

# **One Hundred Years of Indian Communism\***

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A theoretical analysis of the prevailing situation, from which the proletariat's relationship with different segments of the bourgeoisie and the peasantry is derived, and with it the Communist Party's tactics towards other political forces, is central to the Party's praxis. A study of this praxis over the last one hundred years of the existence of communism in India, though highly instructive, is beyond my scope here. I shall be concerned only with some phases of this long history.

While the Sixth Congress of the Communist International (1928) analysed the colonial question, advancing valuable propositions like "Colonial exploitation produces pauperization, not proletarianization, of the peasantry", it put forward a line of action for Communist Parties that was sectarian in character; indeed the period following the Sixth Congress, often referred to as the Third Period, is associated with sectarianism. It was at the Seventh Congress in 1935, in the midst of the fight against fascism, which had claimed Ernst Thaelman, Antonio Gramsci and many others among its victims, that this sectarianism was rectified and the need to form united fronts was emphasized. The Seventh Congress tendency was translated into the Indian context by the Dutt-Bradley thesis calling for the formation of an Anti-Imperialist People's United Front.

The economic programme suggested for such a front included the right to strike, banning reductions of wages and dismissals of workers, an adequate minimum wage and 8-hour day, a 50 per cent reduction in rents and banning the seizure of peasant land against debt by imperialists, native princes, zamindars and money lenders.

Communists being clandestine members of the Congress (the Indian case differed from South Africa in this respect where dual membership, of the SACP and ANC, was possible), and working in cooperation with the Congress Socialist party, were the outcome of this understanding.

This phase came to an end with the German attack on the Soviet Union. The Communist Party's understanding that the nature of the war had changed because of this attack, though striking a sympathetic chord among many leading Congressmen, was officially rejected both by the CSP and the Congress, which actually launched the Quit India movement at this very time (in which many Communists who had been members of the Congress were also jailed for long periods).

With independence, the question of the nature of the new State and the relationship with the bourgeoisie came to the fore. It caused intense inner-Party debate and ultimately divided the Party. The CPI(M)'s theoretical position, enshrined in its programme, took off from Lenin's position in pre-revolutionary debates within the RSDLP, a position that was to underlie, one way or another, all third world revolutionary programmes in the twentieth century. Lenin's argument had been that in countries where the bourgeoisie came late on the historical scene, it lacked the capacity to carry through the anti-feudal democratic revolution, for fear that an attack on feudal property could well rebound into an attack on bourgeois property. It therefore could not fulfil the democratic aspirations of the peasantry. Only a revolution led by the working class in alliance with the peasantry, could carry the

democratic revolution to completion, by breaking up feudal property, smashing feudal privileges, and redistributing land. This, far from holding back economic development, would in fact make it more broad-based by enlarging the size of the home market through land reforms, and also more rapid, by accelerating the growth of agriculture.

The post-independence Indian State's eschewing of radical land redistribution, and its encouraging feudal landlords instead to turn capitalist on their khudkasht land, along with an upper stratum of the peasantry that acquired ownership rights on land from large absentee landlords, was reflective of the bourgeoisie's entering into an alliance with landlords. Since it was a bourgeois-landlord State under the leadership of the big bourgeoisie, that was pursuing capitalist development, which in the countryside entailed a mixture of landlord and peasant capitalism, the task for the proletariat was to replace this State by an alternative State formed by building an alliance with the bulk of the peasantry, and to carry the democratic revolution forward, eventually to socialism. While the bourgeoisie had ambitions of pursuing a capitalist path that was relatively autonomous of imperialism, it was, the Party noted, collaborating increasingly with foreign finance capital.

Two aspects of this characterization deserve attention. First, it recognized that while capitalist development was being pursued, it was not under the aegis of imperialism. The bourgeoisie was by no means subservient to imperialism, a fact of which the use of the public sector against metropolitan capital, economic decolonization with the help of the Soviet Union, in the sense of recapturing control over the country's natural resources from metropolitan capital, and the pursuit of non-alignment in foreign policy, were obvious manifestations. Developing capitalism at home in other words did not mean for the post-independence State joining the camp of world capitalism.

Second, the State, while it manifested its class character in defending bourgeois and landlord property and ushering in capitalism, including junker capitalism, did not act exclusively in the interests of the bourgeoisie and the landlords. It appeared to stand above all classes, intervening even in favour of workers and peasants from time to time. Thus while it presided over a process of primitive accumulation of capital, in the sense of the landlords evicting tenants to resume land for capitalist farming, it prevented primitive accumulation in the more usual sense, of the urban big bourgeoisie encroaching on peasant agriculture or artisan production. On the contrary, it not only reserved a quantum of cloth to be produced by the handloom sector, but also intervened in agricultural markets to purchase produce at remunerative prices, an intervention of which the agricultural capitalists, whether kulaks or landlords, were by no means the sole beneficiaries. Likewise, a whole array of measures for agriculture, such as protection from world market fluctuations, subsidised inputs, subsidized institutional credit, new practices and seed varieties being disseminated through State-run extension services, though they conferred the lion's share of benefits on the emerging capitalist class in the countryside, also benefited large numbers of peasants.

The capitalist development that was pursued was thus *sui generis*. It was a capitalist development from within, not necessarily with the blessings of imperialism, and, notwithstanding increasing collaboration, often even at the expense of metropolitan capital. Because of this peculiar character, it did not cause an unbridgeable hiatus within society, i.e. within the ranks of the classes that had fought imperialism together during the anti-colonial struggle. Put differently, while the bourgeoisie betrayed many

of the promises of the anti-colonial struggle, such as land to the tiller, it did not as long as the dirigiste regime lasted, betray the anti-colonial struggle altogether. This is also why the Party while putting itself in opposition to the regime, supported many of its measures, such as bank nationalization, the development of the public sector and its use for recapturing control over natural resources from metropolitan capital, FERA, and others.

This sui generis character of the capitalism that was being developed has misled many into thinking that it was an “intermediate regime” that presided over it and not a bourgeois-landlord State; but this mistake itself is testimony to its sui generis character. This development could not last for at least four reasons: first, the collapse of the Soviet Union that had made such a development trajectory at all possible; second, the fiscal crisis that the post-independence State increasingly got into inter alia because of massive tax evasion by the bourgeoisie and the landlords; third, the formation of huge blocks of finance capital in the banks of the advanced capitalist countries, especially after the “oil-shocks” of the seventies, which went global after the overthrow of the Bretton-Woods system (itself partly engineered by this finance capital), and which took advantage of the fiscal crisis to push loans to countries like India; and fourth, the fact that the dirigiste regime could not garner the support of the poor, notwithstanding its many pro-poor achievements compared to the colonial period.

The neo-liberal regime under the aegis of the now globalized finance capital represents the pursuit of capitalism of the most orthodox kind, as distinct from the sui generis capitalism of the dirigiste period. The State under neo-liberalism promotes much more exclusively the interests of the ruling classes, especially the corporate-financial oligarchy that gets closely integrated with globalized finance capital, and directly also of globalized finance capital itself (owing its fear that there may be a capital flight otherwise). An unbridgeable hiatus now develops within the country, with the big bourgeoisie aligning itself much more closely with metropolitan capital, having abandoned its ambition of relative autonomy vis-à-vis imperialism.

The neo-liberal regime withdraws to a large extent the support it extended to petty production and peasant agriculture, making it much more vulnerable. A process of primitive accumulation of capital is unleashed upon peasant agriculture not from within the rural economy (through landlords evicting tenants) but from agri-business and big capital from outside; likewise the neo-liberal State facilitates an unleashing of primitive accumulation upon the petty production sector, for instance through demonetization and the shift to a GST regime. Reservation of products for this sector is abandoned. The displaced peasants and petty producers move to towns in search of employment, but employment becomes increasingly scarce because of the abandonment of all constraints on technological-cum-structural change in the economy which the system of licensing had imposed earlier. The swelling reserve army of labour worsens the lot of the organized workers. The fate of the peasants, the agricultural labourers, the petty producers and organized workers get inextricably linked, and this fate worsens greatly, leading not only to a massive widening of economic inequality but also to an accentuation of poverty.

At the same time however neo-liberalism has entailed the shift of a range of activities, especially in the service sector (IT-related services) from the metropolis to the Indian

economy which inter alia has increased the growth rate of GDP in the economy. This poses a fresh challenge before the Party because of the following argument.

Marx in his Preface to A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy had talked of a mode of production becoming historically obsolete when the relations of production characterizing it become a fetter on the development of productive forces. A conclusion is often drawn from this that as long as productive forces continue to develop, that mode of production continues to remain historically progressive. An obvious index of the development of productive forces is the rate of growth of the GDP, whence it follows that as long as this growth remains rapid, opposing a regime in the name of its inequity and exploitative character is historically unwarranted. The Communists on this argument should not oppose neo-liberal globalization, but should join other political forces in accepting it, albeit critically.

This argument however cannot stand scrutiny. Economic historians agree that Russia before the revolution was experiencing unprecedented rates of economic growth, especially industrial growth, and the advanced capitalist world as a whole had witnessed a prolonged boom; yet Lenin had no hesitation in calling capitalism of that time “moribund”. In short to take GDP growth as the marker of the historical state of a mode of production is a form of commodity fetishism; it seeks to locate in the world of “things” phenomena that belong to the world of “relations”.

While other political forces accepted neo-liberal globalization, the Party accordingly steadfastly opposed it. It, along with other Left political forces, stood by the workers and peasants who are victims of neo-liberal globalization instead accepting it as a sign of progress, as many Left formations in other countries have explicitly or implicitly done.

This has brought practical problems. Under the dirigiste regime one measure that separated Communists from others was land reforms. When a Communist government came to power, its task was clear, namely to carry out land reforms. But when land reforms have been completed to a significant extent, the next task is not clear. While industrialization is required, what form it should take and in what way it should be effected, are matters on which the state governments (where Communists are typically located) have very little say within a neo-liberal regime. Hence, Communist state governments within such a regime are often forced to mimic, to their cost, other state governments for effecting industrialization. This is an area where much more thinking and experimentation needs to be done.

Neo-liberal globalization itself however has reached a dead-end, a symptom of which is the mushrooming of authoritarian/fascist regimes in various parts of the world, for the preservation of moribund neo-liberal capitalism, through a combination of repression and of distraction of attention towards the “other” as the enemy. Overcoming this conjuncture is the new challenge before Indian Communism in its centenary year.

\* This article was originally published in the [Peoples Democracy](#) on October 18, 2020.