

23. Linzer Konferenz
8.-12. September 1987

Referat zum
Tagesordnungspunkt 2

Sukomal SEN
Indien

LABOUR MOVEMENT IN INDIA AND THE ROLE OF THE MASS-MEDIA

In a capitalist society where capital and labour are in perpetual conflict, the mass-media plays a very important role in this conflicting situation.

But the question is what type of role do they play. In a capitalist society the press is also monopolized by this ^{or that} group of capitalists or by any individual but powerful capitalist. Another question arises whether the press owned by the capitalists can be non-partisan while dealing with any event of labour movement.

The bourgeois press tries to maintain an aura of non-partisanship. But that is only a facade. The underlying class-nature of the bourgeois mass-media and its utter dependence on the ruling class manifest itself more prominently vis-a-vis the struggles of the working class. Internal haggling between bourgeois newspapers and journals constitutes ^{Contention over} aspects of policy. But irrespective of political naupnces the entire bourgeoisie press within a capitalist state is a weapon for consolidating the power of the bourgeoisie and so it is unabashedly against the working class.

Publication of a newspaper or magazine in a capitalistic society is a normal commercial undertaking requiring the investment of a great deal of capital. Only the big entrepreneurs, the wealthy, those who have at their disposal large sums of money or shares can afford such outlay. The political trend of the publication will naturally be under their control, at any rate on such principally important issues for the bourgeoisie as the state-power and the right to private property.

The other two most modern instruments of mass-media are Radio and Television and since these two instruments are controlled by the capitalist state-power directly or almost directly, their role in

protecting the capitalist interest as against the working class is also more direct and prejudicial to the interests of the working class. And since Radio and Television have much wider coverage than the newspapers, their role in upholding the capitalist interest and decrying the labour movement is also more effective. And the more it is effective, worse it is for the working class.

The Indian Context:

In pre-independence India, labour movement started at a much later period than that in Europe or America. The reasons are obvious. Industrial activities in India had its beginning only at the second half of the last century and with the laying of railway tracks in the mid-fifties of that century and with extraction of coal and cultivating tea-plantation, the first batch of the Indian working class came into the arena. The few industries that started developing in that period were mainly centered round jute mills and cotton mills around Calcutta and Bombay respectively. The jute mills were in the possession of the British capitalists, whereas indigenous capitalism tried to thrive on cotton mills and from the first decade of the present century some other industries like steel also thrived with indigenous capital investment. But indigenous capitalism had to mark its progress against various forms of resistance from the British Government and opposition from the British capitalists whether investing in Great Britain or in India.

Simultaneously, with increasing economic and industrial activities in the country, however haltingly it might have been and spread of English education, vernacular as well as English newspapers and periodicals came into existence.

It is interesting to note that as back as in the sixties of the last century one famous Bengali periodical published from a place near Calcutta openly took the side of the struggling railway workers of Howrah Railway Station.

It was in April-May 1862 a strike by the railway workers at Howrah Railway Station (the main Railway station connecting Calcutta)

broke out on the demand of eight-hour duty and according to all historical records this was the first strike action by a section of the germinating Indian working class. ⁽¹⁾ Somorakash, the Bengali weekly published from near-about Calcutta carried the following news about the strike.

'Recently 1200 workers of Howrah Railway Station had struck work. They say that the workers of Locomotive Department work 8 hours a day. But they have to work for 10 hours. Work has been stopped for some days. The Railway Company should fulfil the prayer of the workers, otherwise they won't get any man'.

Through this news item the vernacular weekly definitely showed its sympathy towards the striking Railway workers.

Likewise the vernacular newspapers took up the case of oppression ^{of} the tea-plantation workers also in that very early period. Regular production of tea may be taken to have been started in India since 1851, and from the very beginning itself the British planter^s inflicted on the tea plantation workers a most inhuman treatment.

Dacca Prakash, a contemporary Bengali periodical appearing in the fifties of the last century seriously took up the case of oppression of tea ~~tea~~ workers by the British planters. With deep anxiety Someorokash² quoted Dacca Prakash,

'For some time different newspapers had been agitating upon the oppressions committed by the tea planters of Calcutta. Then the Tea planters assumed a little peaceable attitude. But now again, day by day, they are becoming fiercer'.

Then the newspaper warned the tea planters,

'We again warn the tea planters not to follow footsteps of indigo plantation ... If they continue this oppression like the indigo planters for some time more, they will have to quit India'.

The sympathy expressed by those newspapers towards the tea plantation workers were born out of the national feelings then germinating in the newly English educated middle-class of Bengal. Similar report exposing the barbarities committed by the British tea planters were

published in another Bengali periodical Sanjivani and a leading English daily The Bengalee published from Calcutta at that time. This sympathy towards the workers was the expression of national feelings by the periodicals and news papers published by the educated Indians. But in contrast, the newspapers representing British interests in India took up just an opposite stand in respect of the problems of the labour and labour movement.

For example, the Statesman, an English daily run by the Britishers and championing British interests and published from Calcutta, the then capital of India, while reporting about the same tea plantation workers made the stern comment that 'sooner or later the whole question of labour on the tea gardens must be resolutely faced, and sooner the better'. Here the attitude is very clear. It is just goading the British tea planters to take resolute action against the workers.

The class character of The Statesman and its attitude towards the labour movement not only in India, but abroad also were clearly revealed in the very early days of its publication when the daily reported about the historic May Day happenings at Chicago in 1886. The daily wrote,

'The Socialist movement in Europe and America has suddenly assumed dimensions that furnish cause we think for the gravest uneasiness. ~~Rather~~ telegraphed on Wednesday of a great outbreak at Chicago, in which fifty of the rioters were shot and five of the police, of whom many also were wounded by 'bombs' being thrown against them. It is alleged we observe that the movement is instigated by foreign Socialists, and that widespread 'strikes' are being made in the States in favour of eight-hours demand of the workmen'.

But the daily did not stop there. It continued expressing deep concern for any possible revolutionary wave in Europe. Thus it reported,

'The Chicago meeting is said to have numbered 15,000 men. The most serious reflection of all is the attitude of the French Minister for War and the leading municipalities of the Republic, for General Boulanger has taken the workmen almost ostentatiously under the protection of the Government, and the language used by him in the Assembly concerning the solidery is rightly described as a 'Capitulation' of the army to the working-mass, while the great German Chancellor

warns the Reichstag that Europe may not improbably find itself face to face shortly with a propaganda of the same as that of 1792 on the part of French nation. The position of the national finances under the Republic is again a repetition of the state of things which produced the first Revolution, and precipitated the French across the Alps and the Rhine, to carry the tricolour throughout Europe.'

The newspaper was, however, hopeful of any absence of danger of revolution in the United States. It continued,

'There is little danger of any revolutionary success in the United States. It is the unhealthy condition of things in Europe which has been converted into a vast camp of standing armies that makes the state of matter so electric on the continent. That we shall see very great changes in the social fabric of Europe before the end of the decade seems to be certain, and the long depression of trade consequent thereon that have produced the present threatening state of matters.'

The deep anxiety and to a certain extent the feeling of consternation of a repetition of the continental revolution that The Statesman expressed, while reporting on the May Day happenings of Chicago, was indicative of the attitude of these British-owned newspapers in pre-independence India towards labour movement itself. In any big labour upheaval these newspapers saw only lawlessness and an attempt for overthrowing the rule of the Crown in India.

Nationalist movement in India started taking shape in the last quarter of nineteenth century. Indian National Congress was born in 1885 as an organisation to represent the interests of the rising indigenous bourgeoisie. During this period, a number of nationalist newspapers both vernacular and English appeared in India voicing national interests, as well as a good number of English newspapers vociferously espousing the British interests in contrast.

During the first two decades of the present century, a section of the bourgeois leadership of Indian National Congress also devoted themselves to organizing the labour, not from any class point of view, but from the perspective of utilising these vast unorganized masses against the imperialist rule. But while organizing the labour, they mainly paid attention to the workers employed in the British-owned

industries. In the industries owned by the Indians, they did not like any labour organization and movement as they did not want to put any obstacle in the way to the growth of indigenous industries.

This particular attitude of the nationalist leaders was also reflected in the reportings of the nationalist newspapers. These papers used to give publicity to the labour movement taking place in British-owned industries and expressed sympathy with the workers' cause. But when the case related to any industry owned by an Indian capitalist, these newspapers took a different viewpoint and discouraged labour activities in those indigenous industries.

It is in this background in pre-independence India, the newspapers and periodicals which were the sole instruments of mass-media before introduction of state-controlled Radio became divided into ^{two} groups as far as the working class movement was concerned. But with the intensification of class struggle between the capital and labour, even the nationalist newspapers which actually represented the indigenous bourgeois interests were reluctant to express sympathy with the cause of the labour.

Contrasting roles: The contrasting attitude of the nationalist and British-owned newspapers on working-class struggle may be clear from some selective examples.

Some of the nationalist newspapers published in English besides a host of vernacular ones reported elaborately and sympathetically about the working class struggles. Among them The Bengalee, the Amrita Bazar Patrika and Forward from Calcutta and Bombay Chronicle FROM Bombay took the leading part. Amrita Bazar Patrika widely reported the massive working-class struggles that broke out in Bengal during the 1905-7 period when great mass agitation developed against partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon, The then Governor-General of India. Similarly in Bombay, when the first political strike of a section of the Indian working class was organized for 6 days in the middle of July 1908 against the imprisonment of the great national leader B.G.Tilak, Bombay Chronicle rendered yomen service by .

publishing daily details of that strike action and the brutalities committed upon the striking workers by the police and army of the colonial Government. At the same time, The Times of India representing British interests stood on the opposite side and by every means tried to condemn the strikes and uphold the interests of the capitalists and the Government. The Statesman and Englishman from Calcutta and Times of India from Bombay among some others vied with each other to pounce upon any manifestation of labour movement and in each of it they used to discover a revolutionary threat to overthrow the rule of the British. Umpteen number of instances may be cited about their crazy obsession with the fear of labour movement. Sometimes they even did not deem it unethical to spread vile slanders against the struggling workers. In 1922 when a series of strikes took place in the British-owned Railways and it paralyzed the entire East Indian Railways, one of the Railways of the country, it created consternation among the English population. Englishman⁴ the Calcutta newspaper representing direct British interests, published, in a vein of panic, a baseless story about alleged molestation of the English women by the strikers. With this canard the newspaper tried to rouse public opinion against the strike. In contrast, when May Day was observed for the first time in India by an early communist S. Singaravelu Chettier at Madras on May 1, 1923, the news of the observance was fully covered by the nationalist English daily of Madras, The Hindu, the next day.

In 1928 when the Simon Commission appointed by the British Government to examine whether the Indians were fit for self-government was to land at Bombay on 3rd February, the All India Congress Committee gave a call for a complete general strike all over the country to record its massive protest against this national humiliation. The working class of India took an active part in that strike and in all labour centres they organized strikes and massive demonstrations. Forward, a militant nationalist daily in English published from Calcutta gave details of the participation of the working class in this countrywide strike action. The paper reported with jubilation how in all labour centres of Calcutta and around the workers observed complete strike and joined demonstrations against the Simon Commission.

While Forward reported about complete strike in the Calcutta Port, Railway Workshops, Tramways, in the Jute mills and other industrial and commercial complexes, The Statesman⁵ published a news giving just an opposite picture of the strike situation. The Statesman wrote, 'Sir John Simon and his colleagues have arrived and the promised uprising⁶ of an indignant people which had been organised with much elaborate care has been thoroughly exposed for what it is - the clamour of small groups of little influence with the people in whose name they profess to speak. In Bombay itself the demonstrations were of no consequence and did not prevent Sir John Simon giving a message of hope and inspiration to India. Delhi was quiet, Lahore had no ~~fast~~ (means stoppage of work) at all. The citizens of Calcutta generally behaved with dignity and went about their affairs, and only from Madras is there news of any serious riot. In Calcutta we had the real measure of the influence of the Congressmen, and found that it counted for practically nothing'. This report of The Statesman was, obviously, far from the truth.

The period 1927-29 witnessed waves of labour movement in India. Particularly notable among them were the general strikes of the textile workers in Bombay and jute workers in Bengal. It may be mentioned here that the textile mills in Bombay were mostly owned by the Indian capitalists, while the jute mills in Bengal belonged to the Britishers. Consequently, while the jute workers strike in Bengal received unstinted support from the nationalist dailies, they were lukewarm in their attitude towards the textile workers' strike in Bombay. It was only the working-class periodicals that lent unequivocal support to both these strikes. This two strikes revealed the dual character of the nationalist dailies - on the one side supporting working class actions in British owned industries, on the other discouraging strikes etc. in the industries owned by the Indians.

But at the same time, at least in one very important occasion, even when the working-class political initiative was at variance with the

with the policy of the leadership of Indian National Congress, its action received wide publicity in some of the nationalists dailies. During this period the working-class political initiative climaxed in an event during Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress in December 1928. The Congress leadership at that time was dithering on the demand of full independence. But the working class took the initiative in pressurizing the Congress leadership for adoption of the goal of complete independence. On 30 December 1928 at the call of the Calcutta Tramwaymen's Union, Bengal Jute Workers' Association, East India Railway Labour Union and several other labour organisations a demonstration of 30,000 workers led by the Communist and other leftist trade union leaders advanced towards the venue of the Congress Session raising slogans like, 'workers of the world unite', 'long live independent Indian Republic,' 'we have nothing to lose but the chain' etc. The labour demonstrators forcibly entered the Congress pandal and in a massive meeting, which Jawaharlal Nehru had to preside, passed a resolution demanding complete independence from British yoke and urged the Congress leadership to go ahead with this goal. Of course, ultimately when actual session of the Congress started, the leadership rejected this demand.

It may be noted here that this working-class demonstration was not to the liking of the Congress leadership. Yet the nationalist daily Amrita Bazar Patrika⁷ which followed Congress line published in full the details of the demonstration and the resolution adopted by them in the meeting inside the Congress pandal. In contrast, The Statesman reporting on this event of the Congress Session banteringly commented, 'All extreme movements tend to shed the honoured leaders of the past, but not often is there such a holocaust as on this occasion'.

An event serving as a glaring instance, which the newspapers representing British interests, decried with craziness and perversity, would be seen in the role of the Times of India of Bombay during

the political struggle of the Solapur workers, a textile mill centre near Bombay in May 1930.

The working class of Sholapur rose up against the British Government when Mahatma Gandhi was arrested on 5 May 1930 as an aftermath to his Salt March to Dandi. Against this arrest, protest demonstrations took place all over India. But in Sholapur it took a militant form and the leadership was in the hand of the working class. There were violent clashes also between the demonstrators on the one hand and the police and the army on the other. As a result, many workers were killed and the main leaders of the movement were ultimately hanged.

Times of India in one of ~~the~~ its editions, while reporting on this countrywide protest actions chose the caption: 'Riots in India' and then reported that 'Grave rioting broke out on Tuesday at Delhi and Howrah'. What was the nature of this rioting? The newspaper wrote, 'About 90 men of the 1-12 Frontier Regiment have been kept in readiness at Howrah Station. Station porters suspended work today. Employees of the Bally Jute Mills did not turn up for work after the mid-day recess, and the mills therefore closed for the day.' And when the newspaper went on describing details of workers' strike in and around Calcutta. But this peaceful strike of the workers was captioned as 'Riots in India'.

A subsequent edition of Times of India came out with the caption: 'Atrocities by riotous mob at Sholapur: Policemen killed', 'Policemen murdered and burnt:', 'Sessions Court and Chowkies set ablaze'. All issues of the newspaper coming out during this time gave the caption 'Mob rule', 'riotous situation' 'Violence by mob' etc. to describe even the most legitimate and peaceful demonstrations of the workers like picketing in front of the liquor shops. Gandhiji was for prohibition and so there was picketing before the liquor shops. When the police and the army fired upon the demonstrating workers and killed them indiscriminately, the newspaper described it as 'violence by mob'. Of course, the workers ultimately came into bloody conflict with the police and the army and pulled down Union Jacks

from all official buildings and hoisted the national flags instead.

If one goes through the reportings of the Times of India during this struggle, one will find the utter perversity and sense of consternation suffered by this newspaper at this outburst of a massive working-class struggle for a national cause.

Till attainment of independence on 15 August 1947, in India the attitude and behaviour of the newspapers which were the sole instruments of mass media besides Radio more or less continued in the above pattern. But as has already been said, the sharpening of class-struggle between capital and labour to a certain extent put restraint on the nationalist newspapers in the matter of reporting or sympathizing with the labour movement, since these papers were controlled mainly by the representatives of the bourgeoisie and other upper strata of Indian society who learnt to abhor class struggle.

Working-class
journals - a
parallel stream:

But parallel to the mass-media owned by the Indian bourgeoisie and the British colonialists, there appeared from the very early days of labour movement a set of periodicals and newspapers which really espoused the cause of the labour. The first of its kind was a Bengali monthly journal entitled Bharat Sramjibi (Indian Worker) published from Baranagar near Calcutta by an educated philanthropist Sashipada Banerjee. Next came another journal entitled Dinabandhu (Friend of the Poor) in Marathi by Narayan Meghaji Lokhunday, an early organizer of the textile labour in Bombay. Thereafter, with the beginning of the present century, a number of such newspapers and periodicals, many of them taking up the cause of the labour from a class point of view, appeared. Notable among them were Langal, Ganabani, Kranti, Kirti-Kisan, Sanyas, Socialist, Sramik, Majdoor, Spark and some others and at a later stage Swadhinata etc. which unstintedly raised voice in favour of the labour and published detailed news of the struggle of the working class.

Quite obviously, their circulation was very limited and the totality of it stood at a fraction of the total circulation of other newspapers whether run by the national bourgeoisie or by the Britishers. Yet, these periodicals and newspapers played a historic role in popularising working-class ideas and to expose the exploitative character of capitalism whether indigenous or British.

In this connection, the role played The Vanguard of Indian Independence, the first fortnightly journal of the emigre Communist Party of India, which had started publication in Berlin in 1923 under the editorship of M.N. Roy, needs also to be specially mentioned. The title of this journal was subsequently changed to Advance Guard and then to The Vanguard and this journal found its secret way into India. As this was a proscribed publication in India, copies of this journal were secretly distributed in India. This journal openly propagated intensification of class-struggle between capital and labour and published detailed news about labour movement in India.

After Independence:

After attainment of India's independence the situation has basically changed. As the Britishers left, the newspapers owned by the Britishers also changed hands. They came under the control of the Indian bourgeoisie along with the other nationalist English and vernacular newspapers.

Independence witnessed handing over India's governance to the capitalist-landlord combine of the country. India took to the path of capitalist development. The leaders of national movement during independence struggle promised that all miseries of the working class would be over after independence. Obviously, that could not be the case. Oppression on the working class remained unabated. So class struggles also more and more sharpened. Labour struggled against the exploitation of the Indian capitalists as well as the foreign capitalists without discrimination. Thus all the Indian newspapers controlled by the bourgeoisie whether in English or in Indian languages took a hostile attitude towards labour and day in and day out they started castigating the labour. The main burden of their

propaganda was and still is that labour movement was and is putting obstacles to India's industrial growth and it is levelling down productivity. The chorus of condemnation of the labour and all their legitimate struggles and dencuncement of the trade unions and their leaders have become a common feature of the mass-media of India. But these newspapers are also following another tactics of suppressing the news of the labour and some times total blacking out of their struggles.

With the rapid expansion of the coverage of the state controlled Radio and introduction of Television the net-work of which now covers all the industrial centres of the country, state-inspired tirade against labour is gaining momentum. Simultanecusly, violating all journalistic ethics and mass-media principles, the Radio and Television have adopted the tactics of total blackout of the news of the working class struggles, which otherwise have tremendous national importance. Discouraging and falsified reports about strikes, or totally omitting the news of the labour are the usual practice of this most powerful state-run mass-media in India. There are occasions that even when five, six million or more workers took part in a nationwide strike, this state controlled media remained silent over it.

As against this, the working-class newspapers, periodicals and the journals published by different trade unions have to wage hard battle to propagate the cause of the labour. As their total circulation is still very low in comparison to the total circulation of the bourgeois newspapers and in the face of the mighty anti-working class campaign of the state controlled mass-media which have assumed the character of a media-explosion, the working class of India is placed in a very difficult position as far as the role of the mass-media and its vicious effect is concerned. But class-consciousness of the working class is rising and more and more the biased and foul role played by the bourgeois newspapers and the state controlled Radio

and Television are getting exposed to them and other sections of the toiling masses and the intelligentsia.

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1. Somprokash, 5 May 1862.
2. Ibid, 1 June, 1862.

Indigo plantation was forced upon the peasants of Eastern India -particularly in Bengal and Bihar by British colonialists and merciless oppression and inhuman cruelties were perpetrated upon the peasants who refused to cultivate indigo or made any sort of protest. Against this indigo cultivating peasants led a big revolt against the British owners of indigo cultivation around 1859-60.

3. The Statesman, May 11, 1895.
4. Englishman, 8 April 1922.
5. The Statesman, 4 February, 1928.
6. The Newspaper banteringly called the general strike call as 'the promised upsprings'.
7. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 31 December 1928.
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10. Ibid, 10 May 1930.

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