

The Indian Socialists: Path and Problems

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The emergence of Socialist movement in India coincides with a quest for a revolution ushering in a new socio-political order enshrining economic and political freedom for the masses irrespective of religion, caste and gender. Organizationally, that movement now remains disintegrated, though the spirit of its ideals remains alive. This spirit, sometimes, manifests itself in the form of smaller outfits working at grassroots level in different regions of the country. They may not be of great political significance during present times but certainly, they have highlighted and brought to center stage the problems of agitating rural masses and backward regions. These efforts, nonetheless, inherited from the socialist movement of the past decades. Indian socialism is perhaps still rich in ideas but poor in organization and action.

The socialist movement in India developed and took an organized shape during the turbulent era of our national freedom struggle in the early 1930s. During this period socialism beckoned many a youth searching for an ideology. Two events of great historic importance provided the background for the rise and growth of the socialist movement. The first was the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia as observed by Acharya Narendra Deva that it deeply impressed many intellectuals and sensitive souls.¹ It also attacked every form of exploitation and the traditional institutions associated with the class rule. The second was the Civil Disobedience movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi which gave a weapon in the form of Satyagraha and non-violence in the hands of common men to challenge any authority. But at the same time, the disenchantment of young Congressmen with Gandhian strategy and leadership led to a lot of rethinking among them. They were critical of the Congress leadership and the way it was conducting the national struggle. Several young men who were together in various prisons during the civil disobedience movement started questioning the validity of Gandhi's method of struggle and his emphasis on non-violence and constructive action. They were also dissatisfied with the Karachi Congress resolution on fundamental rights and wanted to go further by forcing Congress

¹ Brahmanand(ed.), *Acharya Narendra Deva, Towards Socialist Society*, Delhi, 1979, p. 458.

leadership to adopt a programme that is socialist in action and objective.² They came to believe that a new orientation of the national movement had become necessary: a re-definition of its objectives and a revision of its methods.³ Nevertheless, the great significance of the Civil Disobedience movement was as Shashi Joshi argued that, “the masses who participated in it became the basis of the big shift towards the left.... The joint growth of the congress socialist party and the communists was largely possible as the cumulative result of the different levels of mass politicization and radicalization that ensued through the course of the Civil Disobedience movement.....”⁴ While discussing strategies and methods of struggle she has further argued that, “the politicization of the wider layers of the peasantry during the Civil Disobedience movement in turn created the basis for the success of the left wing in the late thirties.”⁵

The first socialist group to rise within the congress was in Bihar in 1931. It was Jayaprakash Narayan who initiated the process leading to the birth of Bihar Socialist Party with Abdul Bari as president and Ganga Sharan Sinha, Phulan Prasad Verma, Rahul Sankrityayan as Secretaries. Others associated with it included Ambika Kant Sinha, Rambriksha Benipuri, Ramnandan Mishra, B.P. Sinha and Baba Ramudar Das. The party had a constitution and programme of its own.

A strong socialist opinion existed in U.P. without a formal group, but Benares had one to its credit. Delhi had a group too. In February 1934, the Bombay presidency socialist group was formed. There was also the Punjab socialist party drawing inspiration from the socialist ideals of Lajpat Rai with Lala Feroz Chand as secretary. A group called Utkal Congress Socialist Karmi Sangh was formed in Orissa in February, 1933 with Naba Krushna Choudhary as its mentor.

² Draft Resolution passed by the first All India Congress Socialists Conference in its meeting held at Patna on 17th May 1934, Political Special. File No. 100/1934, p. 28, Bihar State Archives, Patna

³ Statement of the Central Executive Committee on the Congress Socialist Party's Nature, Task and Tactics, Executive Committee Meeting, Benares, 27 July 1935, Political Special. File No. 14/1936, p.15. This statement was adopted at the 2nd Annual Conference of the All India Congress Socialist Party (AICSP), Meerut, 20th January 1936.

⁴ Joshi, Shashi, *A History of Indian Communists: The Irrelevance of Leninism*, vol. 1, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 279-80.

⁵ Ibid., p. 296.

They decided to start *Sarathi*, the weekly organ of the Karmi Sangh. This was the first radical magazine in Orissa.⁶

It was on the initiative of Bihar Socialist Party that a decision was taken to bring various socialist groups together in a conference.⁷ This conference was held in Patna on 17th May 1934 under the chairmanship of Acharya Narendra Deva. Many socialist groups sent their representatives to the conference which was also attended by a large number of socialist-minded individuals who were not formally associated with any group. Acharya Narendra Deva's presidential address made it clear that it was their endeavor to influence the nationalist movement in the direction of socialism. To those critics of Indian socialist's attempts to reconcile nationalism and socialism and asking them to form themselves into an independent group outside the Congress and act independently of its policy, Narendra Deva's answer was that the socialists do not wish to isolate themselves from the great national movement against British imperialism which the Congress symbolized. He emphatically asserted that the latter with all its defects and shortcomings was "the greatest revolutionary force in the country."⁸ Acharya was deeply convinced that political independence was an inevitable stage on the way to socialism for a subject nation and further added that in the Indian conditions both the revolutions could be carried out simultaneously.⁹

The Patna Conference (1934) considered not only the immediate political issues but also the question of organization and programme. Although Narendra Deva thought it was premature to launch the party immediately, the conference opined that the time has come for the establishment of an All-India organization of socialists within the congress as reflected in resolution No. 5 of the conference.¹⁰ It was with this end in view that a drafting committee was constituted to prepare a draft programme and a constitution for an All India Congress Socialist Party. Further, Jayaprakash Narayan was appointed organizing secretary of the All India Congress Socialist Conference to organize provincial socialist groups where they did not exist on the basis of the

⁶ Dwivedy, Surendranath, *Quest for socialism: Fifty years of Struggle in India*, New Delhi Radiant, 1984, pp. 30-31.

⁷ Memo No. 4196-97 S.B. Bihar and Orissa (II), Special. Branch in Political. Special. File No. 100/1934, p. 25, Bihar State Archives, Patna.

⁸ Original Draft copy of the Presidential speech delivered on 17th May, 1934 at Patna, Political Special, File No. 100/1934, Bihar State Archives, pp. 59-60.

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Supplement to the Bihar and Orissa Police Abstract of Intelligence, Patna, June 1st, 1934 in Political. Special. File No. 100/1934, p. 27.

programme adopted by the drafting committee and to arrange for a national conference to form an All India Socialist party immediately prior to the next session of the Indian National Congress.

The Draft proposals for the formation of a Congress Socialist Party which was privately circulated amongst some people by the Bombay presidency socialist group defined the proposed party's object as "the establishment of an independent socialist state in India."¹¹ It was also enumerated that in order to further the said object, the Indian National Congress should adopt the programme of the party which called for the "organization of the masses for the purpose of preparing them for the fight for their economic and political freedom. The constitution of the AICSP as adopted in Bombay in October 1934 declared its object as the achievement of complete independence and the establishment of a socialist society."¹²

India in early 1930s provided fertile ground for the growth of socialist trends both in terms of leadership and action. The Great Depression, the collapse of the Civil Disobedience movement - all combined and led to the building of mass organizations of different sections of the people in which the socialists played a vital role. Bhagwan Josh justifies the study of the period 1934-41 as a separate period on the grounds that "these eight years were the years in which the forces of the left forged ahead to take a coherent shape."¹³ Once out of Jail, Nehru underlined the "primacy of the anti-imperialist struggle" and "the organic links between the perspective of nationalism and socialism."¹⁴ For the first time, Josh argues "socialism caught the imagination of the youth in a big way" and "this intervention of Nehru led the ideological foundation for the rise of left wing within the Congress... the élan of the ideology of socialism was on the ascendency. The national movement had entered a new phase- the phase of socialist 'thirties'."¹⁵ At this juncture certain fundamental questions were raised which dominated the thoughts of many youth who were committed to freedom in the form of removal of all economic inequalities. Nehru addressed

¹¹ Draft proposals for the formation of CSP privately circulated by Bombay presidency socialist group prior to the All India Congress Socialist Conference, October 21-22, 1934, Bombay.

¹² Constitution of AICSP as adopted in the All India Congress Socialist Conference.

¹³ Josh, Bhagwan, *A History of the Indian Communists: From United Front to the Left Front*, New Delhi, 2011, p. xxxii.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 65-66.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

meetings of these youth and stressed the appropriateness of socialism as the goal.”¹⁶ Jayaprakash Narayan was also thinking on similar lines and expressed his firm belief that most of the young men who were fighting for complete independence were doing so because they had a vision of a better, more just, more prosperous India.¹⁷

The socialist movement in India has passed through tumultuous years in its career. They remained inside the Indian National Congress for fourteen years (1934-48) and immensely contributed towards strengthening the struggle for national freedom by establishing a strong and integral relationship with it.¹⁸ Their role in the Quit India Movement earned them the appreciation of the masses and they emerged as the heroes of the anti-imperialist movement. However, the socialists paid a heavy price for their dogmatic understanding of reality.¹⁹ By coming out of the Congress in 1948 they committed their biggest mistake. They could have served better as a pressure group within the Congress and tried to influence its policies and programmes to realize the goals of socialism.

No doubt, the socialist movement failed but it is not without a significant role in Indian politics. Their contribution to the political and socio-economic history of the country cannot be ignored. They played an important role in widening the social base of the national movement. They also played a prominent role in bringing the youth of the country into it and thus injected fresh blood in the Congress and the national movement. The greatest achievement of the socialist movement was the inspiration it provided to the young generation, the intellectual training it imparted to thousands of young workers and, above all, the new moral values and idealism it inculcated in them.

¹⁶ Ibid,

¹⁷ Ibid.,

¹⁸ Chandra, Bipan, *Ideology and Politics in Modern India*, Har Anand, Delhi, 1994, p. 274.

¹⁹ Ibid.,

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