

Introduction to Damodaran

On 26 June, Indira Gandhi introduced a State of Emergency which led immediately to the arrest of several hundred opposition leaders and to the imposition of a draconian press censorship on the country's normally vigorous bourgeois press. Emboldened by the feeble response to these measures, Indira Gandhi induced the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Indian Parliament) not merely to ratify the State of Emergency but to abolish retroactively the electoral offences of which she had been found guilty on 11 June. A notable feature of Indira Gandhi's constitutional coup was the smoothness of its execution and the responsiveness of the state machine to the orders it was receiving. In fact the events following 26 June, however unexpected, had been well prepared by the whole preceding development and notably by a great expansion in the size and role of the state repressive apparatus. Although the international press was silent on the fact, there were already tens of thousands of political prisoners in Indian jails on 26 June. These had been jailed following the Naxalite revolts of the late sixties and early seventies, the attack on the CPM in West Bengal and the brutal suppression of the railway workers' strike in March 1974. The latter was indeed, in the words of the introduction to *Explosion in a Subcontinent*, 'an ominous further step towards establishing a Bonapartist régime in India'.¹ Moreover the failure of the Indian Left, and in particular the divided forces of Indian Communism, to wage an effective campaign

¹ *Explosion in a Subcontinent*, ed. Robin Blackburn, Penguin/NLR, London 1975.

against this wave of repression was to prove a green light for the present wholesale assault on democratic rights.

The immediate events that precipitated Indira Gandhi's coup were the judgment against her in the Allahabad court for electoral malpractices, and the defeat of Congress in the Gujarat elections earlier in June after a personal intervention by the Prime Minister. These events were exploited to the full by the motley opposition which joined together the communalist Jan Sangh, the Moraji Desai Congress and the reactionary mystagogue J. P. Narayan. Beneath these opposition forces was a surge of spontaneous social revolts against high prices, hoarding, smuggling and corruption. The demagoguery of the opposition was fed by the manifest failure of successive Congress administrations to galvanize Indian capitalism and enable it to offer some hope to the many millions of peoples of the subcontinent.² The repercussions of the world capitalist recession on the Indian economy have intensified the intractable problems confronted by India's rulers and have reduced the scope for open political competition between different representatives of the ruling class. But the relative weakness of Indian capitalism by no means implies that the Indian bourgeoisie is a weak or inconsiderable force. Indira Gandhi's bold move to acquire an unfettered leadership of this class reflects the narrowing options facing Indian capitalism and the political weakness of the worker and peasant masses, but not any lack of political initiative.³ The Indian ruling class is paying a minimal price for its failures because it faces no serious socialist antagonist, capable of mobilizing those masses against their oppressors and exploiters. The bourgeois opposition to Indira Gandhi was able to gain its momentum because of the passivity of the Left and its complicity with some of the worst aspects of the traditional order in India. Despite its present defeat this opposition still represents an alternative bourgeois combination should Indira Gandhi follow too closely the path of the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. By contrast, no section of the Left now presents such an alternative despite the considerable resources that have been at its disposal and despite the extremity of the economic and social crisis in India. Yet at the time of Independence Indian Communism was a mass political force, capable of challenging Congress dominance in a number of important areas. In the interview that follows K. Damodaran traces the historical development of the CPI and gives an account of the splits which were to overtake it in the sixties.

Damodaran became actively involved in anti-imperialist, nationalist politics in the late twenties and was imprisoned as a result. In prison he engaged in discussions with a wide range of Left militants, and soon

² For analysis of the impasse of Indian capitalism see the contributions to *Explosion in a Subcontinent*, op. cit. and also the important study by Brian Davey, *The Economic Development of India*, Nottingham 1975. However, the evident overall weakness of Indian capitalism should not lead to a denial of the relative autonomy of the Indian bourgeoisie and the measure of industrialization it has effected. For valuable research bearing out this latter point see *The Industrialisation of India* by G. K. Shirokov, Moscow 1973. This work has influenced the analysis of the Indian social formation made by K. Damodaran and other Indian Marxists.

³ For a detailed analysis of the consequences of the declaration of the State of Emergency see S. Bhagat 'Where is India Going?' *Inprecor*, 31 July 1975.

after his release he joined the CPI. He helped to found the Communist unit in Kerala together with E. M. S. Namboodiripad, A. K. Gopalan and others. By working inside the Congress Socialists, the Kerala Communists acquired a mass base in the state which was to become a stronghold of the CPI after Independence. In 1956 Damodaran was to become a member of the CPI National Council (the local equivalent of the Central Committee), on which he served for twelve years. He also represented the CPI for six years in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) in the late sixties. Damodaran was not only an important mass leader for the CPI in Kerala, but also a writer and playwright of some repute, whose agitprop dramas were extremely popular with audiences in the countryside and cities. In an article written in May 1974, Damodaran quoted the following passage from Marx: 'Proletarian revolutions constantly engage in self-criticism, and in repeated interruptions of their own course. They return to what has apparently been accomplished in order to begin the task again, with merciless thoroughness they mock the wretched aspect of their first attempts.' In this interview Damodaran is not merciless, but he nonetheless sheds a much needed and timely light on the failures of Indian Communism. Through the twists and turns of party policy the CPI sacrificed the development of the mass organizations and an independent proletarian line for the sake of short-lived adventures or coalitions with the most reactionary political forces.

In the early twenties the tiny groups of Indian Communists were encouraged to initiate a military struggle for liberation long before the pre-conditions for such a struggle were present. The Comintern under Lenin and Trotsky did not grasp the specific nature of the Indian social formation nor correctly assess the strength of the bourgeois nationalism of Congress. It was insistently maintained that Congress would not undertake a struggle against British rule. This error was to be greatly compounded in the Comintern Third Period, during which Indian Communists became completely isolated from the mainstream of the nationalist movement. Congress was denounced as being a vulgar tool of British Imperialism. The turn towards Popular Fronts inaugurated by the Seventh Congress of the Comintern was to witness the emergence of the CPI as a nationally organized force. In this period the CPI grew from no more than 150 members to nearly 5,000 members. With the outbreak of the Second World War the CPI first opposed any support for Britain and France and then, following the invasion of the Soviet Union, gave wholehearted allegiance to the war effort acting as a recruiting sergeant for the British Armed Forces just at the time when the Congress leadership was launching its 'Quit India' movement against British rule. Yet again the CPI was out of step with the development of the national movement. At the time of independence the CPI switched to support for both Congress and the Muslim League, endorsing the religious division of the sub-continent. In the late forties, after denouncing the Congress Government as a British puppet, the CPI embarked on a series of armed uprisings in areas where it had gained mass influence. The mid-fifties saw another sharp turn. Congress was hailed as a progressive anti-imperialist force and the party dedicated itself to acquiring the parliamentary seats that would, it was hoped, enable it to inflect Congress to the Left.

Damodaran argues that the eventual split in the CPI in the sixties, leading to the creation of the CPM, did not concern the basic question of whether the CPI should break with its parliamentary, class collaborationist strategy but rather the tactical question of which bourgeois allies were to be preferred in the pursuit of electoral advance. The CPI was prepared to give every political support to Congress hoping one day to achieve a formal Governmental coalition with it. It has continued to give the most servile support to Indira Gandhi, even after the suppression of the 1974 railway workers' strike and the qualitative turn to dictatorship of June 1975. Following the split with the CPI, the CPM displayed every readiness to ally itself with the most reactionary bourgeois opposition parties. During the most recent period, weakened by its setbacks in West Bengal, it has trailed along behind the campaign of Narayan. Following the imposition of the State of Emergency it proved incapable of mounting any resistance to Indira Gandhi. In their pursuit of different electoral combinations the two Communist Parties were prepared to split the mass organizations of the Indian working class and peasantry, and to facilitate an increasingly arrogant and arbitrary assertion of the power of the capitalist state. Meanwhile the 'Marxist-Leninist' groups which split from the CPM, allegedly on the grounds of its opportunism, have been scattered and defeated after a succession of terrorist adventures: some 'M-L' groups even allowed themselves to become instruments of Congress thuggery against the CPM.

Despite the courage and dedication of thousands of Communist militants, their best efforts have been continually squandered and falsified by the strategic conceptions of the leaders of Indian Communism. These conceptions led them repeatedly to misconstrue the nature of the state and the social formation in India, to subordinate themselves to the political agents of imperialism and capitalism, and to interrupt the development of the mass movement; occasional bouts of adventurism and terrorism only served to consolidate a fundamentally class collaborationist and electoralist strategy.⁴

This interview with Damodaran was conducted shortly before the declaration of the State of Emergency. Nothing that has happened subsequently does anything but confirm his bleak and pessimistic balance sheet of Indian Communism. Yet the necessary task of identifying the failures and mistakes of the past will assist the Indian Left to meet its historic responsibilities in the future. The reader will also discover that this personal memoir by an Indian Communist gives many insights into the development of the international movement of which he was a part. Despite his many disappointments, Damodaran still draws inspiration from the advances of the revolutionary movement elsewhere in the world and is confident that the forces accumulated in the past by Indian Communism could be re-grouped and recuperated by a genuinely revolutionary strategy in the sub-continent.

Tariq Ali

⁴ Cf the point made by Norman Geras, 'Rosa Luxemburg after 1905', *New Left Review* 89, p. 29.

Memoir of an Indian Communist

Why do you think the CPI took such a long time to establish itself? What was its early activity and its relations with the nationalist movement; could it be that the infamous 'Third Period' of the Comintern also seriously disoriented Indian communists by isolating them at a critical phase from the mainstream of the nationalist movement?

My personal experience in this period was restricted to Kerala and I will concentrate on that, but of course the line of march throughout the country was essentially the same. I joined the CPI when it was illegal. It had been banned in 1934 after the Bombay Strike wave, which included a general strike of the textile industry. As a result even the distribution of party literature was extremely uneven and the question of organized internal discussion did not arise. But you must also understand that the CPI was an extremely small organization nationally in that period. In fact the CPI as a national political force only began to develop in 1935–6 after the worst excesses of the 'Third Period'. The politics of the Comintern certainly played a not unimportant part in disorienting the

Communist groups which existed regionally in the twenties and early thirties. The Comintern leaders completely underestimated the relative *autonomy* of the Indian bourgeoisie and its political instrument, the Indian Congress. They went through a stage of equating the nationalist movement and imperialism. Kuusinen, Stalin's spokesman on colonial questions, and many writers in the *Inprecor* went so far as to say that the Indian National Congress was a counter-revolutionary force in the struggle against imperialism and the Congress Socialists were branded as 'social fascists'. The attacks on nationalist leaders in the late twenties and thirties certainly were couched in an ultra-Left rhetoric and were parroted by the different Communist groups which existed in India. However it is not sufficient simply to blame the Comintern: after all the Chinese party also suffered from the wrong advice of the Comintern, but they recovered and finally captured power.

So while not ignoring the importance of the subjective failures we have to look deeper and, when we do, we shall find that there was an objective basis for the existence of a strong and stable bourgeois democratic party like the Indian Congress. This was the development of an Indian bourgeoisie which was *not* a comprador bourgeoisie and which even in the heyday of the raj enjoyed a certain independence. Its interests clashed on many occasions with those of British imperialism. The Indian capitalists developed at an unusually rapid rate when Britain was tied down by inter-imperialist wars. The existence of this bourgeoisie side by side with a civil service and army that involved many Indians created the basis for the existence of a colonial state apparatus which succeeded in tying down the Congress to its structures and ensuring a smooth transition when the time for Independence came. So Indian communists confronted a unique economic and political structure which they never succeeded in analysing properly.

While the CPI was in fact properly established in 1934-5 its development was uneven. For instance the first communist group in Kerala was organized only in 1937 by five comrades including Namboodiripad, Krishna Pillai and myself. We decided that we should not openly call ourselves the Communist Party but win ourselves a base inside the Congress Socialists. I think that this was correct, but it did not happen nationally. Accordingly we disseminated Communist literature inside the Congress Socialist Party, which itself worked inside the Congress, as an organized grouping. Our influence inside the Kerala Congress was not negligible: Namboodiripad, A. K. Gopalan, Krishna Pillai and, later, myself were all recognized leaders of the Kerala Congress and we held office on the leading committees. Utilizing our position in the Congress we organized trade unions, peasants' organizations, students' unions, and associations of progressive and anti-imperialist writers. We organized a regular Communist Party in Kerala only at the end of 1939. It was our mass work coupled with the fact that we were identified with the nationalist aspirations of the people which undoubtedly played a significant role in ensuring that Kerala became one of the important strongholds of post-Independence communism.

When were you first arrested as a Communist?

In 1938. I was at that time a member of the party, but in the eyes of the

masses was still regarded as a nationalist agitator. What brought about my arrest on this occasion was a speech I made to a conference of Youth Leaguers in Trivandrum. I had been asked to preside over the meeting and in my opening speech I mounted a diatribe against imperialism: I attacked British imperialism and the Maharajah of Travancore as embodying the oppression which was being meted out by British imperialism. The right-wing leaders of the State Congress had been saying that the Maharajah was a great man and it was only his local satraps who were to blame and were misleading him. I attacked this absurd concept head-on and utilized the experiences of the French and Russian revolutions, observing that their method of dealing with the monarchy was rather more effective than that of the Congress leaders! I also explained to the meeting the necessity of involving the peasants and workers in the struggle and concluded with the slogan of 'Inqilab Zindabad' (Long Live Revolution) which was joyfully taken up by the whole meeting. That same day there were anti-imperialist demonstrations and clashes with the police in Trivandrum. The next morning I was naturally arrested, together with the Youth League leaders. We spent two or three months in prison and were then released. From then on prison became a regular part of my existence.

Could you briefly describe the impact of developments which were taking place in the Soviet Union on Indian communism. After all the period we are discussing was crucial: virtually the entire leadership of the Bolsheviks at the time of the Revolution were physically eliminated by Stalinist terror as the prelude to a bureaucratic dictatorship which established its total monopoly over all spheres of public life. What was the impact of all this on Indian Communists?

As far as I am concerned I can speak mainly about Kerala. I was not part of the All-India party apparatus at that time and, as I have already explained, objective conditions—leave alone subjective ones—did not permit horizontal contact with party members in other parts of the country. I joined the party just before the theses of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, the Dimitrov theses on the Popular Front strategy. It was after the Seventh Congress that Stalin became well-known in India in the sense that he became the 'Great Leader'. In fact the theses did coincide—better late than never—with the need for us to have a united front with the Congress against the British. The sectarian ultra-leftism of the 1929–34 period had isolated us and this was seen as an attempt to correct the mistakes. For us it was a step in the right direction. Not so much in Kerala, but in Bombay and Calcutta. After all in Kerala there was no communist party in the early thirties. When people ask me why the CPI became so strong in non-industrialized Kerala as compared to Bombay, I reply that the main reason is that there was no CPI in Kerala in the 1930–33 period and so it was possible to start anew. Most of the Communist leaders in Kerala today were totally immersed in the Civil Disobedience movement launched by the Congress in 1930–32. It explains how they won the support of the masses and were able to shatter the Congress monopoly in a later phase.

But to answer your main question: you must understand that the Communists in India were not seriously educated in Marxism. To give

you one example: Lenin's theses on the colonial question were not known to Indian Communists till the end of the fifties. The Seventh Congress line of Anti-Imperialist United Front in India was considered not as a break from the past but a continuation of the Sixth Congress line and was explained as a tactical change necessitated by the changes in the national and international situation. You may consider it strange that the disastrous colonial theses of the Sixth Congress were translated into Malayalam and other Indian languages precisely in this period. But in practice the United Front was a break from the left-sectarian line. The new line implemented by the Party under the able leadership of P. C. Joshi helped us to advance rapidly. The CPI for the first time became a political force with considerable influence in the Congress, among the Congress Socialists and in the mass movements. The rival Trade Unions were united into a single All India Trade Union Congress in which the CPI became the leading force. The All-India Kisan Sabha, the All India Students' Federation and the All-India Progressive Writers' Association came into existence. The Communists played an important role in uniting them and leading their struggles. National unity against Imperialism, Left unity to counter the compromising and anti-struggle policies of the right wing, socialist unity to strengthen Left unity, the CPI as the basis of socialist unity, mass organizations and mass struggles to build and strengthen the united anti-imperialist front—these were the watchwords and positive elements in the new line. This line certainly brought results and helped to build and strengthen an All India Communist Party. The membership of the Party increased from about 150 in 1934 to more than 3,000 in 1939 and its influence multiplied at an even more rapid rate. But these were also the years of Stalinism.

We were told that Stalin was the 'great teacher', the 'guiding star' who was building socialism in the USSR and the leader of world socialism. And being both new to communism and relatively unschooled in Marxism and Leninism I accepted what I was told. There is a tradition in Indian politics of political gurus enlightening the masses and this tradition suited Stalinism completely. Hence we could accept anything and everything that we were told by the party elders who themselves were dependent for their information exclusively on Moscow. This was the atmosphere in which I was brought up as a communist. However, there were some comrades who were extremely perturbed at the information on the massacres which was coming out of Moscow. Philip Spratt, one of the communists sent to help build the CPI from Britain, became so demoralized and disillusioned with Stalinism that he abandoned communism altogether and became a liberal humanist and towards the end of his life an anti-communist. He was an excellent comrade who played an invaluable role in helping us at an early stage. The Congress left wing was also extremely critical of the purges taking place in Moscow and some of their leaders were extremely disgusted by the propaganda contained in the CPI front journal *National Front*, which depicted Trotsky as a poisonous cobra and an agent of Fascism. Even Nehru, who was one of the first Congressmen who popularized the Russian Revolution and Soviet achievements, expressed his disapproval of the purges in 1938. But for us, communists, in those days Trotskyism and fascism were the same. I must confess to you that I also

believed that Bukharin, Zinoviev, Radek and other victims of Stalinist purges were enemies of socialism, wreckers and spies working in the interest of imperialism and fascism. In discussions with independent minded socialists I defended Stalin vigorously. I think the main reason for this was that we identified ourselves completely with the Soviet Union, which was then under constant attack by British imperialists and by the Congress right wing. Every strike was supposed to have been inspired by Moscow, every street demonstration was supposed to be led by agitators in the pay of Moscow. We defended the Soviet Union against these people, though, of course, completely uncritically. Hence, when the Soviet Union was attacked from the Left we used the same arguments against these critics as well. Looking back on that period I feel that all this was a big tragedy not just for us, but for the whole communist movement. Can you imagine: Trotsky had vehemently opposed Fascism and had warned the German communists against the trap they were falling into and this same Trotsky was labelled by us and thousands of others as a fascist. We sincerely believed that in defending Stalinism we were defending the Russian Revolution. I remember writing articles defending Stalin in the Malayalam press in Kerala after Trotsky's assassination and utilizing that book 'The Great Conspiracy' to get some factual material or what I genuinely believed to be the truth. The official history of the CPSU which was published at the end of the thirties reinforced my faith in Stalin. This book was first translated and published illegally in Malayalam in 1941 and soon became a text book of Marxism for our cadres. The study classes I conducted in jail for our comrades were very much coloured by Stalinism. In fact we identified Stalinism with Marxism-Leninism.

What was the first reaction of the CPI towards the war and in what circumstances did that change. One of your former comrades, the CPM leader A. K. Gopalan, argues in his book that the CPI became a mass party during the war. Is this correct?

The initial response of our party was to oppose the war and even before 1939 we were pressuring the Congress to step up the struggle against British imperialism. It was the Congress which hesitated immediately the war began. I remember at the Poona session of the All India Congress Committee in 1940, I moved an amendment to the main resolution moved by Gandhi, and was supported, incidentally, by Jawaharlal Nehru. Opposing Gandhi's line I called for the start of a new mass struggle against the British. This was the line of the CPI at that stage. Soon after that I was arrested and remained in prison till the end of the war. It is necessary to explain why I was kept in prison when most other communists were released to implement the 'Peoples' War' policy. Immediately on the outbreak of war, and in the year that followed, communists had been arrested in large numbers. In prison controversies started on whether or not our line was correct. Then the Soviet Union was invaded by the Nazi armies. Our controversies became ever more heated. Professor K. B. Krishna who was with us in jail wrote a set of theses developing the 'Peoples' War' line and advocating that now everything had changed and that communists should drop their anti-imperialist activities and their opposition to war. I wrote a set of counter-theses arguing that while the existence of the Soviet Union

was vital, nonetheless the best way to help the Russian comrades was *not* by ceasing all anti-imperialist activity, but on the contrary by stepping it up. Our enemy remained British imperialism. The majority of communists inside prison supported my line and only a tiny minority was in favour of the 'Peoples' War' theses. Then some months later we heard that the British party had changed its line and that Moscow was in favour of the change. Outside the jail, the party secretary P. C. Joshi, who was initially one of the strongest opponents of the 'Peoples' War' line, had to change his line and start using his oratorical skills to convince party members, and also the masses, of the importance of helping the war effort. After the change of line most of the pro-war communists were released, but some, including myself, were kept in prison. British intelligence knew perfectly well who to release and who to keep inside.

It seems the atmosphere in jail, as far as discussion and debates within the CP were concerned, was considerably more democratic than it was outside. From what you have said it would appear that all CP members, regardless of hierarchy, were involved in these discussions and that on some subjects there were votes taken.

Yes that is true, but the debate inside prison did have its limits. As long as the discussion did not directly counter the party line it took place. For instance, even on the war issue, when a circular from the party leadership arrived to our party Jail Committee instructing us to carry out the pro-war line I automatically dropped my positions and was mocked by the others who said 'You considered yourself one of the party theoreticians, but you were wrong!' This incident typifies how we were trained as communists. I made a self-criticism and admitted I was wrong. I had to do so because the party was always right, but doubts persisted and in later years I was reassured that I had been correct. Today even the leaders of both the CPI and the CPM are forced to admit that 'some mistakes were made'. That phrase is meant to explain everything. However, in spite of the self-criticism the British did not release me from prison. It is possible that their intelligence services decided that my self-criticism was far too shallow. The official charge-sheet handed to me in prison gave as one reason for my continued detention the fact that I had opposed the line of the 'People's War'. This was written black on white on my charge sheet! Of course the CP leadership made numerous representations to the British authorities demanding our release, but to no avail. I was not released till October 1945.

So when the Congress launched the 'Quit India' movement in August 1942, you were still in prison. Was there much resentment towards the CPI on the part of the hordes of Congress volunteers and leaders who filled the jails in the wake of that movement?

There is a view developed by some of the apologists for the 'Peoples' War' line which argues that the CPI gained a lot of support as a consequence of 'swimming against the stream'. I do not subscribe to this view. Of course the party took advantage of legality granted to it by British imperialism to gain new members and increase its trade-union strength, but the point is that it was swimming against the stream of the mass movement and was to all intents and purposes considered an ally

of British imperialism. It became respectable to be a communist. Many young communists joined the British army to go and 'defend the Soviet Union' in Italy and North Africa. Some of them rapidly shed their 'communism' and stayed in the army even after the war—and not to do clandestine work! It is true that the membership of the Party increased from about 4,500 in July 1942 to well over 15,500 in May 1943 at the time of the First Party Congress. Membership of the mass organizations also increased. But most of these new members had no experience of any militant mass struggle or police repression but only the peaceful campaigns conducted by the Party to 'grow more food', 'increase production', 'release national leaders', 'form a national government' and 'defend the motherland' from the Japanese invasion which never came. Strikes were denounced as sabotage. The party members also conducted social welfare operations to save the victims of the Bengal Famine of 1943. They organized medical aid for the victims of the smallpox and cholera epidemics. Of course, even this social work paid dividends in India, where there is a terrible disregard for loss of life. But we failed in our basic task, namely, to explain the roots of all the problems which confronted the masses.

On the other side, the growth of the Congress and its influence after the 'Quit India' struggle of August 1942 was phenomenal. Millions of men and women, especially the youth, were attracted and radicalized by the struggle, which was considered as a revolution against imperialism. True, we campaigned for the release of the arrested Congress leaders and the formation of a provisional national government to conduct the Peoples' War. But at the same time we branded the Congress Socialists, Bose's followers and other radicals who braved arrests and police repression as fifth columnists and saboteurs. We appealed to Gandhi and other Congress leaders to condemn the violence indulged in by these people. After their release not only Nehru but also the apostles of non-violence, instead of condemning them, praised them as real anti-imperialist patriots—Subhas Bose, Jayaprakash Narain, Aruna Asaf Ali and even obscure figures like Colonel Lakshmi emerged as national heroes and heroines.

In reality the CPI was isolated from the mainstream of the nationalist movement for the second time within a decade. In my view the party's policy virtually delivered the entire anti-imperialist movement to the Congress and the Indian bourgeoisie on a platter. At the time, if the CPI had adopted a correct position the possibility existed of winning over a sizeable and influential section of the Congress to communism. In the 1936–42 period Jawaharlal Nehru himself went through his most radical phase and there were numerous leftward-moving currents (such as the Congress Socialists and Subhas Bose's followers) within the Congress. On my release from prison I experienced the wrath of the left-wing nationalists who used to chant 'Down with supporters of British imperialism' at our meetings. So swimming against the stream when the stream was flowing in the right direction resulted in drowning the possibility of genuine independence and a socialist transformation. We were outmanoeuvred and outflanked by the Indian bourgeoisie.

If the party recovered some ground it was due largely to the militant

strike wave which developed immediately after the Second World War in the 1946–7 period and into which we threw ourselves, though our political line was still faulty. We supported, for example, the creation of the confessional state of Pakistan. In Bombay it was the CPI which mobilized support for the naval mutineers of 1946 only to find that our political line of supporting Congress-Muslim League unity hampered any real solidarity as the naval mutiny was broken not so much by the British as by the Congress and League leaders. They united temporarily to confront this new threat on their left flank which was uncomfortably similar to some of the events of the Russian Revolution. A number of us, including myself, were arrested once again for fomenting class struggles and we were released only on 13 August 1947, a bare twenty-four hours before Independence.

What was the logic behind the notorious Ranadive theses which drove the CPI on an ultra-left trajectory in the period after Independence?

I think we have to carefully distinguish a number of interrelated factors. There is no doubt that the theses drafted by Ranadive and adopted by the Second Congress in Calcutta in 1948 were ultra-left, but the criticisms made of them in the late fifties and even today by many communists and leftist Congressmen have a somewhat hollow ring as they are made from within a reformist problematic.

After the transfer of power there was an anticipatory outbreak of struggles in many parts of the country: these struggles had a dual nature. They both celebrated the transfer of power *to the Congress* and also expected the Congress to carry out all its radical promises. Similar struggles had greeted the election of provincial Congress governments in 1937 while the British were still in India. What these struggles tell us is that there is a link between important victories within the arena of bourgeois politics and the extra-parliamentary mass movement. There was also the struggle in Telengana (Hyderabad) which had begun before Independence and which was being waged against the Nizam of Hyderabad, his administration and their sponsored landlords in the countryside around Hyderabad. Even here the intervention of the Indian army changed the situation as it effectively removed the Nizam and at the same time blocked the development of the left.

The post-Independence upsurge involved workers, peasants, students and teachers. Many left-wing Congress supporters participated in these struggles for more trade-union rights, for the abolition of landlordism and for more freedoms; their character was essentially one of pressuring the Congress to move left. If the CPI had developed a correct strategy based on an analysis of Indian conditions in the preceding years, it would have been able to play a vital role in these struggles, giving them a lead. In that eventuality the Ranadive theses would have been misplaced but would have had a greater resonance. However, given the twists and turns of the CPI, the ultra-leftism of the 1948 Congress proved to be disastrous. The masses were not prepared to overthrow the Nehru government. On the contrary large sections of them identified with it, and the CPI slogan: 'This Independence is a Fake Independence' merely succeeded in isolating the party. The armed struggle which was

launched together with this slogan led to the deaths of many cadres and imprisonment and torture of others throughout the sub-continent. The analysis of the Nehru government as a comprador stooge government of imperialism was another mistake, as it implied that there was no difference between the colonial British administration and the post-colonial Nehru government. As is now commonly accepted by Marxists, the Indian ruling class was never a comprador class in the real sense of the word. It enjoyed a relative autonomy even during the colonial occupation. To argue that it was a comprador class after Independence was not only ultra-left in the sense that it underpinned a wrong strategic line, it also demonstrated the theoretical inadequacy of Indian communism. Many of the themes of that period were taken up again in the late sixties by the Maoist rebels in Naxalbari and other parts of India and we know with what disastrous consequences. Apart from the fact that hundreds of young people were killed, thousands tortured and the movement went from setback to setback, we still have its legacy in the shape of thousands of political prisoners imprisoned by the Indian ruling class. The tragedy here being that the prisoners are virtually bereft of any mass support.

To return to 1948: a whole number of communists, including myself, were arrested once again and it was in prison that a number of debates on the Ranadive theses were started. There was a great deal of dissatisfaction with the new line. The trade-union comrades were becoming increasingly hostile to the party leadership. The party leadership had issued a call for a national railway strike which had completely flopped. It had only succeeded in identifying the communist supporters in the railway union and many of them were arrested. Then the party leaders said that the communists who were the leaders of the union were revisionists and reformists and that is why the railway strike did not take place. But even this debate rapidly evolved in a particular fashion. There was no effort whatsoever to analyse the conditions which existed in India. It became a session of 'Stalin said . . .' to which the opponents in the discussion would respond 'But Mao said the opposite . ..'. So the debate itself was largely sterile. Accordingly the result of all these disputes was not to be decided by the party congress after a discussion throughout the party and the preparation of a balance sheet of the Ranadive line. In the best traditions of Stalinism, the party leadership decided to send a delegation to Moscow to meet Stalin. Four leaders were selected for this unique honour: Ajoy Ghosh, Rajeshwar Rao, S. A. Dange and Basava Punniiah. Ranadive was eclipsed. They returned with a new tactical line and a new draft programme which were adopted by a special conference of the Party held in Calcutta in October 1951. The new line formulated under the direct guidance of Stalin, Molotov and Suslov declared that the Congress Government was installed by the consent of the British imperialists, that the colonial set-up still prevailed in India, that imperialists now covered their rule by the mantle of the Congress government which was completely subservient to imperialism, and that therefore the immediate task of the Communist party was to overthrow the Indian State and to replace it by a Peoples' Democratic State. Thus four years after the transfer of power, Stalin and other leaders of the Soviet Union considered India as a colonial country under British imperialism. Not surprisingly the

Party Conference approved the new line, especially because it had the blessings of the 'greatest Marxist-Leninist and the leader of world revolution'. This was the thinking of the majority of our comrades at least until 1956. I, too, subscribed to this absurd view for some time, but soon doubts arose and I began to argue that India was politically free.

In practice, however, there was a new development. Along with the adoption of the new programme in 1951 the Party decided to participate in the General Election which was fast approaching. While on its own this was correct, the policies adopted by the Party after the elections were a more revealing indication of the turn which had been made. From ultra-leftism the Party had now embarked on a course which can only be categorized as parliamentary cretinism. The Election Manifesto as well as the new programme of 1951 stated that socialism was not the immediate aim of the Party as India was still a backward colonial country. The immediate task was the replacement of the anti-democratic and anti-popular Nehru Government by a government of People's Democracy, on the basis of a coalition of all anti-imperialists and anti-feudal parties and forces. The word 'class' was replaced by the word 'Party' and the word 'state' was replaced by the word 'government'. They were not merely semantic changes. From 1948-51 the Party had stated that its aim was the setting up of a People's Democratic *State*, which was the starting point of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Leaving aside the ambiguities and evasions contained in the formula of 'People's Democracy', the aim was nonetheless clear. The Third Congress of the Party at Madurai stressed that the central task of the Party was the struggle to replace the Congress government with a 'People's government of Democratic Unity'. And here quite clearly 'people's democracy' was not a synonym for dictatorship of the proletariat. It was conceived as an alliance of the CPI and the anti-Congress 'democratic' parties. The aim of the Party became to acquire parliamentary majority and collect enough allies to form Governments. In its different guises this remains the policy of the CPI and the CPI(M).

Could you explain why, despite all its sectarian mistakes, the CPI did so well in the 1951 general election. It had suffered repression, it was isolated from the anti-imperialist forces, it had made only a last-minute decision, obviously correct, to participate in the elections.

I think we were all surprised by the election results. We got about twenty-six or twenty-seven seats in parliament, became the largest party after the Congress and the main focus of opposition to the government. In some cases our candidates got more votes than even Nehru and overnight a whole number of comrades who had only recently been underground or in prison became members of parliament or of provincial assemblies. I think the main reason for this success was not that the people who voted for us thought that our sectarian line was correct. The major factor was that the party cadres were embedded in the mass movement. They worked in the trade unions and the peasants' organizations and many of them were respected for their honesty and courage. Thus the vote for the CPI in the 1951 election was a straightforward class vote and it revealed the potentialities which

existed. The fact that these were not realized is shown on one level in the representation of the party inside parliament today, which is roughly the same as in 1951.

After the turn towards parliamentarianism was there any discussion within the party on what extra-parliamentary tactics should be adopted? Surely it would be difficult simply to switch off the involvement of party members in the mass struggles.

Yes, there were discussions on party committees. The Soviet Union had, after the Korean War, embarked once again on a policy of peace and collaboration with capitalist powers, which Khrushchev was to later theorize as 'peaceful co-existence'. Both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China began to praise the government of India for its 'progressive' policies, especially its foreign policy based on non-alignment. During their visits to India, Khrushchev and Chou En-lai attracted huge crowds. Nehru became one of the architects of the 'Bandung Spirit'. It was against this background that the debate in our party continued. Is India really free or still subservient to British imperialism? Who do we ally ourselves with in the political arena? I remember the debates we had in the Malabar Provincial Committee of the CPI of which I was the secretary, and in the pre-Congress discussion in the Malabar Conference of the Party. Some wanted a Congress-Communist coalition government, others argued for an anti-Congress front and concentrated their fire on the INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress) which was under the leadership of the Congress. Both conceived of the problem as essentially one of winning elections. What these comrades did not realize was that by attempting to unite the class for struggle against its oppressors we would at the same time have weakened the Congress electorally. I, therefore, disagreed with both these lines. My position at that time was for the CPI to have, first of all, a mass line for the struggles ahead. We should conceive of the struggle basically as one between classes and not parties. Accordingly we should attempt united actions between the AITUC and the INTUC and other trade unions against the capitalists with the aim of uniting the working class and other mass organizations which had been disrupted in the immediate postwar period. I argued that on the basis of class unity we should attempt to unite all progressive sections of the people, including Congress supporters, for the implementation of land reforms, for workers' rights, for more democratic liberties, for a firm anti-imperialist foreign policy, etc. and, through these struggles, wean away the masses from bourgeois influence and build the hegemony of the working class. The political resolution moved by me on the above basis was passed by a majority in the Malabar Party Conference.

The Fourth Congress of the Party was held in 1956 at Palghat in Kerala. The emphasis of the majority was on an anti-Congress Front. This well suited their theory that the Indian bourgeoisie was subservient to British finance capital. P. C. Joshi, Bhawani Sen, myself and a few others actually distributed an alternative resolution to the official one which Joshi moved on our behalf. Our resolution pointed out that the Congress government was not subservient to imperialism

although it occasionally made compromises, that it served primarily the sectional interests of the bourgeoisie and not of the common people, that all the acute problems that plagued our people arose because of the bourgeois leadership of the country and that therefore the real remedy lay in establishing proletarian leadership in completing the bourgeois democratic revolution. It called upon the different trade unions like the AITUC, INTUC, HMS and UTOC to merge themselves into a single, united trade-union centre. It called for the united mass organizations to intervene to mould the Second Five Year Plan in their own and the country's true interests. It stressed the need of building a United National Democratic Front as a powerful mass movement to fuse together the masses both within the Congress and outside through struggles against the remnants of imperialism and feudalism and against the reactionary policies of the right wing. We thought that such a united democratic front was the means to build the hegemony of the proletariat. Our resolution was defeated but one-fourth of the delegates supported us. Some of the amendments moved on our behalf were incorporated into the official resolution with the result that it was later interpreted in different ways.

What was the direct impact of the 20th Party Congress of the CPSU at the CPI congress? Was it discussed at all?

Yes, certainly. A resolution was submitted to our Congress on the changes in the Soviet Union. It approved the general drift of Khrushchev's speech, but demanded more discussion on the subjects he had raised. There was, however, not a full discussion on this either at the Party Congress or after. The reason for insisting on further discussion was because most comrades were not convinced of the correctness of the attack on Stalin. I myself began to rethink radically a whole number of questions after 1956. I wanted to defend Khrushchev for his attack on Stalin even though I had been a staunch Stalinist up till that time. For two or three nights after the 20th Party Congress I could not sleep. A man we had been taught to worship, the idol of our world movement, had been attacked and by his own former comrades. Even after reading Khrushchev's secret report I remained in a state of shell shock; I could not believe it for some time, but after re-reading and thinking I came to the conclusion that Khrushchev was correct and I began to defend him against the supporters of Stalin. It was for Khrushchev's attack on Stalin that a number of comrades began attacking him as a revisionist, because his other theses were not too different to Stalin's own practice.

It was at the 1956 Party Congress that I was elected to the highest body of the party, its National Council. Before that I had worked exclusively at the provincial level and concentrated on building the party in Kerala.

Not long after your Fourth Party Congress, the CPI won a tremendous victory in the provincial elections in Kerala, emerging as the largest party in the legislature. Its leader E. M. S. Namboodiripad formed the first ever Communist government in India. The election clearly showed that the party had mass support in the province and it also struck a blow against the dominant cold war ideology

of the time. However, what in your view was the real impact of this victory both on the mass movement and on the future evolution of the CPI?

Soon after the formation of the Communist government, there was a heated discussion within the leadership of the Kerala CP on the nature of the new government. The dominant view, held by the central leaders including Namboodiripad, was that the workers had captured power in Kerala by peaceful means, by winning a majority in the elections, and that Kerala would become the best example of the peaceful road to socialism. It was the first time that this had happened anywhere in the world and it showed the way to the future for comrades throughout the world. This was the initial reaction of the leadership.

I did not agree with this view. I argued that the state remained a capitalist state despite the Communist victory and that it would be wrong to spread illusions to the contrary. I was supported by a small number of comrades. Ajoy Ghosh the Party secretary was sent from Delhi to discuss with the Kerala leadership to try and solve the dispute. Both views were put to him. I spoke for the minority and argued that we were exercising governmental power in a province, but that the state both provincially and nationally remained capitalist and that the main problem which confronted us was how to use this situation in order to strengthen the Party and the mass movement. In other words the working class had not come to power. E.M.S. put forward the majority view and after he had finished Ajoy Ghosh waved his finger at me and asked: 'You mean to say that E. M. S. Namboodiripad is bourgeois? Is he not a representative of the working class?' and much else along the same lines. Needless to say that was not what I had meant. The question was whether the state was bourgeois or not. Namboodiripad was only the Chief Minister of a Provincial Government. Ghosh backed the majority and that was that. I held my views, but all opposition ceased. It was only after the Kerala government had been dismissed that Namboodiripad wrote an article in *Communist*, which was then the theoretical organ of the Kerala unit of the CPI, in which he argued that the state had not been a workers' state. If this wisdom had dawned on him earlier it is possible that the situation would have been entirely different, as the Party would have given primacy to the extra-parliamentary mass struggle which had swept it to power. But Kerala left within the CPI leaders an overwhelming desire to win power and form ministries through electoral means. We can still see it in both the segments of what used to be the CPI. Alliances are made not on the basis of principle, but to get government office.

The impact of the victory on the masses was tremendous. Immediately after the victory the workers and poor peasants, in the main, were jubilant. They felt very deeply that the new government would satisfy their demands. There was a tremendous feeling of pride and strength in the working class. I remember hearing poor, illiterate workers telling policemen on the streets: 'Now you daren't attack us because our government is in power. Namboodiripad is our leader. We are ruling.' This was not an uncommon view. The reserves of goodwill which existed for the government were considerable. Amongst the poor peasants, sections of the students and teachers there was also a feeling

of joy, which increased when they saw how discomfiting the victory was for the landlords, the capitalists and for reactionaries in general. In the first weeks after the election the CP ministers made very radical speeches, constantly stressing their support for the struggle of the workers.

But these promises were in the main, restricted to speeches. Nambudiripad and his Ministers discovered fairly quickly that the civil service was a powerful entity and that the Chief Secretary, the top civil servant in the province, was functioning on orders from the Centre and not from the provincial Chief Minister. The same went for the police and furthermore no laws could be passed without the sanction of the Centre. So even as far as inaugurating a number of *reforms* was concerned the CP ministry found itself powerless. As it had no other real perspectives it found itself in a blind alley. Nothing radically new happened and after a while the novelty of having a communist government began to wear off. In some cases jubilation turned to passivity and in others to open and bitter disillusionment.

An important test for the new government arose a few months after they had been elected. Workers in a factory near Quilon, a town close to the capital city of Trivandrum, went on strike. The union in that factory was under the leadership of the RSP (Revolutionary Socialist Party). The strike was not against the government, but against the employer in that particular factory. It was a typical trade-union struggle. I remember vividly how the situation developed. We were sitting at a meeting of the State Council of the CPI (which consisted of about sixty comrades) when news was brought to us that three workers on strike had been shot dead by the police. We were stunned. Workers had been shot dead by the police while the Communists were in office. The immediate response of *all* the comrades present was to condemn the firing, institute an immediate enquiry, give compensation to the bereaved families, publicly apologize to the workers on strike and give a public assurance that such a thing would never happen again while we were in government. This was our instinctive class response. But a discussion started which lasted for two hours and at the end of it the decisions taken were completely different to our initial response. In my view the whole business was unjustifiable, but it is necessary to understand the context of the time.

The reactionary groups and parties had started a campaign against us under the demagogic slogan of 'Join the Liberation Struggle Against Communist Rule'. They had begun to exploit our weaknesses. The movement was spearheaded by the Roman Catholic priests (as you know Kerala has a significant Catholic population) and the Nair Communalists. But all those opposed to the CPI joined them including the right and left social democrats (the Socialist Party and the RSP) and the movement was beginning to gather mass support. It was in this context that the police firing took place. The logic of the comrades who advocated changing the initial position on the firing went something like this: if we attack the police, there will be a serious decline in their morale; if there is a serious decline in their morale the anti-communist movement will be strengthened; if the anti-communist movement is

strengthened our government will be overthrown; if our government is overthrown it will be a tremendous blow against the communist movement. The final resolution passed by the party defended the police action. It was then decided that someone must go to the spot to explain our point of view, attack the RSP and defend the police action. I was supposed to be one of the party's effective Malayalam orators and I was asked to go and speak on behalf of the Kerala CP. My response was to refuse and maintain that I had been unable to digest the decision taken by the Council and therefore I could not defend it. I was then formally instructed by the party leadership to go and defend the party. I went. I spoke for about an hour and a half and it was pure demagoguery. I blamed the deaths of the three workers on the irresponsibility of the RSP and asked them to publicly explain why they had led these workers to be shot. I made vicious attacks on the strike leaders. That night when I returned home I really felt sick inside. I could not sleep. I kept thinking that I should have refused to defend the party and I felt that I was going mad. I shouted at my wife. Instead of having shouted and hurled abuse at the party leaders, who had put me in such a situation, I took it out on my wife. The next day I was asked to speak at three different places and make the same speech. This time I refused pointblank and my refusal was accepted.

While the firing obviously had a traumatic effect on a number of party members such as yourself, did it also have a lasting effect on the working class?

Obviously it weakened the government and dented its mass support, but a significant section of our supporters remained solid despite the Quilon incidents. Of course the reactionaries increased their support, but, even at that stage, if the CPI leaders had understood the dialectical interrelationship between parliamentary and mass work and understood that the former must always be subordinated to the needs of the struggle we would have maintained our strength and probably increased it tenfold. In the process we would have been dismissed from office, as we were in any case, but we would have been in an immeasurably stronger situation and we could have educated the masses in the limitations of bourgeois democracy. Real revolutionary consciousness could have been developed. None of this was done and at the same time Namboodiripad made speeches predicting a civil war, which flowed logically from his view that the working class had taken the power. These speeches were then used by the Congress leadership to further attack and weaken the government. It soon became obvious from press reports and statements by Congress leaders that the Centre was considering the imposition of President's Rule and the dissolution of the government. The growth of the reactionary-led mass movement within Kerala was also reaching its peak. It soon became difficult for CP leaders to go anywhere without being stoned and this included myself. It was at this time that Nehru decided to visit Kerala and see the situation for himself. He was besieged by petitioners demanding the immediate dismissal of the government. Of course he also met us. He had a number of separate meetings with the government ministers and a delegation of the state committee of the CP. I was one of the members of this delegation. I remember in his discussions with us the first question he asked us was: 'How did you manage to so wonderfully isolate

yourself from the people in such a short space of time?' He then suggested that the communist government could continue on the condition that there would be new elections in order to let the electorate decide. The state committee convened a special session to discuss Nehru's proposal and on Namboodiripad's insistence decided to reject the proposal. We were prepared to accept new elections only in the event that they were held in all the other provinces! I felt even then that it was a wrong decision. We should have accepted Nehru's proposal, won ourselves a breathing space and then entered into battle with the opposition, which in any case was a motley collection of reactionaries, bandwagon opportunists and social-democrats. Secondly the elections would have been held with the communist government in office which would have neutralized if not completely impeded the intervention against us by the state apparatus: the use of civil servants and the police. In any case we refused and in 1959 the government was dismissed. But in the next election, held a year and a half later, we increased our share of the popular vote though we got fewer seats. So while we were defeated electorally it was not a real defeat in the eyes of the masses. And this despite all our errors and mistakes.

The electoral victory in Kerala undoubtedly made the CPI into a national force; its prestige increased tenfold and communist enthusiasts answering the stale headlines of the bourgeois commentators replied: 'After Nehru, Namboodiripad!' The importance of Kerala in that sense was the feeling that Congress could be defeated and that an alternative existed, namely, the Communist Party of India. This was not an unimportant factor given the international situation. Of course even within the CPI there were criticisms of the way in which the E.M.S. ministry had condoned the killing of workers. The state committee of the West Bengal CPI wrote a letter criticizing the Kerala party. But despite all this Namboodiripad drew larger crowds than any other CPI leader and had become a national figure in his own right as the leader of the successful Kerala CPI. The CP Congress in Amritsar in 1958 also treated him as a hero and announced that power could be taken electorally, a view which was facilitated by the positions being developed by the Soviet party. There were some amendments to the main resolution and a few comrades expressed doubts, but by and large there was a consensus. The Amritsar line was to be applied nationally.

Was there never a real discussion within the leadership, even after 1959, of the problems posed on a strategic level by electoral victories won by parties pledged to some form of socialist transformation. Surely one of the key weaknesses of the CPI in Kerala, the CPM in West Bengal and, later, the Popular Unity in Chile was that there was no understanding of the necessity of helping to stimulate and create organs of popular power of a Soviet type which could organize the masses independently of the bourgeois state and could be utilized to challenge the state when the need arose. This whole dimension has been absent from the strategy of the Communist parties for many decades.

These problems you mention are very important and vital ones, but I am sorry to say that they did not enter into the discussions which took place. One of the results of Stalinism has been precisely that the key

importance of organizing the masses through their own organs of power, such as soviets, has disappeared. The party has been seen as the sole representative of the masses.

As for my own political development, I continued to develop doubts after 1956. The question of Stalin was resolved for me by Khrushchev's speech, but on international issues I was to remain totally confused. For instance on Hungary my position was completely orthodox. I even wrote a pamphlet called 'What Happened in Hungary' to answer the widespread attacks on the Soviet Union in every bourgeois newspaper. So, in spite of 1956, the change in my thinking was gradual. I felt fairly regularly the need to read more, but then the material available to one at that time in India was also very limited. I thought in 1956 that I had broken with Stalinism, but looking back it is obvious that this was not the case. The Amritsar line, the Kerala government, all strengthened my doubts, but that is the level on which matters remained: personal doubts, many of which were not expressed even internally within the party. I am convinced that this must have been the case with many a communist militant in those days. But there was no revolutionary alternative to the line of the CPI.

A further change took place in 1958 when I had the opportunity to visit the Soviet Union. I visited Tashkent in 1958 as a member of the Indian Writers' Delegation to attend an Afro-Asian writers' conference. The Chinese delegates were also present and were quite open about explaining their difference with the Soviet Union. But I also had an opportunity to see the Soviet Union and while the tremendous advances made cannot be denied, there was another side which made me uneasy. In Moscow there was a special reception for the Indian delegates which was attended by Khrushchev. During this there was a cultural show and to my surprise I discovered that the empty chair next to me had been taken by Khrushchev. So I used this opportunity to discuss with him and attempt to clear my doubts. At that time you may recall the Pasternak case had excited a great deal of attention. So I asked Khrushchev how he justified the treatment of Pasternak. How was it possible that, fifty years after the Revolution, the Soviet government still felt threatened by a novel written by Pasternak. I explained that as a writer I could not justify the treatment meted out to him even though, as a Marxist, I disagreed with his political line. I explained to him that in a country like India where many anti-imperialists had been sentenced to prison for their writings including poems and short stories, it was impossible to justify and genuinely defend the Soviet party on the Pasternak issue. Khrushchev denied all responsibility for the episode and claimed that it was done by the Writers' Union and suggested that I discuss the matter with them. It was obvious that he was not anxious to discuss the issue. We then discussed the problem of drinking in the Soviet Union and I asked if he had considered prohibition. He replied that they had, but if there was prohibition then immediately illegal distilleries would begin to spring up and it would create graver problems. I responded by suggesting that similarly if they continued to ban books illegal distilleries of books would spring up and could also create problems. Extremely irritated by now he suggested that we concentrate on the ballet! I began to understand the

limits of 'destalinization'. Attempts to discuss Yugoslavia and China were also unsuccessful. Discussions with the officials of the Writers' Union were more vigorous, but equally disappointing. As a result my disillusionment began to deepen.

Did you visit any other countries apart from the Soviet Union. Did you, for instance, have an opportunity to visit the People's Republic of China, where the revolution was more recent and in one sense more relevant to the problems confronting India?

After my trip to the Soviet Union I got more opportunities to travel outside and discuss with foreign comrades. This was very vital for my political evolution. For example, in 1960 I attended the Third Congress of the Vietnamese Workers Party in Hanoi. Harekrishan Konar and myself were the fraternal delegates from the Indian party. I gave the fraternal greetings from Indian Communists to the Congress and afterwards discussed the situation with numerous comrades from different countries. It was a very exciting period. The NLF was about to be formed in the South and the Sino-Soviet split was beginning to dominate communist gatherings. The Soviet delegation invited us to dinner to explain their views, with which we were in any case familiar. The discussion was continued the next day as both Konar and I subjected the Russians to some extremely critical questioning. The positive features of the early period of the Sino-Soviet dispute was that it allowed the possibility of debate and discussion on fundamentals inside the communist movement for the first time since the twenties.

The Chinese delegation invited us to go to Peking for a lengthy discussion. We were flown to Canton and from there in a special plane to Peking. We spent a total of four days in the Chinese capital including a 5½-hour session with Chou En-lai and other party leaders. The main item of discussion was the Sino-Indian border dispute. An hour was spent with the most intricate details relating to old maps, border treaties and the like to establish China's claim to the border lands. I stated my views quite openly. I said to the Chinese comrades: Legally, geographically, historically you may be correct. The question which concerns me is what political purpose does this dispute over uninhabited territory serve. You have come to an agreement with Pakistan and you have given up some land. Why not do the same with India. It will prevent the reactionaries from whipping up anti-Chinese chauvinism and it will strengthen the Left movement in India. We will be able to demonstrate the superiority of the method by which socialist states settle border disputes. We could utilize this to strengthen the bond between the Chinese revolution and the Indian masses. I explained that this had been Lenin's attitude when dealing with bourgeois governments such as Finland or even pre-capitalist monarchies such as Afghanistan. By doing so Lenin strengthened the Russian revolution and its appeal to the broad masses. Immediately Chou said, 'Lenin did the correct thing'. But he explained it in terms of the Soviet state's isolation and the non-existence of a 'socialist camp'. I responded by arguing that while I did not have the texts on me there was considerable evidence to show that Lenin's motives were in reality to develop friendly relations with the peoples of these countries and not to allow the ruling

classes to paint the Soviet Union as a big power gobbling up their countries. Finally Chou said that he could not agree and that we should agree to disagree on this point. I had an extremely soft spot for the Chinese comrades and their revolution so I didn't want to leave matters there. I asked Chou: 'Is there any danger of the US imperialists attacking you through these disputed border territories?' He replied in the negative and said the threat was from the Nehru government and not from the Americans in this instance. The next point of discussion was on the Sino-Soviet dispute.

Here Chou stressed the betrayal they had felt when the Soviet Union, because of political disagreements, had withdrawn their technicians from China overnight. He was extremely bitter about this and complained that they had even taken the blueprints away! I felt that the Russians had been completely wrong, but I did not speak my mind as I did not want to take sides between the two giants. I returned from the discussion fairly depressed with what the Soviet Union had done, but I was not satisfied with Chou's answers on the border question. I couldn't help feeling there was a trace of chauvinism in his attitudes. Konar was much more sympathetic to the Chinese and on his return to India he organized a number of study circles to explain their views.

What was the attitude of the Vietnamese comrades in those days?

The position of the Vietnamese then was what it remains today. They saw in the dispute then the seeds of further and growing discord which they felt could only aid imperialism. On that level they were not so wrong and the attitude of both China and the Soviet Union towards the Vietnamese struggle was not as it should have been. Before I left for Peking we had a lengthy discussion with Ho Chi Minh in the course of which we discussed Vietnam, India and the Sino-Soviet dispute. On the last question he told us that he agreed neither with China nor the Soviet Union and felt that their quarrels were reaching a stage where they could harm the working-class movement internationally. He was extremely anxious and apprehensive and he suggested that nothing should be done to exacerbate the conflict. I asked why the Vietnamese did not publish their positions in their press as it could be a useful way of keeping the movement united, but he replied that they had decided not to interfere in the dispute at all. He made a few jokes about the Third World War theses and said that Vietnam was a small country and even if a few people survived in China after the war there would be no one left in Vietnam, so from pure self-interest they could not support the theses. But all this was said in a semi-ironic vein. I must confess that I found him the most cultured and charming of all the communist leaders I have met. He impressed me a great deal by speaking in six languages to welcome the delegations to Vietnam: Chinese, Russian, Vietnamese, French, English and Spanish.

He gave a characteristic reply when I asked him how in his view the Vietnamese party, which in the thirties was not much bigger than the Indian party, had succeeded whereas we had failed. He replied: 'There you had Mahatma Gandhi, here I am the Mahatma Gandhi!' He then went on to explain how they had utilized the anti-imperialist struggle

to build their hegemony over the masses. They had become the leading force in the anti-imperialist struggle and moved on to socialism. The clear implication was that in India it was Gandhi and the Congress who had kept control and that the CPI was at fault. He also explained as did other Vietnamese leaders the endemic weaknesses of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie, which of course contrasted very vividly with the strength of the Indian bourgeoisie.

It was trips abroad which undoubtedly opened my mind, even though in the beginning these trips were mainly to the Soviet Union and other non-capitalist countries. I remember visiting the Soviet Union again in 1962 for health reasons. While in prison during 1940–5 I had managed to learn a bit of Russian, enough to read *Pravda*, albeit at a snail's pace. The period I was in Moscow coincided with some anniversary commemorating Napoleon's failure to take Moscow and his subsequent retreat. The very fact that a Tsarist victory was being celebrated was odd enough in itself, but what compounded the error in my view was the lengthy diatribe against Napoleon in the pages of *Pravda*. The nationalist fervour of the article was horrifying to me. Of course Napoleon was a counter-revolutionary in the context of the French revolution, but in a war with Tsarist absolutism if one had to retrospectively take sides, it would be with Napoleon not the Tsar. After all he was carrying the bourgeois-democratic revolution, even in a distorted and impure form, to the territories being conquered. The whole of reactionary Europe was arraigned against him. If anything, there is an analogy with the Red Army's sweep into Eastern Europe at the conclusion of the Second World War and the abolition of the capitalist mode of production. I was lying in the hospital reading this article, and I did not have much else to do, so I decided to write a letter to the editor of *Pravda* expressing my shock and dismay at the reactionary nature of this article. After that I used to grab eagerly a copy of *Pravda* every day to see whether or not it had been printed and every day I was disappointed. After a week I was visited by a member of the Central Committee of CPSU who ostensibly came to inquire about my health. And then he informed me that he had read my letter to *Pravda*. I asked how he had read it, if it had been addressed to the *Pravda* editor. He preferred to ignore this question and proceeded to defend the *Pravda* assessment of Napoleon. I cut the discussion short by saying I would be happy to discuss with him or any other comrade in the columns of *Pravda*, but I would rather be spared a heavy-handed lecture in my hospital room. Of course all these things are symptomatic of a more serious disease, but this was the way in which my eyes were opened. If you want to you can learn a lot in the Soviet Union!

This evolution continued in the years which followed and I visited Western Europe twice in the period 1967–9. In Italy I discussed not only with some of the Communist Party leaders, but also with comrades of *Il Manifesto*, in France with dissident communists such as Garaudy and some comrades of the new Left. I also personally experienced the after-effects of May 1968 and then I visited Britain. It was coincidental that I happened to visit Western Europe at a time when it was experiencing new upheavals and a mass radicalization, but nonetheless once there my political evolution continued. I wanted

to study developments taking place with an open mind and so I met all the representatives of different currents which existed and discussed with them. I witnessed for myself in France the differences on the streets between the extreme Left and the PCF and I must confess I was inclined to sympathize with the courage and conviction of the far Left demonstrators, even though I could not completely agree with them.

What was the basis for the split in Indian communism which led to the existence of two major parties—CPI and CPM. Was it a partial reflection of the Sino-Soviet split. Given the fact that the CPI lost Kerala and Bengal, its two main strongholds, to the CPM what was the impact of the split within the CPI?

Many people have written that the CPI/CPM split was a pure reflection of the Sino-Soviet dispute. This is not correct. A more substantial factor was the attitude towards the Sino-Indian conflict. As I have already told you, I was not at all convinced by Chou En-lai's explanation of the Chinese position on the border dispute. I still think that the CPI was correct in opposing the Chinese line. However, there is a big difference between not supporting the Chinese position and supporting your own bourgeoisie. I'm afraid that the statements of some of the CPI leaders were totally chauvinist and merely parroted the speeches made by the Congress leaders. There were even racist slurs of the 'yellow peril' variety directed against the Chinese leaders and some of the articles written by Dange attacking China and defending the Indian bourgeoisie were outrageous, even for a communist leader steeped in Stalinist traditions. Many of the comrades who left with the CPM were disgusted by this and correctly so, but even this was not the main reason for the split, which took place in 1964, some years after the Sino-Indian border clashes.

In my view the major reason for the split was internal differences related to the question of electoral alliances. Ever since the fall of the Kerala ministry a discussion of sorts had been taking place and it reached a head in 1964. If you study the party documents from 1960 to 1964 you can trace the real causes of the split. There is a consistent theme running through all these documents: parliamentary cretinism. On this there are no major differences between the two sides. There is agreement on the need to win more elections in the states and more seats in the Lok Sabha. That is the road to communism in India. There is a supplementary slogan embodied in the formula: 'Break the Congress monopoly'. It is around this that differences develop. Some party leaders state that the key is to break the Congress monopoly, even if this means having the Jan Sangh or the Muslim League as a partner. Others state that the best way to break the monopoly is by aligning with the progressive sections of the Congress against its right wing. Thus the debate which led to a split in Indian communism was not on differences around how best to overthrow the existing state and its structures, but on how to win more seats. In my view it was tactical differences which led to a split.

Other differences were there: on the Sino-Indian question, on an assessment of the Soviet Union's policies, but the main reason was differences on the implementation of electoral tactics. The immediate

reason for the walkout by the comrades who became the CPM leadership was the affair of the Dange letter. This was a letter supposedly written by Dange in 1924 to the British authorities offering his services to them and a copy of this letter appeared in the national archives. The CPI National Council set up a commission to investigate the whole business. The majority of this commission absolved Dange by stating that the letter was a forgery, but a minority stated that there was no proof to indicate that Dange had not written the letter. One-third of the thirty-two members of the Council left the meeting. They were not to return. Of course it was clear that the Dange letter was merely the pretext, but it was also clear that there were no fundamental differences. I think the evolution of the two parties since that time has confirmed this fact. While on the National Council the CPI had an overwhelming majority, the situation in the state councils of the party was different. In West Bengal the CPM had the majority and in Kerala the CPI had a very narrow majority. But even this could be misleading. I'll explain why. If you went below the state council to the district committees the CPM had a majority in some, but if you went even lower down the scale of branches and cells you would see that the CPI was virtually wiped out. A large section of the base went with the CPM in Kerala. In Andhra Pradesh the situation was roughly similar. In those areas where the CP represented a mass current, the CPM gained the upper hand. The reason for this is that many of the CPM leaders after the split and the bulk of their middle cadres, including those who would in the following years break with the CPM and align themselves with Peking, explained the split in terms of the CPI being the 'Right Communists' who struggled for reforms via electoral victories whereas the CPM struggled for revolution. Many of the CPM's middle cadres obviously believed this, but the CPM leadership was engaged not in revolution, but in trying to win elections. Their behaviour after the election victory of 1967 in West Bengal showed this very clearly. But the bulk of those who joined the CPM after the split did so because they genuinely believed that the latter was going to lead them towards the revolution. In addition many of those who were opposed to the line of the CPI and the CPM nonetheless went with the CPM because they believed that the latter had greater potential in the sense that it had taken with it the best and most revolutionary sections of the base. So in all those areas where there was a communist tradition the ranks went largely with the CPM.

Why did you personally decide to stay with the CPI?

Because I was opposed to a split. I did not see that there were any fundamental differences between the two groupings and I feared that a split would further divide the trade-union movement, which is what happened. Some time after the CPM split, the AITUC was also split, the peasant organizations were split and the student organizations were split. This weakened the Left considerably and enabled the Congress and the parties on its right to strengthen their hold on the masses. It is of course scandalous that the workers' movement has to be permanently divided in this fashion. Leaving aside the broader questions of trade-union unity, at least the two communist parties could have maintained a common trade-union structure in the interests of the class they claim

to serve. The main reason they did not cannot simply be ascribed to sectarianism. The reason is that given the weight they attach to electoralism and the fact that they subordinate the extra-parliamentary struggles to parliament, they need their own trade unions to gain electoral support. Thus both parties utilize their respective trade-union, student and peasant organizations mainly for electoral work. The basic concept of unity against the class enemy on every front is lacking from their politics. In any case I saw no reason to split from the CPI and join the CPM and today I am still a member of the CPI. I still maintain that my decision was correct.

There were rumblings in the CPI leadership over the invasion of Czechoslovakia. I know that the CPM defended the invasion without raising any doubts, but within the CPI we heard that there was opposition and that this was not a result of the desire not to offend 'democratic allies' in India?

The National Council unanimously passed a resolution in 1968 approving the measures being carried out by Dubcek and pledging its support to 'socialism with a human face'. Then came the military intervention of the Soviet Union. Immediately a discussion began and a number of us visited the Czech embassy in New Delhi to collect all the materials of the CPCz. There was an even split on the National Council. I think that those who supported the Soviet Union had thirty-five votes and we had thirty-four (it was not a well-attended meeting of the Council in any case) with two initial abstentions. There was further discussion and both the comrades who had abstained came over to our side so that we now had a majority to oppose the Soviet intervention. Once the party leaders realized that they were going to be defeated, they became very conciliatory and suggested that we should not take an immediate vote, but should open a three-month discussion period throughout the party and circulate all the relevant documents. I agreed because I thought that it would be a good thing if all the literature on this question was discussed throughout the party. It could do us nothing but good to have a real debate. But this promise was never kept.

The next council meeting took place four months later. In that time we had been deluged by visitors from the Soviet Union. Some of them discussed with me as well, but I was not convinced one bit. In fact I edited a book entitled 'Whither Czechoslovakia?' under a pseudonym in which all the contributors were pro-CPI, but opposed to the Soviet line. I made sure that not a single contributor could be attacked as an 'enemy of the CPI'. I do not know all the pressures that were applied. In any case at the Council meeting the party apparatus had mobilized all its forces and obtained a majority at that meeting. Immediately afterwards I was questioned about the book and I admitted that I was responsible for it. I was rebuked and an instruction was sent out that this book was neither to be distributed nor read by any CPI members. A public censure of me was proposed in the party press. A party leader suggested that before the censure was published in *New Age* I should be given fifteen days to rethink and recant. I said that it was they who should have time to rethink. They nonetheless gave me fifteen days respite and meanwhile some people came to see me and pressure me to

apologize. They said that they didn't want to censure me openly because I was a leader of the party and well-respected. I refused point blank. So the censure was published in a small corner of *New Age*. But the very next day it was reported in great detail in all the bourgeois newspapers that I had been censured for writing a book criticizing the Soviet invasion and probably more copies of the book were sold than would have been if the leaders of my party had ignored the whole business. Despite all this, however, it is worth pointing out that a discussion of sorts did take place inside the CPI in contrast to the CPM which defended the invasion wholeheartedly.

Can you tell me what are your views on Trotsky and Trotskyism?

I am not a Trotskyist. Stalin was my idol. That idol is broken to pieces. I don't want to replace a broken idol with a new idol even if it is not a broken one, because I don't now believe in idolatry. I think Trotsky, Bukharin, Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci, Lukács and other Marxists should seriously be studied and critically evaluated by all communists. Marxism will be poorer if we eliminate them from the history of the world Communist movement. I don't believe in the Stalinist falsification of history in which Trotsky was depicted as an imperialist spy and a fascist agent. It appears that even Soviet historians have now abandoned such views. In a new history of the CPSU published in the late sixties Trotsky was criticized not for being a fascist spy but for his 'incorrect views'. Even this change is not enough. As Lukács said, one will not understand the history of the Russian Revolution if one does not understand the role of Trotsky in it. I am therefore glad that John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*, which gives an excellent picture of the turbulent days of the Russian Revolution and Trotsky's role in it, has recently been published in the Soviet Union itself along with Lenin's introduction to it. I think some of the important contributions by Trotsky like his essay on bureaucratization published in the *Inprecor* in 1923, *In Defence of Marxism*, *On Literature and Art*, *History of the Russian Revolution* and other works are valuable and some of his ideas are still relevant. This does not mean that I agree with everything Trotsky said or wrote. The development of Marxism needs a critical eye.

You've been involved in the communist movement for well over forty years. You've been on its leading bodies; you've represented it in parliament and at congresses of fraternal parties, you've participated in its debates, not to mention your pioneering role in helping to lay its foundations in Kerala, one of the two regions where it has been most successful. Do you think that the traditional Indian communist movement, by which I would include the CPI, CPM and the splintered M-L groups which despite differences have a common political and ideological basis, has a future in India. In other words can these groups and parties be reformed or is there a need for a communist party of a new type?

I would reject the view that the entire past of Indian communism must be negated. Despite all the deformations and mistakes there have been hundreds and thousands of communists in India who have struggled and suffered all sorts of privations for socialism and revolution. A whole number of peasant struggles, struggles for trade-unionism and

against imperialism were conducted by the finest sort of communist militants. The tragedy was that the leadership, for the reasons we have discussed, was incapable of harnessing their talents and energies in a revolutionary direction. So I would stress that the whole experience must not be written off. There are chapters of it which have to be reappropriated by any new communist movement. At the base of the CPI, the CPM and the M-L groups you have thousands of dedicated activists who want a socialist revolution. They cannot be ignored. Furthermore many of them possess experiences of mass struggles. Many young militants who did not experience Stalinism in the traditional parties are also coming forward as Marxists and Communists. I firmly believe that the unification of all communist forces in the country on the basis of Marxism-Leninism is essential for the development of the Communist movement. How this will be brought about, whether by a merger or unification of all these forces under a new name through a conference, or by the emergence of a new Communist Party, etc., may be left to the future. But unification cannot be brought about by breaking each others' heads but only by principled discussions and comradely debates and through united actions for a commonly agreed programme. This will succeed only if the ranks of the different communist parties raise their own theoretical level and enable themselves to intervene in this great debate effectively. I am an optimist and am sure that even if the leaders of the old and ageing generation fail in this task the revolutionaries of the new young generation will rise to the occasion.

Interviewer: Tariq Ali
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