

Sobhanlal Datta Gupta

Comintern and Communism in India: A Review

1. Comintern and the Periodization of Communist Movement in India

In the history of the communist movement in India the Comintern occupies a place of crucial importance. Since its foundation, the Communist Party of India (CPI) formulated its political strategies by closely interacting with the Comintern. It would be naive, however, to attribute the flourishing of communist ideas in India and the advancement of the CPI to mechanical responses to the directives of the Third International. The interaction, at times quite complex, was largely the effect of two factors. 1) From its inception, the colonial question and the problems of the revolutionary movement in India engaged the attention of the Comintern in all its Congresses and ECCI Plenums. 2) With the establishment of the first contacts between the Comintern and the indigenous communist groups operating in India in the early twenties, the keen interest evinced by the latter in the activities of the Third International furthered the links between the CPI and Comintern in the years that followed.

As we know, the Comintern witnessed major shifts in its perception of the colonial question at different points of time, and a possible periodization of the communist movement in India vis-a-vis these changes may accordingly be made. Phase one: the period of the anti-imperialist united front, 1919-1927. Phase two: the period of left-sectarianism, 1928-1934. Phase three: the period of the united front, 1935-1940. Phase four: the period of the people's war, 1941-1943. This periodization, however, requires a brief explanation.

In its early years, the Comintern was broadly guided in its understanding of the colonial question by Lenin's Colonial Theses, which, with some minor modifications, had been adopted as the key document by the Second Congress in 1920. Lenin's approach emphasized the importance of building up a united anti-imperialist front comprising nationalists as well as communists, without, however, minimizing the necessity of building up communist parties in the colonies. It was primarily this strategy which was carried on up to the Fifth Congress in 1924. The communists in India were accordingly advised to build up the broadest possible anti-imperialist front against British imperialism, by associating with the Indian National Congress, the main political force representing Indian nationalism. After Lenin's death and following the rise of Stalin, left-sectarianism gradually began to creep in the Comintern's understanding of the colonial question, and during the Sixth Congress in 1928 a decisive strategy change took place, the implication of which was that nationalism in the colonies had become virtually a spent force and that the anti-imperialist movement henceforth would have to be waged under the leadership of the party of the proletariat. In the case of India this meant a break with the nationalist forces and a drive toward revolutionary struggle under the leadership of the newly formed Communist

Party. By 1935, however, it became evident that the potentiality of nationalism had not been exhausted, nor had the CPI been able to establish itself as a hegemonic force in India. Moreover, the rise of fascism in Germany in the early thirties called for the unity of all anti-fascist forces. Consequently, the Seventh Congress held in 1935 witnessed a break with the line that had been adopted at the Sixth Congress and called for a united front strategy, which, in regard to the colonies, meant a reversion to the pre-Sixth Congress period. For the CPI this implied forging a united front with the Congress as well as building up the mass base of the Party by mobilizing the workers and peasants in the anti-British struggle. This strategy, however, was again jolted in India as well as colonial countries, after the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. The Comintern interpreted it as an imperialist war. However, when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the Comintern now stated that the "imperialist war" had been transformed into a "people's war", thereby exhorting all communist parties to rise up to the defense of the USSR by lending support to the anti-Hitler coalition, i.e. imperialist countries of the West together with the Soviet Union. For the Indian communists this meant virtual suspension of anti-imperialist struggles and lending support to the British war efforts. This strategy led to the final break of the CPI with the Congress in 1942, when, with the commencement of the "Quit India" movement launched by the Congress, the anti-British struggle reached a new height. The CPI opposed the movement on the plea that this would weaken British war efforts.

2. Identifying the Basic Issues

This overview of the Comintern's perception of the colonial question raises certain basic issues relating to the communist movement in India vis-a-vis the Third International. These may be broadly identified as follows: 1) The Communist Party of India, as we know, was initially formed by some emigré revolutionaries led by Manabendra Nath Roy at Tashkent in 1920, while in India, the Party was formed at Kanpur in 1925 by a number of communist groups working inside the country. In the early twenties, Roy was thereby the spokesman of the Comintern with regard to matters relating to India, and he operated from abroad. The question is how he effected the coordination between the indigenous communist movement in India and the Comintern. 2) Were the shifts in the Comintern's strategy at different periods accepted mechanically and followed blindly by the CPI? 3) What precisely were the means of underground contact between the Comintern and the CPI throughout? What role, in this connection, was played by the Comintern emissaries? 4) How was the contact between Comintern and the communist movement in India viewed by the British Government? 5) Can it be argued that the Comintern's contribution to the development of the communist movement in India was broadly positive, notwithstanding negative aspects at certain points of time? When reviewing the interaction between the Comintern and communism in India over a period of about two decades, these questions demand careful consideration.

3. A Note on Sources

For a researcher interested in this subject, the most important sources are the original documents of the period, an impressive collection of which is to be found in the Central Party Archives, Ajoy Bhavan, Communist Party of India, New Delhi. Also important is the very rich collection of the Private Papers of Puran Chandra Joshi at P.C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Extremely valuable are the three confidential reports prepared by the British intelligence authorities in India, which have now been published. These reports were prepared at different times by Cecil Kay, David Petrie and Horace Williamson.¹ Two volumes, containing selections from confidential files of the Government of India relating to communist activities during this period, are also quite useful.² Almost invaluable are the records of the Meerut Conspiracy Case,³ which contain most of the seized documents of the early period.

The most systematic collection of primary source materials of the period between 1919 and 1928 is now available in a multivolume though incomplete series, edited on behalf of the CPI by the late Gangadhar Adhikari.⁴ Two selections containing documents relating to the Comintern and CPI during the phase of the "people's war" are quite useful.⁵

The official journals of the Comintern and CPI constitute another very important source. The files of Inprecor and Communist International are available at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi; this Library also has the holdings of Vanguard, Advance Guard, and Masses of India, originally published abroad by M.N. Roy, as well as National

¹ Cecil Kaye, Communism in India. With Unpublished Documents from the National Archives of India (1919-24), ed. by Subodh Roy (Calcutta, 1971); David Petrie, Communism in India: 1924-27, ed. by Mahadevprasad Saha (Calcutta, 1972); Horace Williamson, India and Communism, ed. by Mahadevprasad (Calcutta, 1976).

² Subodh Roy (ed.), Communism in India: unpublished documents 1925-1934 (Calcutta, 1980), and Communism in India: unpublished documents 1935-1945 (2nd edition, Calcutta, 1985).

³ Meerut. Sessions Court. Proceedings of the Meerut Conspiracy Case, 11 vols. (Meerut, 1929).

⁴ The series is entitled G. Adhikari (ed.), Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Vol I: 1917-1922 (New Delhi, 1971) [hereafter, DHCPI, I]; Vol. II: 1923-1925 (New Delhi, 1974) [hereafter, DHCPI, II]; Vol. III A: 1926 (New Delhi, 1978); Vol. III B: 1927 (New Delhi, 1979) [hereafter, DHCPI, III B]; vol. III C: 1928 (New Delhi, 1982) [hereafter, DHCPI, III C].

⁵ G. Adhikari (ed.), From Peace Front to People's War (2nd, enlarged edition, Bombay, 1944); P. Bandhu and T.G. Jacob (eds.), War and National Liberation. CPI Documents: 1939-1945 (New Delhi, 1988).

Front and People's War, the organs of the CPI in the thirties and forties, respectively. Also useful are the files of Labour Monthly, published throughout this period by Rajani Palme Dutt, London. They are available at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

For authentic information about this period it is also helpful to go through the memoirs of such prominent functionaries of the CPI as Muzaffar Ahmad⁶ and Philip Spratt.⁷ The reminiscences of Michael Carritt,⁸ a high-ranking British civil servant who maintained clandestine links between the CPI and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the forties, are also useful in this regard.

4. Comintern and the Formation of the Communist Party in 1920

Any meaningful study involving the Comintern and the growth of communist movement in India should take the economic status of India in the twenties as point of departure.⁹ To be very precise, until the First World War, India was exploited by Britain as a source of raw materials and a market for British goods. India remained primarily a peasant-dominated economy and the level of industrialization was extremely low. However, as the war progressed, there was a transient shift in Britain's attitude toward the industrialization of India. Prompted by the consideration of war (i.e., the necessity of stepping up industrial production in the Asian sector, the temporary inability of Britain to supply the Indian market with manufactured goods and the emergence of Japan as a rival, etc.), the British Government in 1916 agreed to the introduction of a protective tariff system, and the Indian industries temporarily got a booster. The pattern of industrialization was, however, quite significant: only a few workers were engaged in production-oriented heavy industries (i.e., transport, metallurgy, building), while the industries that really flourished were textile, cotton and jute. In other words, the so-called industrialization had not transformed the basic character of India as a predominantly agrarian colony. Moreover, when at the end of the war an all-round crisis of British industry occurred, followed by the great General Strike, it led to corresponding curtailment of whatever little industrialization had been encouraged in India earlier. This was evident in the almost complete stoppage of the inflow of

⁶ Muzaffar Ahmad, Communist Party of India. Years of Formation: 1921-1933 (Calcutta, 1959), The Communist Party of India and its Formation abroad (Calcutta, 1962), and Myself and the Communist Party of India: 1920-1929 (Calcutta, 1970).

⁷ Philip Spratt, Blowing up India: Reminiscences and Reflections of a former Comintern Emissary (Calcutta, 1955).

⁸ Michael Carritt, A Mole in the Crown (Calcutta 1986).

⁹ For an exposition of the problem, see the section entitled "India" in Communist Party of Great Britain, The Communist International between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses: 1924-1928 (London, 1928), pp. 464-466.

British capital to India and the ensuing deflation of Indian currency, which now severely hit the Indian industries. In other words, the British policy of industrialization was essentially tailored to the interests of British capital, and India remained a backward, peasant-dominated economy under the tutelage of British colonial domination.

It was against this background, in the 1920s, that the formation of the communist movement in India took shape and the first contacts with the Comintern were established. The victory of the October Revolution in Russia was the main inspiration motivating a number of revolutionaries to follow a new path in their efforts to overthrow British domination of India. Theirs would be different from the paths of conventional terrorism, or the national reformism manifest in the ideology of the Congress, which was the most influential nationalist party in the country. Meanwhile, with the formation of the Comintern in 1919 in a Manifesto addressed to the "Proletariat of the whole world", the colonial question highlighted with the argument that, with the national liberation movement in the colonies increasingly assuming a social character and the advent of proletarian dictatorship in Europe, the liberated colonies would soon get all assistance from socialist Europe.¹⁰

The emergence of the communist movement in India was manifest in the activities of four principal groups. The first group comprised nationalist revolutionaries like Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, Mohammad Barakatullah, Manduyam Pratiwadi Bhayankar Tirumal Acharya, Roy and Abaninath Mukherji. Coming from enlightened middle class families, they were, in their early years, militant nationalists fired by a revolutionary zeal to overthrow British imperialism. In the period of the First World War, they went abroad, became deeply influenced by the October Revolution, and came to espouse communism. For intellectuals such as Chattopadhyaya, Barakatullah and Roy, perhaps marxism had an added attraction. The second group consisted of men like Mohammad Ali Sepassi, Abdul Majid and Shaukat Usmani, who were representatives of the Pan-Islamic Khilafat and, more particularly, of the Hijrat movement.¹¹ These movements were both primarily religious in orientation, but differed in one respect: while the Khilafat movement made common cause with the Indian National Congress to fight British Rule, the Hijrat movement, dissatisfied with the Congress programme of non-violent non-cooperation, gave a call to Muslim youth to go to Turkey to join Kemal Pacha's army in its fight against British imperialism. This appeal illicited a tremendous response from not only dissatisfied, landless peasants and shopkeepers of the Punjab, but a substantial group of Muslim intellectuals as well. The latter, when they went abroad, became radicalized under the influence of the Russian Revolution. A third group emerged in 1922, when some

¹⁰ Adhikari, DHCPI, I, pp. 108-109.

¹¹ The Khilafat movement was originally inspired by the idea of the restoration of the Khaifa (Sultanate) of Turkey. Hirjat means: going into exile to escape religious persecution.

of the nationalists of the erstwhile Ghadar [Revolution] Party, revived in the post-war period by Rattan Singh and Santokh Singh, established contact with the Comintern. Finally, a number of communist groups emerged which, disillusioned with Gandhi's policy of non-violence and aware of the importance of communist ideology through experience in organizing the workers' and peasants' struggle, also forged links with the Comintern. They were Shripat Amrit Dange in Bombay, Singaravelu Chettiar in Madras, Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta and the Inquilab [Revolution] group in Lahore. The last group, significantly, had its roots entrenched in the movements of the oppressed classes in different regions of the country in the real sense of the term. In 1925 they will play a key role in founding the Communist Party on Indian soil. At the moment, however, Roy, operating from abroad, was the principal coordinator of the activities of these groups and, eventually, the primary link between the Comintern and the embryonic communist movement in India.

Although until 1922 the communist groups operating in India had virtually no information about the Third International, in 1920 at the Comintern's Second Congress, Roy had engaged himself in the well-known debate with Lenin regarding the strategy of revolutionary struggles in colonies such as India. On the basis of all the original documents now available,¹² the following can be contended: Lenin, in his Draft Theses on the colonial question, was pleading for the establishment of a united anti-imperialist front in the colonies by bringing within its fold bourgeois nationalists as well as communists, who would preserve a distinct identity; Roy opposed this line in his Draft Supplementary Theses, arguing that nationalism, in colonies such as India where industrialization had sufficiently progressed, was a spent force, and that such countries were ready for a proletarian revolution under the leadership of the communist party. Lenin, while acknowledging the importance of building up the party, contested Roy's idea that capitalism had developed in countries where peasants dominated. He emphasized the importance of strengthening non-party mass organisations, i.e., soviets in these countries.

Since the Second Congress eventually adopted both the Theses with some modifications following debates in the colonial commission, it is commonly believed that this indicated Lenin's compromise with Roy.¹³ However, on the basis of research into the archival materials of this period carried out by the late Soviet scholar A.B. Reznikov¹⁴ it has now been

¹² Ibid., pp. 178-194, 198-205.

¹³ See, for instance, Sibnarayan Roy (ed.), Selected Works of M.N. Roy, Vol. I: 1917-1922 (Delhi, 1987), pp. 20-121.

¹⁴ The photostat copies of Lenin's alteration of Roy's Draft have been reproduced in Adhikari, DHCPI, I, pp. 173-177. For a detailed account, see A.B. Reznikov, "V.I. Lenin o problemakh natsional'no-osvoboditel'nogo i kommunisticheskogo dvizheniya na Vostoke", Narody Azii i Afriki, 6 (1974), pp. 45-56. For an account in English, see A. Reznikov, The

established that this notion is not at all correct; while Lenin's Draft had been accepted with some minor modifications, Roy's Draft in its original form had been drastically amended by Lenin in the colonial commission, and then suitably altered so as to make it agreeable with Lenin's Theses, and it was this amended version of the Draft which was adopted by the Congress along with Lenin's document. The aftermath of the Second Congress witnessed the formation of a Communist Party of India, at Tashkent in Soviet Russia on 17 October 1920, on the initiative of Roy. It was constituted by seven emigré revolutionaries, notably A. Mukherji, Mohammad Ali (Ahmed Hasan), and Evelyn Trent-Roy, with M.P.B.T. Acharya as Chairman and M.N. Roy as Secretary.¹⁵

5. Early Contacts between the Comintern and the Communist Groups in India

Following the formation of the Communist Party in 1920, Roy now stepped up efforts to establish contact with the communist groups operating in India. His objectives were to keep the Comintern informed of the Indian situation and to familiarize the Indian communists with Comintern guidelines. Despite reservations about the anti-imperialist front strategy formulated by Lenin at the Second Congress, Roy accepted it in principle, and broadly popularized it with regard to India in a series of articles published throughout 1921 in Inprecor, Vanguard and Advance. These were followed by a Manifesto addressed to the thirty-sixth session of the Indian National Congress at Ahmedabad in December 1921 and signed by Roy and Mukherji.¹⁶ This, incidentally, was the first document of Roy to have reached India through Nalini Gupta, who had established contact with Roy upon his arrival in Moscow in 1921 with a group of Indian revolutionaries. In this Manifesto, Roy urged the Congress to radicalize its programme and step up contact with the toiling masses. This was followed by the adoption of a Resolution on the Orient Question¹⁷ by the ECCI in 1922, significant as one of the earliest directives of the Comintern to the West European communist parties to extend support to the national revolutionary movements in the colonial countries, particularly India and Egypt.

While the Third Congress in 1921 did not discuss the colonial question as such, the eve of the Comintern's Fourth Congress in 1922 witnessed a significant turn in Roy's contact with the communist groups operating in India. Following the decline of the nationalist struggle in India, which resulted from Gandhi's withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement,

Comintern and the East. Strategy and Tactics in the National Liberation Movement (Moscow, 1984), pp. 61-72.

¹⁵ For the documents of the Tashkent Conference, see Adhikari, DHCPI, I, pp. 230-233.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 341-354.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 424.

working-class leaders like Dange in Bombay and Chettiar in Madras had started to seriously reconsider the formation of a genuine socialist party which would work inside the Congress, aiming to reshape its programme in a radical and militant direction. In fact, since August 1922, Dange had started publishing Socialist, the first Marxist journal in India where this alternative perspective was outlined. Roy had also been thinking along this line, and they became close through quite extensive, yet secret, correspondence. Roy was able to establish direct contact with the leaders of the four communist groups operating in India, namely Dange in Bombay, Ahmad in Calcutta, Chettiar in Madras and Hussain in Lahore, through Charles Ashleigh, a British communist. He had secretly been sent to India to invite them to the forthcoming Fourth Comintern Congress.

The Ashleigh visit failed. Apart from Roy, however, four Indian emigré revolutionaries did attend the Fourth Congress: Rattan Singh, Sontokh Singh, Nalini Gupta and Masood Ali Shah. The main document adopted by the Congress was the "Theses on the Eastern Question", which broadly reiterated the strategic formulation of the Second Congress with regard to the colonial question, while noting the weakness, vacillations and reformism of the bourgeois nationalist forces in colonial countries.

The aftermath of the Fourth Congress is of special significance in understanding the growing importance of the Comintern for communist movement in India. Adhikari's study¹⁸ of police records and other documents of this period has now established the fact that Roy at that time again approached the four communist groups in India, proposing a joint conference in Berlin under the auspices of the Comintern. The objectives would be to form a communist party nucleus to coordinate their respective activities and to set up a left-wing mass party inside the Congress to radicalize the latter. The Indian communist groups considered this idea to be impracticable, and the plan was dropped.

Of the four communist leaders in India, Ghulam Hussain of Lahore took the initiative in proposing a conference in Locknow in June 1923, to form a left-wing mass party based on the ideas of Roy, Dange and Chettiar. Significant is that Roy sent a Memorandum on behalf of the Eastern Bureau of the Comintern and a letter of the ECCI dated 14 June 1923 extending full support to what was described as the inaugural conference of the Workers' and Peasants' Party of India (WPP).¹⁹ The conference ultimately could not take place, since most of the leaders were arrested by the British Government in May-June 1923 and implicated in the Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy case. The latter had ostensibly been launched on the grounds that the arrested leaders were maintaining secret contact with the Comintern through Roy, and that the WPP was going to be formed with the ultimate objective of overthrowing British rule in order to further the cause of communism in India. As Adhikari has pointed out, the important point to be

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 523-527.

¹⁹ Adhikari, DHCPI, II, pp. 140-156.

noted in this context is that it was the Comintern and its links with the communist groups in India which was the cause of major concern to the British authorities, not the idea of the WPP which, in fact, had not yet been formed. This becomes particularly evident, if one considers the facts presented as main evidence for the alleged conspiracy: intercepted letters of Ahmad, Dange and others, and the fact that Nalini Gupta was the main link between the communist groups in India and Roy.²⁰

Although no communist party had yet been formally established in India, it is clear that the British authorities were taking no chances with regard to the potential threat posed by groups maintaining clandestine links with the Comintern.

6. Comintern and Communism in India between the Fifth and the Sixth Congress

Meanwhile the Fifth Comintern Congress took place in the wake of Lenin's death, and Roy and Mohammad Ali Sepassi, an emigré revolutionary, attended the Congress representing India. In the Congress, the Indian question acquired a new dimension, as evident in the debate between Dimitri Manuilsky and Roy: while Manuilsky broadly reiterated the earlier line of the Comintern on the colonial question, emphasizing the relevance of the Second Congress, Roy reverted back to his earlier stand on industrialization, contesting the necessity of building up an anti-imperialist front in India together with nationalist forces and stressing the importance of a working class-peasant alliance. Roy especially criticized a Congress resolution on the ECCI report, which highlighted the need for the Comintern to maintain direct links with the nationalist forces in the East which, Roy contended, had become synonymous with the forces of betrayal.²¹

Very significant, however, is information now available through Reznikov²² that the Fifth Congress eventually could not adopt any resolution on the Eastern Question, presumably because its draft had been sent to Stalin, who had definite reservations in its regard. In a way Stalin was somewhat critical of the draft's central emphasis on the idea of an anti-imperialist front, and his position was rather close to Roy's understanding, in that Stalin was in favour of emphasizing the compromising role of the nationalist bourgeoisie in the colonies, notwithstanding its general opposition to imperialism. He also strongly favoured the idea of raising the issue of proletarian hegemony in the liberation

²⁰ Ibid., p. 285.

²¹ For this part of Roy's speech, see Sibnarayan Roy (ed.), Selected Works of M.N. Roy, Vol. II: 1923-1927 (Delhi, 1988), pp. 291-306.

²² A.B. Reznikov, "The Strategy and Tactics of the Communist International in the National and Colonial Question", in R.A. Ulyanovsky (ed.), The Comintern and the East. The Struggle for the Leninist Strategy and Tactics in National Liberation Movements (Moscow, 1979), pp. 169-170.

struggle of the colonies. That Stalin's position was rather different from that of the Comintern becomes particularly evident, if one contrasts the stand taken by the Fifth Plenum of the ECCI (held in March-April, 1925) on India with the observations made by Stalin on India and the colonial question immediately thereafter. The ECCI at that time broadly underscored the strategy of fighting imperialism by asking the communists in India to build up WPPs as the mechanism for strengthening the anti-imperialist front and effecting the radicalization of the Congress. It simultaneously emphasized simultaneously the importance of uniting all communist groups into a disciplined communist party. Sharply different was the tenor of Stalin's reference to India in his Report to the fourteenth conference of the RCP(B) on May 9, 1925, followed immediately by a speech that he delivered to students at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, on May 18, 1925. In these speeches, Stalin put forward the idea that among the nationalist bourgeoisie in the colonies a split had taken place between the reactionary and revolutionary wings. Although this position was not identical to that of Roy, who had virtually written off the role of the nationalists as a whole, it was certainly a departure from the erstwhile strategy pursued by the Comintern in regard to the colonies. In fact, this new understanding marked the beginning of the slow drift towards left-sectarianism that culminated in the position adopted by the Sixth Congress in 1928.

Meanwhile, on the initiative of Satyabhakta, a nationalist-minded communist who was rather sceptical of forging any link between the embryonic communist movement in India and the Comintern, a conference was organized in Kanpur in December, 1925, to form a Communist Party of India by coordinating a number of communist groups which had by this time emerged in different parts of the country. This conference was a turning point in the history of communism in India, in the sense that here on 26-28 December 1925 the CPI was formed on the Indian soil.²³ Its first central executive committee was formed by representatives of all the groups in the country, including among others, Chettiar (Madras), Muzaffar Ahmad (Calcutta), Abdul Majid (Lahore), Ghatge (Bombay), and Hazrat Mohani (United Provinces). Satyabhakta, however, soon developed differences with the rest of the members and left the Party. This is how the activities of all communist groups operating in India were first coordinated and the foundation laid for the beginning of CPI mass activities.

This conference was significant for more than one reason. To begin with, total party membership could for the first time be ascertained and was reported by Satyabhakta to be about 250 persons.²⁴ Also important on this occasion was the adoption of a Constitution in which the organizational structure of the Party was outlined. It was based on the principle that each higher committee would be elected by the representatives of

²³ The documents of the Kanpur conference are given in Adhikari, DHCPI, II, pp. 630-670.

²⁴ Satyabhakta, "The Future Programme of the Indian Communist Party", in Adhikari, DHCPI, II, p. 630.

the immediately preceding lower committee, and envisaged the following pattern: (a) central executive; (b) provincial committees; (c) district committees; (d) other working class unions as might be affiliated to it from time to time.²⁵

In this connection, two questions arise that require careful consideration. First, how did the Comintern react to this sudden formation of the CPI, since a Communist Party formed by Roy in 1920 had already been functioning from abroad? Second, how did the Comintern view the CPI in relation to the WPPs, which it had encouraged as part of its strategy of building up anti-imperialist united front in India? As regards the first issue, Adhikari, who studied the police records, informs us²⁶ that Roy got reports of the Kanpur conference through Janaki Prasad Bagerhatta, one of the general secretaries elected at the meeting. In a letter to Bagerhatta dated 20 March 1926, Roy observed that the newly formed Executive Committee of the CPI could be regarded as a basis for interaction with the Comintern, though the CPI's formal affiliation with the Comintern could not be effected till the convocation of the next Congress. Roy further proposed that the Communist Party which had been functioning from abroad would act as the Foreign Bureau through which the newly formed CPI would henceforth maintain its links with the Third International, this Foreign Bureau comprising Roy, Sepassi and Clemens Dutt. In fact, it has now been established that in 1924, after the Fifth Congress, the Comintern had sent Sepassi to India to set up secret contact with Ram Charan Lal Sharma, a fugitive from the Kanpur Conspiracy case, and Ajothya Prasad, a seaman. Attempts to send Clemens Dutt to India in 1925 were not successful. The appreciation of these gestures by the newly formed CPI was evident in the new Constitution adopted by the Central Executive Committee in 1927, in which the idea of the Foreign Bureau was accepted in principle and a resolution passed to look up to the Comintern for leadership and guidance.²⁷ Also effected by the new Constitution were changes of the organizational structure of the Party.²⁸ It was now envisaged that the affairs of the Party when not in session would be regulated and administered by an Executive Council, which would be elected on the principle of centralization, and not territoriality. It would be elected from the floor of the entire party membership. Furthermore, a new executive organ called the Presidium was formed, which would be elected and entrusted with the overall responsibility of supervising and organizing party work.

Let us now consider the second issue, involving the relation of the CPI and the WPPs, to see why the standpoint of the Indian communists, who were actually working inside the

²⁵ "Constitution of the Communist Party of India", in Adhikari, DHCPI, II, pp. 662-664.

²⁶ Adhikari, DHCPI, II, pp. 625-627.

²⁷ Adhikari, DHCPI, III B, p. 211.

²⁸ "The Constitution of the Communist Party of India", ibid., pp. 207-211.

WPPs, differed from that of Roy. By 1927 the WPPs spread rapidly throughout the country, mainly due to the organizational efforts of such leaders as Dange, Keshab NNilkantha Joglekar, and Bagerhatta, and, consequently, major working-class strikes were organized, notably in Bombay. These helped to put considerable pressure on the Congress to end its policy of reformism, compromise and vacillation. The Indian communists considered the WPPs as radical fractions within the Congress which could raise the anti-imperialist struggle to new heights through the coordinated efforts of all left nationalists and radicals, but they never considered them to be alternatives to the Congress. At the same time, by 1927, following the massive arrests of the communists in the Kanpur Conspiracy case, it was becoming evident that the CPI would require a "legal cover" in order to withstand such repression, and it accordingly considered the WPPs. This may appear a bit confusing, because the CPI, although formed on the Indian soil in 1925, had not yet been formally declared illegal by the British authorities. Past experience, however, had shown that the Government would not be hesitant to round up individual communists and effectively break their organizations on the pretext that they were acting as agents of the Comintern, aiming to overthrow British rule of India. The CPI, although not banned, worked in semi-underground conditions to avoid repression. Hence the Party favoured the idea of working inside more broad-based and ideologically like-minded parties (i.e., the WPPs) so as to conceal the identity of its members and maintain its organizational nucleus. Roy, on the other hand, favoured the idea of utilizing the WPPs exclusively as a "legal cover" for the communists. He was rather sceptical of using them as an instrument for putting pressure on the Congress, since, in his opinion, the Congress had become a spent force in India. Instead, he preferred the idea of forming an alternative people's party or a national-revolutionary party as a substitute for the Congress. This was evident in a letter of Roy, dated December 30, 1927, addressed to the Indian Communists.²⁹ Despite this difference expressed by Roy, the Comintern, however, endorsed the participation of the Indian communists in the WPPs till the time of the Sixth Congress.

7. India and the Sixth Congress of Comintern

With regard to the colonial question, the Sixth Congress has gone down in history as one that effected a definite break with the earlier position of the Comintern. To be more exact, the Congress largely endorsed Stalin's position of 1925 and put across the formulation that while the reformist section of the nationalist bourgeoisie in the colonies had virtually abandoned the fight for national liberation, the other wing would play an effective role if the Communist Party could establish its hegemony in the national scene. For India, this implied a critique of Gandhi and his followers in uncompromising terms. However, despite this stance, the Draft Theses on the colonial question, as presented by Otto Kuusinen, were

²⁹ Adhikari, DHCPI, III C, pp. 225-243.

criticized from a far-left angle by a number of representatives of the CPGB and India, who were in favour of characterizing the role of the entire Indian bourgeoisie as virtually counter-revolutionary. Roy, who could not participate in the Congress, came out with a "Draft Resolution on the Indian Question",³⁰ expounding the idea he had been developing for years in his writings on India: that industrialization on an extensive scale had made progress in India, giving rise to a kind of compromise between British imperialism and the nationalist bourgeoisie, which thereby opened up the prospect of decolonization of India through the grant of Dominion Status by Britain. This, Roy stated, called for a strategy of countering the bourgeoisie by stepping up class struggle, implying that a social revolution under proletarian leadership was on the agenda.

Although the British and Indian delegates did not agree with Roy's framework of analysis - indeed, he was severely criticized at the Congress for expounding the theory of decolonization - in effect they, too, broadly endorsed the industrialization theses and the criticism of the role of the Indian bourgeoisie as a spent force. In a way this position had already been advocated by the well-known leader of the CPGB R.P. Dutt in his work, Modern India (1926). The Draft Theses, however, did not agree with either the argument in defense of industrialization or the extreme left position favouring a complete rejection of nationalism.³¹ Reznikov's findings now give us the additional information³² that in the Draft the "left" position, although evident, was not very much pronounced. After quite heated debates a commission for editing the Draft was formed, including some delegates who had criticized the document from far-left positions. In the finally adopted document these positions were presumably partly accommodated, thereby explaining the left-sectarian orientation of the Sixth Congress.

A study of this period suggests that several factors contributed to the shift in the Comintern's perception of the colonial question. First, there was the impending crisis of world capitalism, giving rise to a feeling of optimism that the breakdown of capitalism and the victory of the working class were perhaps imminent. Second, in many countries nationalist struggles took a backseat, in the sense that in India, for instance, the Gandhian leadership of the Congress adopted a passive attitude towards a series of working class strikes in Calcutta, Madras, Kanpur, Sholapur and Ahmedabad which rocked the country. Moreover, at the Calcutta session of the Congress in 1928, the demand for complete independence was shelved and replaced by the idea of "Dominion Status",

³⁰ For the text of this hitherto unpublished document, see ibid., pp. 572-606.

³¹ For an exhaustive account of the debate between Kuusinen and the critics of the Draft Theses, see Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, Comintern, India and the Colonial Question: 1920-37 (Calcutta, 1980), ch. 4.

³² Reznikov, The Comintern and the East, p. 255.

confirming the feeling that the Congress had become a force of betrayal. Third, the experience of the collapse of the united front between the Communist Party of China and the Kuomintang in 1927, followed by the massive repression of the communists in China, prompted the Sixth Congress to assert the need for strengthening the Communist Party, establish the hegemony of the proletariat and decry the forces of national reformism.

8. Comintern and the Communist Movement in India after the Sixth Congress

The early thirties witnessed the beginning of a period when the communist movement in India made itself almost totally loyal to the directives of the Comintern, some dissenting voices notwithstanding. Since the end of the Sixth Congress the situation in the country was marked by certain distinct features. First, most of the leading members of the CPI were arrested and implicated in the Meerut Conspiracy case launched by the British Government in 1929, one of the major contentions being that they were engaged in carrying out the plans of the Comintern in India. This again shows the British Government using an old trick to effectively break the Party's organization, while not yet formally declaring it illegal (it was officially banned only in 1934). They simply rounded up the most important activists of the Party on the pretext that they were acting at the instance of the Comintern to overthrow British rule in India. The arrests shattered the Party organizationally, and the communist movement became intensely faction-ridden thereafter. Second, in this period a series of mounting working class and peasant struggles occurred throughout the country, primarily as a result of the Great Depression which rocked the capitalist world and had a devastating impact on colonies like India. Third, the compromising strategy of the Indian National Congress reached a new height in this period, as the nationalist leaders were desperately looking for a political settlement with the British Government on the issue of Dominion Status, followed by the rather disquieting Gandhi-Irwin agreement, its subsequent endorsement at the Karachi session of the Congress in 1931, and the decision to join the Round Table Conference in London with the purpose of discussing a future Constitution for India.

The Comintern attached great importance to these events and came down heavily on the compromising policies of the Congress. Meanwhile, Roy had been expelled from the Comintern because of his association with the Brandler group of the Communist Party of Germany, and henceforth it was the CPGB, represented by such leaders as R.P. Dutt, which became the main link between the Comintern and CPI. In a series of articles published in Inprecor and Communist International, the CPI was now exhorted to provide organizational leadership to the growing tide of mass movements in India by exposing and removing the Congress leadership. This militant strategy was particularly supported by the decisions of the Ninth, Tenth and Eleventh Plenums of the ECCI taken between 1929 and 1931. These were largely guided by the understanding that just as European social democracy had betrayed the people by taking a passive attitude towards fascism, similarly in the colonies

not only the reformist wing but also the petty bourgeois, so-called radical elements representing the left wing of nationalism constituted a serious threat to the advancement of the liberation struggle. Hence, it was argued, that the whole nationalist bourgeoisie of India would have to become the target of CPI attack. This certainly was a reworking of Stalin's original formulation and a further shift towards leftism.

For the CPI, the implications of this fall-out of the Sixth Congress were two-fold. On the one hand, henceforth not only Gandhi but even Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose, who were broadly known as representatives of the more radical wing within the Congress, would have to be attacked. On the other hand, it was now envisaged that only the CPI could provide real leadership to the liberation struggle of the Indian masses, and this, it was believed, was the way to proletarian hegemony. Any association of the CPI with non-communist, yet radical, petty bourgeois and left-nationalist elements was henceforth positively discouraged. As a consequence, the CPI severed its relation with the WPPs on the ground that these were basically two-class parties, comprising primarily non-communist elements and, therefore, certainly different from a communist party modelled on the ideology of the proletariat. The Comintern directive in this regard was unambiguously clear. In a letter dated December 2, 1928, which the ECCI sent to the All India Conference of WPPs this was also quite strongly evident.³³ These were followed by a meeting of the Central Executive Committee of the CPI in Calcutta between 27-29 December 1929, of which the available minutes indicate that it took note of the Colonial Theses of the Sixth Congress and proposed to work out the Party's strategy accordingly.³⁴ In December 1930, this eventually culminated in the CPI's adoption of a document called the "Draft Platform of Action", which now fully reflected the extreme left-sectarian positions of the ECCI.

According to the information given by Philip Spratt, a leading Comintern emissary of this period, the decision to wind up the WPPs reached the CPI through Gangadhar Adhikari, who arrived in India from Berlin in December 1928. Adhikari, who subsequently became a leading figure in the CPI, brought the materials of the Sixth Congress with him, and the Comintern's line was broadly endorsed by the Party.³⁵ It is also significant, as a veteran associate of the CPI tells us, that Lenin's Colonial Theses were not known to the Indian communists at that time, while the theses of the Sixth Congress were published in various Indian languages, preparing the ground for the acceptance of the Comintern position as wholly correct.³⁶

³³ Adhikari, DHCPI, III C, pp. 757-765.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 454.

³⁵ Spratt, Blowing up India, pp. 42-43.

³⁶ K. Damodaran, "Memoir of an Indian Communist", New Left Review, 93 (1975), p. 38.

9. The Seventh Congress and the CPI

The strategic line formulated by the Sixth Congress, however, proved to be rather ineffective. The rising wave of fascism in Europe, notably in Germany, made it an imperative for the Comintern to build up a united front against fascism by closing the gap with social democracy. As regards India, the disastrous impact of left-sectarianism, which grew out of the Comintern's Third Period, was soon felt. In the first place, the CPI's idea of establishing proletarian hegemony by attacking the nationalist forces, its break with the WPPs, and the Meerut arrests which followed left the Party isolated and practically crippled. Secondly, the failure of the Round Table talks between Gandhi and the British Government led to a militant resumption of the Civil Disobedience movement, the ban on the Congress in 1932, and the consequent repression of the nationalist forces in different parts of the country. The CPI, which was split into factions after the arrests and virtually without any central leadership, found itself confronted with a situation which was rather baffling.

Contemporary intelligence reports³⁷ indicate that the Comintern sent at least three emissaries to India at the time: William Nathan Kweit, Harry Somers and Henry G. Lynd, who got in touch with the underground nucleus of the CPI operating in Bombay so as to be informed of the situation in India. Available evidence suggests that the Party leadership was divided on the issue of continuation of the left-sectarian line: while one faction led by S.V. Deshpande stood behind it, another faction under the leadership of Bhalchandra Trimbok Ranadive preferred a moderate strategy. Among the Meerut prisoners, too, there was indirect disapproval, though within the framework of the Sixth Congress, of some of the extreme left positions of the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI concerning the situation in India. Spratt informs us³⁸ that Dange and especially Joshi were rather sceptical of the wisdom of the Comintern's policy. In fact, the statement of the accused in the Meerut case³⁹ suggests that there was definite reservation among them regarding the immediate feasibility of a Soviet-type revolution in India under proletarian leadership as envisaged in the "Draft Platform of Action". Furthermore, it appears that before 1933 two self-critical reports prepared by the Meerut prisoners regarding the erroneous functioning of the CPI had reached the Comintern through John M. Clarks and William Bennett, two representatives of the Red International Labour Union who had already visited India. These reports contained, among other terms, two vitally important suggestions to the Comintern for revamping the CPI: 1) that

³⁷ This account is based on Williamson, India and Communism, pp. 169-174.

³⁸ Spratt, Blowing up India, p. 54.

³⁹ The general statement of the accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case dealt with this problem. See Muzaffar Ahmad (Introd.), Communists challenge Imperialism from the Dock (Calcutta, 1967), pp. 82-94, 103-107.

henceforth the Comintern should not make assessment of the Indian situation through emigré representatives; this should be done by either sending the Comintern's own emissaries to India or through visits of CPI representatives to Moscow; and 2) that the Comintern should issue a series of "Open Letters" suggesting modifications of the CPI's self-defeating strategy.⁴⁰

Thus the primary initiative for revising the left-sectarian line of the CPI was taken, not by the Comintern, but by the Party itself through clandestine contact with the Third International in extremely difficult conditions. The results were soon evident in the publication of two "Open Letters", one issued by the Communist Parties of China, Great Britain and Germany in Inprecor, 19 May 1932, and the other singly by the Communist Party of China in Inprecor, 24 November 1933. Although the suggestions contained in these letters and in a series of articles in Inprecor did not opt for any united front strategy, their main thrust was to make the CPI aware of its organizational isolation and of the importance of participation in reformist mass organizations with a view to building up a mass party. This was followed by the publication of three crucial documents of the CPI, namely, "Draft of the Provisional Statutes of the C.P. of India", Inprecor, 11 May 1934, "Draft Political Theses", Inprecor, 20 July 1934, and "Problems of the Anti-Imperialist Struggle in India", Inprecor, 9 March 1935. While the last two documents were programmatic in nature, with arguments broadly in favour of work within the Indian National Congress, thereby acknowledging the mistakes of the left-sectarian line, the first document was even more significant. As we have seen, the self-critical Meerut documents (cited above) had already stressed the importance of revamping the organizational structure of the Party. A small but important move had been made in this direction, when, following the release of the first group of Meerut prisoners in mid-August 1933, a provisional Central Committee was formed in early 1934 with Adhikari as the temporary Secretary. This attempt to reorganize the Party, however, did not escape the attention of the British authorities, who took no time in thwarting the move, as the CPI was officially banned immediately thereafter in July 1934. To meet the challenge of fighting British imperialism in difficult underground conditions, it was now proposed by the aforesaid provisional Central Committee that the organization of the Party be thoroughly restructured. Accordingly, a draft was published in the form of the first document. This new organizational set-up, which was approved with a few minor amendments by the provisional Central Committee in a secret meeting held in Bombay at the end of 1934, continued to guide the CPI during the remaining period under study. According to contemporary British intelligence, it was reported in this meeting that party membership had increased from a score or so at the beginning of 1934 to about 150 and that a hundred or more candidates were awaiting membership. The Party, it was further stated, was primarily

⁴⁰ This account is based on Williamson, India and Communism, pp. 176-180.

rooted in three main railways, the entire textile industry in Bengal and the cotton industry in Kanpur,⁴¹ which suggests that the CPI drew its support primarily from the industrial working class in the organized sectors located in urban areas.

Coming now to the issue of the reorganization of the Party, the "Provisional Statutes" for the first time emphasized certain principles which were not mentioned in the earlier Constitutions of the CPI (i.e., in 1925 and 1927). First, it was stated that the underground organization would be guided by the principles of democratic centralism, which meant: (a) all the leading organs of the Party, from top to bottom would be elected; (b) the Party organs would periodically report to their party organizations; (c) strictest party discipline and subordination of the minority to the majority; (d) decisions of the Comintern and higher party organs would be unquestionably obligatory for lower organs and all members of the Party. Second, departing from the 1927 Constitution which had its emphasis on centralization and not territoriality, it was now proposed that the Party be built on the territorial-industrial principle. Accordingly, the following organizational structure was proposed:

(a) Territory of India: All India Party Congress which would elect the Central Committee and form a Politbureau for current work.

(b) Province: Provincial Party Conference and Provincial Party Committee, which would work on the territory included in the administrative boundary of a province.

(c) Town (or Locality): Town (Local) Conference and Town Committee to be formed with confirmation of the Provincial Committee.

(d) Factory or Village: General meeting of cell or bureau. The cell would be the basic unit comprising no less than three Party members, and the cells would be confirmed by the Local/Town committee. It was further stated that in all mass organizations outside the Party (i.e., trade unions) with no less than three Party members, Party fractions would have to be organized. These would function under the complete control of the corresponding Party committee (i.e., central committee, provincial committee, town/local committee, cell). It goes without saying that this new organizational machinery,, broadly corresponded to the Bolshevik norms such as communist parties generally upheld during the Comintern period.

It was at this time, in July 1935, that the Seventh Congress of the Comintern commenced, during which Georgi Dimitrov, in his main report, and Wang Ming in a speech "The Revolutionary Movement in the Colonial Countries", put forward the strategy of building up a united front with a view to expanding the mass base of the communist parties in the struggle against fascism as well as imperialism in the colonies. This was the final break with the line of the Sixth Congress. The Seventh Congress was now attempting to combine the strategy of a united front from above with that from below by emphasizing the importance of front-building and party-building simultaneously. This is particularly important,

⁴¹ Williamson, India and Communism, p. 201.

because there are opinions which consider the line of the Seventh Congress as one that advocated tailism in the name of a united front with the bourgeoisie, neglecting the role of the party.⁴² That the Comintern was seriously concerned about India is evident in the adoption of a Resolution entitled "Prospects on the Indian Question" by the Comintern Secretariat in February, 1936.⁴³ Here the CPI's front with the Congress in India was very clearly given the stamp of approval. This was then followed by a well-known article by Ben Bradley and R.P. Dutt in Inprecor, 29 February 1936, on the instructions of the Comintern, written to encourage the communists in India to whole-heartedly adopt this new line.

As the memoirs of Michael Carritt, a high ranking British official who had secret and very close contacts with the CPI in India, reveal,⁴⁴ it was through him that the materials of the Seventh Congress reached the CPI leadership in the summer of 1936. Subsequently, Joshi, who had now become the General Secretary of the Party, took the initiative in implementing this line, despite reservations expressed by a few of the leading group.⁴⁵ The forging of such a united front was particularly facilitated by the formation of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), a group formed by radical Congressmen like Jayaprakash Narayan, who professed left-socialist views, which freely allowed the Communists to operate within its fold. The strategy of the CPI was also helped by the Lucknow session of the Congress in 1936 where Nehru, in his Presidential Address, expressed deep sympathy for "Left" and "Socialist" elements, sharply criticized the Congress for its growing isolation from the masses, and paid rich tributes to the Soviet Union for its support to anti-imperialist struggles. Finally, it should also be noted at this point that with the exit of Roy, it was the CPGB, represented by Harry Pollitt, Ben Bradley and R.P. Dutt, which now became the primary link between India and the Comintern, and this was evident in a series of articles written by them on India in Inprecor and Labour Monthly during this period.

10. The CPI and the "People's War"

The newly forged united front between the CPI and Congress, however, started cracking as the Second World War drew near. Britain's war preparations and the involvement of India in the war were interpreted in altogether different perspectives by the Congress and the CPI. The Congress policy was marked by passivity and hesitancy: while not supporting the British

⁴² Jainus Banaji, "The Comintern and Indian Nationalism", in K.N. Panikkar (ed.), National and Left Movements in India (New Delhi, 1980), pp. 260-261.

⁴³ Reznikov, The Comintern and the East, pp. 157-158.

⁴⁴ Garritt, A Mole in the Crown, p. 129.

⁴⁵ For details of these inner-party differences, see Datta Gupta, Comintern, India and the Colonial Question, pp. 225-226.

policy of dragging India into the war, it did not resolutely oppose it either. The CPI, on the contrary, was firmly opposed to the war right from the beginning and exhorted the Congress to come out with a more militant line. This gradually led to mounting tensions inside the united front, although the articles published in National Front (the organ of the CPI) clearly indicate that the CPI was cautious about voicing its difference with the Congress, not wanting to endanger the front's existence. Still, the growing militancy of the CPI in regard to its attitude towards the War did not find favour with a number of conservative Congress leaders such as Chakravati Rajagopalachari, and some influential members within the CSP also were becoming increasingly critical of the CPI's participation in the united front.

Indeed, a study of the documents of the CPI in this period very clearly suggests that it considered the outbreak of war and the consequent crisis in Britain as an opportunity to mobilize the masses to overthrow British rule in India by armed insurrection. The War was thus regarded by the CPI as an "imperialist war" which would have to be converted into a war of the Indian masses against British imperialism. This strategy was clearly evident, as recent research indicates, in the ideological documents brought out in this period by the underground CPI. We are now also informed now of the highly significant fact that in 1941 the CPI circulated, through its underground network, an article by Ossip Piatnitsky, who at the Thirteenth Plenum of the ECCI had dealt with the organizational principles to be followed by the communist parties in the war period. The article explained the relevance of these organizational principles for India.⁴⁶

With Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the war changed its face, since the anti-Hitler coalition which was now formed comprised the erstwhile ideological opponents, namely, the USSR and the Allied Powers, the defeat of fascism having become the primary consideration. With this turn in the war, the communist parties now considered the defense of the Soviet Union as their primary responsibility, thereby implying, all-out support to the strengthening of the anti-Hitler coalition. For the Indian communists this meant a reversal of its earlier line in that it now would have to extend support to Britain's war efforts, since she was a partner in this coalition. For the CPI, the "imperialist war", after 22 June 1941, had become a "people's war", in which the forces of peace, freedom and progress represented by the USSR were pitted against fascism. The defense of the Soviet Union was now the most important task, and all help to the anti-Hitler coalition therefore justified.

This very important episode in the history of the communist movement in India raises two controversial yet major questions. 1) What was the role of the Comintern in shaping the CPI's adoption of the "people's war" line? 2) What exactly was the response of the Indian Communists to such a directive, if any? In fact, many scholars have been believed to share the

⁴⁶ Utpal Ghosh, "The Communist Party of India and India's Freedom Struggle: 1937-1947" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Burdwan, 1991), p. 208.

opinion that in making this choice the CPI acted virtually as a stooge of Comintern and the Soviet Communist Party, thereby betraying the freedom struggle in India.⁴⁷

Although many of the documents of this period remain as yet unpublished, recent studies⁴⁸ have disproved these rather oversimplified interpretations. It can now be contended that while there was no official Comintern resolution regarding the adoption of the "people's war" strategy, initially there were two articles, one published in Labour Monthly in August 1941 by Quaster and the other in World News and Views on 10 October 1941, presumably by R.P. Dutt, which called for a change of line with the entry of the Soviet Union in the war. These were followed by a CPGB resolution on India, published in World News and Views on 18 October 1941 which further endorsed this position. It is now evident that the CPI, in its understanding of the war, was primarily guided by the opinions of the CPGB, which, as mentioned earlier, had been the main link between the Comintern and the CPI since the beginning of the thirties. This is corroborated by the fact that the CPI gave wide publicity to these opinions in Party Letter, its underground mouthpiece, immediately thereafter, and eventually the Politbureau of the Party adopted a resolution advocating the change of line in December, 1941.

It would be, however, incorrect to suggest that the shift in the CPI's strategy was entirely due to the CPGB advice on behalf of Comintern. This was a period when a number of Indian communists were languishing in the Deoli jail: Dange, Muzaffar Ahmad, Ranadive, Shantaram Sawlaram Mirajkar, Ghate and Ajoy Ghosh. Primarily on the initiative of Dange and Ranadive they prepared a document "A Note from Jail Comrades" (popularly known as the "Jail Document") which whole-heartedly advocated the change of strategy and impressed upon the CPI leadership to switch over to the "people's war" line. We are now also informed now that at this time Achhar Singh Chhina, a political prisoner, went to Moscow following his release from a Punjab jail and, on his return to India, passed on a message from Moscow to the Deoli prisoners before December, 1941. This also may have influenced the line advocated in the "Jail Document". This document, sent from the Deoli jail, was ultimately decisive in effecting the shift to the "people's war" strategy in December, 1941, since the Communist leaders outside the jail, namely Joshi, Adhikari, Puchalapalli Sundarayya, Somnath Lahiri, and Ennakulam Manakkle Sankaran Namboodiripad, were apt to consider the anti-imperialist struggle as more important. In other words, until the official adoption of the new line, the CPI leadership was certainly divided on the issue, despite exhortations from the Comintern

⁴⁷ M.R. Masani, The Communist Party of India. A Short History (London, 1954), p. 87; Arun Shouri, "The Great Betrayal (I)", The Illustrated Weekly of India, 18 March 1984, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Ghosh, "The CPI and India's Freedom Struggle", pp. 248-250.

through the CPGB.⁴⁹

This reversal of line virtually amounted to CPI support for the British war efforts, so that when the "Quit India" movement was launched on a massive scale under the auspices of the Congress in 1942, the Party set itself against it. The CPI's argument was simple: hostility towards Britain would weaken the fight against fascism and, therefore, suspension of the anti-imperialist struggle in India was necessary. Consequently, the CPI voted against the resolution of the All India Congress Committee, an event which signalled the break-up of the united front between the CPI and Congress. This was preceded by the lifting of the ban on the CPI in July 1942, ending eight years of clandestine existence since 1934. While the change of line certainly led to the Party's isolation from the mainstream of the freedom struggle, it would, however, be incorrect to say that the CPI therefore betrayed the cause of freedom by following the Comintern's instructions.

In fact, it is quite a significant fact that despite the Party's relative political isolation, the CPI expanded quite rapidly after 1942. We are now informed that at the time of the first congress of the Party, held in Bombay from 23 May to 1 June in 1943, party membership stood at 15,563⁵⁰ - a remarkable feat considering the long period of illegality to which the Party had been subjected. Now that it could function openly, the Party also rapidly built up its organisational base all over the country. For example, the All India Trade Union Congress (its trade union front) had 3 million members in 1943. The All Indian Kishan Sabha (its peasant front), also had a membership of 3 million in 1943, which rose to 5,530,000 in 1944 and 8,250,100 in 1945. The women's organization of the Party had enrolled 41,000 members by 1943⁵¹ and, on the cultural front, the Indian People's Theatre Association was erected, reviving many popular art-forms and bringing within the fold of the Party a number of extremely talented cultural workers. Furthermore, studies of the British Government's assessment of the role of the CPI after 1942 very clearly show that the Party, while supporting the British war efforts as a tactical measure, remained essentially anti-British in its orientation, and this attitude persisted throughout the war period.⁵²

11. Comintern: A success or failure

⁴⁹ This account is based on Ghosh, "The CPI and India's Freedom Struggle", pp. 252-262 and Shashi Bairathi, Communism and Nationalism in India. A study in Interrelationship: 1919-1947 (Delhi, 1987), pp. 182-183.

⁵⁰ Communist Party of India, Guidelines of the History of the Communist Party of India (New Delhi, 1974), p. 64.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 66.

⁵² Ghosh, "The CPI and India's Freedom Struggle", pp. 275-280 and Bairathi, Communism and Nationalism in India, pp. 225-226.

The above review of the Comintern's activities vis-a-vis the development of communist movement in India makes it amply clear that it would be somewhat naive to evaluate the Third International's role in shades of either black or white. For a long time, however, this has been the predominant pattern in assessing the performance of the Comintern. While non-Marxist historiography has broadly regarded it as an instrument of soviet Realpolitik, the official soviet viewpoint has always considered its role in glowing terms. Now that the grey areas are slowly emerging, following the opening up of the Comintern archives, a more dispassionate understanding is becoming possible as well as necessary.

As far as India is concerned, it is undeniable that the Comintern's assistance to the embryonic communist movement was essential to its growth in the early twenties. The relation between Roy's Foreign Bureau abroad and the CPI, however, remained somewhat tense, mainly because of certain directives which did not work in Indian conditions. Despite these difficulties, the way India's problems were highlighted and considered with deep sympathy throughout by the Comintern leadership, certainly heightened the prestige of India and, moreover, contributed greatly to the strengthening of mass movements within the country. This is evident if one takes a look at the following figures⁵³ related to working class strikes which rocked the country at different times under the leadership of communist-controlled trade unions. Massive textile strikes were organized in 1928 and 1929 involving 506,851 and 532,016 workers respectively. In 1934, even when the CPI was shattered organizationally after the Meerut arrests, the strike figure stood at 2,200,808, consisting primarily of textile workers. In October 1939 the communists organized a massive anti-war strike in Bombay in which 90,000 workers participated. This was followed by a strike of 1,750,000 textile workers in Bombay in March 1940 which continued for forty days, and all sections of workers, numbering 3,500,000 altogether, went on a one-day solidarity strike on 10 March 1940. This was followed by a wave of strikes all over the country including 20,000 textile workers in Kanpur and 20,000 municipal workers in Calcutta. It is also an indisputable fact that in the thirties, the suggestions given by the Comintern after the Seventh Congress also helped the CPI to come out of the blind alley of left-sectarianism. This, in a way, was a reflection of the strong bonds that existed between the Comintern and the Indian communists.

Despite these positive gains, the CPI also suffered because of the atmosphere which gripped the Comintern after Lenin's death. It is now acknowledged by the officials in charge of the Comintern archives in Moscow that with Stalin's rise to power the discussions, debates, criticisms and self-criticisms which marked the Lenin era now increasingly became resolved by isolating those who disagreed with Stalin,⁵⁴ which

⁵³ The figures have been taken from Guidelines, pp. 20, 43, 55.

⁵⁴ Fridrikh Firsov, "What the Comintern's archives will reveal", Problems of Peace and Socialism, 1 (1989), p. 55.

ultimately, during the thirties, transformed the relations between the RCP(B) and other communist parties into relations between those issuing orders and those following them. This caused immense damage to many communist parties.⁵⁵ Indeed, it is notable that, as one Indian scholar has correctly observed, it was precisely at this stage in the history of the Comintern that most of the early leaders of the CPI established any significant political contacts with it. While earlier, the mediation had been effected by Roy, the leadership that now emerged in the thirties "had no conception of what the Comintern had been like in the days of Lenin, no conception of its glorious revolutionary past, of its heroic early years, when the whole political outlook and intellectual level of the organization were radically different [...]".⁵⁶ This, in fact, largely explains the CPI's almost total loyalty to the Comintern in the thirties and forties, some dissenting voices in the Party notwithstanding. Consequently, the Communist movement in India suffered a great deal, operating as it did in the given objectivities of a historical situation which, ironically enough, was largely manipulated by the subjective considerations of the cult of Stalinism.

⁵⁵ Sung Hungxun, "The Comintern: Achievements and Mistakes", Problems of Peace and Socialism, 1 (1990), p. 82.

⁵⁶ Banaji, "The Comintern and Indian Nationalism", p. 263.