistic society came from Marx, intrinsically their ideology was rooted in the humanist and liberal tradition of India's past. And here we have a prime example of how an alien ideology was sought to be modified, remoulded and absorbed by the genius of Indian non-conformism.

The Congress socialists were anxious to remove inequality and exploitation, but their idea of socialism was mainly based on the liberal experience of the nineteenth century. In contrast to Marxism, as interpreted by Lenin, which rejected the idea of gradualism and reform, they believed in the evolutionary transformation of society into a socialistic pattern. Their faith in gradualism and piecemeal social engineering was influenced by the study of British constitutional history, the achievements of the socialist movement in Britain and above all, the lessons of Fabianism. They did not, therefore, blindly admire everything that happened in the Soviet Union. They believed in the basic economic theory which underlay the social change in Russia but did not approve of everything that had taken place in that country—the ruthless suppression of all contrary opinion, the wholesale regimentation and unnecessary violence in carrying out socialist programme. Thus, so far as civil rights and liberties were concerned, they were more attracted by Western liberalism than by the Marxian doctrine of proletarian dictatorship. Socialism held out a new hope of an idyllic socio-economic order, a rationalist, secularist and scientific outlook as against the ethical, conservative and revivalist approach of the orthodox nationalist leaders. They accepted socialism as a goal but rejected the Marxian precept that there could be no socialism without violent revolution.

Congress socialism, in fact, represented a complex assortment of ideologies including Marxism, Leninism, Fabian socialism and even some aspects of Gandhism and humanism. What distinguished the Congress socialists from the orthodox nationalists was that they sought to yoke socialism to the chariot of Indian nationalism. This socialist orientation of Indian nationalism inevitably demanded a concrete programme which was to be 'socialist in action and objective'. And as the Congress socialists felt that the INC could accept a socialist programme only in 'mutilated form', the responsibility for carrying on the struggle was bound to devolve upon the masses.

The most strident criticism of a section of the Congress socialists came from the communists who described Congress socialism as a 'Left manoeuvre of the Indian bourgeoisie' and an example of 'social fascism'. But this was too brusque a judgement of the Congress socialists' predilection for the ideal of democracy. In fact, when one discards irrelevant hypotheses and misleading historical analogies and looks dispassionately at the underlying spirit of the Indian freedom movement, the ideological orientation of the Congress socialists ceases to be a Left manoeuvre of the Indian bourgeoisie. Drawing its inspiration mainly from Western liberalism and Fabian socialism and to a lesser extent from Marxism, Congress socialism had emerged by responding to the problems and requirements of the peculiar Indian situation. As pointed out by Thomas A. Rusch, the Congress Left wing was 'divided by three amorphous and overlapping tendencies—Marxism, social democracy of the British Labour Party type and a democratic socialism tempered by Gandhian concepts and the use of non-violent civil disobedience techniques of nationalist and class struggle'. Although Congress socialism was receptive to such tenets of Gandhism as moderation and non-violence, it rejected his asceticism, traditionalism and the concept of village-based democracy. Like the communists, the Congress socialists recognized the class antagonism in the Indian society, the need for the liquidation of inequality and exploitation, rapid industrialization and the paramount role of the state in bringing this about. They, however, discarded the communist methods of coercion, insurrection, violent overthrow of the existing order and the dictatorship of the proletariat. They stood for a revolution by consent, a revolution without fear.

LEFT'S DISILLUSION WITH GANDHIAN POLITICS

In striking contrast to Congress socialism, communism in India had not grown organically in the country's own political and spiritual climate. It came to India when a section of radical nationalists, utterly dissatisfied with the leadership of Gandhi, started grouping for a more militant ideology and found in the Marxist–Leninist revolutionary doctrine an answer to Gandhism. When the Non-Cooperation Movement was suspended by Gandhi, consequent on the outbreak of violence at Chauri Chaura, these extremist elements felt themselves betrayed and blamed Gandhi for 'pandering to the government'. Since that day, many of them permanently lost faith in Gandhi and his technique of non-violent struggle. M.N. Roy observed: 'If India will not have freedom conquered by violent means, she [it] will have to go without it.' Castigating the Gandhian principle of non-violence, Evelyn Roy also wrote:

That three hundred million Indians will cheerfully endure all kicks and insults, all hunger and nakedness, all poverty and wretchedness at the hands of their exploiters, until these, touched and overcome by such a demonstration of man's innate divinity, will respond to it by throwing away their machineguns and fleshpots, their treasure hoards and princely power, and will welcome their three hundred million brethren to a new fraternity of man where liberty and equality will rule the human race under the aegis of perfect love.... Non-violence, resignation, perfect love and release from the pain of living—this is the substance of Indian philosophy handed down through the ages by a powerful caste of kings, priests and philosophers who found it good to keep the people in subjection. Mr Gandhi is nothing but the heir to this long line of ghostly ancestors; he is the perfect product of heredity and environment. His philosophy of *satyagraha* is the inevitable fruit of its spiritual forebears. What is unfortunate is that Mr Gandhi's revived philosophy of the otherworldliness coincides with the most unprecedented growth...of a spirit of revolt against material privation, on the part of the Indian masses.

Imbued with the teachings of Marx, these radical nationalists had not only broken with Gandhi's cult of non-violence but also found that their newly acquired ideas were absolutely incompatible with the whole range of Gandhian theories and attitudes. M.N. Roy, perhaps the first communist writer to present a Marxist appraisal of Gandhi, identified him with the feudal class interests of India. He found in Gandhi and his principles an 'unerring instinct for safeguarding class-interests' and averred:

This strong instinct of preserving property rights above all betrays the class affiliation of Gandhi, in spite of his pious outbursts against the sordid materialism of modern civilization. His hostility to capitalist society is manifestly not revolutionary but reactionary. He believes in the sanctity of private property, but seeks to prevent its inevitable evolution to capitalism.

R. Palme Dutt also identified the INC leadership of Gandhi with the petty-bourgeois elements which 'wished on the one hand to stand forward as leaders of the masses, but also feared to break with the propertied interests of the bourgeoisie'. The leaders of the international communist movement also held identical views on Gandhi and Gandhism. In an article entitled 'The Constitution for the Enslavement of the Indian People and the Policy of the Indian Bourgeoisie' in the *Communist International*, Valia observed that Gandhian teachings represented 'the cowardly antirevolutionary bourgeoisie, linked up with the landlord system and in deadly fear of a national revolution'. P.C. Joshi, another communist intellectual, summed up Gandhism as the 'outlook of negation, the policy of passivity and the practice of subservience'.

About the Author

Satyabrata Rai Chowdhuri, PhD, DLitt (1935–2016), was a renowned political scientist of his times, specializing in South Asian politics and international relations. He taught at various government colleges in West Bengal early in his career before joining Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata where he held a long stint as a Professor and the Head of the Department of Political Science. In 2000, the University Grants Commission conferred on him the Emeritus Fellowship.

Professor Rai Chowdhuri also lectured on Indian politics at the University of Oxford and was a Senior Fellow in International Relations at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London. In 2006, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. A prolific writer, he was a commentator and columnist on South Asian politics with several esteemed publications across the globe. His other recent book is *Nuclear Politics: Towards a Safer World*.

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