

# **YEARS OF THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA**



Dossier n° 32  
Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research  
September 2020

# ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA



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On 17 October 2020, the Indian communist movement looks back on a century of courageous resistance against tyranny, oppression, and exploitation. This was a century of sacrifices by hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries of the Indian communist movement who pledged their lives to the dream of an egalitarian and a truly democratic society. Thousands of cadre were martyred on this path and many more continue to carry forward the dream and the fight in the face of state repression, violence, and infinite efforts at subversion.

Through their self-effacing work, the communists have galvanised hundreds of millions of people into action in order to bring about far-reaching changes in society. They fought sectarian religious strife and caste discrimination, mobilised workers and peasants to fight to advance their rights, and worked to change the consciousness of the people in a progressive direction in order to make society more liveable for all marginalised, exploited, and oppressed sections of people. The communist movement is aware that the exploitation of human beings by human beings can end only with the establishment of a socialist society and its transition towards communism; the fight for this goal continues through the difficult times that humanity is faced with today.

Indian communists are patriotic; their practice is deeply rooted in Indian socio-economic and cultural realities. Yet they see their revolutionary activity in India as an intrinsic part of the international struggle for human liberation and emancipation. They have always been acutely aware that their dream of a communist future

is a dream that they share with comrades across the world. This means that the Indian communist movement has always been strongly internationalist. In other words, it has stood for the rights of the oppressed people and nations across the world, even when such a stance has not been popular within the country.

Moreover, the Indian communist movement itself was strongly inspired by the October Revolution (1917) – a glorious episode in history that bore fruits not just in the struggle against the Tsarist Empire, but across all oppressed nations. A set of Indian revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow British colonial rule in India reached Tashkent, in what was then the Soviet Union, from various parts of the world. Assisted by MN Roy – an Indian revolutionary who was a founder of the Mexican Communist Party and who was a member of the executive committee of the Communist International – they formed the Communist Party of India on 17 October 1920.

Apart from the émigré Communist Party of India, scattered communist groups were emerging in different parts of India during the early 1920s, led by leaders such as SA Dange in Bombay, Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta, M Singaravelu Chettiar in Madras, and Ghulam Husain in Lahore. The activities of the émigré Communist Party of India served to provide theoretical and practical education in Marxism-Leninism to these groups.

The communists who were in touch with MN Roy held an open conference of Indian communists in the city of Kanpur in the

present-day state of Uttar Pradesh from 25 to 28 December 1925 and decided to form a Communist Party of India with headquarters in Bombay. This was the first effort on Indian soil to form an all-India communist party and is considered by a section of Indian communists to mark the beginning of the Indian communist movement.





MN Roy (centre, black tie and jacket) with Vladimir Lenin (tenth from the left), Maxim Gorky (behind Lenin), and other delegates to the Second Congress of the Communist International at the Uritsky Palace in Petrograd, 1920.

**Magazine Krasny Panorama (Red Panorama) / Wikipedia**

## *The Early Years*

The Indian communists wanted to achieve full independence from British colonial rule and to build a society where working people could be the masters of their own destiny. For them, the example of the Soviet Union was living proof that this was an eminently possible objective. They undertook intense organisational work, which strengthened the trade union movement by the late 1920s in the urban centres. The years 1928 and 1929 saw a wave of working-class strikes in the country, including protracted struggles waged by the textile mill workers of Bombay and the railway workers of Bengal.

With the emergence of communists in the anti-colonial struggle, the Indian National Congress, which was leading the Indian national movement, was forced to adopt a stronger stance against British rule – a departure from the mild resistance it had put up until then. In the Ahmedabad session of the Indian National Congress in 1921, two communists – Maulana Hasrat Mohani and Swami Kumaranand – moved a resolution demanding complete independence from British rule. While the Congress rejected the resolution, that it was raised at the meeting and taken seriously shows that communist ideas had begun to make an impact on the anti-imperialist struggle.

Alarmed by the spread of communist ideas in India and worried about the implication to its empire, the British launched a series of conspiracy cases against the early communists. Between 1921 and 1933, many important communist leaders of that time were arrested

and incarcerated. The most prominent of these cases was the Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929-1933). Though the case was launched to suppress the communist movement, it provided an excellent platform for the communists to propagate Marxist ideology. They made use of the opportunity by spiritedly explaining and defending Marxism in the court room, helped along by the great interest that these proceedings generated among the Indian public. Twenty-seven of the thirty-three accused were convicted and sentenced to transportation or imprisonment. In 1934, the British government outlawed the Communist Party and all of its affiliated organisations, making its membership a criminal offence. The communists continued their revolutionary activity clandestinely and continued to grow the Party's reach and membership.

The success of the Soviet Union – even in the midst of the Great Depression, which ravaged the capitalist world – attracted numerous people across the world to socialism and to Marxism. India was no exception. Though the Communist Party was banned, communists continued to work in various organisations that were part of the Indian national movement, including the Indian National Congress. They carried out their party activities clandestinely and recruited many young people into the Communist Party. Many of those recruited into the communist movement in this fashion later became prominent leaders. Using these various fora, one of which was the Congress Socialist Party or CSP (a left bloc within the Indian National Congress), communists plunged headlong into mobilising vast sections of people into various mass and class organisations of peasants, workers, students, and writers.



Portrait taken outside the jail in Meerut of twenty-five of those who were imprisoned as part of the Meerut Conspiracy Case. Back row (left to right): KN Sehgal, SS Josh, HL Hutchinson, Shaukat Usmani, BF Bradley, A Prasad, P Spratt, G Adhikari. Middle Row: RR Mitra, Gopen Chakravarti, Kishori Lal Ghash, LR Kadam, DR Thengdi, Goura Shanker, S Bannerjee, KN Joglekar, PC Joshi, Muzaffar Ahmad. Front row: MG Desai, D Goswami, RS Nimbkar, SS Mirajkar, SA Dange, SV Ghate, Gopal Basak.

*The Hindu Archives*

## *The Growth of Mass and Class Organisations*

As they matured in the movement, the communists recognised the importance of the alliance of the working class and peasantry in order to achieve complete independence. They understood the role that revolutionary workers can play in paralysing the machinery of the colonial administration, as well as transport and communication. As a result of communist activity, a wave of working-class strikes involving 606,000 workers took place across India in 1937.

Apart from workers, the communists identified the role that students, young people, and intellectuals could play in the national movement and sought to mobilise them behind the revolutionary cause.

Most importantly, the communists came to realise that in India, where more than 80% of the population lived in agrarian societies, national liberation would truly be possible only when the peasantry was mobilised on a large scale. Thus, the communist movement – which in its early years had mainly mobilised in urban centres – started growing in rural India as well.

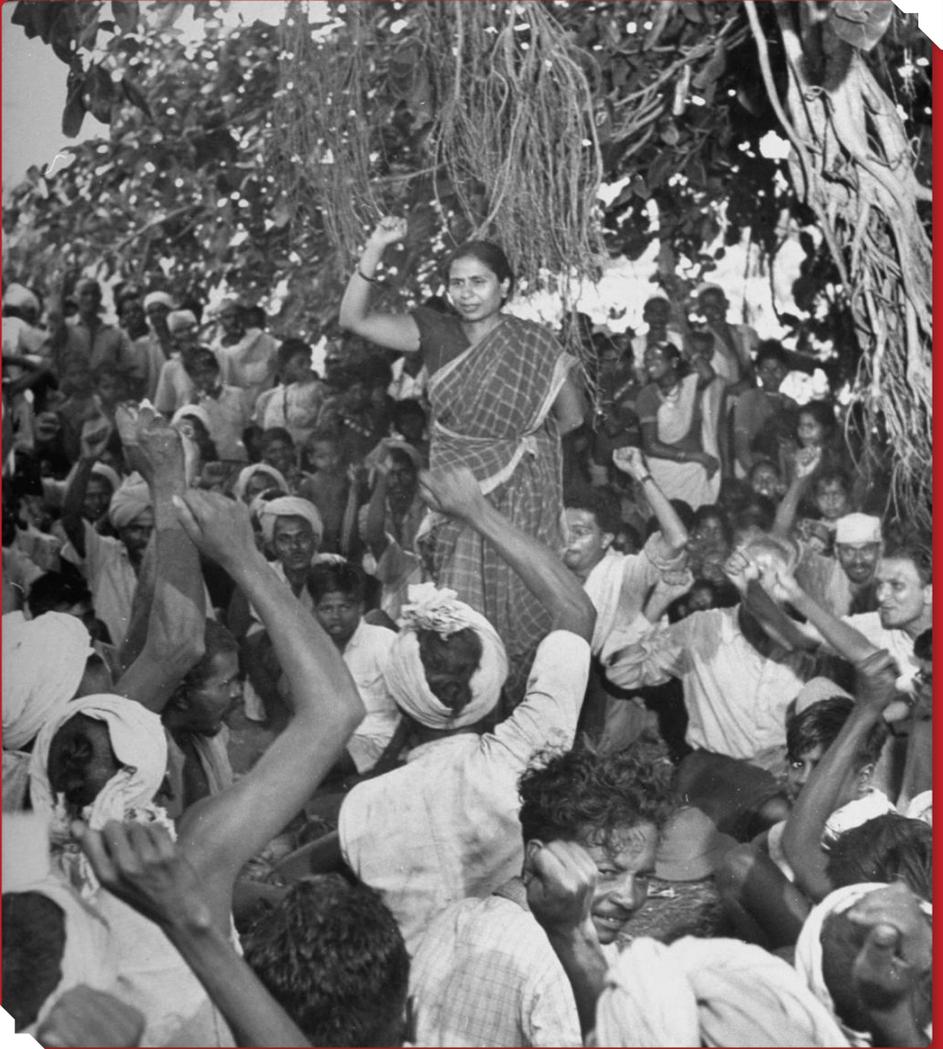
With this understanding, the communists formed a number of mass organisations in 1936: the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS or All India Peasant Union), the All India Students' Federation, and the Progressive Writers' Association, as well as the Indian People's

Theatre Association in 1943. The first organisation of agricultural workers was also started by the communists. These mass organisations helped channel the quest of various sections of people seeking justice and rights towards a revolutionary consciousness.

As the communist movement entered rural India, it had to grapple with the entrenched structure of Indian feudalism – in particular with the amalgam of caste and class. Rural India was rife with the exploitation of peasants by the landlord class, moneylenders, and government officials. After the extraction of rent and debt by moneylenders, the peasant who grew the food hardly had anything left with which to feed his family. Pushed into a cycle of debt, inevitably a large section of the peasantry lost their lands, becoming tenants. Even worse was the situation of the landless workers, mainly belonging to untouchable castes, who were forced – through the coercion of physical force and societal customs – to provide free labour and to lead a socially sanctioned subhuman existence. The first among the many issues that communists took up in the villages was that of untouchability, which they connected with other issues such as low wages and conditions of forced labour.

Under the leadership of communists, the peasant movement gathered strength. The membership of the communist-led All India Kisan Sabha rose from 600,000 in May 1938 to 800,000 in April 1939. The peasant movement had a range of demands, which included abolishing landlordism and granting land ownership to cultivating peasants, ending forced labour and illegal exactions from tenant farmers by landlords, redistributing land to landless peasants, radically changing the land tax system, and better prices for crops.

While the communists mobilised the peasantry, the leadership of the Congress was openly aligned with the landlords and rulers in most places. The landlord class, along with Indian industrialists, were two pillars of support for the Congress. As a result, tensions rose between the communists and the right-wing sections of the Congress. The provincial governments led by the Congress were openly supportive of landlords and capitalists. Under pressure from the right-wing of the Congress, the CSP leadership expelled the communists. Following this, as EMS Namboodiripad, a key communist thinker and the first Chief Minister of the state of Kerala, recalls, 'some of the state, district and local units of the CSP (including the entire membership of the CSP in Kerala) transformed themselves in their entirety from the CSP to the CPI.'



Circa 1946: Godavari Parulekar, leader of the communist movement and the All India Kisan Sabha, addressing the Warli tribals of Thane in present-day Maharashtra. The Warli Revolt, led by the Kisan Sabha against oppression by landlords, was launched in 1945.

**Margaret Bourke-White / *The Hindu Archives***

## *The Second World War*

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Britain made India a participant in the war without consulting the representatives of the Indian people. The war caused the Indian people immense hardship as the price of essential goods rose sharply. The CPI staunchly opposed the war and organised mass protests. The British government began mass arrests; by May 1941, almost the entire CPI leadership was in jail.

But the character of the war changed after Nazi Germany launched its attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 from an inter-imperialist war to an all-people's war against fascism. Proletarian internationalism now called upon the communist parties of all countries 'to recognise that Hitler-fascism was the main enemy and that war waged by the USSR in alliance with Britain and America was a war which had to be won by all the people in the interests of defending the base of the world revolution' ('Resolution of the Polit Bureau of the CPI, despatched to all party members under the cover of party letter no. 56 dated 15 December 1941').

The Congress was in negotiations with the British, who offered concessions – including the transfer of power – but only after the war. The negotiations broke down. The threat of a Japanese invasion loomed large as the Japanese forces advanced towards India and conquered the British-occupied territories of Singapore, Burma, Malaya, and the Andaman Islands. Nevertheless, the Congress, which had long

campaigned against fascism, now launched the Quit India struggle, demanding that the colonial rulers must 'quit India', to pressure the British to quickly seek a compromise.

The communists opposed the Quit India Resolution of the All India Congress Committee. Faced with the global advance of fascist powers, they considered the call to be inappropriate for the time and were concerned that any weakening of the Allies would weaken the anti-fascist war effort. But the people were impatient to discard the yolk of colonialism, and the communists' stance went against the popular feeling in the country at the time.

After India won independence, this stance was reviewed by the Communist Party, which concluded that it had been a serious mistake to go against the popular mood during the Quit India movement. While supporting the people's war in the international sphere, the communists ought to have backed the Indian people's just demand that the British colonialists 'quit India', the CPI concluded. Though the Congress issued the call for the British to 'quit India', most of its leaders were arrested immediately, and there was no direction or preparation from the part of the Congress leadership regarding how to carry forward the struggle when faced with large-scale repression. Despite their opposition to the call, the communists campaigned for the release of the jailed Congress leaders and demanded the establishment of a national unity government.

The ban of the Communist Party that had been imposed in 1934 was lifted in July 1942 and the communists were released from jail. Amidst the war, the horrific Bengal Famine of 1943-1944 caused

the deaths of more than three million people in Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, and Assam. As economist Utsa Patnaik has pointed out, this was the result of a deliberate policy by the British to engineer profit-inflation 'to raise resources from the Indian population by curtailing mass consumption in order to finance the Allies' war in South Asia with Japan'. The communists actively took part in procuring and distributing essential commodities. The Party campaigned to build a movement against sections of merchants and landlords who hoarded food grains and other essential commodities, and to expose the anti-people character of the British rulers who were favouring such exploiters. Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti ('Women's Self Defence Committee') was formed to save young women from human traffickers. Volunteers and medical teams were mobilised and sent for relief work. As a result of such tireless work – despite taking an unpopular stand on the war – the communists retained their independent strength, and mass support for the Party significantly increased.



HUMANITY DEHUMANISED

*He has lost his land and his wife  
has left him. There is very little  
that he could call his own in the  
world.*

A page from *Hungry Bengal* (1945) by Chittaprosad. Copies of the book were seized and burnt by the British; this drawing is from the only surviving copy (reprinted in facsimile by DAG Modern, New Delhi, 2011). Chittaprosad's drawings on the Bengal Famine were published in the Communist Party of India's journal *People's War*, helping to intensify popular anger against the British colonial regime.

## *The Post-War Upsurge*

The post-war period saw an upsurge of mass struggles in India, many of which were led by the Communist Party. The strength that the Communist Party built in many regions during the war was now mobilised into mass actions.

A tide of working-class struggles rose up in the country in response to the retrenchment of five to seven million workers and the rising cost of living as well as in response to calls to strengthen the struggle for national independence. Among the massive working-class actions were strikes of post office, telegraph, and railway workers in 1946.

The mutiny of the ratings (junior officers) of the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) in February 1946 was a landmark event. The naval ratings of Bombay who went on strike hoisted the red flag along with flags of other parties in the national movement. They took up arms and arrested their superior officers. The CPI fully supported the uprising and called for a general strike on 22 February 1946. Across the country, hundreds of thousands of workers went on strike, merchants closed their establishments, and students boycotted classes. Ultimately, the rebelling naval ratings surrendered on 23 February; however, the popular support that they garnered as a result of the communist-led campaign prevented their total annihilation.

Under the leadership of communists during this period, various parts of India saw massive mobilisations of peasants against the exploitation of landlords. Everywhere, the CPI demanded the abolition of various forms of economic and social oppression that have burdened the Indian villages for centuries. In some places, the mobilisations took the form of armed revolts led by the communists; there were massive mobilisations of peasant men and women that ran from Andhra, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Maharashtra to Bengal, Assam, Tripura, and Kashmir. These mobilisations shook the ruling classes, which used extreme violence to suppress them. Ultimately, the peasants won many of the rights they had been fighting for, further strengthening the communist movement.



BT Ranadive, G Adhikari, and PC Joshi at a meeting of the Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of India at the CPI headquarters in Bombay, 1945.

**Sunil Janah / *The Hindu Archives***

## *The Tebhaga Movement*

The Tebhaga movement was a massive peasant agitation in Bengal led by the Communist Party of India under the banner of the All India Kisan Sabha from 1946 to 1950. Sharecroppers had been allowed to keep only half of the produce from the land, with the rest going to the landowners. The Tebhaga movement demanded that the sharecroppers' share be increased to two-thirds and that rents be reduced. *Tebhaga* literally means 'three shares', referring to the demand that the harvest be divided into three, with two out of the three shares going to the sharecroppers. The movement took place at a time when communal riots were occurring in Calcutta and in the district of Noakhali in the eastern part of Bengal. But the Tebhaga movement held up a glorious example of Hindu-Muslim unity based on class struggle, and the areas where the Kisan Sabha had influence remained free of communal<sup>1</sup> riots. Hindus, Muslims, and tribal men and women were among the 73 people who were killed by the police during the struggle. In spite of brutal repression by the Muslim League ministry in Bengal, sharecroppers' rights as demanded by the Tebhaga movement were established in many regions as a result of the struggle.

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<sup>1</sup> Communalism in South Asia refers to the idea that religious communities are political communities with secular interests that are opposed to each other. Political parties that subscribe to the worldview of communalism are called communal parties; terms like 'communal violence' and 'communal riots' are used to refer to clashes between people belonging to different religious communities in the context of an atmosphere charged with communalism.

## *The Telangana Armed Struggle*

The Telangana armed struggle was the biggest communist-led uprising that has taken place in India's history. It took place from 1946 to 1951 in Telangana, a Telugu-speaking region which was then part of Hyderabad. During British colonial rule, India had hundreds of regions that were not under direct British rule, and where vassal states were allowed to continue in subsidiary alliance with the British. Hyderabad, ruled by the monarch with the title Nizam, was one such princely state. The Telangana struggle, led by the Communist Party, fought against the autocratic rule of the Nizam and against feudal exploitation by landlords. The struggle began with demands to abolish unjust taxes and *vetti* (forced labour) and provide title deeds for peasants who were cultivating lands. As the communist mobilisation grew stronger, the repression, violence and murders of communists by both the Razakars (the Nizam's stormtroopers) and the police intensified, leading to armed resistance. At the peak of the armed struggle, the movement had complete control of 3,000 villages with a total population of over three million. As a result of this struggle, one million acres of land were distributed among the peasantry. Forced labour was abolished, the daily wage of the labourers was raised, and minimum wage was enforced. Education, health, and other services were organised in these villages by the people through self-organised committees.

The Congress government launched 'police action' on 13 September 1948 to suppress the communist-led struggle and to force the Nizam

to join the Indian Union. The Nizam surrendered and the merger of the Hyderabad state into India was announced. But it was not enough to seize Hyderabad. The Indian army then marched into the villages to crush the peasant struggle. The landlords and the former regional administrators of the Nizam came back to the villages with the Indian Army and the police to restore the lands to the landlords, though the people resisted successfully in many places. As many as 4,000 communist and peasant militants were killed during the uprising and crackdown, and more than 10,000 people were thrown into detention camps and jails to be tortured for three to four years.



Mallu Swarajyam (left) and other members of an armed squad during the Telangana armed struggle (1946-1951).

**Sunil Janah / Prajasakti Publishing House**

## *The Punnapra-Vayalar Uprising*

Punnapra and Vayalar, two villages in the Alappuzha district of Kerala, became the epicentres of a major struggle in 1946 against the autocratic rule of the king of Travancore and his prime minister. Travancore was a princely state like Hyderabad. Its rulers were trying to avoid joining independent India, instead wanting to adopt the 'American model' with an executive President rather than the parliamentary system that India adopted. The refusal of the Travancore rulers to concede to the demand for a government that would be accountable to an elected legislature and the move to impose the 'American model' spurred action by the working class led by the Communist Party. There were furious battles between the workers and the armed police. The police shot and killed several hundred workers from 24 October to 27 October. In less than a year, the prime minister had to leave Travancore in ignominy, and the immediate political demand of a democratic government became a reality with Travancore becoming a part of India. The struggle also set in motion the process for the formation of the united linguistic state of Kerala, by the merger of the Malayalam-speaking regions: the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and the Malabar district of the Madras presidency which was under direct British rule.

## *Differences in the Communist Movement*

By the time of Indian independence on 15 August 1947, a number of questions had emerged before the communist movement. The colonial power that the communists had vehemently fought against was gone. Now Indians ruled the country. But what was the nature of the new state and who were the new rulers? Was the new Indian state a puppet state of a colonial power? Or was it an independent one, rooted in the support of Indian ruling classes? Who were the Indian ruling classes in this new context? What should be the nature of engagement of the communist parties with the new state and the ruling classes? Should the Communist Party engage and ally with the new rulers? Or should it wage an armed struggle for the overthrow of the state? Should it take the 'Russian path' or the 'Chinese path'? Or was there an Indian way? These were the major questions that brewed within the communist movement and which subsequently led to the formation of different strands within the movement.

The differences intensified from the mid-1950s onwards. The immediate question was how to analyse the policies of the post-independence Indian government, headed by Jawaharlal Nehru of the Indian National Congress. The government was pursuing a relatively independent foreign policy; it had set in motion the process of economic planning; and the Congress even claimed that its aim was to establish a socialistic pattern of society. A section of the CPI felt

that the communists should work with the left faction within the Congress, represented at the time by Jawaharlal Nehru, arguing that this faction represented the national bourgeoisie and that it stood in opposition to imperialism and feudalism.

These debates ultimately led to the Communist Party of India splitting into two in 1964. The faction that opposed the path of cooperating with the Congress formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M); the other faction retained the name Communist Party of India (CPI).

In 1969, convinced of the necessity of armed struggle, other communists formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) or CPI (ML).

## *The Left Governments*

A crucial phase of the Indian communist movement began with the formation of communist-led governments at the state level.

India as a nation is constituted by multiple linguistic nationalities, and the Indian polity is by and large divided into linguistic states (for instance, West Bengal for the Bengali-speaking people, Tamil Nadu for the Tamil-speaking people). The communist movement played a crucial role in the language-based re-organisation of Indian states. Under the British and during the early years after independence, the division of states in India had no rational basis; states were divided on the basis of when and how the British had acquired those regions. This resulted in the imposition of non-local languages on native populations, impeding their participation in education, culture, and political life. The communists advocated for the formation of linguistic states based on the understanding that India is a multi-national state with many linguistic-cultural groups that make up different nationalities within the greater unity of the Indian nation. The Telangana uprising and the Punnapra-Vayalar revolt were among the struggles that galvanised the movements for the formation of linguistic states in India.

Due to the successful organisation of peasants by communists in some regions during and after Indian independence, the communists

were strong enough to win elections and form governments in some of the linguistically-organised states. While it is clear that merely winning elections and governing is not the path to state power for the working class and the peasantry, leading governments at the state level enabled communists to showcase alternative policies and to provide relief to the people as well as to politically educate the people using the electoral process.



Members of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti headed by communist leader SS Mirajkar (third from right, wearing dark glasses) who was then the Mayor of Bombay, demonstrating before the Parliament House in New Delhi, 1958.

*The Hindu Archives*

## *Kerala*

After setbacks in the attempt to form a communist-led government in the state of Andhra Pradesh, came a historic victory in Kerala. The state of Kerala was formed based on the common language of Malayalam in 1956. In 1957, the CPI won the first assembly elections and formed the government; EMS Namboodiripad took the oath as the first chief minister on 5 April 1957.

The communists came to power in Kerala on the back of mighty movements of the working class and the peasantry. The communists had led decades-long struggles of the peasantry against feudal landlordism under which peasants were subjected to rack rents, exorbitant exactions, evictions, and social indignities. Thus, land reforms were naturally high on the communist agenda. On the sixth day after coming to power in 1957, the CPI government issued an ordinance banning the eviction of tenant farmers by landlords. The ministry introduced land reforms legislation – the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill. Its aims included providing permanent land rights to cultivating farmers, fixing fair rent, imposing an upper limit (or ‘ceiling’) on the size of land holdings, and giving tenants the right to purchase the land they were cultivating.

The communist ministry greatly expanded funding for education, and undertook reforms in the education sector to bring more democratic oversight and better working conditions, job security, and remuneration for teachers in private schools. Public healthcare was

expanded, and a network of fair price shops was instituted to supply rice at affordable rates to the poor.

The land reform measures rattled the landlords, while the education reforms were detested by the leadership of the Catholic Church, which ran a large number of private schools. The Catholic Church and the dominant caste organisations which represent landed interests joined hands with the Congress party to oppose the communist ministry. They waged an agitation that they ironically named *Vimochana Samaram* ('Liberation Struggle'). Making use of the opportunity, the Congress government at the centre dismissed the communist ministry in Kerala in 1959.

The Congress-led governments which came to power after the first communist ministry was dismissed diluted the land reform legislation. Nevertheless, further legislation and administrative actions by the Left government of 1967-69, as well as agitations led by the CPI(M) during the first half of the 1970s, led to the implementation of far-reaching land reforms that continued in the subsequent years. By 1993, 2.8 million tenant farmers had been conferred ownership rights or had their rights protected, and 600,000 hectares of land had accrued to them through these measures. More than 528,000 landless agricultural labourers had been provided with homestead land by 1996.

Land reforms in Kerala broke the back of dominant caste landlordism, raised the living standards of vast sections of the peasantry, and greatly increased the bargaining power of agricultural workers.

Public investments in education and healthcare resulted in sharp improvements in literacy and in health indicators. These improvements were noted by academic studies from the mid-1970s onwards, which gave rise to the concept of the 'Kerala model'. The basic ideas behind the Kerala model are: (1) it is not necessary for a country or region to wait until it becomes rich to bring about significant improvements in peoples' material conditions of living, distributed across the entire population; and (2) public action by the people can drive such changes by forcing the governments to adopt redistributive measures and other programmes. Kerala is the Indian state with the highest literacy and the lowest infant mortality rate. It is also the state with the highest wage rates and the most wide-ranging social security measures for workers. The strength of the working-class movement has been the most crucial factor in making these possible.



EMS Namboodiripad (right) taking oath as the first Chief Minister of Kerala. Thiruvananthapuram, 5 April 1957.

**Rajan Poduval / *The Hindu Archives***

## *West Bengal*

Bengal was one of the provinces that bore the brunt of British colonialism the most. Millions of Bengalis died in famines induced by colonialism, and Bengali farmers were some of the worst exploited in the country. Along with independence came the partition of the country into two: India and Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands were killed in communal riots in which violence raged based on divides of religious identity, historically fanned by British colonial rulers and other political organisations which sought to benefit from such divides. There were massive flows of refugees from Pakistan to India and vice-versa. Bengal was split into two, with east Bengal joining Pakistan. The communists in West Bengal were in the forefront fighting to stop atrocities and demanding housing and voting rights for refugees.

Communists carried out relief work during the Bengal Famine, and led a food movement in the 1950s during which the rural poor poured into the streets of Calcutta as part of 'processions of the hungry' (*Bhukha Michhil*). These contributed to poor people rallying behind the Communist Party in ever larger numbers.

The demand for land reform had become part of the demands of the Tebhaga movement in its later stages, and the 1950s saw the communist-led Kisan Sabha fighting against the eviction of sharecroppers from their land.

The rising strength of the communists was reflected in their electoral performances. The CPI(M) and CPI were part of short-lived United Front governments that served in office in 1967-1969 and in 1969-1970. In 1977, the Left Front, a coalition of CPI(M), CPI, and some other left parties, won the elections and formed the government, with Jyoti Basu as the chief minister. For 34 unbroken years, the communists led the state government of West Bengal.

The Left Front government carried forward the land reform measures initiated during the United Front governments' tenure. It implemented Operation Barga, whereby the rights of sharecroppers (*bargadars*) were established; this ensured that a fair share of the harvest went to the sharecroppers who tilled the land. The landowner had to give the sharecropper a receipt for his share so that the receipt would be accepted by banks as proof of the tenant's right to the land. Landholdings above a certain ceiling were declared surplus land and were redistributed.

The scale of the Left Front's land reform programme in West Bengal can be seen by the fact that more than 50% of the total number of beneficiaries of land distribution programmes in India were from West Bengal alone. As of 2008, more than 2.9 million people had received agricultural land as part of land distribution programmes, more than 1.5 million sharecroppers had their lands recorded, and more than 550,000 people had received homestead land. Moreover, 55% of the recipients of agricultural land belonged to the Dalit (untouchable) castes and tribal communities who constitute the poorest sections in Indian society.

An important achievement of the communist-led governments in West Bengal was the revival of agriculture and hence of rural livelihoods in the state. Public investment in rural development, including irrigation, was expanded significantly, which enabled vast tracts of lands where only one crop had been grown per year to grow three crops per year instead. Land reforms encouraged productive investment by the peasants themselves. All these led to higher agricultural growth in West Bengal, and the state turned into the leading producer of rice in the country.

The process of democratic decentralisation that the Left Front governments set in motion brought about vast changes in rural West Bengal. Panchayats (local self-government institutions in the countryside) were set up and tasked with local decision-making, including the implementation of land reforms. A substantial share of the funds was devolved from the state government to the local self-government institutions. These reforms altered the balance of class forces in the villages in favour of the peasantry, substantially weakening the dominance of the big landowners, old landlords, and moneylenders. The proportion of Dalit and tribal panchayat representatives rose well above their share in the population.



Communist leader Jyoti Basu (sixth from the left in the front row; no glasses), who later became the Chief Minister of West Bengal, at a *Bhukha Michhil* ('procession of the hungry'), during the Food Movement of 1959.

***Ganashakti***

## *Tripura*

In Tripura, the communist-led People's Liberation Council (*Ganamukti Parishad*) was formed in 1948. It led struggles for the pressing issues of the tribal people, such as ending forced labour extracted from tribals, and usurious money-lending practices.

Following the partition of India in 1947, Tripura saw a wave of refugees immigrate from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Political disturbances and communal tensions in East Pakistan meant that this immigration continued into the 1950s and 1960s. The immigration had a severe impact on the tribal people and their land. Before the Left Front came to power, the state administration was apathetic to the condition of refugees. The political movement led by the Ganamukti Parishad and the communists in the 1950s and 1960s raised a series of demands: the protection of tribal lands, proper rehabilitation of refugees, and ending the eviction of tribal sharecroppers. The common struggles of the peasantry, both tribal and non-tribal, helped build unity among them.

The CPI(M)-led Left Front came to power in Tripura in 1978, with Nripen Chakraborty as chief minister. The Left Front government initiated a series of measures. Among these were the full implementation of land reforms, which focused on stopping the illegal transfer of tribal land, tribal land restoration, ensuring the rights

of sharecroppers through an amendment to the land reform legislation in 1979, and redistributing land to the landless and the poor peasantry. The Autonomous District Council (ADC) legislation – which aimed at democratic decentralisation and providing regional autonomy to tribal people – was passed in 1979. The tribal language Kokborok was included as one of the official languages of the state.

Tripura witnessed a spate of secessionist insurgency-related violence starting in the early 1980s, which continued into the 1990s and mid-2000s. Physical insecurity caused by insurgency was a major challenge in the state until the mid-2000s. However, by the late-2000s, a multi-pronged approach by the Left Front government led to a sharp reduction in insurgency-related violence. This approach included mass political campaigns, counter-insurgency measures, and developmental measures in tribal areas.

The return of peace led to the revival of developmental initiatives, and Tripura saw significant achievements in literacy, schooling, health, per capita income, and democratic decentralisation. The protection of tribal people's rights as well as unity along class lines between tribal and non-tribal people are the most significant highlights of Tripura's communist and democratic movement.

The Left Front was in power in Tripura from 1978 to 1988, and again from 1993 to 2018. It lost the state elections in 2018. On the one hand, it was difficult to realise middle-class aspirations while facing investment boycotts and the pressure of neoliberal policies pushed

by the central government. On the other hand, enormous amounts of money were pumped into Tripura by the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in order to spread misinformation through social media and other means. There were also violent attacks against the communists by the right-wing forces. Despite this electoral loss, the communists in Tripura remain strong and continue to fight repression unleashed by the BJP.

## *The Neoliberal Era*

In 1991, India formally entered the neoliberal era, though the increasing power of India's big capitalists and the country's drift towards the neoliberal path was evident even before. Communists fought tooth and nail against the government's efforts to privatise public industry, sell off public assets at low prices, and dilute labour rights. The collapse of the Soviet Union increased India's shift towards a more aggressive form of capitalism. The rise of rabid right-wing political forces that seek to turn India into a Hindu state came hand in hand with neoliberalism. These forces are led by the fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), with numerous affiliate organisations, including its main political-electoral arm, the BJP.

At the national level, the communist parties and other left parties supported two short-lived coalition governments dominated by regional parties during the late 1990s. The peak of the communists' influence in national politics in post-independence India came during 2004–2007. This was when the CPI(M), the CPI, and two other left parties, the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the All India Forward Bloc, supported a coalition government at the centre led by the Congress in order to keep the BJP out of power. This period saw several measures being enacted to provide succour to working people, including a rural employment guarantee scheme, the Right to Information Act (which improved transparency in governance), and the Forest Rights Act (which sought to protect the rights of tribes and other forest-dwellers to land and other resources). But

the neoliberal thrust was not reversed, and ultimately the Left parties withdrew their support for the government in 2008 over India moving closer to US imperialism by signing a nuclear deal with the United States.

The most crucial turning point, however, came in 2007 in West Bengal. The Left Front had won a landslide victory in the state assembly elections in 2006. But with neoliberalism gradually seeping into the economy, states began losing their autonomy. There was competition between states, whereby the states that protected labour rights lost out on investment. While successive central governments regularly discriminated against West Bengal with regard to public investments, private and foreign investment went to states that gave substantial tax concessions and exempted industries from labour laws. West Bengal suffered the most in this race to the bottom. The growth spur provided by land reforms had slowed and alternatives were needed.

While the Left Front government tried to attract private investment, its efforts to acquire land from the peasantry for industrialisation became controversial. This snowballed into a crisis, as the controversy was utilised by the opposition to turn sections of the peasantry against the Left Front government. This resulted in the electoral defeat of the communists in the 2011 state assembly elections, after which a full-scale campaign of terror and violence was unleashed by the right-wing which continued in the subsequent years. More than 250 cadres and supporters of the communist parties and other left parties were killed; thousands of left supporters were driven out of their homes and villages.

However, communist-led struggles are continuing in Bengal and the rest of the country. Communists have redoubled their efforts to organise the increasingly unorganised and contractual urban work force. They have been particularly successful in organising women workers in key areas, such as government schemes and garment factories. The efforts to organise women domestic workers and agricultural workers are coming to fruition. The lack of a permanent common workplace and the high amount of home-based work pose an organising challenge for communists. Despite this, they have mobilised successful actions by workers in these situations.

Crucial to these struggles is the fight against the caste system and caste discrimination, the violence of which has only increased in the recent decades. Communists have fought caste oppression since the inception of their movement in India, and that fight continues. This is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges for the communist movement in India. Several new communist-led platforms have been set up from the late 1990s onwards to carry forward the work to annihilate the caste system. These platforms have been waging struggles to end abhorrent social practices, to win land rights for oppressed castes, and to ensure affirmative action in education and jobs for marginalised communities. In these struggles, Indian communists are trying to build the broadest possible front against caste oppression and caste violence, against violence against women, and for the emancipation of all oppressed groups.

Apart from significant women's participation and leadership in workers' and peasants' struggles, the left-democratic women's movement has played a significant role in several battles to enact laws that

ensure citizen's rights for women, such as women's right to property and to divorce. Movements against gender-based violence have provided the backdrop to important amendments to anti-rape law. The fights against caste atrocities and honour killings (in which couples who choose to marry or have relationships defying caste norms are killed) have been notable in recent decades, in particular the struggles in Haryana waged by the communist-led All India Democratic Women's Association.

The rise of Hindutva forces (Hindutva is right-wing political Hinduism) and the communal mobilisations that they lead have posed serious challenges to the emancipatory struggles led by the communists and have created schisms in the working-class movement. As the RSS, BJP, and other fascistic formations channelled the Hindu working class's increasing disenchantment with neoliberal policies towards violent communal conflagrations, at times the communists have stood alone in their fight. While many political parties have cowered instead of confronting the frequently violent Hindutva fascists, the communists, in a broad coalition with other secular and progressive forces, have remained in the forefront defending the lives and rights of minorities in India.

In the neoliberal era, as US imperialism and the Indian bourgeoisie have co-opted various political actors in the name of identity politics and single-issue based non-governmental organisations, Indian communists continue to be at the forefront of all just struggles. Increasing repression by the state may have cowed the dissent and voices of many, but not the communists. The communist movement

recognises that the struggles ahead are difficult and have to be faced with spirit and hope.

Indian communism, 100 years old this year, is an unfinished project. It is fluid and mobile. It has been weakened by the rise of neoliberalism, but it recognises both its limitations and its opportunities. Only an honest look at the problems and the potential, absent rancour and bitterness, will show the way forward; this way forward is essential for the Indian people. Anything else will be barbaric.





Farmers in Sikar, Rajasthan conducting a mock funeral of the BJP government of the state of Rajasthan as part of a struggle led by the All India Kisan Sabha, 3 September 2017.

**All India Kisan Sabha**





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