

THE FORMATION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA, 1927-1937:

THE DILEMMA OF THE INDIAN LEFT.

A thesis submitted for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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THE MEERUT PRISONERS.



Portrait of 25 of the Meerut prisoners taken outside the jail. Back row (left to right): K. N. Sehgal, S. S. Josh, H. L. Hutchinson, Shaukat Usmani, B. F. Bradley, A. Prasad, P. Spratt, G. Adhikari. Middle Row: R. R. Mitra, Gopen Chakravarti, Kishori Lal Ghosh, L. R. Kadam, D. R. Thengdi, Goura Shanker, S. Bannerjee, K. N. Joglekar, P. C. Joshi, Muzaffar Ahmad. Front Row: M. G. Desai, D. Goswami, R. S. Nimbkar, S. S. Mirajkar, S. A. Dange, S. V. Ghate, Gopal Basak.

DECLARATION

This thesis is based on original research undertaken in the Department of History, School of General Studies, at the Australian National University.

R.J. Stuart.

To Anh Thu, Eliane and James,
and to the memory of Damodaran.

ABSTRACT

The thesis takes as its starting point the historical failure of Indian communism to create a viable, popular alternative to the country's dominant political culture. It argues that the 'Stalinisation' - or, as I have termed it, 'bolshevisation' - of Indian communism has been central to this failure. 'Bolshevisation' has undermined the autonomy of Indian communism and has thus prevented the movement from maintaining two relationships critical for political success - with its national environment and its own history. But not all communist parties suffered this fate. Why, then, was the Communist Party of India 'bolshevised'? The thesis is devoted to answering this question; for it was during the formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI), between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s, that it was first 'bolshevised'.

The 'bolshevisation' phenomenon is an interesting one. Not only was it a central cause of the CPI's failure to create a political alternative, but it also performed a necessary integrative function for the Party - a necessity largely arising, in turn, from its inability to maintain a stable mass base. This inability was largely a consequence of a number of specific features of the colonial Indian environment. The negative environmental features operating in Calcutta and Bombay were quite different: in the former the problem was largely one arising from the intensive 'colonialisation' of eastern India; in Bombay it was a problem of what I have called 'political space' for revolutionary mass politics. Thus we are investigating a phenomenon that was, simultaneously, a cause, cure and symptom of the failure of Indian communism. This investigation

therefore allows us to connect a leadership failure with the environmental features contributing to that failure.

The first Indian political groups with identifiably Marxist programs were founded in 1927 in the cities of Bombay and Calcutta - the two locations to which Indian communism was virtually to be confined throughout almost all of the formation period. This event followed an extended period of ideological transition, guided from abroad, among a few nationalists. Both groups then sought to take advantage of a contemporaneous wave of working class unrest. But while the Bombay group achieved a remarkable success and built for itself a major mass base, the Calcutta group was unable to replicate this achievement. There was a corresponding contrast in the two groups' development as communist leaderships - the Bombay group progressed towards becoming a 'proletarianised' and autonomous leadership while the Calcutta group stagnated, then disintegrated. The Bombay group's development could be seen clearly in the markedly independent stance it adopted towards the Communist International (Comintern). But this achievement remained unconsolidated and very vulnerable.

This phase ended in 1929 with the arrests of both provincial leaderships and the breaking of the Bombay mass base: the environmental conditions under which the Bombay developments had occurred proved to be both temporary and atypically favourable.

In the unfavourable conditions for communist politics in the ensuing period, from 1929 to 1933, the communist leadership which remained, regressed. Between 1929 and 1933 Indian communism

consisted of a constellation of impotent and mutually hostile factions based on regional, personality and policy differences.

After surveying the communists' situation the imprisoned former leadership realised that Indian communism faced a dilemma, imposed by the extremely difficult 'objective conditions': a 'natural' process of national Party formation 'from below' would be extremely protracted and uncertain; therefore the Party could be formed in the foreseeable future only by the artificial, 'from the top' method of direct Comintern intervention - i.e., by full 'bolshevisation'. However the jailed leadership did not comprehend the full implications of the 'bolshevised' alternative - that it involved the long term failure of Indian communism. It chose this course. After its unanticipated release from prison it managed, between 1934 and 1937, as a proxy Comintern representative, to form a centralised, functioning CPI. The Party has subsequently retained these 'bolshevised' foundations.

PREFACE

In researching and writing this thesis I have been generously assisted by a great many people. My debt began with Professor D.P. Singhal of the University of Queensland, where I did my undergraduate degree and began my doctorate. Professor Singhal initially suggested the subject and supervised and encouraged my early explorations of it. Mr. Geoffrey Fairbairn has supervised my work since I moved to the Australian National University. He has been a patient guide and a generous source of encouragement as well as critical comment. I owe much to him. I am also indebted to others in the Department of History. In particular, Mr. Don Baker did much for me in arranging my field trip, and Dr. Campbell Macknight, who has been the Department's student administrator since my return from my field trip, has been a constant source of support. He has been almost unbelievably patient with me almost all of the time. I also owe a heavy debt to all of the members of the ANU's South Asia History section. Professor D.A. Low has provided great encouragement and valuable commentary. Robin Jeffrey, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Steve Henningham have been generous beyond words with both their comments and their time. All have improved my conceptual clarity, and Steve and Robin have been particularly helpful with my prose. My discussions with Dipesh have been of particular importance in helping me to develop the conceptual framework I have employed, and his work on the Calcutta working class has been of immediate relevance to mine. I am also thankful to Sandy Gordon for very fruitful discussions on Bombay and for

allowing me to reproduce his excellent map (Map 1).

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I am very thankful to Rosemary Metcalf for the fine maps which she drew at short notice, and to Bev Ricketts, Margaret Carron and Janet Healey for having provided emergency help at the end. Glenda Hudson, Lynn Peters and Barbara Button have done an excellent job in the typing of the thesis. I am also thankful to my multi-disciplinary colleagues at Childers Street for having helped me to remember that there was more to life than the Meerut Conspiracy Case. Finally I owe more than I can express

to my wife, Anh Thu, for her suggestions and critical commentary and, together with Eliane, my parents and my friends, for having provided me with constant support under trying circumstances.

* * * * *

A Note on Terminology

In the thesis I often refer to the Communist Party of India (which was founded, as an essentially nominal organisation, in 1925) as 'the Party'. In the late 1920s the communists' main political organisation was called the Workers' and Peasants' Party. I distinguish this from the CPI by referring to it as 'the party' - with a lower case 'p'. In addition, I use the lower case 'p' when referring to communist parties generically, and an upper case 'P' when referring to specific communist parties.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations, Maps and Tables	xii
Abbreviations used in the text and notes	xiii
Abbreviations used in the notes only	xiv
Glossary	xvii
1. <u>Introduction: the 'Bolshevisation' of Indian Communism</u>	1
2. <u>India's First Communists and their Environment</u>	47
1. Colonialisation, and the Unevenness of its Penetration into Eastern and Western India	51
2. Eastern India, Bengal and Calcutta	63
3. Western India, Maharashtra and Bombay	96
4. India's First Communists	132
5. The Communists and the Raj: the First Phase	161
6. Help from Abroad: the Communists' Received Marxism	173
3. <u>'Taking Marxism to its Class'</u>	194
1. Bombay	200
2. Calcutta	271
4. <u>From Left Nationalist Faction Towards an 'Independent' Party: 1927-early 1929</u>	339
1. The Bengal WPP	340
2. The Bombay Communists' Political Advance	354
3. Towards the Formation of an Independent Communist Leadership in Bombay	369
5. <u>Environmental Shifts, I: the Contraction of Urban 'Revolutionary Space', March 1929-1933</u>	409
1. The Logic of the Raj's Anti-Communist Strategy	411
2. In the Wake of the Meerut Case Arrests	467
3. The Communists' Situation on the Eve of Civil Disobedience	505
6. <u>Environmental Shifts, II: the Comintern's 'Third Period'</u>	513
7. <u>The Consequences of Defeat: the Disintegration of Communist Leadership during Civil Disobedience and the Comintern's 'Third Period'</u>	543
8. <u>The Formation of a Communist Party: 1934-1937</u>	619
<u>Conclusion</u>	703
<u>Bibliography</u>	716

ILLUSTRATIONS

Frontispiece: Portrait of 25 of the accused in the
Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case, 1929-33

MAPS

1. Bombay	xix
2. North Bombay - Mill Area	xx
3. Calcutta Industrial Region	xxi

TABLES

1. Five-yearly regional averages of total exports of merchandise	56
2. Five-yearly regional averages of export surplus	57
3. Advances by the Imperial Bank to purely industrial concerns	60
4. Ownership and management of selected industrial concerns	61
5. Areas of origin of skilled and unskilled jute workers in Bengal	81
6. Principal areas of origin of the labour force employed in some selected industries in Bengal, 1921	82
7. District/Province of origin of Bombay city cotton mill workers, 1921	101
8. Industrial disputes in India, 1928-1933	502

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT AND NOTES

AICC	All-India Congress Committee.
AITUC	All-India Trade Union Congress.
AIWPP	All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party.
BB & CIR	Bombay, Baroda and Central India Railway.
BB & CIRU	Bombay, Baroda and Central India Railway Union.
BJWA	Bengal Jute Workers' Association.
BJWU	Bengal Jute Workers' Union.
BMOA	Bombay Mill Owners' Association.
BNR	Bengal Nagpur Railway.
BPCC	Bombay Provincial Congress Committee.
BTLU	Bombay Textile Labour Union.
BTUF	Bengal Trade Union Federation.
CC	Central Committee.
CCP	Chinese Communist Party.
CD	Civil Disobedience.
CEC	Central Executive Committee.
CI	Communist International.
Comintern	Communist International.
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain.
CPI	Communist Party of India.
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist).
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
CSP	Congress Socialist Party.
DIB	Director of the Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India.
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International.
EIR	East India Railway.

EIRU	East India Railway Union
GIPR	Great Indian Peninsula Railway
GIPRU	Great Indian Peninsula Railway Union.
GKM	Girni Kamgar Mahamandal.
GKU	Girni Kamgar Union.
HSRA	Hindusthan Socialist Republican Association.
IJMA	Indian Jute Mills Association.
IMC	Indian Merchants' Chamber and Bureau.
INC	Indian National Congress.
Inprecor	International Press Correspondence.
JMSC	Joint Mill Strike Committee.
LAI	League Against Imperialism.
NCO	Non Cooperation Movement.
TUC	Trade Union Congress.
UP	United Provinces.
WPP	Workers' and Peasants' Party.
YCL	Young Comrades' League.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN NOTES ONLY.

ACH	Archives of Contemporary History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
ASAA	Asian Studies Association of Australia.
BC	<u>Bombay Chronicle.</u>
BCP	Commissioner of Police, Bombay.
BPP	Bengal Past and Present.
BREC	Bombay Riots Enquiry Committee.
BSAI	Bombay Secret Abstracts of Intelligence.
BSB	Bombay Special Branch.
CSSS	Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.
EPW	<u>Economic and Political Weekly.</u>

FR1	Fortnightly Report for First Half of a Month.
FR2	Fortnightly Report for Second Half of a Month.
G. of Ben.	Government of Bengal.
G. of Bom.	Government of Bombay.
G. of I.	Government of India.
H. Poll	Home Department, Government of India, Political Branch.
HD	Home Department, Government of India.
IB	Intelligence Bureau, Government of India.
IESHR	<u>Indian Economic and Social History Review.</u>
IO	India Office.
IOL	India Office Records and Library.
IQR	<u>Indian Quarterly Register</u> and <u>Indian Annual Register.</u>
LG	Local Governments and Administrations.
LM	<u>Labour Monthly.</u>
L/PJ	Judicial and Public Department, India Office.
L/PO	Private Office Papers, India Office.
MAS	<u>Modern Asian Studies.</u>
MCCC	Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case.
MCCC,P.	Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case Prosecution Exhibit.
MCCC,PW.	Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case Prosecution Witness.
MCG:1	Meerut Communist Group to the Comintern, September 1931.
MCG:2	Meerut Communist Group to the Comintern, August 1932.
MCG:3	Meerut Communist Group to the CPI, late 1932 or early 1933.

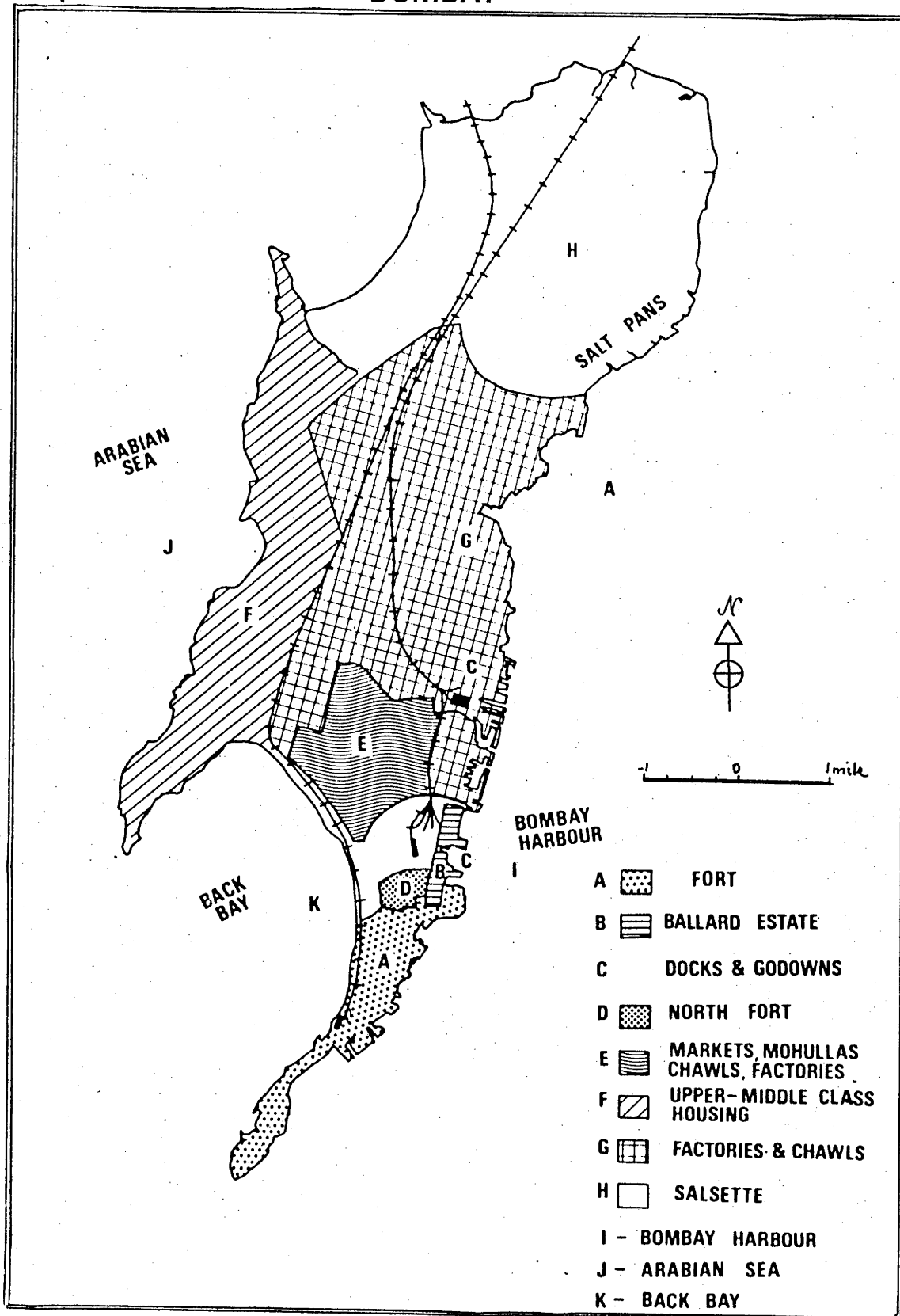
NAI National Archives of India.
RCLI Royal Commission on Labour in India.
S of S Secretary of State for India.
TNA Tamil Nadu Archives.
WBA West Bengal Archives.

GLOSSARY

Bhadralok	Lit. 'respectable people'; Bengali middle class.
Bhagavad Gita	Long poem embodying some of the Lord Krishna's philosophies. Part of the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata.
Bhakti	Hindu religious tradition and movement with the goal of salvation through love and devotion.
Bustee	Urban slum.
Charka	Traditional spinning wheel.
Chawl	Tenement building.
Crore	100 Lakhs (i.e. 10,000,000).
Dada	Lit. 'older brother'; elderly person, leader or authority figure.
Daladali	Factionalism or factious.
Hartal	A traditional form of protest strike involving the closure of shops and the cessation of work.
Hijrat	Lit. 'flight'; Muslim flight from religious persecution.
Jobber	Composite labour recruiter and unofficial foreman.
Joolum	Oppression or exploitation.
Jotedar	Rich peasant, usually engaged additionally in money-lending and trade.
Khaddar	Hand-woven cloth made from hand-woven yarn.
Khot	Land holder similar to <u>zamindar</u> (q.v.)
Khoti	Land revenue system similar to <u>zamindari</u> system(q.v.).
Kshatriya	Hindu warrior caste.
Lakh	100,000.
Maulvi	One who is learned in Islamic doctrine; title of respect.
Mazdur	Labourer.

Mistri	Skilled worker.
Mohalla	Residential block or community.
Mufussil	The country districts and towns, as distinct from the chief town.
Muhajir	One who takes part in <u>hijrat</u> (q.v.)..
Pandal	A temporary structure for the shelter of a mass meeting.
Pardesh	Foreign land.
Ryot	Cultivator.
Ryotwari	Land revenue system in which the state collects revenue directly from the <u>ryot</u> .
Sabha	Association or society.
Samiti	Association or society.
Sardar	See 'jobber'.
Satyagraha	'Truth force'; political technique using non-violent moral persuasion.
Shetia	Merchant.
Swadeshi	Indigenous; produced in one's own country to exclude foreign imports; political movement with this goal.
Swaraj	Self rule; freedom.
Tamasha	Popular, earthy melodramatic dance-drama.
Ulema	Muslim lay priesthood.
Wahabi	Follower of Abdul Wahab, an early 18th century puritanical Arab Muslim reformer; in 19th century India, the name of a movement of Wahab's followers who sought to eject the British.
Zamindar	Landholder, usually hereditary, who pays a fixed revenue to government and collects rent and revenue from his tenants.
Zamindari	Land revenue system in which the state collects revenue from the <u>zamindar</u> .

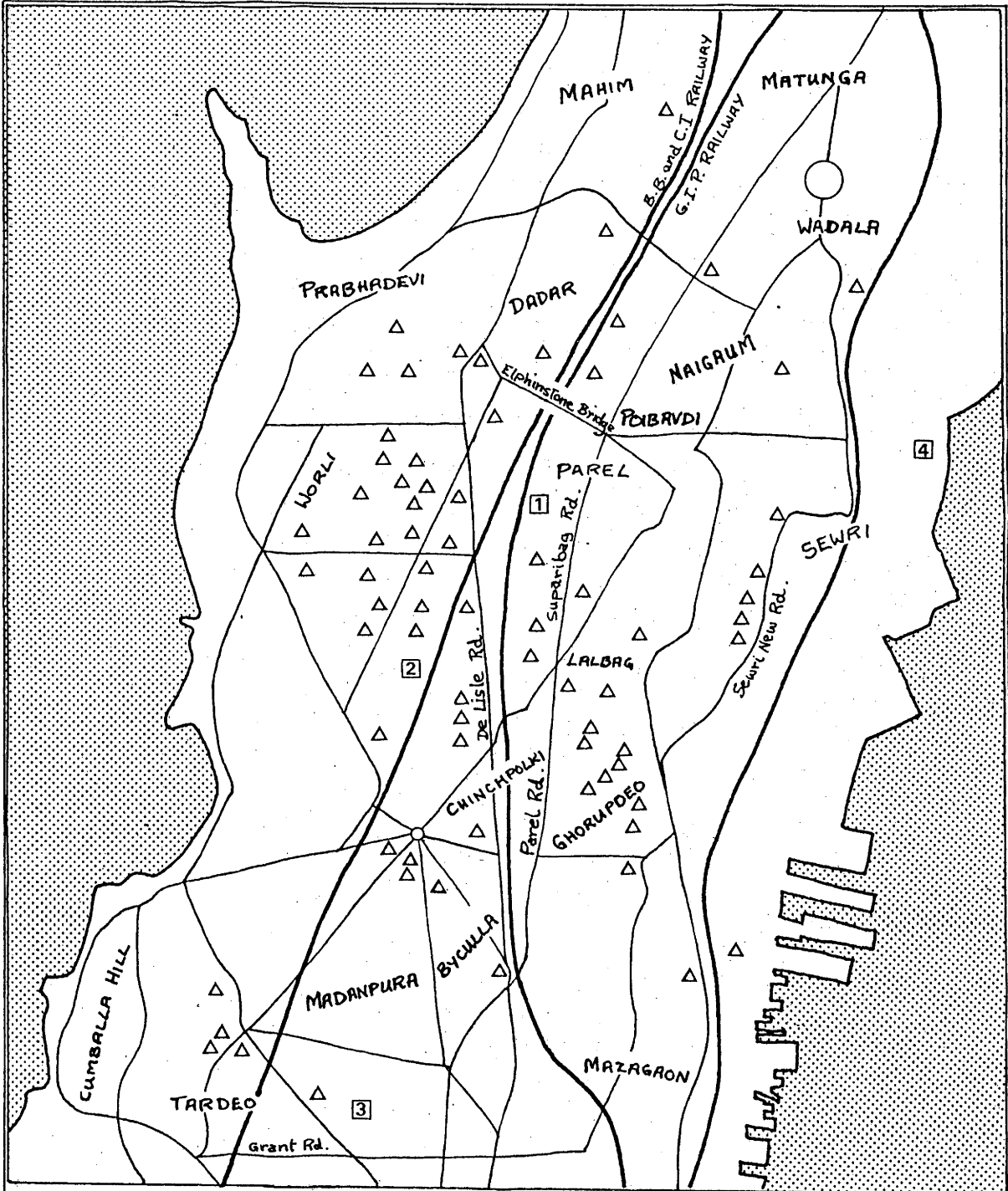
Map 1 BOMBAY



(Courtesy A.D.D. Gordon)

Map 2

NORTH BOMBAY Mill Area



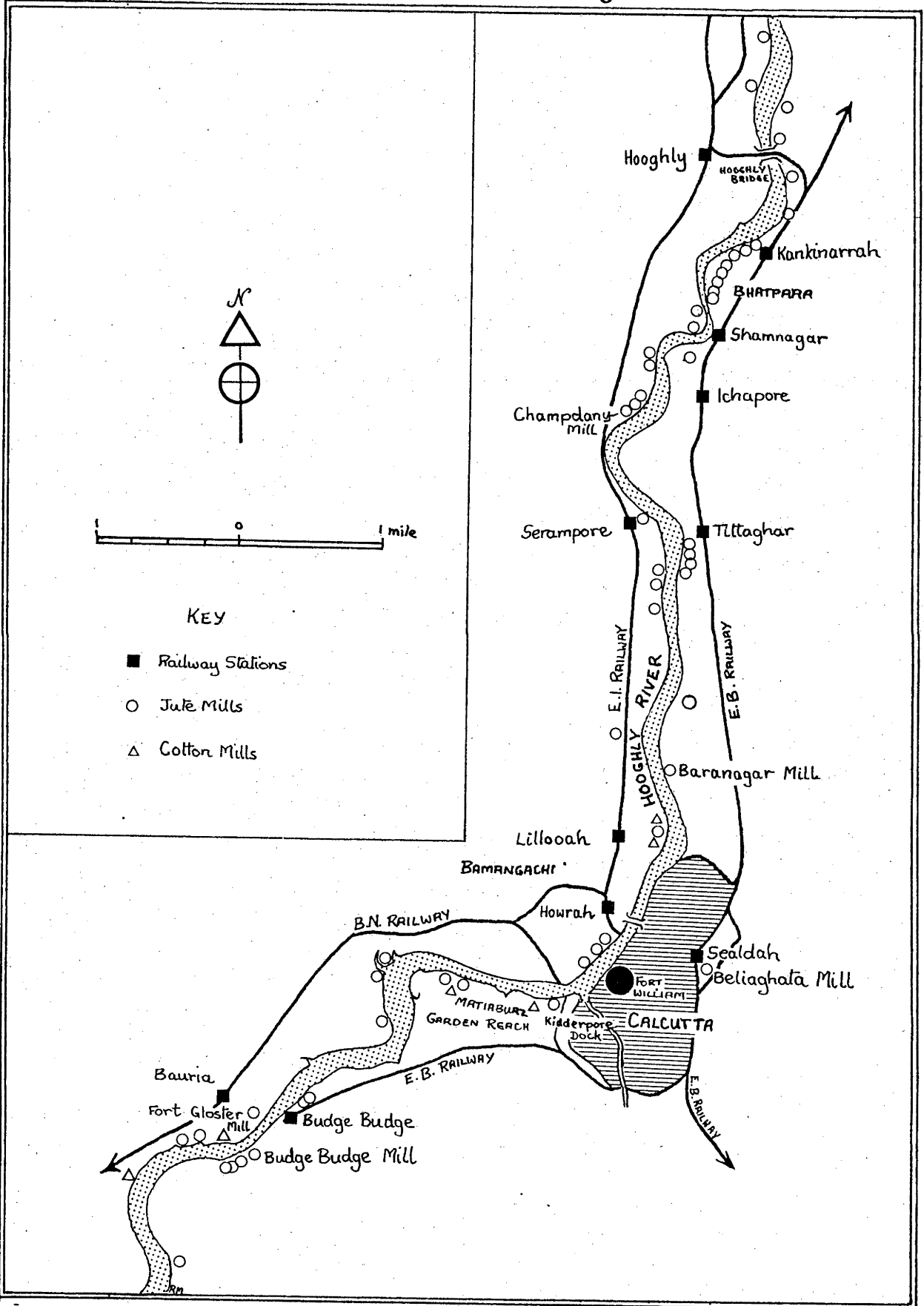
1 mile

KEY

- △ Cotton Mills
- ① G.I.P Railway Workshop
- ② B.B. and C.I Railway Workshop
- ③ Municipal workshop and Tram Depot
- ④ Bulk Oil Installation

Map 3

CALCUTTA Industrial Region



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE 'BOLSHEVISATION' OF INDIAN COMMUNISM

'The history of any given party can only emerge from the complex portrayal of the totality of society and State (often with international ramifications too). Hence it may be said that to write the history of a party means nothing less than to write the general history of a country from a monographic viewpoint, in order to highlight a particular aspect of it.'

- Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, (London and New York, 1971), p.151.

'Thus it came about that the Comintern [Communist International] not only shone with the reflected light of the Russian party, but that it reflected each of its internal alignments in turn. This was so much the case that anybody who would try to comprehend the history of any Communist party merely in the context of its own national environment would fail'.

- Isaac Deutscher, Stalin: A Political Biography, (London, 1966), p.394. (My emphasis.)

The subject of Indian communism has received considerable attention, but no satisfactory account of its formative phase, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, has yet been written. This lacuna seriously weakens our understanding of its later history, for the most crucial features of 'mature' Indian communism were established during the protracted formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

The most comprehensive study of the CPI as a national party, G.D. Overstreet and M. Windmiller's Communism in India, (Bombay, 1960), provides only a summary sketch of the

Party's formative period. Moreover, the authors' very ideological, Cold War perspective further detracts from the value of their study. The negative effects of this perspective are partially counter-balanced by the detailed empirical work behind their account of the CPI in its later phases, but it almost completely undermines the explanatory value of their already schematic treatment of the Party's formative period.

J.P. Haithcox's Communism and Nationalism in India: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy 1920-1939 (Princeton, 1971), is, as the title suggests, essentially a study of Roy's career, and particularly of his changing relationship with the Communist International (Comintern). Haithcox provides a useful and detailed (though uncritical) biographical account of Roy in his Marxist phase and of Comintern policy on India. But he adds little to our understanding of the CPI as such. M.R. Masani's The Communist Party of India: A Short History, (London, 1954), is an anti-communist polemic in the mainstream of the Cold War tradition. It provides some useful information for those who have not had access to the Government of India's Intelligence Bureau's studies of Indian communism.¹ However for our period at least, it adds little, either factually or interpretatively,

1. Four of these confidential studies were published by the Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India (hereafter IB), between 1924 and 1935, for distribution to relevant government officers. These were: Communism in India, (1924), (Republished, Calcutta, 1971); Communism in India 1924-1927, (1927), (Republished, Calcutta, 1972); India and Communism, (Calcutta, 1933); and India and Communism, (Revised up to January 1, 1935), (Calcutta, 1935). These will be cited as, respectively: IB, Communism, (1924); IB, Communism, (1927); IB, Communism, (1933); and IB, Communism, (1935).

to those studies. L.P. Sinha's The Left Wing in India (1919-47), (Muzaffarpur, 1965), does include a more detailed narrative account of the CPI's formative phase and considerable - though still limited - empirical data not available in other published accounts. Nevertheless it does little to explain why the Party developed in the way that it did or, therefore, the relationship between formative and 'mature' communism in India.

But apart from their specific failings, all of these studies share a common feature: their very narrow frameworks. In particular, by failing adequately to relate the Party to its Indian environment they are unable satisfactorily to explain either its development as an Indian party or the determining features of its relationship with international communism. For example, they are unable to explain the marked regional differences in Indian communism, the consequences of this for the national Party, and the reasons why the CPI (in contrast to some communist parties) became so firmly linked to Moscow. Gramsci's argument that the history of a party should be a 'general history of a country from a monographic viewpoint' provides an ambitious ideal but a necessary counter-perspective for an explanatory account of the development (or non-development) of a political leadership. It is a perspective which is essentially absent from the above studies. For this reason they tend towards tautological 'explanations' of the fate of leaderships in terms of their own observable characteristics. This shortcoming is compounded in several cases by a priori assumptions about the nature of the relationship between a communist party and international communism. The contemporary student of Indian politics who seeks to go beyond these limits is fortunate in being able to draw upon the very considerable

body of South Asian scholarship produced in the last decade or so.

The existing historiographical gap for the CPI's formative period contrasts with the greater scholarly attention which has been given to the equivalent periods in the histories of the communist parties of most of the other major Asian colonies and semi-colonies. No doubt the absence of satisfactory accounts of the early development of Indian communism is due primarily to its subsequent marginality in the politics of the colonial period and its inability to establish itself as a decisive national political force after Independence. These historical features distinguish it from a number of its fraternal parties elsewhere in Asia. Yet, as D.A. Washbrook has argued persuasively, the study of colonial India solely from the perspective of those movements which won power at Independence may inhibit the identification of the deeper roots of Indian politics.² The study of 'failures', and of the sources of those failures, is a necessary complementary perspective. A study of the formative phase of Indian communism not only illuminates its later history, but also provides an explanation of some of the reasons for the failure of a radical alternative to Congress politics. Furthermore, it adds to our understanding of the nature of Congress politics, and of the general problems of the Left in relation to it and to the wider context of colonial India. At the same time, it

2. D.A. Washbrook, The Emergence of Provincial Politics: the Madras Presidency, 1870-1920, (Cambridge, 1976), pp.6-10.

provides a case study in the application of communist politics in the era of the Communist International. It therefore adds to the literature on the problems of communism in the wake of the Russian Revolution.

Some Characteristics of 'Mature' Indian Communism

Having characterised the history of Indian communism since the formation of the CPI as one of 'failure', it is necessary to establish more precisely what is meant by that term. I certainly do not mean to imply a failure of will on the part of the individual communists. Indeed the record of dedication to their cause, and of courage and sacrifice in pursuing it, makes the failures of the movement seem the more surprising. I am not seeking to explain the overall failure of the CPI to gain hegemony within the nationalist movement, though that fact is of some analytical significance in comparison with the Chinese and Vietnamese Communist Parties. Nor am I concerned, directly, with the Party's failure to establish itself as a decisive force in Indian politics, although this study will help to explain why that has been the case. Rather, the failure which I am primarily concerned to explain is close to that defined by Bipan Chandra as 'the basic failure' of Indian communism: the failure to create and project the essentials of 'an alternative social system, ... an alternative political leadership'.³ This failure to create even the nucleus

3. B. Chandra, 'Total Rectification', in Seminar, No. 178, 1974, p.26.

of an alternative to Congress and communal political culture, and to make such an alternative credible and accessible for the masses of the Indian population, underlies the wider failures of communism in India.

But is such a negative characterisation of the record of Indian communism legitimate? After all, it does have many notable achievements to its credit - from the formation of India's first genuine mass trade union in the late 1920s, to the world's first communist government elected under the system of parliamentary democracy. Further, informed observers, from the Intelligence Bureau of the colonial Government of India⁴ to a more recent, Indian historian of the Party,⁵ have consistently seen the CPI as a very real threat to the established order. In 1958 Overstreet and Windmiller could conclude that though the CPI was 'as yet some distance from the achievement of power in all of India', it was very possible that it could become 'truly a force to be reckoned with' in the future.⁶

An assessment from the vantage-point of the 1970s presents a rather different picture. For instance, a 1974 symposium devoted specifically to this question, to which a number of distinguished Indian academics and one former CPI leader contributed, produced a remarkable degree of consensus.⁷

4. See fn.1.

5. Masani, op. cit..

6. Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., pp.538-9.

7. Seminar, No. 178, 1974. It is titled 'Marxism and India: a symposium on the Application of an Ideology'. The contributors are: K. Damodaran, Bipan Chandra, Asok Sen, Ashok Mitra, and P.C. Joshi (of the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, not the former General Secretary of the CPI with the same name). It should be added that the critiques which they offered were not 'anti-communist'. For a post-Emergency restatement see N. Chakravarty, 'The Communist Spectrum', in Seminar, No. 216, 1977, pp.48-51.

From their different angles of vision they confirmed the following characterisation of the movement's history:

... somehow, relating Marxism ... to the Indian context has been an elusive process. ... [today] there seems little to demarcate the parties of the proletariat from the parties of the bourgeoisie... The history of the communist movement, as the main purveyor of Marxism in the country, reveals a vacillation between blunders and irrelevancies, both accompanied by a unique courage. ... Nowhere in all these years of Marxist parliamentary ... or underground activity has there emerged a picture either of the objective reality or the projected future of the Indian State.⁸

This is an essentially accurate, if bluntly stated, assessment. There is ample documentation of the shortcomings of the Indian communist movement since it emerged as a functioning Party in the mid-1930s:⁹ a chronic factionalism of sufficient severity to split the movement twice; violent strategic oscillations between extremes, such as ill-fated insurrectionary politics and pronounced 'popular-frontism', in the absence of major concurrent changes in the Indian situation; the communist mainstream's early 1960s' abandonment, in favour of 'parliamentarism',¹⁰ of a revolutionary mass strategy; a continuing inability to produce an autonomous and sociologically concrete theory of Indian politics or to act on the lessons of the past; a failure to create a politically educated, rather than merely executive, cadre structure; and the failure to build a firm base among the

8. The Editor, 'The Problem', in ibid., pp.10-11.

9. For sources see fn.37, below. We will return to these issues later in this chapter.

10. By 'parliamentarism' I mean the strategic conception that fundamental social change can be achieved essentially through parliamentary activity, and the consequent centering of political activity around electoral strategies at the expense of independent mass organising towards revolutionary ends.

more exploited sections of the peasantry. These failures heavily outweigh Indian communism's many partial achievements and its positive contributions to Indian political and intellectual life;¹¹ and they flow from the communists' 'basic failure' to establish an alternative political vision. The contemporary participation of the two biggest Communist Parties in Indian politics as little more than two more parties competing for power through the parliamentary system - giving only secondary attention to independent extra-parliamentary mass organisation - is one indication of this 'basic failure'.¹² The absence of a significant, Marxist-inspired, popular ideology and culture - a feature in striking contrast with, for instance, Vietnam¹³ - is another. The failures of the later history of the movement form a necessary perspective for an historical account of its origins.

Why, then, has Indian communism failed to create the essentials of a credible and commanding alternative political culture and leadership? One of the movement's dominating features has been the deeply symbiotic nature of the relationship which the Party leadership has established with post-revolutionary communist parties abroad. Many have seen this symbiosis as central to the Party's failures. K. Damodaran, for example, speaking with the added authority of having been a long-standing CPI leader, active at nearly all levels of the Party structure,

11. For a brief summary of some of these achievements, see Chandra, *op. cit.*, p.25.

12. See, eg., Bipan Chandra's comment (in *op. cit.*, p.26) on the Punjabi agricultural labourer who told him that the 'capitalists' had three parties in his area: 'the Congress, the Akalis and the Comrades'. For other commentary on contemporary communist 'parliamentarism' see fn.39 below.

13. See fn.43, below.

has described this relationship and its effects in the following terms:

... the Indian Communists failed to use the Marxist methodology to understand and change Indian reality. ... They were more eager to study the history of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] than their own history, economy and culture. ... Reliance on outside bodies - whether Moscow or China - as infallible and absolute authorities has undermined the necessary process of strategy formation ... [by] a praxis of Marxist theory and Indian revolutionary action.¹⁴

He argues, further, that this type of relationship has been replicated within the Party:

This external authoritarianism has also been reproduced in the relationships in the movement itself. This has resulted in a lack of education of [the] cadre through democratic participation. Democratic discussions depend on education of [the] cadre. Lack of education necessarily leads to the negation of inner party democracy and the consolidation of bureaucracy.¹⁵

An important consequence of this combination of 'external' and 'internal' characteristics has been the alienation of the Indian

14. K. Damodaran, 'The Past', Seminar, op. cit., p.23. See also his interview with Tariq Ali: 'Memoir of an Indian Communist', in New Left Review, No. 93, 1975, pp.35-59. Damodaran is unique in the Indian communist movement in having produced a radical critique of the movement's record after a long and distinguished career within it. He began as a founding member of the Party in Kerala in the late 1930s and became an important mass organiser and propagandist in that state as well as a leading member of the provincial organisation. He was elected to the Party's Central Committee in 1956 and was a member of that committee and its successor, the National Council, for the next twelve years. He served on the Central Executive Committee from 1958 to 1968. He has also been concerned with cultural issues and has written a number of books in this field and several popular dramas in the Malayalam language. He was a leading figure in the Progressive Writers Association. He represented the CPI in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Indian Parliament) from 1964 to 1970. He was engaged in historical research on the CPI, as a Fellow at Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi), when he died in July 1975. Because of his experience and the quality of his evaluation of the CPI's history he is an invaluable source for a study such as this.

15. loc. cit.

communist movement from both its Indian environment and its own historical experience - from two relationships essential for the development of an effective political alternative.

Damodaran and others have categorised this complex of features under the rubric of 'Stalinism'. There can be little doubt that the dual 'Stalinist' pattern described by him has been a dominant characteristic of Indian communism - particularly when it has been engaged in a revolutionary, extra-parliamentary, rather than a 'parliamentarist', strategy.¹⁶ That it has been retained by the Communist Party which has sought to make the most radical break with the Indian communist tradition - the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)) - indicates the depth of its roots.¹⁷

16. For example, the CPI(Marxist) (CPI(M)), which split from the CPI in 1964, has been formally - though far from completely - independent of the 'external' dimension of 'Stalinism'. However the CPI(M) has been, from the time of its inception and in common with the contemporary CPI, a 'parliamentarist' Party. Moreover, the 'internalised' dimension of 'Stalinism' has not weakened in the CPI(M). For accounts of the CPI(M) as a 'Stalinist' Party see: Ram, Indian Communism, passim; Damodaran, 'Memoir', p.57.

17. This is seen, for example, in the following slogan, which was popular during the 'Naxalite' period: 'China's Chairman is our Chairman'. The following appeared in the Party's organ in February 1970:

... we must conscientiously and seriously wage a struggle to establish the revolutionary authority of Comrade Charu Mazumdar (the CPI(ML) leader). Our slogan is: Internationally, we must follow Chairman Mao, Vice-Chairman Lin Piao and the great glorious and correct Communist Party of China as well as the world lessons of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution; nationally, we must be loyal to Chairman Mao, Vice-Chairman Lin Piao, and the Communist Party of China and must fully accept the revolutionary authority of the leadership of Comrade Charu Mazumdar.

(Quoted in M. Ram, Maoism in India, (Delhi, 1971), p.134.) For discussion of 'Stalinism' in the CPI(ML) during the Naxalite period, see ibid., passim; M. Ram, Indian

'Stalinism' has indeed been, I will argue, central to the problems of communism, and particularly revolutionary communism, in India. In demonstrating my case in the discussion which now follows I will be referring primarily to the undivided CPI, in the period from the mid-1930s to the early 1960s.

That Indian communism has been so completely 'Stalinised' has been due in large part to the apparently necessary role the phenomenon has played. Paradoxically, not only has 'Stalinism' been the introduced cause of the movement's most fundamental problems, but it has also been adopted as the 'cure' of fundamental and chronic problems in its internal relationships. These problems have been due not only to the Party's 'Stalinist' character, but also to the great and manifold difficulties it has faced in its Indian environment. That is, the 'Stalinisation' of Indian communism has been, simultaneously, a cause, symptom and cure of the range of problems which have prevented the communist movement from emerging as a viable alternative, revolutionary force in India. Thus the concept of 'Stalinisation' focusses the most fundamental of the Indian communist movement's internal troubles and the relationship between these and the difficulties imposed by its national and international environments. For this reason the concept can be used not only descriptively, but also as a valuable analytical tool.

17. Cont'd

Communism: Split Within a Split, (New Delhi, 1969), pp.253-67; and P. Mitra and M. Sen, Communist Party and Naxalites, (CPI, New Delhi, 1971), which also reproduces many selections from the CPI(ML) press.

However I have chosen to use the term 'bolshevisation' rather than 'Stalinisation'. I have adapted the term from one which was used in the post-Leninist Comintern. During the debates at the Fifth World Congress of the Comintern in June-July 1924 the anti-Trotsky faction associated with Stalin introduced a slogan which was subsequently to become a program - 'Bolshevise the Communist International'.¹⁸ The 'Bolshevisation' program came eventually to incorporate all of the characteristics which are associated with 'Stalinisation'. But the term 'bolshevisation' is not only less burdened by the pejorative (and sometimes laudatory) connotations of 'Stalinisation', but is also a more useful concept analytically. It does not limit the phenomena associated with 'Stalinisation' to the personality, goals and initiatives of its most outstanding protagonist in the way that the latter term tends to do. It is more suggestive of a wider context - of the fact that the roots of 'Stalinism' went much wider and deeper than Stalin himself, beyond the extremes for which he, personally, was responsible. The 'bolshevisation' of the Comintern was a structural phenomenon, as well as a conscious policy initiated by a particular Soviet faction during Stalin's rise to prominence in the 1920s and consummated with his dictatorship in the 1930s. It arose largely from the exigencies faced by

18. For analyses of the content and context of the 'Bolshevisation' slogan see: F. Claudin, The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform, (London, 1975), pp.141-2, p.624; I. Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed - Trotsky: 1921-1929, (London, 1959), pp.146-51; E.H. Carr, Socialism In One Country, Vol. 3, (London, 1964), pp.92-4, 293-308; K.E. McKenzie, Comintern and World Revolution 1928-1943: the Shaping of Doctrine, (London and New York, 1964), pp.55-7, 93-4.

the isolated Russian Revolution and post-Revolution Soviet Union, and it incorporated certain premises established in the Comintern during its Leninist phase. In this thesis I distinguish the more inclusive sense of the term and its derivatives from the narrower, programmatic sense, by the use of a lower case 'b' for the former and an upper case 'B' and quotation marks for the latter: bolshevisation and 'Bolshevisation' respectively.

The Soviet Roots and Dynamics of Bolshevisation

Before investigating the relationship between bolshevisation and the failures of 'mature' Indian communism we need first to examine the phenomenon at its source - post-Revolution Soviet Russia.

In December 1924, some six months after the emergence of the slogan 'Bolshevisation of the Communist International', there appeared another, complementary slogan: 'Socialism in one country'.¹⁹ These complementary slogans heralded an allegedly theoretical, though in fact pragmatic resolution of the dilemmas produced for Marxist theory by the unanticipated and unprecedented situation of an isolated 'workers' state' in a predominantly pre-capitalist society, riven by internal crisis, with its original Party activists and working class decimated, and surrounded by hostile and far more powerful capitalist states. The 'Bolshevisation' program was based on the twin assumptions that revolutions would not occur elsewhere in the foreseeable future and that in the interim the interests of the

19. For the following, see the sources cited in fn.18.

world revolution were coterminous with the consolidation of the Soviet Union and the construction of socialism within its boundaries. The 'Bolshevisation' of the Comintern thus required a fundamental erosion of the autonomy of its member parties. In 1929, when the 'Bolshevisation' program was reaching its penultimate phase, it was described in the Comintern's Executive Committee (ECCI) as

... a process of cleansing of the Party membership of all that is putrid and inactive, of all that weighs down upon them as ballast, and retards the progress of the Parties. What the Right wingers call "crises" in the Comintern is but the Bolshevisation of the Communist Parties ... This, if it may be so put, is but a passing into a "higher class", in the course of which all that is undesirable, unsuitable and backward, is swept away from the Communist movement.²⁰

'Bolshevisation' required the communist parties' 'overcoming of internal resistance and hesitations' in regard to the execution of Comintern and ECCI policy, it was explained elsewhere on the same occasion.²¹ But by 1929 the Stalinist faction of the CPSU, rather than the communist parties of the world, established the criteria for determining which communist elements were 'putrid and inactive, ... undesirable, unsuitable and backward', and what constituted a '"higher class"' of communist party. Thus the implementation of the 'Bolshevisation' program

20. Report by Manuilsky to the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI, 3/7/29, International Press Correspondence (hereafter, Inprecor), Vol. 9(4), 1929, p.852.

21. From Kuusinen's concluding speech at the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI, Inprecor, Vol.9(53), p.1151. Kuusinen's speech contained a special section titled 'On the Further Bolshevisation of Communist Parties'.

involved, in Trotsky's words, the transformation of the communist parties from 'the vanguards of the world revolution' into 'the frontier guards' of the Soviet state.²²

That both the 'Bolshevisation' and 'Socialism in one country' slogans first appeared in the year of Lenin's death has great symbolic significance. Nevertheless the compromising of the autonomy of the member parties did not begin with Stalin. From the time of its foundation in March 1919 the Comintern had been an 'ultra-centralist' organisation. Its central organ, the ECCI, for example, possessed drastic executive powers over the national sections far in excess of that of the executives of the First and Second Internationals.²³

Stalin did not have to change the constitution of the Comintern in order to achieve his objectives within it. It was a long way from the original operational principles practised in the organisation to Dimitrov's 1935 rallying call - 'To guard the Bolshevik unity of the party as the apple of one's eye is the first and highest law of Bolshevism'.²⁴ There was, nevertheless, a certain continuity. This element of continuity is important. The founding of the Comintern, and the extremely centralised form that it adopted, were intimately connected to the pressing problem of the continued isolation of the victorious

22. Trotsky, quoted by Isaac Deutscher, in Stalin: a Political Biography, (London, 1966), p.389.

23. The structure of the organisation was not formalised until its Second Congress in 1920. The constitution and operational principles adopted in 1920 are reproduced in J. Degras, The Communist International, 1919-1943: Documents, Vol. 1 - 1919-1922, (London, 1956), pp.161-72.

24. Quoted in Claudin, op. cit., p.122. (Claudin's emphasis.)

revolution in Russia: both the timing and the form were closely linked with the need to break this fateful isolation by facilitating revolution elsewhere in the immediate future.²⁵

In 1917 Lenin, following his theory of contemporary, finance-dominated monopoly capitalism being capitalism's 'highest' and last phase, believed that the advanced capitalist west - and particularly Germany - was in an 'objectively revolutionary' state. Proletarian revolution in Russia, he argued, would almost certainly catalyse revolution in the west. Indeed, this was a fundamental premise of the 1917 'April Theses' with which he convinced his hesitant Bolshevik comrades that the Party should take the gamble and by-pass the bourgeois-democratic revolution and proceed directly to the proletarian revolution. But Lenin recognised that without a supporting proletarian revolution in the west - or in at least some of the advanced capitalist countries - soon after the Russian Revolution, the latter would have little chance of survival. In the immediate aftermath of the 1917 Revolution Lenin continued to believe that Europe was 'objectively revolutionary'. The failure of the Revolution to materialise was due, he believed, to the absence of a crucial element - effective communist parties of the Bolshevik type. Accordingly, in 1919, with the isolated

25. See for example: ibid., pp.51-5, 103-9; M. Liebman, Leninism Under Lenin, (London, 1975), pp.385-416, and particularly pp.404-16; E.H. Carr, The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 3, (London, 1966), pp.121-33. Claudin's analysis is particularly interesting for the relationship that he establishes between Lenin's theoretical schema of the world revolution and the timing of the formation of the Comintern and the structure which it was given. The following discussion of Lenin and the Comintern is based primarily on Claudin's analysis.

Russian Revolution gravely endangered, he initiated an event which he had been urging ever since the Second International had capitulated to national chauvinism and the bourgeoisie at the outset of the First World War: a split with the Second International and the founding of a Third International of revolutionary Marxist parties. The Third, or Communist International was Leninist in its organisational form, in the policy it adopted and in the theory of world revolution which underlay both. It was imperative and urgent, Lenin argued, that, with world capitalism in its terminal phase, the revolutionaries of the advanced capitalist nations should come together to form a World Party which, as a 'General Staff', could effectively plan and execute a coordinated World Revolution. As Claudin has shown, Lenin's conception of the World Party was that of an internationalised Bolshevik Party. The model was internationalised without taking into account the specificity of the original model's development or of its relationship to the conditions of Tsarist Russia: it was, in effect, a proposal 'to create chemically pure Bolshevik parties overnight'.²⁶ In fact the founding of the Comintern created both the International and its first member parties in the same act. In accordance with Lenin's theory of the imminence of world revolution, and through the universalisation of the Bolshevik model, the Third International became a highly centralised organisation directed, above all, towards one immediate goal. Its Executive Committee, apart from being given great directive powers over its national sections, was also, and necessarily, seated in Moscow until - Lenin hoped - revolution elsewhere made its transfer possible. Moreover, the Soviet state provided most

26. Claudin, op. cit., p.109.

of its funding and Bolsheviks occupied the most important executive positions. Because of these organisational, operational and situational features and - probably more importantly - because of the successful Bolsheviks' tremendous prestige among revolutionaries, the Russian Party inevitably dominated the organisation. In doing so it transgressed a principle of international revolutionary organisation earlier upheld by Lenin. Commenting in 1907 on the authority held within the Second International by the German Social Democrats (who at that stage he greatly respected), Lenin stressed that

important though this authority is in widening the horizon of the [proletarian] fighters, it would be impermissible in the workers' party to claim that the practical and concrete questions of its immediate policy can be solved by those standing a long way off. The collective spirit of the progressive class-conscious workers immediately engaged in the struggle in each country will always remain the highest authority on all such questions.²⁷

Had Lenin's schema of world revolution been confirmed by events in the short term, and had the isolation of the Russian Revolution thus been broken, then the Comintern's subsequent problems would not have arisen in the acute form in which they did. Claudin has demonstrated how the discrepancy which did arise constituted an implicit and fundamental crisis of Leninist theory and practice. However only Lenin appears to have become aware of the crisis.²⁸ But, immobilised by his

27. Quoted in ibid., pp.115-16. (My emphasis.)

28. Most notably, in his last article (Feb. 1923), 'Better Fewer, But Better', in his Collected Works, (Moscow, 1966), Vol.33, pp.499-501. See also his critical comments on the excessive 'Russian-ness' of the decisions taken at the 1922 Fourth World Congress of the Comintern, in 'Five Years of the Russian Revolution and the Prospects of the World Revolution', in ibid., p.430.

stroke, it was too late for him to act effectively upon his last reflections. The centralism of, and the Bolshevik hegemony within, the Comintern, had initially been linked to a theory of imminent revolution. These characteristics, of doubtful value even initially, became completely anachronistic in the post-War stabilisation of the capitalist world. But instead of being decentralised accordingly, the Comintern was, from 1924, progressively to become far more centralised and Soviet-dominated. Moreover, Stalin's programs for revolution elsewhere were firmly linked to his domestic preoccupations and so bypassed most of the revolutionary content of Leninism. Certain crucial modes which had been absent from the latter were introduced. One example was the 'religiosity' which was imported into Marxist theory and ideology: the canonisation, and thus neutralisation, of Lenin's writings, the cult of Lenin, and then of Stalin, and the theological category of crime of conscience for dissent from majority positions.²⁹ Another was the sanctification of bureaucracy and hierarchical privilege and the active promotion of bureaucratic structures and values close in form to those of Tsarist Russia. Bolshevisation meant the transference to the Comintern of these modes, which were associated with the 'construction of socialism' in Russia. It thus represented the projection of the problems of one particular post-revolutionary situation, and of one

29. A particularly clear example of this novel 'religiosity' is cited by Deutscher - Stalin's 1924 'Oath to Lenin'. In this 'the style of the Communist Manifesto is strangely blended with that of the Orthodox Prayer Book' - in Stalin, pp.272-3. This style was to become all-pervasive.

particular response to those problems, on to communist parties which were in a highly diverse range of pre-revolutionary situations.

The form which this projection took in the post-Leninist Comintern had a number of specific dimensions. The bases of political activity - theory, ideology, policy and organisation³⁰ - were progressively distorted between 1924 and 1935, and the issue of the relationship between political activity and popular culture was barely raised.³¹ Theory, the ostensible basis of organisational forms and policy, was transformed into extremely abstract rationalisations of policies determined by the dominant faction of the CPSU according to criteria only tangentially related to concrete realities in specific national situations. The already fragile democracy of the 'democratic centralism' which was the original organisational principle of the Third International was replaced by the ideal of the 'iron monolith', its 'iron unity' protected from dissent, actual or potential, by the exercise of 'iron discipline' from above. In the realm of ideological activity, the notorious 'wooden language' which became the lingua franca of the Comintern, epitomised the reduction of ideology to a dogmatised, clichéd

30. I do not make a sharp division between 'ideology' and 'theory'. But I use the former in the sense of 'world-view' - a conception of the social world which is not necessarily internally logically consistent. I use the latter in the sense of a systematic body of reasoning within which internal logical consistency is important - at least as a goal. 'Ideology' is the interconnected constellation of conceptions through which the world is 'spontaneously' understood - continuous with both 'culture' and 'common-sense'. The transformation of the existing popular ideologies through the propagation of an alternative ideology acceptable to the masses is a pre-condition of revolutionary change. Theory is the analytical guide to political practice.

31. Gramsci was a notable exception. But he was jailed by the Fascists in 1926 and his conceptions had little impact outside Italy.

orthodoxy. Finally, Comintern policies came to possess 'a peculiarly deadening quality: they were neither revolutionary nor reformist, but abstract and ineffective'.³²

Thus the implementation of the 'Bolshevisation' program both realised, and added greatly to, the most negative of the possible consequences for the autonomy of the world's communist parties inherent from the beginning in the isolation of the Russian Revolution and in the character of the Comintern. The issue of bolshevisation therefore raises the more general question of the nature of the complex legacy of the Russian Revolution for revolution elsewhere, and it suggests that it was an ambiguous legacy. On the one hand, the 'ten days that shook the world', and their aftermath, have provided inspiration, revolutionary principles and resources for other communist movements. Moreover, a few of these have been successful. But at the same time the projection on to the world stage of the patterns of the Bolshevik Revolution and of its post-revolutionary consequences in Russia has eroded the potential for revolution elsewhere. The study of the bolshevisation of a particular communist party - in our case the Communist Party of India - can perhaps illuminate, to a limited extent, this much broader question.

Bolshevisation, Communist Parties and National Environments

Isaac Deutscher has encapsulated the effect of bolshevisation on the relationships between a communist party and its Comintern and national environments in the following passage:

32. Claudin, op. cit., p.640.

It was as if the giant figure of an athlete engaged in a homeric fight had thrown around itself twenty or thirty shadows, each mimicking the tense wrestling and violent gestures of the real body, each pretending to shake heaven and earth. The strange picture was made even stranger by the fact that the foreign sections of the Comintern were not mere shadows. They were half bodies and half shadows. With one part of their existence they were immersed in the realities of their national life ... while with the other they participated in the hectic dance of phantoms round the General Secretary.³³

In the terms of this metaphor, a particular communist party was bolshevised to the extent that it became a 'shadow' of Soviet politics and correspondingly divorced from its own national environment. No communist party, not even the Maoist faction of the Chinese Party (CCP), escaped bolshevisation completely.³⁴ Yet some parties, and most notably the Chinese and Vietnamese, managed to retain sufficient autonomy in their relationships with the Comintern to become 'bodies' rather than 'shadows', and thus to provide effective leadership for their respective revolutions. This fact raises the question of why some parties were able largely to escape bolshevisation while most did not.

Although a comprehensive comparative answer to this question is beyond the scope of this study, it does introduce a necessary perspective. A number of determinants of the nature and extent of the bolshevisation of communist parties can be identified with some confidence.

33. Deutscher, Stalin, pp.398-99.

34. For a perceptive analysis of the relationship between Maoism and 'Bolshevism' see R. Lew, 'Maoism and the Chinese Revolution', in The Socialist Register, 1975, pp.115-59. See also S. Schram, 'The Party in Chinese Communist Ideology', in China Quarterly, No. 38, 1969, pp.1-26.

The level of contact between a party and the international communist movement, and the amount of attention paid to the party by the Comintern leadership, were factors of obvious importance. So, too, were the timing of a party's first contact with the Comintern and the particular way in which it was mediated. These factors would determine the extent to which a party leadership was exposed to both the positive and the negative elements of the Russian Revolution's ambiguous legacy, the extent to which it became aware of the Leninist rather than the post-Leninist phase of the Comintern, and the level of its exposure to the 'Bolshevisation' program.

But the inter-related factors of the extent of a communist party's capacity for effective revolutionary leadership, and the nature of its national environment, were also crucial. The social and political backgrounds of a party's recruits, and the extent to which they were familiar with the Marxist revolutionary tradition, would have a direct bearing on the question of its competence as a revolutionary leadership. But the key determinants would be the existence or otherwise of autonomous radical mass traditions and of contemporary social and political upheaval, and the degree of stability of the existing structures of social and political control. These features would determine the extent of the available 'space' for revolutionary organising and the consequent potential for the development of communist-led, autonomous, revolutionary momentum. They would also determine the viability of radical, non-communist political alternatives for the politicised intelligentsia, and thus, to a significant degree, the extent to which a communist party would be able to attract talented

leaders to its ranks. The importance of able leadership was demonstrated as well as stressed by the Bolsheviks. But the Bolshevik experience also demonstrated the conditioning effects of national environmental factors on a political leadership. For example, the development of the Russian labour movement - particularly as manifested in the 'spontaneous' workers' soviet movements of 1905 and 1917 - made a deep impact upon Lenin's conceptualisation of the relationship between the Party and the masses. This led him (though ambiguously) beyond the mechanistic and exaggeratedly 'elitist' thinking of his 1902 work, What Is to Be Done?.³⁵ Similarly, it was the development of the revolutionary situation in 1917 that led Trotsky, finally, to abandon the non-Bolshevik revolutionary alternative and join Lenin's party.

The following chapters of this thesis will show that in the CPI's formative phase the combination of the above national and international features was, on balance, decidedly unfavourable, and that the potential for bolshevisation was correspondingly great. The failures of Indian communism have a context - they have not simply been the failures of leaderships.

Bolshevisation, the CPI and the Indian Context: the Dilemma of the Indian Left

With an understanding of the meaning of bolshevisation, and of the importance of specific environmental factors in determining its specific role and effects within a particular party, we can now return to the question raised earlier - the

35. See A. Carlo, 'Lenin on the Party', in Telos, No. 17, 1973, pp.1-40.

nature of the relationship between bolshevisation and the CPI's failure. The issue of Party factionalism provides a useful focus for this inquiry. It has been the most conspicuous of the Indian movement's internal problems, and one which bolshevisation was intended to resolve; moreover, it has been the most overt symptom of the Party's difficulties in relation to its Indian environment.

The evidence provided by existing studies of Indian communism after the period of its formation³⁶ reveals a definite pattern of relationships between bolshevisation and Party factionalism.³⁷ As we have seen, a central intention of the 'Bolshevisation' campaign was the eradication of factionalism - 'deviationism' - and its replacement by 'monolithic unity'. This campaign could be effective in the Soviet Union, where all of the resources of the state apparatus could be mobilised to crush opposition. For the CPI (and other communist parties), without such resources, bolshevisation produced a different result. It could not 'liquidate' the problem in the

36. In addition to: Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit.; Ram, Indian Communism and Maoism; and Sinha, op. cit.; see: J.H. Kautsky, Moscow and the Communist Party of India, (New York, 1956); B.S. Gupta, Communism in Indian Politics, (Columbia, 1972), and 'India's Rival Communist Models', in Problems of Communism, Vol. 22(1), 1973, pp.1-15; P.R. Brass and M.F. Franda, (Eds.), Radical Politics in South Asia, (Cambridge, Mass., 1973); M.F. Franda, Radical Politics in West Bengal, (Cambridge, Mass., 1971); H. Gelman, 'The Communist Party of India: Sino-Soviet Battleground', in A. Doak Barnett, (Ed.), Communist Strategies in Asia: a Comparative Analysis of Governments and Parties, (Bombay, 1968); and B. Pavier, 'The Telengana Armed Struggle', in Economic and Political Weekly (hereafter EPW), Vol. 9(32-34), 1974, pp.1413-20, which provides a useful analysis of the relationship between the different levels of the CPI leadership during that movement. I have included few of the several regional studies of the CPI that are available.

37. This pattern has emerged most clearly during the movement's periodic crises. For example: the transition from P.C. Joshi's leadership to the B.T. Ranadive leadership

CPI; it could only provide certain external resources to suppress the immediate symptoms. At the same time the dogmatic, arbitrary, bureaucratic and highly authoritarian bolshevist modes have aggravated the problem in the longer term. The factions were bolshevised and, as a consequence, have tended to be particularly rigidly formed and sectarian rather than fluid alliances based primarily on serious political differences. The Party split in 1964 appears to have been the logical outcome of this situation.³⁸ Rather than 'monolithic unity', Indian communism has been characterised by what Overstreet and Windmiller have called a 'factional balance of power'.³⁹ The factions, rather than the Party as a whole, have been 'monolithic': the Party has been characterised by a 'multiple monolithicity'.

37. Cont'd

in 1947-48; the struggle to replace the Ranadive leadership during 1949-50 and then the successor Andhra leadership during 1950-51; and the protracted crisis leading to the formal split and formation of the CPI(M) in 1964. The later split within the CPI(M) ranks and the formation of the CPI(ML) falls within this pattern. For the most part, the studies cited in fn.36 above do not go beyond describing the conflict patterns. They do not provide an adequate explanation of the interaction of the bolshevisation mode and the social roots of factionalism.

38. Even though it was the most overtly ideologised of factional struggles in the CPI, it was, in the opinion of one of the participants, more an organisational struggle for electoral tactical advantage than an expression of major strategic differences: Damodaran, 'Memoir', pp.55-7. T.R. Sharma's 'Electoral Imperatives in the Indian Communist Party Split' in Modern Asian Studies (hereafter, MAS), Vol. 10(3), 1976, pp.349-60, lends further support to this analysis.

39. Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., p.352.

The 'factional balance' has characteristically been maintained by the dominance of one faction over suppressed competitors, and of one exclusive policy over equally rigidly defined alternatives. Among the resources available for maintaining this dominance, and hence 'unity', legitimacy conferred by the ECCI and its successors has been the most important. But legitimacy has not necessarily been conferred in accordance with demonstrated political superiority. This situation has resulted in recurring struggles by subordinate factions for the conferred legitimacy and, if granted (or apparently granted), in a realignment in the 'factional balance of power'.⁴⁰ The realignment has usually been traumatic, involving a campaign to discredit the previous leadership and the dissociation of the newly dominant faction from its predecessors. This process has resulted in sharp discontinuities not only in policy, which has often swung from one pole to its diametric opposite, but also in leadership - and hence in political experience. Beneath these discontinuities, however, the more fundamental continuity of the bolshevist mode has prevailed.

The factionalism and discontinuity inherent in this mode have been supplemented by the periodic changes in the content of policy issued by Moscow. These changes have

40. This is particularly apparent in the prolonged crisis between 1947 and 1951, when successive factions gained control of the Party by virtue of their being able successively to claim Moscow's concurrence in their policies. The sequence was completed when the unstable new Central Committee sent a four man delegation to Moscow to get a definite ruling from the CPSU leadership. See: Ram, Indian Communism, pp.49-50; Damodaran, 'Memoir', pp.43-4; and S.A. Dange (one of the delegation), When Communist (sic) Differ, (Bombay, 1970), pp.56-8.

consistently lacked theoretical justification and have been quite arbitrary in relation to Indian developments. Nevertheless, the CPI has been required to accept that the successive changes were theoretically continuous. The legitimisation of policy changes by arbitrary authority, rather than by demonstrated theoretical and political consistency or superiority, has further exacerbated factional disagreement. This arbitrariness has also required the development of a camouflaging mystique of infallibility around the leadership. The leadership has not, as a rule, made itself accountable to the lower Party levels, and so has not had to justify its policy changes to them in terms of demonstrable changes in the 'objective situation'. It has relied instead on a claim to infallibility-by-proxy by virtue of its role as representative of 'the Centre' of the 'World Party'.

This bolshevist leadership cult has reinforced rather than confronted the 'neo-feudal' modes of consciousness imported into the Party by recruits. In K. Damodaran's words, the bolshevist cult of the 'great teacher' has fitted comfortably with an Indian 'tradition ... of political gurus enlightening the masses'.⁴¹ This cultism has encouraged a passive attitude of loyalty to particular leaders among the lower level cadres. This attitude

41. Damodaran, 'Memoir', p.38. This quotation occurs in the following passage, in which he comments upon his own induction into this cult in the 1930s and 1940s:

We were told that Stalin was the 'great teacher', the 'guiding star'... . 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. See also B. Chandra, op. cit., passim, for an analysis of this phenomenon.

is conducive to 'vertical' factionalism around personalities rather than 'horizontal' factionalism around serious political differences.

Thus the combined result of the bolshevist mode and the changes in policy content within that mode has been the continual interruption of the movement's continuity and the separation of the Party from the Indian environment. These conditions have precluded the development of an effective Marxist alternative to the predominant political modes. Instead, with few exceptions, the CPI's Marxism has been characterised by a curious combination of bolshevist 'metaphysical materialism'⁴² and a narrowly pragmatic-programatic type of analysis, and by a failure to create a body of Marxist theory and popular culture wedded to the Indian environment.⁴³

It can be seen, then, that bolshevisation undermined the potential of communism in India. Yet, despite this, the CPI did survive as a significant political entity, whereas the non-bolshevised Marxist movements which developed in India in the colonial period have not survived.⁴⁴ This fact

42. This is Gramsci's term; see his penetrating critique of the 'vulgar Marxist' elevation of materialism to a transcendental metaphysic, in his 'Critical Notes on an Attempt at Popular Sociology', in Prison Notebooks, pp.419-72.

43. For an analysis of the communists' failure in the spheres of culture and philosophy see P.C. Joshi, 'Towards a Renewal', in Seminar, No. 178, 1974, pp.47-57. As Joshi points out, the relative lack of concern with culture, ethics and philosophy, contrasts markedly with the development of the communist movements in China and Vietnam. In the case of Vietnam this concern, and its importance for the development of communist hegemony in that country, is demonstrated very clearly in David Marr's current work on continuity and change in Vietnamese cultural and intellectual history from the 1920s into the 1940s (tentatively titled 'Vietnamese Tradition on Trial: An Intellectual History, 1920-1945'). This complements his Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925,

suggests that revolutionary Marxism in India faced a dilemma which was inherent for the Left in the Indian situation. On the one hand, bolshevisation appears to have fulfilled a necessary function by providing the only effective resource for the resolution of the recurring internal crises consequent upon the problems it has faced in its Indian environment. But, simultaneously, bolshevisation contributed to the crises and precluded the development of a viable communist alternative.

The crisis had already appeared and the bolshevist solution had been adopted by the mid-thirties, when the CPI first emerged as a functioning centralised party. Both the problem and solution had developed organically from the experiences of the communist groups in the preceding decade, during the difficult process of formation of the Party. This foundation has been retained by the Indian communist movement since then, through all of the violent oscillations of policy, splits and regroupments which have characterised its history. When viewed from this perspective the CPI's history has not been one of development, but of the continuous reproduction of this original mode. This is a case, therefore, where a

43. Cont'd

(Berkeley, 1971). See also Nguyen Duc Minh, 'A Study Of the Literature of Persuasion of North Vietnam', (Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1973).

44. Two notable cases being the socialist group in the Indian National Congress, whose cooption by the Congress leadership is studied in B.R. Tomlinson, The Indian National Congress and the Raj, 1929-1942, (London, 1976), and the Royists, whose eventual demise is traced in Haithcox, op. cit.. Damodaran says that one of the reasons for the CPI's continued 'Stalinism' was that for dissatisfied communists 'there was no revolutionary alternative to the line of the CPI': 'Memoir', p.51.

study of origins leads directly to an understanding of a movement's later history in quite different conditions. The following thesis is an investigation of the previously neglected questions of why and how the pattern was first established.

The Formation of the CPI - the Thesis

The ascription of a date at which the process of Party formation began is inevitably somewhat arbitrary. One could argue that the formation began in the immediate post-War years, with the ideological impact of the Russian Revolution upon the few intellectuals who were to become India's first communists. One could also - with the CPI(M) - nominate 1921, which was when an expatriate CPI was formed by some Indians at Soviet Tashkent.⁴⁵ Or one could choose - as does the CPI - 1925, which was when a nominal CPI was formed on Indian soil.⁴⁶ I have selected 1927, which was when the first political grouping with an identifiably Marxist program was formed. Moreover, it was from this point that changing political conditions stimulated communist development. However I

45. For a CPI(M) statement of this position, see M. Ahmad, The Communist Party of India and its Formation Abroad, (Calcutta, 1962).

46. The CPI's argument for 1925 is put forward in G. Adhikari, 'The First Indian Communist Conference in Kanpur: Introduction', in G. Adhikari, Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Vol. 1 (1917-1922), (New Delhi, 1972), pp.591-629. However Adhikari does recognise (p.629) that the 1925 conference 'did not have the features of a proper foundation congress of a communist party'. See the essentially social democratic Constitution and Objects of the Party formed at Kanpur in 1925, reproduced in ibid., pp.662-66. The executive committee formed at this conference did not meet again until May 1927.

would agree with critics that this is an arbitrary choice and that earlier developments were important. But in agreeing with them I would nevertheless argue that the gradual, hesitant ideological transition of India's future communists, from 'pure' nationalism towards a Marxist conception of nationalist politics, was of much more significance for the subsequent development of the Party than were the two contested CPI foundation dates.

From 1927 the formation of the Party proceeded unevenly until a functioning, centralised, all-India organisation was finally established in the mid-1930s. The formation process can be separated analytically into three distinct stages, the first two of which are defined primarily by developments in Bombay: 1. 1927-29 - a stage in which a systematic Marxist theory of Indian politics, a communist mass base and position of influence in nationalist politics, and functioning communist political organisations, were established for the first time; 2. 1929-33 - a stage in which a sharp conjunctural change occurred, resulting in the disintegration of the mass base, of the position in nationalist politics, and of the communist leadership itself, and in the reversal of the earlier trend towards theoretical and political autonomy; and 3. 1934-37 - a stage in which the old leadership emerged from jail and forged a functioning (and bolshevised) national Party organisation from the existing scattered and divided communist groupings. It was from this basis that the CPI emerged as a significant element in Indian politics.

Did the CPI have an alternative to bolshevisation? This thesis argues that bolshevisation was a necessary pre-

condition for the formation of a centralised communist party in the conditions existing in colonial India. That the original bolshevisation dynamic which was established in these formative years bears a close relationship to the pattern described earlier for 'mature' Indian communism suggests that there has been a high degree of continuity in the conditions which have shaped the Party. In this thesis I will attempt to identify the main features of this conditioning structure of opposition to communist politics as it operated in the critical mid-1920s to mid-1930s phase of Indian politics.

That the CPI was not bolshevised until the latter stages of its formative period facilitates the investigation. The period under study forms a unity in terms of the theme of formation, but a clear distinction can be made between a 'pre-bolshevised' phase and one of bolshevisation. The year 1929 was the watershed between the two phases. A comparison of these two phases is particularly instructive because significant, though contrasting, successes were won in each of them. This comparison reveals the relative strengths and weaknesses of both non-bolshevised and bolshevised Indian communism and allows a more penetrating study of the original causes of the Party's bolshevisation. The heuristic value of this contrast is complemented by that of the contrast between Bombay and Calcutta - the two locations to which, essentially, formative Indian communism remained confined. By studying the reasons for the widely varying outcomes for communist politics in these two cities we are able to identify more precisely the elements in the colonial Indian environment

which contributed towards the bolshevisation of the CPI.

These elements are outlined in Chapter 2. This chapter first examines the historical background of the Bombay and Calcutta communists' national and international environments and establishes the way in which these environments functioned in the early and mid-1920s, before the CPI's formation began. I identify 'colonialisation' as the ultimate national determinant of the possibilities for and limitations to communist politics. More precisely, the character of British colonialism in India, and the different levels of its penetration into eastern and western India, meant that the communists faced quite different prospects in the two cities. The extent of colonialisation determined the extent to which pre-colonial characteristics were retained in the colonial period. It profoundly affected those elements of the environment which would have a direct bearing on the fate of communist politics: it shaped the socio-economic and politico-cultural characteristics of the social groups from which the communists were recruited (these characteristics including the intelligentsia's relationship to the masses), and it largely determined the socio-economic bases and ideological characteristics of nationalism, the political economy of industry, the composition and characteristics of the working class, and the relationship between the colonial state and society. Chapter 2 begins, therefore, with an account of colonialisation, as it operated in India, and establishes the unevenness of its penetration into the two regions. It then outlines the ways in which colonialisation shaped the different relevant elements in eastern and western India and then, against this background, delineates the contrasting

characters of Calcutta and Bombay. The emergence, in the upheaval of the post-War years, of the antecedents of Indian communism, is then related to these respective contexts. I then examine a particular problem common to both communist groups - the nature of the Raj's strategy towards political opposition in general, and radical mass politics in particular. The Raj's first initiatives against Indian 'Communism' are examined against this background. Finally, I look at the international communist environment shaping the development of Indian communism in the 1920s. In particular, I identify India's role in Comintern analyses and politics and the organisational links between international communism and India, and evaluate the adequacy of the Indian communists' received Marxism.

Chapter 3 is a study of the implementation of the communists' working class programs in Bombay and Calcutta in 1927-29 - a period of unusually high industrial unrest and freedom from anti-communist repression. By studying the widely contrasting results in Bombay and Calcutta it shows how, in these conditions, the structural and ideological differences outlined in Chapter 2 allowed the communists to establish close contact with the Bombay working class and to build a mass trade union base, but prevented the Calcutta communists from replicating these achievements. From this comparative study I draw some conclusions about the necessary conditions of the mass mobilisation which was the necessary pre-condition, in turn, for non-bolshevisation.

In Chapter 4 we examine comparatively the consequences for the respective communist leaderships of the working class

success in Bombay and the failure in Calcutta. In particular, I examine the integrative and 'proletarianising' effects of a mass base and political momentum upon a communist leadership, and the correlated autonomous tendencies induced by this mass base and momentum in the communists' orientation towards the Comintern. Bombay and Calcutta provide an instructive, if not total, contrast in this regard.

In Chapter 5 we see that the conditions under which the Bombay developments of 1927-28 occurred were atypical and temporary. The political conditions which allowed the communists to exploit the industrial opportunities which became available proved to be dependent on a particular, concurrent phase in the overarching conflict between their two main political opponents - 'bourgeois' nationalism and the colonial state. From early 1929 this situation changed, and by mid-1930 the earlier 'revolutionary space' had virtually disappeared. The leadership was arrested and the still very vulnerable communist mass movement was broken. These difficult conditions were to remain in force throughout the Depression/Civil Disobedience period. By studying the crises of the 1929-33 period we are able to see more clearly the essential features of the complex structure of opposition to radical mass politics which, in the final analysis, ensured the bolshevisation of the CPI. In this structure we can see some of the continuities, as well as the discontinuities, between 'bourgeois' nationalism and the Raj.

The conjunctural shift in India from 1929 coincided with major changes in the Comintern - the penultimate phase in the bolshevisation of the Comintern. Moreover, the negative

effects of this intensification of the 'Bolshevisation' program were compounded by an associated, ECCI-decreed, political strategy. These changes are the subject of Chapter 6. Because India played a number of important ideological roles in this Russian-centered strategy, the CPI received particular attention in this phase. Thus the CPI was subjected to both an intensified 'Bolshevisation' and an inappropriate, pragmatically and externally determined policy, at a point at which it was particularly vulnerable.

This compounded the Party's existing problems in the 1929-33 period - problems which the thesis studies in Chapter 7. The crisis of Party leadership in this period confirmed the necessity of revolutionary momentum for the development of a creative, 'proletarianised' and 'Indianised' communism. Just as the atypically favourable conditions of 1927-28 had allowed the Bombay communists and working class to demonstrate their respective capacities to create a politicised mass movement, so the harsh conditions of 1929-33 demonstrated, in an extreme form, the great problems for Indian communism inherent in both its national and its international environments.

The extreme nature of the crisis in the 1929-30 period prompted a correspondingly extreme, bolshevist solution. This solution was based on a selective synthesis from the lessons of the past decade. It was formulated by the jailed 1920s leaders - who, because of the jail experience, became India's first united national leadership - and was implemented upon their progressive release from prison from late 1933. There was a slight improvement in industrial and political conditions from 1934, but these remained much closer to the conditions of 1929-33

than to those of the extra-ordinary 1927-28 phase. For this reason the environmental factors which produced both the 1929-33 crisis and the jailed group's solution continued to operate. This can be seen in the fact that it took until early 1937 to resolve the Party crisis. The extreme bolshevisation of the Party which took place between 1934 and 1937 was continuous with the bolshevist pattern of later Indian communism, outlined earlier in the Introduction. Because the reasoning behind the formulation of the mid-1930s solution was made explicit, and because the immediate problem it was designed to overcome was so extreme, we are able to see particularly clearly the various, inter-locking dimensions of the bolshevist syndrome. In particular, we are able to see why bolshevisation was, under the prevailing conditions, the only method of forming a centralised, disciplined communist party - why there was a dilemma for the CPI inherent in its situation.

It is perhaps necessary to say something about the differing lengths of the chapters. The length of particular chapters has been determined by the importance to the main thesis of the sub-themes covered in them and by the complexity of these sub-themes. Chapters 2, 3 and 5 examine and inter-relate elements in the communists' environment allowing and preventing the development of communist-led revolutionary momentum. As this issue was the ultimate determinant of the nature of the formation process and, in particular, of the extent of the Party's bolshevisation, and because an investigation of the issue is necessarily complex, these chapters are substantially longer than the others. The content of communist theory and ideology, also, is treated at some length.

This treatment is given not only because of the intrinsic importance of these dimensions as determinants of communist politics and of their results; theoretical and ideological developments also provide a useful index of the overall levels of autonomy, 'proletarianisation' and initiative attained or retained by the communist leadership during the successive stages of Party formation.

This thesis does not attempt to examine every manifestation of communism in India during the Party's formative period. It examines only that activity which is relevant to the themes of the formation and bolshevisation of the Party. These criteria exclude the proto-communist groupings outside Bombay and Calcutta - such as those in the Punjab and UP and, in the 1930s, Kerala - except insofar as they were incorporated into the national Party structure created between 1934 and 1937. Individuals from other centres played a role in the CPI's formation. But the groups themselves remained extremely weak, essentially undifferentiated from their immediate political contexts, and isolated from Bombay and Calcutta, throughout the critical 1927-33 years.⁴⁷ For the

47. See Chapter 7, fn.4. For the close relations between the terrorist and proto-communist groups of north India, see: M. Harcourt, 'Revolutionary Networks in Northern Indian Politics 1907-1935; a Case Study of the "Terrorist" Movement in Delhi, the Punjab, the United Provinces, and Adjacent Princely States', (Ph.D., University of Sussex, 1973), Chapter 6; B. Chandra, 'The Ideological Development of the Revolutionary Terrorists in Northern India in the 1920s', in B.R. Nanda (Ed.), Socialism in India, (Delhi, 1972), pp.163-89. For the emergence of the Kerala communists from Congress politics in the 1930s see R. Jeffrey, 'From Matriliny to Marxism' (forthcoming, Journal of Asian Studies).

same reason I have not treated in great detail either the 1920-27 developments or the Party's political activity in the 1934-37 period. As the most significant features of the period before 1927 were ideological, not organisational, I have concentrated on the ideological development of India's first communists rather than on the details of the first attempts to establish links between Europe and India and within India. These details have, in any case, already been covered by earlier studies⁴⁸ (though it should be noted that these studies have not provided particularly perceptive accounts of the ideological theme).⁴⁹ The CPI's political activity after 1934 is treated only tangentially, for it had only an indirect effect upon the way in which the Party was formed. For this period, therefore, I am interested primarily in the CPI's intra-Party politics.

The historian of Indian communism in its formative phase is richly served by source material. This is so largely because of three of the communists' great problems: an effective state intelligence system, the selective, legalistic mode of

48. Eg.: Overstreet and Windmiller, *op. cit.*, Chapters 2, 3 & 4; Haithcox, *op. cit.*, Chapters 1, 2 & 3; L.P. Sinha, *op. cit.*, Chapters 2 & 3; G. Adhikari's series of introductory notes and essays in G. Adhikari (Ed.), Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Vol. 1 (1917-1922), (New Delhi, 1972) and Vol. 2 (1923-1925), (New Delhi, 1974). V.S. Budhraj's 'The Communist International and Indian Politics', in Nanda (Ed.), Socialism, pp.17-41, adds little to these accounts.

49. In particular, all except Adhikari are primarily pre-occupied with the Comintern, at the cost of concrete analysis of how international communism was perceived by India's future communists. Moreover, even their treatment of Comintern ideological and theoretical themes tends to be disjointed. Though Adhikari (the CPI's official historian) corrects this imbalance his analyses are vitiated by a markedly teleological approach.

state repression,⁵⁰ and Party factionalism.

Until the communists created an effective underground apparatus in 1934-37, the Raj's intelligence apparatus maintained a very effective surveillance of their activities. The intelligence reports and captured documents that I have used were found primarily in the Home Political files of the National Archives of India, the archives of the Bombay City Special Branch, and the Bombay Presidency Secret Abstracts of Intelligence. The Special Branch files were particularly valuable, especially for the 1930s. A number of files not available in the above locations were found in the Public Department files in the Tamil Nadu Archives. Unfortunately, almost all of the relevant Political Department and Commerce Department files in the West Bengal Archives have been destroyed, the files for each alternate year have been transferred to Dacca, and I was unable to obtain access to the Bengal Intelligence Branch's records. However, much of the Bengal information would appear to have been incorporated in the valuable series of Intelligence Bureau publications, noted in fn.1 of this chapter, and in the Bombay and New Delhi intelligence files.

The Raj's preference in the 1920s for conspiracy cases rather than more summary modes of repression is responsible for the major source of communist documents for the second half of the 1920s - the several thousand carefully verified and explained

50. The special problems created for the communists by this mode of repression are studied in Chapters 2 and 5.

pieces of evidence tendered in the massive Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case which was launched in early 1929. The evidence includes numerous police reports of communist activities. (However the records of the other provincial magistrate court cases that I attempted to locate have not survived). That India's communists met with less bloody modes of repression than their comrades in some other countries has also meant that a large number of the early communists survived to old age. I was fortunate enough to be able to interview several of those still alive, and I was assisted greatly by them.

Party factionalism and, particularly, the CPI split of 1964, are responsible for a large number of the many published reminiscences and claims and counter-claims about, and republished documents from, the Party's formative period. That much of the controversy centres on this period indicates its importance for the CPI's later development.

In addition to the above sources I also found a number of important Party documents in P.C. Joshi's excellent Archives of Contemporary History at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. A few others were found in the Marx Memorial Library, London, and in the British Museum's 'Proscribed Indian Books' collection. Unfortunately I was unable to gain access to the documents in the CPI's archives. However the Party's historical project, under Dr. Adhikari's direction, has made a number of these available in published form.⁵¹

51. See fn.48, above.

I relied primarily on the Marx Memorial Library and the British Museum for the Comintern and CPGB publications.

Because there are more archival sources available for Bombay than for Calcutta there is an unavoidable unevenness in the source material on the two communist groups. This problem is compounded by the fact that the Calcutta communists, being less integrated politically, kept less regular records of their activities than did the Bombay branch. Moreover, it is not possible to provide as complete an account of the Calcutta communists' immediate political and industrial environments. This is largely because the secondary work available on the Bombay environment is more complete. But the problem in the industrial sphere also arises from the fact that there was less state interest in industry in Bengal than in Bombay.⁵² The Bengal government, therefore, knew less about the operations of industry. Thus, for example, the Bengal information in the Royal Commission on Labour volumes is less complete than Bombay's. Until Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on the jute industry is completed we will not have the comprehensive information provided by Richard Newman and

52. This was partly because the jute industry, not having powerful competitors in Britain, was able to avoid having factory legislation imposed upon it. The Bombay millowners were less fortunate. An additional factor from the late 1910s was the fact that the Bombay millhands were not as controllable by the managements as were the jute workers. The Bombay government therefore felt it necessary to maintain a more effective industrial intelligence system. This can be seen in the two governments' accounts of their intelligence systems in their 1929 submissions to the Royal Commission on Labour in India: cf. Vol. I(1), pp.151-54 and Vol. V(1), pp.167-9, for Bombay and Bengal respectively.

Morris D. Morris for the Bombay textile industry.⁵³ These problems would have been more serious for this study if the Calcutta communists had played the dominant role in the CPI's formation. In fact, however, the centre of gravity remained in Bombay throughout the period studied. But there is one serious lacuna in the source material available for Bombay - the records of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee were not available. This means that we can only observe 'from the outside' an important arena of both communist and anti-communist activity in Bombay.

The nature of state policy towards communist and radical working class activity and the imperial and indigenous factors conditioning this policy constitutes an important sub-theme in this thesis. The sources for this were found primarily in the Home Political files of the Government of India and in the Public and Judicial records and Private Office Papers in the India Office Records and Library.

Because it was necessary to cast my net in several different directions in order to cover the central theme adequately,

53. Newman's study, 'Labour Organisation in the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1918-1929', (Ph.D., University of Sussex, 1970), is particularly valuable for my study, and I have drawn upon it extensively. This is largely because of the immediate relevance of his work to my study of the communists in Bombay. But Newman also provides a set of necessary conditions for the building of effective trade unionism which can be used for comparative purposes. In the present absence of satisfactory work on Calcutta's industrial labour in the 1920s and 1930s, Newman's model provides a valuable set of criteria with which to begin to identify the reasons for the failure of trade unionism in Bengal. However I am also interested in several aspects of the Bombay situation to which Newman does not give very much attention: the Maharashtrian historical background of both the workforce and the communists; the wider political context, and particularly the atypical political factors allowing the development of trade unionism in Bombay in the 1920s; and the ideological dimension of communist-millhand relations. Moreover, my comparison with

and because the time available for my field trip was limited, I had to be more selective in my choice of source material than I would have preferred. In particular, it was impossible to read the provincial newspapers for both Bombay and Calcutta for the whole period covered by the thesis. I have therefore used them only where there was significant communist activity, likely to be reported in the press, which was not covered adequately by my main sources.⁵⁴

Time factors also restricted my interviewing schedule. I was unable during my too hurried visits to Bombay and Calcutta to locate some of the communists who played important roles in the formation of the Party. In a few cases this was because we were not in the same place at the same time. Nor, for the most part, was I able to interview the communists' non-communist colleagues and antagonists.

Finally I have to acknowledge the serious limitation of not speaking or reading either Marathi or Bengali. This limitation has restricted my access to information. However this is substantially compensated for by the facts that much

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Calcutta highlights the distinctiveness of the Bombay situation in a way that Newman's non-comparative approach does not.

54. In particular, the 1929-30 period, between the Meerut Case arrests and the total collapse of significant communist activity. However the intelligence files and the Meerut Case evidence include large numbers of press clippings from other periods.

of the communists' business was conducted in English⁵⁵ and that the various intelligence branches, and the prosecution in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, assiduously translated large quantities of printed and oral communist vernacular material. I am particularly fortunate that these translations include mass-oriented literature, and even a few documents and speeches by working class figures. The more serious aspect of the language limitation is perhaps that, because of it, I have inevitably remained too much of an 'outsider', unable to enter far into the cultural world of my subjects or to grasp the nuances which are communicated only in the speakers' native language. I hope that, despite this limitation, this thesis makes a useful contribution to the subject.

55. Ironically, this is related to a language-imposed problem for the Party. Because English was, essentially, and necessarily, the language of inter-provincial communication, the inherent difficulties of developing national-level leaders from among the working class Party members were greatly increased.

CHAPTER 2

INDIA'S FIRST COMMUNISTS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

In 1922-23, in the wake of the Non-Cooperation movement, small groups of young radical nationalist intellectuals in the two cities of Bombay and Calcutta began to formulate vaguely socialist ideologies and programs as alternatives to the prevailing and preceding nationalist modes.¹ In both cities these young men were very largely from high caste² and middle or lower middle class backgrounds and had been involved, in or sympathetic to, the extremist or revolutionary wings of the nationalist movement. They had been profoundly influenced ideologically by the international events of the War and post-War years. The 1916 Irish rebellion, and then the Russian Revolution, had captured their imaginations; but because the Russian Revolution was poorly reported in the Indian press, and because there was no existing Marxist tradition in India, they had only barely perceived its social-revolutionary dimension. Then, impressed with Gandhi's skills in mass anti-imperialist

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1. The following three paragraphs are based primarily on government Intelligence reports and interviews with, and published memoirs by, participants in the events. For fairly detailed chronicles of the events discussed, see: Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., pp.37-79; & Haithcox, op. cit., pp.20-46. We will return below to an investigation of these developments.
 2. I am including Muslims in this caste categorisation.

mobilisation, if not with his insistence on non-violence or his 'obscurantist' program, most of these radical nationalists had become activists in the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movement in the early 1920s. The withdrawal of the movement had ended their experiment with Gandhism and catalysed a renewed search for an effective mass anti-imperialist model for India.

Their socialist tendencies were, from this point, encouraged and guided by the Comintern's new expert on Asian affairs, and its agent for India, the Bengali ex-terrorist, M.N. Roy. Through the post, and through emissaries sent to India, Roy provided them with their first acquaintance with a Marxist analysis of, and program for, Indian politics. As they became more familiar with Marxism they became more impressed with its intellectual synthesis of a powerful political attack on imperialism, capitalism and feudalism, with a coherent rational analysis of society. 'Scientific socialism' provided them with a theoretical means to separate political militance from the obscurantist religious revivalism with which it had previously been associated, and to free rationalism from its previous liberal-moderate political associations. This was an exciting and satisfying intellectual discovery. It led to the convening of India's 'First Communist Conference' in Kanpur in December 1925, concurrently with the annual session of the Indian National Congress in that city.

These proto-communists of both provinces turned naturally to the industrial working class - at first in theory and later in practice - for the initial mass base for their new conception of revolutionary nationalism. On this basis they hoped eventually to develop a movement which could 'capture'

the Congress and other nationalist organisations and convert them into vehicles for a socialist anti-imperialist movement based on the proletariat, the peasantry and the intelligentsia. However they soon came up against the determined opposition of the existing, conservative nationalist leaderships, and they were later to encounter great problems in making meaningful contact with their respective working classes. A third obstacle which soon confronted them was the vigorous opposition of the colonial state. The Raj was very anxious to prevent the development of a Marxist mass politics in India, and particularly one with connections with Soviet Russia. The Raj's opposition was underlined by its launching of the Peshawar and Cawnpore Conspiracy Cases in 1923 and 1924 against the first Indians to establish Soviet contacts - extremely limited though these contacts were.

From this outline of the background and environment of what were to become India's first communists, and of the timing and the process of their conversion, it is apparent that the two provincial groupings had much in common. The general similarities between the two urban environments of Bombay and Calcutta, to which early Indian communism was essentially to remain confined, appeared the greater when contrasted to the vast agrarian sea in which they were situated. They were the two great urban centres of the world's longest standing, largest and most important colony, and both were creations of the colonial period. Both cities had populations exceeding a million, largely made up of recent migrants settled in complex community patterns. Bombay and Calcutta were the two most important centres of trade - both internal and foreign - and industry in British India, and both

served their very large hinterlands in both capacities. The industries of both cities were primarily in the manufacturing sector and, moreover, were dominated overwhelmingly by one industry in each case - the jute mills in Calcutta and the cotton mills in Bombay. The two cities were also the most important provincial administrative and strategic centres in India. Finally, they remained, in the early 1920s, the two major centres of nationalist politics.

But these correlations masked a number of quite profound structural differences between the two cities and regions - differences which presented correspondingly different combinations of possibilities for, and limits to, a communist politics. Of these, the most important for the communists were the following: the much weaker and narrower socio-economic base for nationalist politics in Bengal than in Maharashtra; the far greater social and cultural distance between the intelligentsia and the masses in Bengal; the higher level of extra-provincial labour within, and social and cultural heterogeneity of, the industrial working class in Bengal; and the fact that Europeans dominated industrial capital in Calcutta, while Indian capital was predominant in Bombay. All of these differences were intimately related to the very substantial differences in the timing and intensity of the impact of colonialism on the two regions. We therefore begin with a brief investigation of the colonisation process and the extent of its penetration into eastern and western India. We then go on to outline the dynamics of the process in the two regions and to establish the relevant features of the societies it sculpted from their pre-colonial orders.

1. COLONIALISATION, AND THE UNEVENNESS OF ITS PENETRATION
INTO EASTERN AND WESTERN INDIA

The dynamics of British imperialism in India were complex, and moved through several distinct phases. But the central function of Britain's Indian empire throughout the period of the colonial presence was its export of surpluses to serve Britain's global interests: as Anil Seal has put it, Britain's colonial government in India 'was organised for the power and profit of their imperial system throughout the world'.³ And because the British 'wanted to pull resources out of India, not to put their own into India... the administrative and military system had to pay for itself with Indian revenue'.⁴ 'These were the London-imposed, 'twin imperatives' of the British presence in India;⁵ and, in Bagchi's words, 'in a colonial context, the mechanism for expansion of exports is that of export-led exploitation rather than that of export-led growth'.⁶

Indian resources were made available for Britain's wider interests in a number of ways. In the days of the East India Company the means were simple: through trade in Indian manufactures and raw products obtained at deflated prices, under increasingly direct British control, and largely through methods

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3. A. Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India', in MAS, Vol. 7(3), 1973, p.326.
 4. ibid., p.327.
 5. B.R. Tomlinson, 'India and the British Empire, 1880-1935', in Indian Economic and Social History Review (hereafter IESHR), Vol. XII(4), 1975, p.338.
 6. A.K. Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth in India During the Period of British Rule', in Bengal Past and Present (hereafter BPP), Vol. XCV (Pt. 1 No. 180), 1976, p.250.

of extra-economic coercion; and through heavy land revenue demands. Subsequently, as British capitalism developed and its global interests expanded, India's role, and the way it was fulfilled, also changed. Bagchi has summarised its essential features from the late 19th century:⁷

India occupied a special position in the British imperial order ... Up to 1914, India formed the biggest single foreign market for traditional British exports - particularly for cotton textiles, but to a lesser extent for engineering goods; India's exports to hard currency areas provided the critical balancing item in the current balance of payments of the British Empire and more particularly, of Britain, with the rest of the world; the payments for 'home charges', the profits on capital accumulated in India by British nationals and the payments for the financing and transport of Indian exports and imports served as the mechanism for the transfer of the surplus from India to Britain.

'India was useful', Bagchi concludes,

less as a field for the reinvestment of profits made by British nationals elsewhere than as a dependable source from which part of the needed surplus for maintaining the British-controlled gold standard and the political apparatus of Pax Britannica was derived.

As in the days of the East India Company, the needed surplus continued to be secured by political as well as directly economic means. Moreover, land continued to be the primary source of the revenue from which the empire paid for itself - as well as for a significant portion of the exported surplus. This regressive and inelastic source of revenue was retained because it was believed that direct forms of taxation would be

7. A.K. Bagchi, Private Investment in India 1900-1939, (London, 1972), p.420. See also: ibid., Chapter 2; S.B. Saul, Studies in British Overseas Trade, 1870-1914, (Liverpool, 1960), Chapters III & VIII; and Tomlinson, 'India and the British Empire', pp.339-342.

politically too dangerous - and, thus, expensive.⁸ Land revenue demands on the peasantry were, therefore, particularly heavy.

During the 19th century the mechanism of 'export-led exploitation' produced effects that were everywhere similar: 'under the impact of capitalist colonialism... all regions of India were underdeveloped'.⁹ Among the effects which colonial underdevelopment tended to produce, we posit the following:¹⁰

- (1) The export of the available agricultural surplus from the countryside to the cities and abroad, and the intensification of pre-capitalist, 'feudal' modes of production and exploitation rather than their transformation into new, more productive modes.
- (2) The erosion of traditional industry (particularly spinning and weaving) and its displacement by modern capitalist industry in general, and the industry of the colonising country in particular.
- (3) The pauperisation, heavy debt-bonding and, often, the dispossession, of much of the cultivating and artisan population through the processes outlined in (1) and (2).
- (4) The exclusion of indigenous capital and personnel from major business activity, and particularly from export-oriented activity.

8. See *ibid.*, p.343-4, & Seal, *op. cit.*, pp.328-9. Taxation of business enterprise would also reduce the remittable surplus: see Rajat Ray, 'The Crisis of Bengal Agriculture, 1870-1927 - the Dynamics of Immobility', in *IESHR*, Vol. X(3) 1973, pp.256-7.

9. Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth', p.267.

10. For supporting evidence for this hypothesis see sections 2 and 3 below.

- (5) A weak level of modern industrialisation, and the consequent failure of this sector to compensate adequately for the effects indicated in (3). Weak industrialisation would also heighten the problems of Indian capital outlined in (4).
- (6) A position of great weakness for labour vis a vis industrial capital - particularly the dominant colonial fraction of industrial capital - one of the results of which would be low wage levels.
- (7) The creation of 'colonialised' elites, benefiting from, and dependent upon, the colonising power and colonially-induced changes in the society.

But the distortions introduced by colonialism were not everywhere of the same order: 'all regions of India were underdeveloped, but some more than others'.¹¹ In particular, eastern India was colonised earlier, and far more intensively, than western India. In fact these two regions stood at opposite ends of the underdevelopment spectrum in India. This fact makes a comparison of political activity in the two regions particularly interesting: communism was to fail in both regions, but for different reasons and in different degrees.

There were two particularly important reasons for the unevenness of the penetration of colonialism into eastern and western India.¹² The first was east India's greater export base. The East India Company was initially attracted to Bengal by the wealth of its luxury products; subsequently, rich export products

11. Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth', p.267.

12. See ibid., ps. 248 and 257.

such as indigo, tea, coal and, most lucrative of all, jute, continued to make the region an extremely valuable colonial possession. Even after a thriving export trade in raw cotton, and then in cotton yarn, had been established in western India from the mid-19th century, its export base could not match this.¹³ The second reason was the Maratha empire's successful military resistance to the British until 1818, more than 50 years after the Battle of Plassey. Even then, several principalities in the region - such as Baroda and Kholapur - escaped formal annexation.

Unfortunately, because of the discrepancies in the statistical criteria used in the two regions and the very limited nature of existing comparative scholarship, we do not yet have the statistics necessary for a comprehensive and systematic comparative quantification of the colonialisation process and its effects.¹⁴ However Bagchi has recently computed tables which provide an approximate comparative index (if not an absolute quantification) of the extent of colonial penetration into the two regions. Bagchi has used the regional figures for the surplus of exports over imports of merchandise as 'first approximations to the burdens imposed by colonialism'.¹⁵ This approach is based on the fact that the drive to remit export-

13. Eg. see Table 1 below.

14. The discrepancies in data-collection criteria are particularly marked in the case of agricultural statistics. For comparative quantifications we rely heavily on Bagchi's trail-blazing work.

15. Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth', p.254. However, as Bagchi points out (*ibid.*, p.250), this index is likely seriously to underestimate the effects of colonialisation; see his discussion on the use of export-surplus figures as an index, in *ibid.*, pp.248-55.

earned profits - either directly to the metropolitan country or to those countries with which the colonial power had a trade deficit - was the central dynamic of colonialism. Profits earned by indigenous capital, in contrast, would tend to be reinvested in the colonised country, thus tending to lead to an increase in imports - for example, of industrial machinery. Thus export surplus figures provide a reasonable comparative index of the extent of colonial political-economic control, and of its effects.

Bagchi estimates that in the early 19th century Bengal's exports were approximately equal to the combined exports of the Bombay and Madras Presidencies.¹⁶ For the period from the last quarter of the 19th century he has computed the following tables:

TABLE 1
FIVE-YEARLY REGIONAL AVERAGES OF TOTAL EXPORTS OF
MERCHANDISE (Rs. '000)

Period.	Bengal	Bombay (excluding Sind)	Madras
1876/77 to 1880/81	301,708	225,443	76,240
1881/82 to 1885/86	340,591	319,711	82,486
1886/87 to 1890/91	375,250	369,856	102,853
1891/92 to 1895/96	432,511	384,710	116,311
1896/97 to 1900/01	484,468	326,220	116,467
1901/02 to 1905/06	589,400	437,654	141,017
1906/07 to 1910/11	770,956	510,123	190,032
1911/12 to 1915/16	924,299	580,092	240,502
1916/17 to 1920/21	1,291,319	879,693	262,711
1921/22 to 1925/26	1,301,795	1,026,661	347,084
1926/27 to 1930/31	1,304,679	705,441	412,343
1931/32 to 1935/36	630,490	313,425	254,045
1936/37 to 1938/39 (3 yearly averages)	807,199	402,803	367,689

Source: Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth', p.251.

TABLE 2

FIVE-YEARLY REGIONAL AVERAGES OF EXPORT SURPLUS
(EXPORTS OF MERCHANDISE MINUS IMPORTS OF
MERCHANDISE) (Rs. '000)

Period	Bengal	Bombay (excluding Sing)	Madras
1876/77 to 1880/81	109,819	71,302	39,496
1881/82 to 1885/86	119,006	109,532	36,528
1886/87 to 1890/91	118,716	95,302	43,308
1891/92 to 1895/96	155,955	102,802	52,775
1896/97 to 1900/01	166,726	-21,470	53,701
1901/02 to 1905/06	214,400	105,626	60,300
1906/07 to 1910/11	272,776	82,204	85,520
1911/12 to 1915/16	303,256	58,120	83,924
1916/17 to 1920/21	275,331	40,744	103,945
1921/22 to 1925/26	399,914	118,437	143,845
1926/27 to 1930/31	502,749	-99,691	167,267
1931/32 to 1935/36	269,338	-208,923	95,566
1936/37 to 1938/39 (3 yearly averages)	336,967	-214,488	136,634

Source: ibid., p.252.

Table 1 shows that by the last quarter of the 19th century Bombay had developed an export trade (primarily in cotton twist and yarn and coarse cotton cloth) rivalling that of Bengal. Although by this time European capital dominated the Bombay export agencies, the cotton manufactures were produced primarily in Indian-owned mills. During the last quarter of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century the export

16. ibid., p.280 fn.7. The figures are for the period 1813/14 - 1822/23. The ratio was even higher in the 18th century: ibid., p.249.

trades of both regions increased, though Bengal's increase was at a faster rate. During the War and post-War boom from 1916/17 the exports of both regions leapt ahead. However, after the boom, and during the Great Depression, Bombay's exports fell to a much greater degree, as the western Indian cotton export trade lost its markets to China and Japan while eastern India retained most of its markets and continued to be a strong export economy.

Table 2, however, shows that throughout there was a marked disparity between the two regions in the relationship between exports and export surpluses. While Bengal's surplus continued to rise at a roughly proportional rate until 1920/21, Bombay's surplus stayed more or less stationary until the 1901/02 - 1905/06 quinquennium, then began to fall at an increasingly rapid rate. (The 1896/97 - 1900/01 import surplus for Bombay was associated with the serious famines and plague of that period.) From 1901/02, Bengal's export surpluses again equalled Bombay's and Madras's combined. Although Bombay's surplus increase in the immediate post-War boom was significantly greater than Bengal's, this was a very temporary and contingent phenomenon. From 1926/27, the relationship between Bombay's exports and what was now, in fact, a consistent import surplus, became even more disproportionate than before when compared to Bengal. Bombay's import surpluses in the 1926/27 - 1938/39 periods were closely related to increasing industrial investment in western India by Indian capitalists. The contrast between Bombay and Madras, whose economy was dominated by colonial interests, is also interesting in this regard. Although Madras's exports averaged between a half and a third of Bombay's up to

1920/21, its export surpluses rose steadily until, in the 1906/07 - 1910/11 quinquennium its surplus overtook Bombay's. This tendency accelerated henceforth.

Bagchi's index of the uneven character of colonial penetration into eastern and western India is supported by the available, limited, comparative figures on some of those effects of colonialisation that we outlined above. For example, that the de-urbanisation associated with de-industrialisation proceeded much further in eastern India than elsewhere is apparent from the following figures: in 1891 the percentage of urban population in the once relatively highly urbanised Bengal Presidency (then including Bihar and Orissa) was a mere 4.8 percent; this contrasted with the Bombay Presidency's 19.5 percent, the Madras Presidency's 9.9 percent and the North West Frontier Province's 11.3 percent.¹⁷ N.K. Sinha has calculated that by 1828 some 1,000,000 involved in the traditional cotton industry in Bengal-Bihar had been thrown out of employment by the changes attendant upon colonialisation.¹⁸ Bagchi, in a careful statistical analysis of Gangetic Bihar, calculates conservatively that during the 19th century the percentage of the population dependent for its livelihood upon industrial production was reduced from some 18.5 percent to approximately 8.5 percent, most of the effect being felt by the textile industry.¹⁹

17. Ray, op. cit., p.278 fn.65.

18. N.K. Sinha, The Economic History of Bengal 1793-1848, Vol. III (Calcutta, 1970), p.7.

19. A.K. Bagchi, 'Deindustrialisation in Gangetic Bihar, 1809-1901', in B. De et. al. (Eds.), Essays in Honour of Professor S.C. Sarkar, (New Delhi, 1976), pp.499-522, and in particular ps. 509 and 512, Tables 3 and 4.

He estimates that the effect in Bengal proper was far greater.²⁰

We have no comparative figures on rural indebtedness or its increase during the colonial period. Nevertheless it seems safe to say that indebtedness was of far greater dimensions in Bengal than in Maharashtra. For example, a government report on the Dacca district for the 1910-17 period found that the recorded indebtedness in the district - Rs. 4,76,00,553 - was more than seven times the actual rental of Rs.64,50,000. The annual interest payable on loans exceeded Rs. 2,00,00,000.²¹ Thus rural credit operations were of a much greater dimension than rent collection. We do not have equivalent statistics for western India, but it is apparent that rural credit there did not reach such levels.²²

The much weaker position of Indian capital and businessmen in eastern India compared to western India is indicated by the following tables:

TABLE 3

ADVANCES BY THE IMPERIAL BANK TO PURELY INDUSTRIAL CONCERNS
(Rs. '000)

	Indian	European	Total
Bengal	374	574	948
Bombay	850	65	915

Source: A.K. Bagchi, Private Investment in India 1900-1939, (London, 1972), p.173 (from evidence taken before The Royal Commission on Indian Currency and Finance (1926)).

TABLE 4

OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF SELECTED INDUSTRIAL CONCERNS

Province and nature of factory, etc.	Number owned by companies of which the directors are			Number privately owned		Number managed by	
	Europeans and Anglo-Indians	Indians	Of both races	Europeans and Anglo-Indians	Indians	Europeans and Anglo-Indians	
						Indians	Indians
Assam	494	12	-	55	48	536	73
Tea plantations							
Bengal	158	18	-	46	18	193	47
Tea plantations	53	6	21	7	43	66	63
Collieries	50	16	-	7	36	64	45
Jute presses	49	-	-	1	-	50	-
Jute mills							
Machinery and engineering worksh.	22	-	-	4	7	30	7
Brick & tile fact.	7	3	4	10	136	8	153
Oil mills	4	4	-	-	118	4	115
Printing presses	11	4	1	17	65	32	71
Bihar and Orissa							
Indigo plantations	12	-	-	93	14	117	2
Collieries	80	11	5	6	99	87	112
Mica mines	10	-	1	4	37	14	38
Lac factories	1	-	-	1	46	2	46
Bombay							
Cotton, etc.							
Ginning, cleaning and pressing factories	13	92	13	-	194	10	304
Cotton, etc.							
spinning, weaving and other mills	12	92	25	-	18	43	106
Flour and rice mills	1	14	3	-	39	6	51
Machinery and engineering workshops	5	-	2	4	2	10	3
Printing presses	8	8	-	5	36	16	45
Railway workshops	13	-	-	-	-	12	1

Source: Bagchi, Private Investment, P.183.

Finally, we have some quantitative data on the real and money wages of industrial workers in eastern and western India which, though resting on very narrow bases, nevertheless establish a clear discrepancy in wage trends in the two regions.²³ In 1900 the average monthly money wages of jute mill workers in Calcutta were marginally higher than cotton mill workers in Bombay city and Ahmedabad (Rs. 12.0, 12.3 and 11.4 respectively).²⁴ By 1939 these figures had risen to Rs. 19.6, 35.4 and 35.0 respectively; i.e., while the money wages in the Bombay mills rose by 188 percent and in the Ahmedabad mills by 208 percent between 1900 and 1939, those of the jute mill workers rose by only 63 percent. A similar trend occurred in real wages. The real wages of the Calcutta jute mill workers were significantly higher than those of the Bombay and Ahmedabad workers in 1900, but by 1939 they had increased by only 40 percent in Calcutta compared with 186 percent in Bombay and 188 percent in Ahmedabad.²⁵

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20. *ibid.*, pp.518-19. See also A. Sen, 'Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and His Elusive Milestones', Occasional Paper No. 1, Centre For Studies In Social Sciences, (hereafter CSSS), Calcutta (Aug. 1975), pp.72-76.
21. Ray, *op. cit.*, pp.268-9. Moreover, only a small percentage of the credit was borrowed for use in production.
22. Eg., I.J. Catanach, Rural Credit in Western India, 1875-1930, (Berkeley, 1970), passim, and particularly Chapter I. Catanach questions, for example, the conventional view that widespread indebtedness was the fundamental cause of the 1875 Deccan Riots (pp.11-24), and cites the Riots Commission's conclusion that only about a third of the occupants in the affected areas were seriously indebted (p.24). See also Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth', pp.259-62.
23. See Bagchi, Private Investment, pp.121-4.
24. *ibid.*, p.125, calculated from Table 5.3, p.126.
25. *ibid.*, p.125, calculated from Table 5.1, p.122.

Thus the above figures on de-industrialisation, rural indebtedness, the position of Indian capital in industry and the wages of industrial workers, though perhaps fallible as absolute quantifications, nevertheless establish clear regional differentials which accord with Bagchi's indices of the extent of the overall process of colonialisation. We will now look at those features of the structural differences between colonial Bengal and Maharashtra which would directly affect the potential for communist politics in the cities of Calcutta and Bombay.

2. EAST INDIA, BENGAL AND CALCUTTA

The events in Bengal during the second half of the 18th century were critical for the way in which the region would be able to respond to the major social changes of the 19th century. Its 19th century experience would, in turn, largely determine the character of its nationalist politics in the critical inter-War period in the 20th century.

The Early Colonialisation of East India

By the time the Marathas had been defeated, eastern India had already been profoundly affected by the colonialisation process.²⁶ For example, because of the trading activity of the

26. The following two paragraphs are based on: N.K. Sinha, The Economic History of Bengal, from Plassey to the Permanent Settlement, Vol.I, (Calcutta, 1956), & Vol.II (Calcutta, 1962), passim; B.K. Chowdhury, 'Political History, 1757-1772', in N.K. Sinha (Ed.), The History of Bengal (1757-1905), (Calcutta, 1967), pp.22-56; N.K. Sinha, 'Administrative, Economic and Social History: 1757-1793', in *ibid.*, pp.76-129; Ratna Ray, 'The Bengal Zamindars: Local Magnates and the State Before the Permanent Settlement', in IESHR, Vol.XII(3), 1975, pp.263-92; Rajat & Ratna Ray, 'Zamindars and Jotedars: a Study of Rural Politics in Bengal', in MAS, Vol.9(1), 1975, pp.81-90; A. De, Roots of Separatism in Nineteenth Century Bengal, (Calcutta, 1974), pp.3-4 and 15-17.

East India Company and the free-traders and the associated decline of the old Mughal urban centres, the artisan class was greatly weakened. The weavers, in particular, suffered from the disintegration of the Mughal courts, the low prices at which they were forced to sell their products, and the wholesale restructuring of their market to serve the export trade.²⁷

The heavy revenue demands exacted from the Bengali population were the more burdensome for their having to finance the extension of empire elsewhere in India.²⁸ The extent of the exploitation of the labouring population in the years immediately following the Battle of Plassey was revealed by the 1770 famine, which took some 10 million lives.

The former Muslim ruling order, too, was seriously eroded during the second half of the 18th century. This process was facilitated by the availability of skilled groups of collaborators from among the Hindu traditional service, trading and banking castes - both Bengali and north Indian. They were economically, administratively and politically indispensable to the British during the entrenchment of their colonial position. For the collaborators, the colonial connection initially provided them with a new level of relative independence, and unprecedented opportunities for social mobility. Their opportunities were increased, at the expense of the Muslim

27. For the dynamics of de-industrialisation throughout the colonial period, see also D.R. Gadgil, The Industrial Evolution of India, (Fourth Edition) (London, 1942), Chapters III & XII.

28. See: H. Furber, John Company At Work, (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), Chapters VI & VII; Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth', pp.260-61.

aristocracy and the peasantry, by the radically new land legislation introduced by the British towards the close of the 18th century. Because of their greater economic strength and familiarity with the operations of British law, they were able in the following decades to purchase most of the new zamindari rights that now became available. They were able largely to exclude the landed Muslim families in the process - thus laying the foundations for a long-term conflict between the Hindu and Muslim elites. The cost to the peasantry, also, was high. The British land legislation, by vesting the landlord with alienable proprietary rights in revenue collection and the right to enhance rents and to subinfeudate his tenure rights as he wished, greatly enhanced his power over the peasantry.

Thus by the early decades of the 19th century British colonialism had created a new type of Bengali elite. It came to be known as the bhadralok (literally, 'the respectable people') because of the high premium it placed on its ritual status and cultural attainments. It would be the dominant indigenous social group in Bengali society for the next century.

By the early 19th century the bases of its recently acquired power were in capitalist business activity, land-holding, government service and the professions. All areas of activity were associated with the colonial connection. The bhadralok was, as a British official wrote in 1828, created and sustained 'under our sovereignty, chiefly in our service, and entirely through our protection'.²⁹

29. Quoted in Sen, 'Iswarchandra Vidyasagar', p.4. Sen's study is a useful analysis of bhadralok characteristics and socio-economic bases as they developed during the 19th century.

The Bhadrakok and Colonialism

Elements of continuity can be established between the bhadralok's characteristics and functions and those of the pre-colonial social groups from which it was drawn. Under the Mughals the Hindu gentry had held most of the zamindari revenue collection rights, had occupied most of the administrative positions below the top levels and had exhibited considerable entrepreneurial, linguistic and literary skills. Moreover, the pre-colonial upper caste gentry had placed a high premium on its ritual status, with abstention from manual labour in general, and cultivating activity in particular, being central features of this concern. There was a wide social and cultural gap between the elite and the masses in pre-colonial Bengal. Broomfield and others have stressed these elements of continuity, and Broomfield incorporates them into his Weberian definition of the bhadralok as an open status group. He argues that the bhadralok's preoccupation with its social honour constituted the 'cardinal fact' about this social group.³⁰

However this approach fails to recognise that the most significant facts about the bhadralok were that it was essentially a colonial creation, both socio-economically and culturally, and that the elements of discontinuity with the pre-colonial past were more significant than the limited continuities. Moreover, Broomfield's approach does not pose the question: what was it

30. J.H. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth-Century Bengal, (Berkeley, 1968), p.13. For his discussion of the bhadralok as a status group see ibid., pp.12-18.

about the dynamics of colonial Bengali society that made it possible for an elite with the 'feudal' status pretensions of the bhadralok to retain for so long its preeminent role, despite the profound changes introduced by colonialism?.

We can begin to answer these questions by examining the bhadralok culture and ideology developed during that profoundly important phase in its development known as the 'Bengal Renaissance', and by matching these against the bhadralok's contemporary socio-economic and political position. The vigorous, and often brilliant 'Renaissance' was to provide the foundations of subsequent bhadralok culture and much of its mythology; and the main outlines of the bhadralok's socio-economic bases and relations with the wider society were established in the first half of the 19th century.

The Renaissance has often been likened to the European protestant Reformation, and its 'founding-father' - Rammohan Roy - to Luther. Rammohan himself hoped that he was initiating a Bengali 'Reformation'.³¹ However there were a number of crucial features of this cultural movement which distinguished it in quite fundamental ways from the European phenomenon.

Culturally, the Renaissance has been seen as a decisive move forward, via European liberalism, from 'feudal' irrationalism to modern rationalism. However, Sumit Sarkar has argued, Rammohan's transition was of 'a limited and deeply

31. Sumit Sarkar, 'Rammohan Roy and the Break With the Past', Paper presented at a symposium on 'Rammohan Roy and the Modernisation of India', Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, 1972, p.11.

contradictory kind', to a 'colonial (one might almost add comradore) framework' - a transition achieved, moreover, 'mainly on the intellectual plane and not at the level of basic social transformation'.³² It is significant that Rammohan's most militant rationalism appeared in his earliest work and that his later work was a retreat in this regard. Both Sarkar and Pradyumna Bhattacharya argue that Rammohan's early rationalism owed more to rationalist trends in late Mughal thought than to the introduction of western liberalism.³³ In other words, the Renaissance's 'break with the past' appears not to have been the clear progression to 'modernism' it has characteristically been seen as. Moreover, the Renaissance was distinguished from the European Reformation by its 'elitism'. After a detailed textual analysis of Rammohan's writings, Bhattacharya concludes that his prose was 'sundered from the current of common speech' - 'From this point of view, there is a marked difference between Rammohan and Luther'.³⁴ While Luther - himself of peasant stock - was intimately acquainted with, and drew constantly upon, the language of the peasants and artisans, Rammohan adopted 'an altogether different course'. He made the highly Sanskritised, elegant literary language of the

32. ibid., p.1.

33. ibid., pp.4-10; P. Bhattacharya, 'Rammohan Roy and Bengali Prose', Paper delivered at the symposium cited in fn.31, p. 12. It is significant that Rammohan's earliest extant work, the Tuhfatul Muwahhiddin (ca. 1803-04) was written before he had a substantial knowledge of English (Sarkar, 'Rammohan Roy', p.4). Sarkar argues (p.11) that for, bhadralok culture, the most significant feature of English education was not its contribution to Bengali rationalism, but its creation of 'an impenetrable barrier between the 19th century and the immediate pre-British past'.

34. P. Bhattacharya, op. cit., pp.14-15; also pp.18-19.

elite the foundation of his prose, and was neither closely acquainted with, nor greatly interested in, the rhythms, idiom and metaphors of the popular language and Vaishnava lyrics. Sarkar and Bhattacharya note that the tendencies which they identify in Rammohan Roy's work subsequently became entrenched characteristics in bhadralok culture, particularly as English language education became more widespread.³⁵ We can perhaps see in these Renaissance tendencies the foundations of the subsequent bhadralok ideological rejection - as 'inferior' and 'un-Bengali' - of popular Vaishnava and Muslim culture and the immediate pre-colonial past, in favour of a distant, mythical, Brahmanical Golden Age.

These Renaissance cultural characteristics had a specific historical context. In addition to being a great intellectual Rammohan was, together with other leading Renaissance bhadralok figures such as Dwarkanath Tagore, an active businessman, and had extensive interests in money lending and zamindari. But, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has stressed, the range of their business activities was circumscribed by the colonial framework: they were dependent on colonialism; and their material dependence had an ideological counterpart.³⁶ Both Chakrabarty and Sarkar have placed the Renaissance thinkers firmly within a free-trader ideological framework: the free-

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35. Eg., Sarkar (p.2) characterises post-Renaissance bhadralok culture as 'a story of retreat and decline', while Bhattacharya writes (p.20): 'Historically, this disjunction between the living speech and the sadhu bhasa [elegant, highly Sanskritised literary Bengali] constitutes the basic contradiction, that has determined the development of Bengali prose in modern times'. See also Broomfield, op. cit., p.10.
36. D. Chakrabarty, 'The Colonial Context of the Bengal Renaissance: a Note on Early Railway Thinking in Bengal', in IESHR, Vol.XI(1), 1974, pp.92-111.

trader critique of Company policy provided the limits of the Renaissance critique of colonialism.³⁷ They accepted uncritically that the British were performing a progressive role in India; or, as Chakrabarty has put it succinctly, the concept of 'colonialism' as it is being used here was absent from the Renaissance ideological 'problematic'.³⁸

However colonial realities would prevent this ideology from leading, ^{either} immediately or subsequently, to a Reformation-style movement of social transformation in Bengal. The same realities would also impose very great problems for future, more radical ideologies and political leaderships. These colonial barriers operated at several levels.

The Bhadrakalok and Society: Business Activity, Agrarian Relations, the Artisans, and the Industrial Working Class.

The first was the very fragile and temporary character of the bhadrakalok's expanding business activity. Once the British were economically and politically firmly entrenched the Indian capitalists were inexorably squeezed out from the major economic life of the region. By the end of the 1840s even the most collaborative of Indian capitalists had been virtually eliminated.³⁹

37. ibid., pp.100-02; Sarkar, op. cit., pp.17-18. See also A. Tripathi, Trade and Finance in the Bengal Presidency, 1793-1833, (Bombay, 1956), p.191 & pp.233-35.

38. D. Chakrabarty, op. cit., p.103. Chakrabarty is using the concept of 'ideological problematic' in the sense of the inherent 'problematic themes which induce... [an ideology] to raise the kind of questions it raises'.

39. N.K. Sinha, 'Indian Business Enterprise: Its Failure in Calcutta (1800-1848)', in BPP, Vol.LXXXVI, (Pt.II, No.162), (Diamond Jubilee No.), 1967, pp.112-23.

Henceforth, Bengal's commerce, finance and industry - and the economies of east and north India as a whole - were to come firmly under the control of the European managing agency system.⁴⁰ Indians, and Indian capital, were all but excluded from this system. There was, therefore, no room for a bhadralok-led social transformation in this direction.

The second reason was the nature of the bhadralok's emerging relationship to the peasantry and agricultural production, and the character of the mode of agricultural production in colonial Bengal.⁴¹ Under the zamindari system, and because of the dynamics of Bengal's colonialised economy, the (primarily bhadralok) landlords' relationship to the peasantry became a purely extractive-exploitative one. This created a structural barrier between the peasantry and their bhadralok masters, reinforcing the existing religious barrier between Hindus and a predominantly Muslim agrarian population. The problem became more accentuated during the century. Following the shrinking of

40. For an account of the workings of the managing agency system from the late 19th century, see Bagchi, Private Investment, pp.176-81.
41. This paragraph is based on: N.K. Sinha, The Economic History of Bengal, III, passim; B.K. Chowdhury, 'Agrarian Relations in Bengal (1859-1885)', in N.K. Sinha (Ed.), The History of Bengal, pp.237-336; Rajat & Ratna Ray, 'The Dynamics of Continuity in Rural Bengal Under the British Imperium: a Study of Quasi-Stable Equilibrium in Under-developed Societies in a Changing World', in IESHR, Vol.X(2), 1973, pp.103-28, and 'Zamindars and Jotedars', pp.90-97; Ray, 'The Crisis of Bengal Agriculture'; B.B. Chaudhuri, 'The Land Market in Eastern India, 1793-1940, Part I: The Movement of Land Prices', in IESHR, Vol.XII(1), 1975, pp.1-42; and Sen, 'Iswarchandra Vidyasagar', pp.62-80.

entrepreneurial opportunities in commerce and, subsequently, because of the exclusion of Indian capital from industry, the agricultural sector was the only remaining profitable, secure and status-enhancing area for investment.⁴² Consequently there was a marked and increasing flow of urban capital into the countryside within a few decades of the Permanent Settlement. But this capital went almost exclusively into the unproductive areas of rental rights, usury and speculative trade, not into investment in improved agricultural productivity. This pattern also accelerated the flow of resources from the countryside to the city - and, from Calcutta, abroad. This situation arose because, under the prevailing economic and legal systems, 'feudal' methods of extraction of the agricultural surplus from the chronically debt-bonded tenantry were possible, and more profitable than capitalist investment in improved productivity. This was as true for European concerns, such as the Midnapore Zamindari Company, as for Indian investors. The situation was compounded, as the century progressed, by the large-scale landlord absenteeism associated with the bhadralok's increasingly urban orientation, the development of a complex, multi-layered system of intermediaries between the tenantry and the zamindars and the urban-based speculative merchants and suppliers of rural credit, and escalating subinfeudation of land ownership and rental shares. By the turn of the century almost all bhadralok families had an interest in landed rent, no matter how small and unproductive. As agricultural production did not increase markedly during the century, and because rent, usury and the

42. On this point see also Bagchi, Private Investment, pp.203-05 & 211-12.

profits from speculative trade had to support an increasing number of people, the burden on the majority of the tenantry was greatly enhanced. The same forces, together with the wider colonial extraction of the agricultural surplus,⁴³ greatly inhibited the emergence of a rich peasant-based intermediate intelligentsia. These were the massive structural impediments to bhadralok-peasant social, cultural and political interaction.

The third factor was the collapse of the artisan class.⁴⁴ Already greatly weakened by its 18th century experience, the artisan class of eastern India was, as we have seen, particularly vulnerable to the influx of British manufactured goods - through the, by now, well established importing and marketing networks - during the nineteenth century. Further, because of their westernised consumption preferences, the new elite did not provide a market to compensate for the loss of that provided by the old courts. With the erosion of the artisan class another of the intermediate levels in the traditional social structure had been undermined. This further reduced the possibility of the 'renaissance' becoming a Bengali Reformation. Further, the dispossessed artisans were thrown primarily into agriculture for their livelihood, thus greatly increasing the pressure on land and reinforcing the regressive, 'feudal-colonial' agrarian system of Bengal.

From the last quarter of the 19th century there was another, increasingly numerous mass force potentially available

43. For a summary of these mechanisms - from the purchasing policies of the jute industry to the taxation and monetary policies of government - see Ray, 'The Crisis of Bengal Agriculture', pp.256-74.

44. Bagchi, 'Deindustrialisation'; Sen, 'Iswarchandra Vidyasagar', pp.72-7; Gadgil, op. cit., Chapters III & XII.

for political mobilisation - the industrial working class.⁴⁵
 Because of its immediate relevance to our study we will investigate the nature of the working class in rather more detail.

In the colonial Asian context, India became a comparatively highly industrialised country. Of the other Asian colonies and semi-colonies, only China had a comparable level of industrialisation.⁴⁶ Moreover, although only a very small percentage (approximately 0.5 percent in 1931) of the total population, the industrial working class, because of its concentration and strategic location, occupied a position of potential political weight out of proportion to its numbers. This was a fact of which the Raj, for one, was to become acutely aware: during the Non-Cooperation movement, for example, its 'greatest fear' was the possibility of a general strike being coordinated with the mass agitation.⁴⁷ For the

45. The rate of growth of the industrial working class can be illustrated by the case of the jute industry - by far the largest employer of labour in the Calcutta region (see below). Mills began to be established in the 1850s and 1860s, but the real expansion did not begin until the 1870s. By 1879 the mills employed some 27,500 workers. There were some 40,500 by 1881, 60,600 by 1889 and 73,700 by 1894. There was a period of rapid expansion from 1895, and by 1901 there were some 113,500 millhands. By 1921 it had more than doubled to 280,300; Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply, 1855-1946, Some Preliminary Findings', pp.280-81 and Appendix A.
46. By 1931 the average daily number of employed in organised industry (excluding plantations) was estimated to be 1,630,037 (Bagchi, Private Investment, p.118). Chesneaux has estimated that the number of workers similarly employed in China in the 1920s was approximately 1,489,000: J. Chesneaux, The Chinese Labour Movement, 1919-1927, (Stanford, 1968), p.41.
47. D.A. Low, 'The Government of India and the First Non-Co-Operation Movement 1920-1922', in R. Kumar (Ed.), Essays On Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919, (London, 1971), p.322.

bhadralok there was an additional advantage. Because Bengal's industry was overwhelmingly British-owned, there was no direct conflict of economic interest - as there was in the case of the peasantry - between the bhadralok and the working class. By the 1920s there were some 450,000 factory workers in the Calcutta region, some 300,000 of them concentrated in the jute industry.⁴⁸

However a number of factors militated against the realisation of the Calcutta working class's industrial and political potential. Firstly, the Bengali intelligentsia's social and cultural divorce from the peasantry was replicated in the industrial sphere. This was because of its exclusion from any involvement in the world of industrial production and the fact that the working class was drawn primarily from peasant and artisan backgrounds. But, secondly, there were a number of inter-related features, specific to the nature of industrialisation in a colonial context, which posed formidable additional barriers against working class organisation and the development of intelligentsia-proletariat linkages.

As we noted earlier, India's colonial status permitted only weak industrialisation within the country. This was primarily because of colonial capital's predominant orientation towards the export of raw or simply-processed materials, the economic competition and political weight of metropolitan manufacturing interests, the weakness of the Indian market because of the permanent agrarian crisis, and the failure of the colonial state to provide the necessary state protection and patronage for Indian industry.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, colonial-

48. Royal Commission on Labour in India, (London, 1931) hereafter RCLI), Report, pp.8-9. See also Das Gupta, op. cit., Appendix A, for the yearly figures on jute labour during the 1920s.

49. Bagchi, Private Investment, passim; Partha Chatterjee, 'Stability and Change in the Indian Political System' (unpublished paper, CSSS, Calcutta, 1977). The role of state patronage was, of course, crucial in the so-called 'second way' method of industrialisation adopted by the backward German and Japanese nations.

isation created a very large population of pauperised or dispossessed peasants and artisans, from which industry could draw its labour. A major consequence of the combination of weak industrialisation and large-scale pauperisation and dispossession was a marked excess of supply over demand in the industrial labour market.⁵⁰ Another was a working class divided by the complex social differentiation of the village. Secondly, because of the technologically simple character of most of the industry which did exist in India, there was little demand for skilled labour.⁵¹ This illiterate, untrained and depressed majority of the labour force was, therefore, easily and inexpensively replaceable; industry required a reliable supply of labour, but not, necessarily, a stable workforce.⁵² Thirdly, labour was not recruited formally by managements in the cities, but informally through intermediaries, with similar backgrounds to the workers, who recruited primarily in the village or through village connections. These intermediaries were known as 'jobbers' in the Bombay mills and 'sardars' in Calcutta - in the interests of simplicity I will refer to them as jobbers in both cases.⁵³ The jobbers were also responsible for the immediate supervision and control of the labourers, and represented their workers' interests with the factory managements. Additionally, they acted

50. See, eg., Bagchi, Private Investment, pp.118-21 & 131-33, & p.150. Contingent factors, such as epidemics and famines, could, however, create short-term shortages in labour supply.

51. ibid., pp.150-56.

52. This point is made by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his 'Communal Riots And Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill Hands in the 1890s', Occasional Paper No. 11, CSSS, Calcutta, October 1976, (forthcoming, Past And Present), p.26.

53. For analyses of the role and operational methods of the jobbers see: RCLI, Report, pp.22-4, Vol.I(1), pp.9-10 & Vol.V(1), pp.3-4. For a detailed account of the jobber in the Bombay mills see Newman, op. cit., pp.30-8.

customarily as suppliers of credit - both as moneylenders and shopkeepers - and in other ways which met (and, often, exploited) the workers' day-to-day needs.⁵⁴ Thus the jobber acted as a composite labour contractor, foreman and working class representative, and as a community leader, 'something analogous to ... the Patil or Headman of a village',⁵⁵ in the workers' wider social existence. Because of the multiplicity of crucial roles which he performed in the workers' lives, both inside and outside the factory, the members of a jobber's 'gang' were highly dependent on him. The strength of his position was reinforced by his importance to the management as a recruiter and as an agent of social control. The toleration of jobber corruption - which was widespread - by both managements and workers, was symptomatic of his pivotal position: jobberism was almost universal.⁵⁶ Consequently, the imported village community divisions of caste, religion and region were complemented and reinforced by those between jobbers' gangs: the workforce

54. Eg. Burnett-Hurst commented that the jobber 'endeavours to acquire an influence over his friends and acquaintances who live in the same or in neighbouring chawls [tenements]. He lends them money, advises them in family affairs and arbitrates in disputes. When labour is required, he uses the influence so gained ... [and] when he visits his village he paints the life of a mill worker in the brightest colours and endeavours to induce his relations and friends to leave their homes and fields for the more remunerative calling': A.R. Burnett-Hurst, Labour and Housing in Bombay: A Study in the Economic Conditions of the Wage-Earning Classes in Bombay, (London, 1925), pp.46-7.

55. RCLI, Vol.I(1), p.10.

56. This was so in the wider colonial world, too. Eg., for China, see Chesneaux, op. cit., pp.54-62; for Malaya (where the labour was primarily imported from India and China), see M. Stenson, Industrial Conflict in Malaya: Prelude to the Communist Revolt of 1948, (London, 1970), pp.1-6.

was composed of a multiplicity of vertically organised sub-groups; it was not a homogeneous 'mass'.⁵⁷ The community divisions were further reinforced by the workers' strong tendency to form community clusters - both occupational and social. The strength of the class organisation of industrial capital contrasted strikingly with this fragmentation. The working class was, therefore, in an inherently very weak bargaining position vis a vis capital.

There were many deep-rooted barriers against the transformation of this fragmented, vertical, community mode of organisation into the unified, horizontal, class mode of organisation of modern trade unionism. The workers, in conformity with the prevailing mode of their organisation, exhibited a mode of consciousness which Chakrabarty has termed 'community consciousness': the worker would tend strongly to identify himself as a member of his religious, caste or regional community rather than as a member of the wider industrial working class.⁵⁸ The community modes of consciousness and organisation were reinforced by the imperatives of the worker's everyday existence. For insecure rural immigrants in a highly competitive labour market and an

57. Eg. the manager of a Calcutta mill commented: 'The workers are divided by race, religion and district of origin into many groups having little intercourse with those of different race or religion. The [s]olidarity of such a group from one small foreign district, and possibly connected more or less by family ties, is probably greater than that of a works committee in occidental countries': quoted in Newman, op. cit., p.10. Newman adds that the Bombay case was similar.

58. Chakrabarty, 'Communal Riots and Labour', p.5. He uses the term to refer to 'a state of mind whereby the Muslim worker thinks of himself primarily as a Muslim, or the Hindu of himself firstly as a Hindu', and reserves the term 'communal' primarily to refer to overt Hindu-Muslim tension. This is a

alien and harsh urban environment,⁵⁹ the community networks satisfied deeply felt material and psychological needs: the community modes of organisation and consciousness were immediately functional, even though they were often exploitative, weakened the workers' bargaining power and helped maintain their depressed condition.

Trade union organisations and would-be political mobilisers of the working class could develop a stable basis within the workforce, and begin to match the class organisation of capital, only by meeting the workers' complex needs more effectively than could the community networks and leaders - and particularly the jobbers. The path to the working class was not, therefore, an easy one for 'outsiders' (as they were called by the workers in Bombay) from the intelligentsia either to find or to travel. In particular, at some point the outsider would meet, and have to come to terms with, the jobber. In times of industrial stability at least, the jobber would be likely

58. Cont'd

useful conceptualisation, and it will be employed in this study. However I will use 'community consciousness' in a wider sense to refer to primary self-identification with any of the intersecting community forms - religious, caste or regional.

59. The harshness of existence in the urban environment - eg. crowded, overpriced housing conditions, high mortality rates, absence from family, excessively long working hours in bad conditions, etc. - has been well documented: see, eg., the sections under such headings in RCLI, Report; Burnett-Hurst, op. cit., passim; Newman, op. cit., p.21 & pp.42-4; Chakrabarty, 'Communal Riots and Labour', pp.26-32. Note also Chakrabarty's perceptive comments on the implications of these conditions for working class community consciousness and organisation. On this theme of the close correlation between insecurity among immigrant workers and high levels of community consciousness, see also W.L. Rowe's findings on north Indian workers in Bombay. His findings would be equally applicable to Calcutta: W.L. Rowe, 'Caste, Kinship and Association in Urban India', in A. Southall (Ed.), Urban Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies of Urbanisation, (New York, 1973), pp.211-249.

to have the upper hand in that encounter.

These features were common to the industries of both Calcutta and Bombay. However Calcutta's labour was in a particularly weak position. This was primarily because of the more extensive 'catchment area' from which Calcutta could recruit its labour, and the greater organisational powers and economic strength of Bengal's primarily British capital. We will illustrate these factors with reference to the jute mills. Colonialisation had produced a potential labour supply throughout east and north India.⁶⁰ In the first decades of industrialisation the labour force - both unskilled and skilled - was primarily Bengali. However during the second half of the 19th century 'up-country' immigrants, mainly from Bihar and UP, began to form an increasing proportion of the unskilled workforce.⁶¹ By the 1920s, immigrants born in Bihar, UP, Orissa and Madras made up more than three quarters of the unskilled workforce, though Bengalis continued to predominate in the skilled positions.⁶² Ranajit Das Gupta has calculated that in 1895, Bengalis still constituted approximately 55 percent of the total jute mill labourforce, that by 1921 it had fallen to 24 percent, and by 1929 to 17 percent.⁶³ However the remaining proportion of Bengali workers

60. For the effects of colonialisation in north India see, eg., C.A. Bayly, 'Town Building in North India, 1770-1830', in MAS, Vol.9(4), pp.483-504.

61. Das Gupta, op. cit., pp.285-6 & pp.295-6. The immigrants displaced Bengalis from existing positions as well as filling most of the new positions provided by the expansion of the industry.

62. See RCLI, Vol.V(1), pp.5-14.

63. Das Gupta, op. cit., p.297, Table 6.

was not evenly distributed throughout the jute workforce. For reasons that have not yet been identified, the mill centres to the south of Calcutta, such as Bauria, Chengail and Budge Budge, continued to employ mostly Bengali labour. Most of this Bengali labour was recruited from local districts.⁶⁴

The 1921 Census computed the following provincial breakdown (in percentages) of the skilled and unskilled employment in the jute and other significant industries of Bengal:

TABLE 5

AREAS OF ORIGIN OF SKILLED AND UNSKILLED JUTE WORKERS, 1921

<u>Province</u>	<u>Skilled workers</u>		<u>Unskilled workers</u>	
	<u>No. of workers</u>	<u>Percent of total</u>	<u>No. of workers</u>	<u>Percent of total</u>
Bengal	38,890	31.31	26,558	18.32
Bihar	45,716	36.81	47,919	30.78
Orissa	8,762	7.05	23,218	14.92
United Provinces	28,030	22.56	36,988	23.77
Madras	2,062	1.66	10,786	6.93
Other parts of India	600	.48	8,219	5.28
Outside India	161	.13	5	.00
Total	124,221	100.00	155,633	100.00

Source: reproduced in Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply, 1885-1946, Some Preliminary Findings', in IESHR, Vol.XIII(3), 1976, p.298, Table 7.

Note: The 'skilled workers' category is widely defined in the case of the jute workers. It is more accurately defined in Table 6.

64. RCLI, Report, p.11; Das Gupta, op. cit., p.301.

TABLE 6

PRINCIPAL AREAS OF ORIGIN OF THE LABOUR FORCE
EMPLOYED IN SOME SELECTED INDUSTRIES 1921

Industry	Category of workers	Number	P e r c e n t o f w o r k e r s b o r n i n				Other parts of India	Out- side India
			Bengal	Bihar	Orissa	United Provinces		
1. Cotton mill	Unskilled	7,288	18.30	7.68	33.01	32.16	4.32	4.62
	Skilled	6,109	36.24	6.01	24.65	18.07	6.35	8.77
	Total	13,397	26.47	6.83	29.20	25.75	5.24	6.51
2. Iron Foundries	Unskilled	10,277	36.17	45.10	2.66	13.43	0.26	2.40
	Skilled	4,600	56.76	32.95	2.63	7.11	-	0.73
	Total	14,877	42.53	41.26	2.64	11.47	0.17	1.88
3. Machinery & Engineering Works	Unskilled	6,691	26.07	17.89	31.46	23.06	0.61	1.90
	Skilled	10,685	73.02	11.52	3.93	9.55	1.06	0.87
	Total	17,376	35.48	10.94	10.94	21.39	6.22	6.96
4. Railway Workshop	Unskilled	10,836	24.60	17.07	6.28	23.03	8.80	20.20
	Skilled	19,124	38.61	17.31	4.11	21.48	8.38	8.95
	Total	29,960	33.54	17.21	4.89	22.04	8.86	13.02

Source: reproduced in *ibid.*, p.305, Table 9.

The reasons for this major change in the composition of the Calcutta industrial labourforce have not yet been established. It seems probable, however, that the immigrants were prepared to work for lower wages than was Bengali labour, and that this was an important reason for the change.⁶⁵ Another factor may have been social control considerations.⁶⁶ However, whatever were the reasons, the organisational ability of the managing agencies to provide such a diverse workforce was a striking fact.⁶⁷ Some agencies, such as Bird and Co., originally specialised in labour contracting for the Assam tea plantations during the 19th century. From the mid-19th century, recruitment of indentured labour for the plantations was further facilitated by government legislation. The same managing agencies managed both the jute mills and the plantations. Thus when the jute industry began rapidly to expand from the last decade of the 19th century it had available a highly organised recruiting network, drawing on a wide 'catchment area'.

The consequences for working class industrial and political organisation were profound. By the beginning of the 20th century the Calcutta working class was particularly heterogeneous, was drawn from particularly depressed backgrounds, and was existing in a particularly competitive job market.⁶⁸ Its linguistic internal divisions and the cultural separation

65. See Bagchi, Private Investment, p.136.

66. This was certainly the case for the Fort Gloster Mill at Bauria in 1928: see the section on the Bauria strike in Chapter 3(2) below.

67. See Bagchi, Private Investment, pp.133-36 and 179-80.

of most of it from the surrounding Bengali population were two of the more obvious characteristics. Community consciousness and organisation were correspondingly high, and it exhibited to a particularly marked degree all of the weaknesses as a working class outlined above. In the case of the industrial working class the preponderance of non-Bengali labour also added to the already considerable distance between the Bengali intelligentsia and the masses.

The organisational and economic strength of the jute industry intensified the difficulties. The Calcutta jute mills were in an inherently very strong position because of their proximity to virtually the only source of raw jute in the world, the availability of cheap labour with which to process it, and the strong world demand for the products.⁶⁹ They had a virtual monopoly control of the world market and were therefore in a strong position to dictate the prices of their products. They also had a monopsonistic control on the raw jute market and could therefore strongly influence the

68. See Das Gupta, op. cit., pp.310-325 and Appendix B for the very great caste complexity of, and the high percentage of workers from very depressed backgrounds within, the jute mill workforce; see Chakrabarty, 'Communal Riots and Labour', pp.24-6, for statistics on the very competitive nature of the labour market. A.A. Yang, 'The Optimising Peasant: A Study of Internal Migration as an Option in a Northeast Indian District', (Paper prepared for a workshop at the University of Pennsylvania, nd.), which studies the factors operating at the source to cause emigration from Saran district in Bihar, confirms Gupta's findings. Brij Lal's current ANU doctoral thesis on emigration from UP will fill an important gap in our understanding of the factors operating in the source areas.

69. For this paragraph see: Bagchi, Private Investment, pp. 139-41, 262-79 & 284-87; D.H. Buchanan, The Development of Capitalist Enterprise in India, (N.Y., 1934), Chapter XI.

prices at which they bought their raw materials. The organisational cohesion of the industry - a cohesion which was facilitated by the racial-cultural homogeneity of the owners and managers⁷⁰ - enabled the maximisation of these inherent advantages. The Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA) was an extremely powerful controlling body, capable of implementing very effective restrictive trade practices and other coordinated policies. The industry was further strengthened by its political and racial proximity to state power at all levels - local, provincial, national and metropolitan.⁷¹ Broadly, there were two consequences of this situation for working class organisation. The first was direct - the IJMA's organisational power for social control, which contrasted so strongly with the organisational weakness of its divided workforce.⁷² The second followed from the industry's monopolistic position and economic strength. It was relatively free of the competition - national or international - or other economic difficulties which might lead to crises or structural changes within the industry; it was, thus, correspondingly free of the dangers of these possible catalysts of class combination within its workforce and worker-intelligentsia linkages.

70. A homogeneity which was the greater for the owners and managements being overwhelmingly Scottish.

71. For the power of the Calcutta British business community as a whole vis a vis the state at its various levels, see Broomfield, op. cit., p.43.

72. Eg. see Buchanan's contemporary observations in op. cit., pp.430-31 & p.434.

The Elite, Politics and the Masses from the Late 19th Century to the Non-Cooperation Movement.

From the above survey of colonial Bengali society we can see that the 'cardinal fact' about the bhadralok, and the primary determinant of its role and fate, was not its pre-occupation with its social honour; it was its structurally determined location, divorced from productive activity, in an intensively colonialised society. As Asok Sen has argued, in the 19th century at least, it was not in a position, as a group, to exercise hegemony over the labouring, productive sectors of the population; it was structurally greatly inhibited from initiating a process of social transformation.⁷³ Nor, in this polarised and depressed society, were there any other social groups in a decisively better position to make the attempt. The Muslim intelligentsia, for example was not as linked to landlordism and the other forms of agricultural exploitation. It also had the advantage of a potential religious link, via the ulema, with the majority of the peasant population and the approximately 30 percent Muslim sector of the workforce.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, even those sections of the Muslim intelligentsia who were not dependent on zamindari were handicapped vis a vis the peasantry by their primarily urban orientation. Further, the potential for religion providing an ideological channel to

73. This is the central theme of Sen's 'Iswarchandra Vidyasagar'.

74. The ulema - the Muslim priesthood - were a powerful force among the Muslim masses, both in the villages and among the working class. Through them the wealthy patrons of the Calcutta Muslim merchant community had, in fact, from the 1890s, established a strong community network among the Muslim mill hands: Chakrabarty, 'Communal Riots and Labour', passim.

the rural population was considerably vitiated by the pronounced - and increasing - caste consciousness of Bengali Islam, and its associated north Indian orientation:⁷⁵ the Muslim elite under colonialism exhibited many of the Hindu bhadralok's characteristics, if not to such a pronounced degree. However the intense competition for the limited number of positions of power and influence in the colonialised Bengali economy greatly exacerbated relations between the Hindu and Muslim elites.

What Broomfield has seen as the core characteristics of Bengali politics were, then, largely symptoms of the deeper reality. The socio-economic bases of indigenous politics in Bengal were particularly narrow and weak. The Bengali bhadralok's 'vanguard' role in Indian nationalist politics masked this fact. In politics as in education, the Bengali elite acted not as a filter to the masses, but as 'a jar hermetically sealed'.⁷⁶ For these reasons, the intelligentsia would tend to provide the 'mass' base of nationalist politics as well as its main activists; and in Bengal the intelligentsia was overwhelmingly the Hindu bhadralok.⁷⁷

75. See: A. Roy, 'The Social Factors in the Making of Bengali Islam', in South Asia, No. 3, 1973, pp.23-35; A. De, op. cit., pp.23-30; and Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908, (New Delhi, 1973), pp.415-16.

76. This expression was used by Lal Behari Day in 1868 to refute the theory that the elite could act as an educational 'filter' to the masses: quoted in Sen, 'Iswarchandra Vidyasagar', p.19.

77. See the tables provided in Broomfield, op. cit., pp.9-10, fn.8; also Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, pp.507-14.

Valiant individual efforts to bridge the gap between the elite and the masses were made during the second half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, but they were defeated by the factors outlined earlier. For example, Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown how Sasipada Banerjee's Brahmo-style social reform activities among the jute millhands of Baranagar in the 1860s and 1870s failed because of his near-total lack of understanding of both the labourers' real problems and the concrete issues of colonial industrialisation.⁷⁸ Sasipada, in fact, 'discovered' the working class through the influence of the English Christian social reformer, Mary Carpenter, whose approach was to 'seek and save the lost'.⁷⁹ A major conclusion of Sumit Sarkar's study of the Swadeshi movement in the first decade of the 20th century is that that movement failed largely because of the bhadralok's failure to make substantial contacts with either the peasantry or the Muslims.⁸⁰ He traces the roots of this failure back to the 19th century phenomena we have outlined above. Even during the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat agitation, when widespread rural unrest was coordinated

78. D. Chakrabarty, 'Sasipada Banerjee: a Study in the Nature of the First Contact of the Bengali Bhadrakok with the Working Classes of Bengal', in Indian Historical Review, Vol. II(2), 1976, pp.339-64. Chakrabarty has characterised Brahmo-style reformism in the following perceptive way (p.342): 'The 1860s saw the growth of something like a "social conscience" in Bengal, at least among the "young" Brahmos. People like Keshub Chunder Sen [and Sasipada] began at this time to bring their own private sense of sin into public life, and made earnest and sincere efforts at removing "social evils" and reclaiming "fallen souls". ... The creed of reformism in Bengal of the 1860s and 1870s is couched in this language of personal sin-resolution, setting it apart from the broader social consciousness of, say, contemporary Bombay, which manifested itself on more impersonal questions like caste and civic reforms; perhaps this personalised flavour of Bengali reformism is what made it so prone to guidance - both divine and colonial.'

79. ibid, pp.345-7.

80. Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, pp.333-5, p.359, pp.389-9 & pp.514-16.

with the movement against the Raj, rural agitation in most districts depended heavily on the mediation of the Muslim ulema, and the bhadralok-tenant contradiction acted as a considerable brake on the Bengal Congress's enthusiasm for peasant organisation.⁸¹

One consequence of the structurally determined, inherently 'hermetic', narrowly based nature of bhadralok politics, was its proneness to the 'fortuitous rivalry' of daladali factional politics.⁸² Bengali politics was extremely factious. But of particular significance was the fact that ideological differences between elite factions tended to be bereft of real socio-political content; the factional rivalry tended to be fortuitous. This had been true of the often fierce ideological debates between the so-called 'conservative', 'reformist' and 'radical' Renaissance factions,⁸³ and of bhadralok politics in the second half of the 19th century.⁸⁴ It remained so during and after the Swadeshi movement, in the early decades of the 20th century, despite the emergence of a more militant anti-colonialist ideology and tactics and the

81. Rajat Ray, 'Masses in Politics: The non-Cooperation Movement in Bengal 1920-1922', in IESHR, Vol.XI(4), 1974, pp.362-63, 393-94 & 403-10.

82. The term is Asok Sen's: Sen, 'Iswarchandra Vidyasagar', p.39.

83. See: S.N. Mukherjee, 'Daladali in Calcutta in the Nineteenth Century', in MAS, Vol.9(1), 1975, pp.59-80, and particularly pp.78-79 (Mukherjee stresses the functional, integrative role of daladali, as well as its fissiparous tendencies); Chakrabarty, 'Colonial Context of the Bengal Renaissance', p.105; Sarkar, 'Rammohan Roy', pp.19-25.

84. Sen, 'Iswarchandra Vidyasagar', pp.38-40.

beginnings of a 'mass' politics. With a few individual exceptions, even the leaders of the revolutionary-terrorist groups were unable to give their concept of political independence a socio-economic content which could clearly distinguish their program from those of the less militant leaderships; constitutionalism and terrorism were linked in the same continuum of elite politics.⁸⁵ This situation reflected the particularly narrow and homogeneous base of Bengali politics into the third decade of the 20th century.

However by the early 20th century there were greatly increased pressures on a growing section of the bhadralok to forge new political alternatives.⁸⁶ These arose from a number of coinciding factors. Returns for individual families from the increasingly subdivided tenure system had been greatly reduced with the growing bhadralok pressure for rental shares. The enhancement of rent collections was meeting with increasing resistance, particularly in eastern Bengal, from the jotedars - the substantial tenantry. The declining rental returns increased the bhadralok pressure for service and professional employment. However the job market in this sector

85. Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, Chapter 9, and particularly pp.488-92. (The individual exceptions were men such as Hemchandra Kanungo and Bhupendranath Dutt, who realised the need to develop a program which could mobilise the peasants and workers by incorporating their specific needs. Dutt was later to become a Marxist); Broomfield, op. cit., pp.15-20 & 146-62.

86. For this paragraph see: ibid., pp.32-4, 45-6 & 155-59; Ray & Ray, 'Zamindars and Jotedars', pp.97-101; Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, p.25, pp.418-20 & 511-12; and Ray, 'Masses in Politics', pp.343-4.

began to decline rapidly in the last quarter of the 19th century, following the consolidation of the empire in India and the reversal of the colonial policy of employing Bengalis in the other provinces. The market became even more competitive from the first decade of the 20th century, when the British instituted a policy of discrimination in favour of the Muslim elite - a policy which was symbolised by the partition of Bengal and which added to the growing communal conflict between the two elites. Finally, two sharp waves of inflation - between 1905 and 1908 and from the War until 1920 - followed by an equally sharp slump beginning in the middle of 1920, added to the economic distress of the lower strata of the bhadralok as well as to that of most of both political and non-political Bengal.

These economic and political pressures were accompanied by profound changes in elite ideological perceptions of the character of British colonialism. As Sarkar has stressed - chastising the economic reductionism of both Marxist and 'elite' theorists - the increasing hold of anti-British ideology was no mere reflex of the economic pressures sketched above: 'economic distress could lead to nationalist politics only via the 'mediation' of an ideology - in this case the theory of British economic exploitation'.⁸⁷ Nor was the Hindu bhadralok the only section of the Bengali elite

87. Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, p.512. See also pp.23-30 & 507-12. In support of his argument Sarkar points out (p.26) that the mufussil areas which became the Swadeshi strongholds were those where 'a marked concentration of intermediate tenures coincided with a relatively high level of English education'.

affected by these combined economic and ideological changes. A small but significant number of Muslims had joined hands with the bhadralok Swadeshi activists.⁸⁸ During the second decade of the century a new type of urban politician, epitomised by Fazlul Huq, had, in the wake of the annulment of the Partition of Bengal, begun expressing its dissatisfaction with the Raj. By 1920 the north Indian inspired Khilafat agitation against allied plans to dismantle the Turkish Caliphate had also deeply affected the Calcutta Urdu-speaking community - and particularly its intelligentsia and merchant elements. The young radical journalist ~~Abdul~~ Kalam Azad became the leading spokesman of this sentiment.⁸⁹ Finally, the young radicals of the Marwari business community were also becoming responsive to the growing anti-British sentiment.⁹⁰ The shifts in Bengal's political life were brought into the open during the prelude to the launching of the Non-Cooperation movement. Bengal's established Muslim and bhadralok political leaderships resisted the programs of Gandhi and the Ali brothers because of their fears of the unpredictable consequences of a call to mass action and their reluctance to relinquish the benefits of their positions in the professions, government service and legislatures. However the economic pressures upon,

88. ibid., Chapter 8. However the nationalist Muslims who participated worked mainly as individuals, and did not attain substantial success in their efforts to establish a stable 'united front' nationalist organisation based on a Hindu-Muslim alliance: ibid., p.440.

89. Broomfield, op. cit., pp.63-5 & 156-57; K. McPherson, 'The Muslims of Madras and Calcutta: Agitational Politics in the Early 1920s', in South Asia, No. 5, 1975, pp.37-9; & Ray, 'Masses in Politics', pp.346-47.

90. ibid., p.362.

and the political fervour of, the radicalised intelligentsias from the different communities, was sufficient for Gandhi and the Khilafatists to be able to go over the heads of the prevaricating leaderships and elicit an enthusiastic response from their followers. The leaders then followed.⁹¹

Bengal's second attempt at a mass nationalist politics had begun. The hopes that it raised among several distinct groups of young Bengali radicals, then later disappointed, were to provide the background for the subsequent, tentative emergence of Bengal's first communists. The hopes were raised, in the tumultuous national and international events of the post-War years, by the unprecedented event of a joint Hindu-Muslim leadership launching a militant challenge to the Raj through a call on the radical intelligentsia to mobilise the labouring masses. They were disappointed by the sudden withdrawal of the movement, by the subsequent collapse of the Hindu-Muslim pact into communal bickering, and by the political impasse reached by the Bengal Congress and the Jugantar and Anushilan leaderships after the ending of Non-Cooperation and the death of C.R. Das.⁹²

Gandhi's decision was the immediate cause of the collapse of the movement. But within Bengal the contradiction between, on the one hand, the bhadralok's need for a mass base

91. ibid., pp.347-59; Broomfield, op. cit., pp.162-68.

92. For these sequels to the withdrawal of Non-Cooperation see: Broomfield, op. cit., pp.227-80; J. Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal 1930 to 1939', in MAS, Vol. 7(3), 1973, pp.589-97; Laushey, op. cit., pp.21-27 & 30-35.

with which to challenge the British and, on the other, the great risks for the elite of mobilising a peasantry upon whose exploitation its social position was based, were also central to the collapse of Non-Cooperation in this province. Even the contemporary strike activity of the industrial workers,⁹³ which greatly impressed the future communists, was not as promising as it appeared on the surface. The Non-Cooperation jute mill agitation, for example, was organised by Azad and his radical Khilafatists.⁹⁴ For their (fairly

93. Strike activity in Bengal as a whole, and in the jute mills, reached peaks of some magnitude in 1921-22, as can be seen from the following figures from 1921 (the first year in which the Government of Bengal began recording strike statistics) to 1924:

Year	No. of Disputes	Numbers Involved	Man-days Lost
<u>1. BENGAL</u>			
1921	150	254,982	2,990,253
1922	93	198,702	1,803,750
1923	67	137,529	1,247,569
1924	55	90,881	925,562
<u>2. JUTE MILLS</u>			
1921	39	186,479	706,229
1922	40	173,957	1,079,627
1923	29	90,664	644,904
1924	18	69,488	346,756

Source: RCLI, Vol.V(1), ps.121 & 126.

94. Ray, 'Masses in Politics', ps.360 & 373; Broomfield, op. cit., p.156.

limited) successes in promoting political strike activity⁹⁵ they appear to have relied largely upon the Muslim community network - linking Calcutta's Muslim elite to the up-country millhands via the maulvis, ulema and Muslim jobbers - that had become established since the 1890s.⁹⁶ Bhadralok labour organisers had previously, during the Swadeshi campaign, achieved modest results in fomenting strike activity among the inflation-affected jute and railway workers.⁹⁷ But these strikes had also been for economic rather than political ends, and the working class response to their efforts had come only from the minority Bengali working class community. Moreover, in contrast to the permanence of the Muslim working class community organisations, nothing of the bhadralok Swadeshi activists' incipient labour organisation - nor of bhadralok interest in trade union activity - survived the Swadeshi era.⁹⁸ During the Non-Cooperation movement the non-Khilafat activists who involved themselves in trade union work were almost all non-Bengali Gandhians.⁹⁹ But the only jute industry trade unions which remained in 1922 were Khilafatist, with no bhadralok officials.¹⁰⁰ During Non-Cooperation, an occasion of Hindu-Muslim unity, the Muslim community network had been utilised to coordinate working class strike activity with an

95. McPherson, op. cit., p.42

96. Ray, 'Masses in Politics', p.373; Chakrabarty, 'Communal Riots and Labour', pp.66-9; see Broomfield, op. cit., p.156, on Azad's use of rumours of 'Islam in danger' in his agitational activity in the mill area.

97. See Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, Chapter 5, for an account of the activities and results of the Swadeshi labour organisers - most prominent among whom was Aswinicoomar Banerji.

98. ibid., pp.241-43.

99. Ray, 'Masses in Politics', pp.372-73.

anti-British campaign. But the same network could as readily be made to serve the needs of overtly communal politics. The 1926 riots, as had the 1918 riots before them, were to demonstrate that reality.¹⁰¹ Bengali industrial unionism as a whole remained very weak during the 1920s. For example the great majority of the trade unions formed in the post-War/Non-Cooperation period were clerical unions, and the same pattern was retained during the decade.¹⁰²

This was the rather unpromising background to, and context of, the emergence of communism in Calcutta. But before tracing that process we will outline the background against which Bombay communism developed.

3. WESTERN INDIA, MAHARASHTRA AND BOMBAY

One consequence of the weaker colonialisation of western India was that this region retained a much higher degree of continuity with its pre-colonial past than did eastern India; it was not as completely broken adrift from its traditional moorings. Another was that its social order retained a much higher level of internal continuity, functional differentiation

100. IB, G of Ben.: 'List of Labour Unions and Associations in Bengal, 1922'. (I owe this source to Dipesh Chakrabarty.)

101. See Chakrabarty, 'Communal Riots and Labour', pp.66-7, on this.

102. See fn. 100; RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.119. The Bengal government reported that the ratio between clerical and manual workers unions was approximately three to two, and that most of the latter were extremely unstable and often little more than ephemeral strike committees.

and autonomy; its intermediate social structure was not as severely eroded, nor the society as polarised nor as subjugated to the colonial order. This was particularly the case in Gujarat. Maharashtra was more deeply affected.¹⁰³ But Maharashtra, too, was much less colonialised than was Bengal. Bombay, which drew its capital primarily from Gujarat, its labouring population primarily from Maharashtra, and its intelligentsia(s) from both, epitomised much that was distinctive in the region as a whole, while constituting a discrete entity in its own right.

Colonialisation in Western India

An obvious contrast with eastern India was the survival of much of western India's pre-colonial capitalist strata.¹⁰⁴ These capitalist elements were able, together with the new comprador (primarily Parsi) capitalists who emerged under colonialism, to move into and dominate large-scale industry - particularly the cotton spinning and weaving industry in Bombay, and then, Ahmedabad. This industrial foothold provided a fairly solid basis for the future survival and expansion of Indian capital, despite the severe constraints under which it operated

103. See: Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth', pp.259-60; Omvedt's figures on agrarian relations in Maharashtra and Gujarat, in G. Omvedt, 'Development of the Maharashtrian Class Structure, 1818 to 1931', in EPW, Vol.VIII(31-33), 1973, p.1426, Table 6; R. Kumar, Western India in the Nineteenth Century; A Study in the Social History of Maharashtra, (Canberra, 1968), Cf. Chapters I, V & IX; and K. Gillion, Ahmedabad, A Study in Indian Urban History, (Canberra, 1969), passim, for the remarkable degree of continuity between traditional and modern Ahmedabad

104. See Bagchi, 'Reflections on Regional Growth', pp.256-59, for a description of the contours of the pre-colonial Gujarati capitalist class and its relations with other classes.

in the colonial context.¹⁰⁵ The survival of indigenous capital until the period of modern industrialisation was due very largely to the fact that the British remained dependent on its collaboration during and, for some time, after the campaign against the Marathas - into the first quarter of the 19th century. However the comparative strength of Indian capitalism in western India was also an index of the greater integrity retained by the society as a whole. As Bagchi has argued, the survival of indigenous capital was linked - and in a mutually reinforcing way - with the comparatively high survival levels of the artisan class, traditional agrarian relations and the old ruling order. For example, the artisan class, apart from not suffering as intensively the directly colonial pressures faced by the artisans of east India, also retained more of its traditional market (for example in the several princely states) and the support of indigenous capital.¹⁰⁶ The

105. Eg., Bagchi, (*ibid.*, p.267) has written: 'However significant the differences in the processes of formation of capitalist classes in eastern and western India, they are not enough to make any tall claims for industrial growth in western India, for the colonial regime shaped the growth patterns of all regions in certain fundamental ways. Out of all the possible tableaux that are conjured up by the constellation of class forces in British Gujarat, for instance, the colonial constraints ultimately allowed only one to surface: many of the important bankers and traders emerged to form the core of a tightly-knit industrial bourgeois class in Ahmedabad (and Gujarat in general), either directly as pioneers or in collaboration. But their growth was limited by the low level of development of productive forces in agriculture, by the low level of innovative ability built into the industrial organization and by the overall lack of dynamism of the home market'.

106. The larger scale urban artisans had provided an important class of clients for the traditional capitalists (see, eg., Gadgil, *op. cit.*, pp.173-74), and it was therefore in the capitalists' interests to resist this class's destruction (see Bagchi, 'Reflections on Regional Growth, p.257). The cotton mills initially developed by supplying coarse yarn

survival of the principalities also reinforced the traditional capitalist strata, and later they were to provide capital for Indian industrial ventures and favourable political conditions for investment within their borders.¹⁰⁷ The less colonialised agrarian relations of western India also provided a more favourable context for indigenous industrial development in the region.¹⁰⁸ Conversely, the availability of alternative profitable investment opportunities (such as in industry) reduced the flow of urban capital into exploitative, unproductive forms of agricultural investment.¹⁰⁹ The overall contrast with eastern India could be seen clearly in the survival of several substantial urban centres - both industrial and non-industrial - in the region, and in the vigorous political life which developed in each of these centres.

106. (Cont'd)

to handloom weavers: Bagchi, Private Investment, p.220. See Gillion, op. cit., pp.47-9, on the high survival rate of the Gujarati weavers into the 20th century because of the weakness of the colonial impact on their traditional market. The most serious competition, in fact, came eventually from the Ahmedabad mills. However the mills also provided an alternative source of employment for displaced artisans.

107. ibid., p.257; Bagchi, Private Investment, p.210 & pp.214-15. Bagchi argues (ibid., p.215) that 'The political separateness of the native states from British India was more important for industrial growth than the semi-feudal structure of administration within many of those states, given the discrimination practiced against Indian businessmen under the imperial system'.

108. See Bagchi, 'Reflections on Patterns of Regional Growth', pp.262-3, for evidence of rich peasant capital being invested in industry (though to a limited extent) and of the greater rural retention of the agricultural surplus in the region providing a stronger market for regional industry.

109. Catanach, op. cit., p.25 & pp.78-87. For Gujarat see Gillion, op. cit., pp.79-80. In fact west Indian indigenous capitalists helped finance rural cooperative credit societies. Moreover, under the ryotwari system, unlike the Permanently Settled areas, the government had a direct interest in attempting to maintain the cultivator's viability; for government revenues were supposed to vary directly with the peasant's revenues.

Industrial Capital and Labour in Bombay

These distinctive regional features were also reflected in the character of the Bombay cotton industry which began to be established in the second half of the 19th century, and in the character of the workforce which it attracted. The industry began when a Parsi, Cowasji Davar, opened a spinning mill in 1856.¹¹⁰ In 1858 a group of Bombay businessmen started a composite spinning and weaving mill. By 1874 there were 17 mills, and by 1900 there were 86. By 1884 the industry was employing some 40 thousand workers, and twice that many by the end of the century.¹¹¹ By 1920 the figure was 140,898. Between 1920 and 1928 some 145,000 to 150,000 workers were employed in approximately 80 mills.¹¹² Newman calculates that by this time perhaps half of Bombay's population was dependent to some extent on the textile industry.¹¹³ In the 1920s Bombay had a total factory population of about 190,000.¹¹⁴ The three railway workshops at Parel and Matunga employed the second biggest concentration of labour - by the 1920s there were 19,500 workers, divided approximately evenly between the three workshops.¹¹⁵

110. M.D. Morris, The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854-1947 (Berkeley, 1965), pp.23-26.

111. The employment figures are taken from the table in ibid., Appendix II, pp.217-18.

112. Estimates of the numbers vary between these two limits for the years up to 1928, after which mill employment began to fall. See the figures provided in RCLI, Vol.I(1), p.12, and Morris, op. cit., pp.213-14. The 1921 Census, however, provides the unrealistically low figure of 117,100: Newman, op. cit., p.5.

113. ibid., p.6.

114. RCLI, Report, p.9.

115. RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), pp.8-9.

Although Bombay's industry shared many of Calcutta's industrial features, there were also some crucial differences - most notably in the composition of the workforce and the organisational and economic strength of industrial capital.

Whereas Calcutta's workforce was primarily non-Bengali and was highly heterogenous in regional and caste composition, Bombay's labour was overwhelmingly Maharashtrian and was much more homogeneous. The 1921 Census gave the following breakdown for the regions which supplied significant numbers of cotton mill workers:

TABLE 7

DISTRICT/PROVINCE OF ORIGIN OF BOMBAY CITY COTTON MILL WORKERS

<u>District/Province</u>	<u>Numbers</u>
Ratnagiri	54,570
United Provinces	14,467
Satara	10,183
Poona	9,490
Kolaba	6,870
Ahmednagar	4,585
Hyderabad	3,510
Kolhapur	2,836
Nasik	1,761
Sholapur	1,558
	<u>109,820</u>

Source: Reproduced in Newman, op. cit., p.54, Table V.

Notes: The number of workers represented in this table is significantly less than the 117,100 listed in this Census as full-time millhands, and substantially less than the actual number of workers employed. Nevertheless it is highly unlikely that any important source of supply is missing - apart, perhaps, from those who were born in Bombay city - and the figures almost certainly provide a reasonably representative picture of the composition of the total workforce: see Morris, op. cit., p.228.

Thus workers from Maharashtrian districts constituted more than 80 percent of the total mill workforce. Moreover, the cultivating Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster¹¹⁶ accounted for 52,650 of the sample - i.e., approximately half. From five to seven percent were Muslims, and approximately 13 percent were Untouchables.¹¹⁷ The Marathas tended to be concentrated in the weaving departments, the Untouchables in the spinning departments, and the Muslims in a few Muslim dominated mills - primarily in the Madanpura area. As in Bengal, there had initially been a higher proportion of local labour in the workforce, the proportion of 'up-country' labour increasing over time.¹¹⁸ But the rate of increase was nothing like that in Bengal.

Broadly, there appear to have been two factors contributing to the Bombay situation. In line with our argument about the effects of colonialisation, there would not have been as intense or as widespread a pressure to move from the land and the traditional industries to the city in western India compared to eastern and northern India.¹¹⁹ But what was probably

116. I will term this caste cluster 'Maratha' for the sake of brevity.

117. These figures and percentages are taken or calculated from the caste figures provided in Newman's Table V. A survey conducted by the Bombay Millowners' Association in 1940 also provides percentages for the respective caste categories of the order of those given here: see Morris, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-5, including Table XI.

118. Eg., according to Morris (*ibid.*, p.63, Table VII), the UP's share in the workforce increased from 3.05 percent in 1911 to 9.42 percent in 1921 to 11.82 percent in 1931 (though our sample indicates 13.2 percent in 1921).

119. For example, this would help to explain the fact that there was virtually no labour from Gujarat and very little from other contiguous provinces employed in the Bombay mills, despite the accessibility of Bombay. The existence of cotton mills at both Ahmedabad and Sholapur (both of which employed mainly local labour - see *RCLI*, Vol.I(1), p.4 & pp. 8-9) and, probably, the fact that there was less pressure

more important was the fact that the Bombay millowners' had a much narrower recruiting network than their European counterparts in Bengal. Not having to hand an equivalent to the Europeans' managing agency recruiting system throughout eastern and northern India, the Bombay millowners simply did not have the available means readily to reproduce Calcutta's heterogenous workforce.¹²⁰ Thus, while community modes of organisation and consciousness prevailed among Bombay's workers as in Calcutta, there was not the same pronounced degree of community fragmentation nor as marked an impetus towards heightened community consciousness. Of particular significance were the facts that more than 80 percent of the Bombay workforce was Marathi-speaking and that half of it belonged, broadly, to one community - the Maratha caste cluster. For these reasons the barriers to the formation of horizontal linkages across the workforce, and linkages with a Marathi-speaking 'outsider' intelligentsia, were, though considerable, not nearly so great as in Calcutta. The predominance of the Marathi-speaking categories, and particularly of the Maratha group, had a further significance: their sharing with each other and, to a considerable degree, with the Brahman elite, of a unique and still live cultural tradition, which was distinguished by its

119. (Cont'd)

on the land in western India than in Bengal's contiguous provinces, would have combined to produce this result. That much of the immigration from Hyderabad was diverted from Bombay to Ahmedabad after the establishment of the Ahmedabad textile industry supports this contention (see *ibid.*, pp.6-7). Had the high degree of landlessness in Ratnagiri and of dwarf-holdings in Satara (see Omvedt, *op. cit.*, p.1427, Table 7 Part II), the two major source districts for Maharashtrian labour, been more widespread in western India, the picture may well have been very different. The de-population caused by periodic epidemics, and the famines to which the Deccan was prone, also acted to produce short-term labour scarcity.

assertiveness and by a significant element of egalitarianism.¹²¹

The significance of each of the above features of the Bombay working class was exemplified in an event in 1908 which could not have occurred in contemporary Calcutta - the week-long strike in most of the mills, and demonstrations by very large numbers of millhands, in protest at the trial and conviction of Tilak.¹²² There is reason to doubt the claims made by some - including Lenin¹²³ - that this was a clear demonstration of rising class consciousness, for the event appears to have been engineered primarily by jobbers in contact with the Tilak political organisation.¹²⁴ Nevertheless the point remains valid; for the event was evidence of the potential cohesiveness of the predominant Maratha working class community, of the preparedness of the Maratha workers to be drawn into militant nationalist actions, of a significant degree of cultural sharing between the Brahman Tilakite leaders and the Maratha workers, and of the ability of the Tilakites to establish organisational links with the Maratha jobber intermediaries.¹²⁵

120. Attempts by J.N. Tata in the 1880s and 1890s to institute a formal system of recruitment in north India - precisely in order to undermine the potential for working class combination - failed. The increasing numbers of UP migrants arrived informally, not as a result of a BMOA recruitment policy or system: Morris, op. cit., pp.54-5 & p.64.

121. This will be gone into below.

122. For a detailed account of the strike, see A.I. Chicherov, 'Tilak's Trial and the Bombay Political Strike of 1908', in I.M. Reisner and N.M. Goldberg, Tilak and the Struggle for Indian Freedom, (New Delhi, 1966).

123. V.I. Lenin, 'Inflammable Material in World Politics', (Aug. 5, 1908), in his Collected Works (1963), Vol.XV, p.184.

124. Newman, op. cit., p.122.

125. For Tilak's working class activity, see Cashman, op. cit., Chapter VIII.

The 1908 strike contrasts with the results of the Swadeshi activists' working class program in 1905-08 in all of these respects.¹²⁶ The greater assertiveness and cohesiveness of the Bombay workers was also evidenced in the strikes which occurred in the post-War period of high inflation. The Bombay unrest led to two extended general strikes in 1919 and 1920.¹²⁷ Although strike activity was substantial in Calcutta, nothing like a general strike occurred.¹²⁸

This inherent sociological potential for the formation of class modes of working class organisation and consciousness, and for the political mobilisation of the proletariat by a radical intelligentsia, was further increased by the political economy of the cotton textile industry.¹²⁹ The industry was, economically and politically, in a much weaker position than was the jute industry. The Bombay mills were not in the jute industry's position to establish either a monopsony control over the purchase of its raw materials or a monopoly control over its markets. In its purchase of raw cotton it had to compete with the Indian mills at Ahmedabad and elsewhere and, occasionally, when American supplies were disrupted, with international purchasers as well. In its national and international markets it faced the competition of Lancashire and Japan as well as that

126. A point made by Sarkar, in The Swadeshi Movement, pp.244-46.

127. Newman, op. cit., Chapter V; R. Kumar, 'The Bombay Textile Strike, 1919', in IESHR, Vol. VIII(1), 1971, pp.1-29.

128. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.126.

129. The following information on the economics and organisation of the industry is taken from Morris, op. cit., Chapters II & III; Bagchi, Private Investment, Chapter 7; Buchanan, op. cit., Chapter X; Newman, op. cit., Chapter III; and A.D. Gordon, 'Bombay City Businessmen and Politics, 1918-1933: The Politics of Indigenous Colonial Businessmen in Relation to Rising Nationalism and a Modernising Economy' (Cambridge University Ph.D., 1975), pp.250-54.

of the other Indian textile centres.¹³⁰ Bombay's competition-created problems - including the gradual loss of its export market - increased rapidly during the first two decades of the 20th century and, though temporarily alleviated by the War/post-War boom, returned in the 1920s.¹³¹ Although the Bombay millowners had a great deal of influence upon the provincial government¹³² they were not able to mobilise sufficient political weight to force the colonial state to implement substantial, compensatory tariff barriers and other forms of state protection and patronage. Finally, Bombay's problems were compounded by the poor management, under its often inefficient managing agency system, of many of its mills.¹³³

Two consequences for working class organisation flowed from the textile industry's comparatively weak economic position. The first was that it did not have the jute industry's inherent capacity to establish a tight monopsonistic-monopolistic regulatory organisation.¹³⁴ Therefore the Bombay Millowners'

130. See Bagchi, Private Investment, p.234, Table 7.4 and p.238, Table 7.5.

131. In fact, except for 1927, between 1924 and 1929 the industry as a whole experienced annual gross losses ranging between Rs.19,540,908 and Rs.29,877,920. Only a few mills (notably Tatas and Wadias) remained reasonably strong: Gordon, op. cit., pp.253-54, including Table 5.4.

132. See ibid., passim.

133. Bombay's efficiency problems were not shared by the jute industry because of the scope for inefficiency allowed by its wide, monopolist, profit margins.

134. That economic stability and lack of competition were important for the establishment and maintenance of the IJMA's regulatory powers was evidenced during the Depression and subsequently, when economic difficulties and increasing competition from non-IJMA mills in the Calcutta region led almost to the breakdown of the IJMA's agreement on restricted production. The agreement was saved only by the government's intervention: Bagchi, Private Investment, pp.47-50.

Association (BMOA) did not have the IJMA's inherent organisational capacity to respond to working class resistance in a highly concerted manner. This problem was further compounded by nationalist considerations - particularly at times when the industry was in conflict with the state - for these considerations would tend to inhibit (though by no means to prevent) the repressiveness of the responses of Indian managements to Indian working class combination and agitation. The second consequence was the industry's inherent pronounced vulnerability to economic crisis and structural change, and thus to major working class resistance to, and organisation against, the millowners. In the 1920s the Bombay mills were, in fact, to enter a particularly severe, decade-long marketing crisis leading to structural changes which would have this effect.

The Brahman Intelligentsia and Colonialism in Maharashtra

The contrast between the two regions could also be seen in the respective intelligentsias' different characteristics and relations to the wider societies. The differences were in part pre-colonial in origin, in part a consequence of the quite dissimilar nature of the encounters between the respective Hindu elites and the British, and in part they reflected the contrasting effects of colonialisaton on the two societies as a whole.

As in Bengal, the colonial intelligentsia of Maharashtra was drawn primarily from the high Hindu castes that had provided the traditional intelligentsias and administrators. But whereas the Bengali bhadralok's pre-colonial ancestors had

been politically subordinate to the Mughal power, Maharashtra's Brahmans - and particularly the Chitpavan Brahmans - were, politically and ideologically, the dominant group.¹³⁵ Thus the imposition of colonialism involved the displacement of the Brahmans, not, as in Bengal, their 'liberation' from the rule of the Muslims. For this reason the Maharashtrian intelligentsia was initially more resistant to the new Raj.

Much of this resistance was disarmed by the new opportunities provided under British rule. Brahmans were the first to move into and dominate the government service and professional positions which became available.¹³⁶ However these opportunities were not as great as they had been for the bhadralok during the expansion of empire in Bengal and elsewhere. Further, the ryotwari system did not allow the Brahmans or other elite groups to become as systematically a landed class as did the zamindari system the bhadralok.¹³⁷ Nor did the Brahmans benefit significantly from the new business opportunities which became available, particularly in Bombay, under the British. These were captured primarily by Gujaratis and Parsis. Moreover, these

135. Eg., Kumar (op. cit., p.39) has written: 'The control of political and social power by the chitpavans through their connection with the Peshwas, and the intellectual hegemony which they exercised by virtue of their caste, created a degree of brahmanical dominance in Maharashtra to which there existed no parallel in the rest of India'. (The Peshwas - literally 'ministers' - were the Chitpavan Brahman rulers of the Maratha empire for the century prior to 1818.)

136. C. Dobbin, Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and Communities in Bombay City, 1840-1885, (London, 1972) Chapter II; Kumar, op. cit., Chapter VIII.

137. This point is reinforced by a similar contrast within the Bombay Presidency. While most of the Marathi speaking areas were settled under the ryotwari system, the Konkan districts of Ratnagiri and Kolaba were settled under the zamindari-type khoti system. There was also a significant

groups began during the second half of the 19th century to produce their own, fairly distinct, Bombay-based, intelligentsias. 138

Thus the material incentives for the dominant section of the Maharashtrian intelligentsia to become wholehearted supporters of colonialism were not nearly as great as for the bhadralok. Consequently the Chitpavans' response to colonialism and ideological Westernisation contrasted - in its ambivalence at least - with the bhadralok's enthusiastic endorsement. The initial resistance, the extent of Brahman hegemony in Maharashtrian society, and the absence of an adequate alternative collaborationist elite in the mufussil, were sufficient for the Bombay government to tread very carefully on Chitpavan sensibilities. One aspect of this caution was Elphinstone's transitional policy of continuing to subsidise traditional scholarly pursuits in Poona, through the old Peshwa institution of the dakshina, in the hope of gradually winning the Chitpavans to the colonial viewpoint.¹³⁹ Throughout the 19th century, Brahman ambivalence towards the British remained pronounced enough for influential sections of the government to

137. (Cont'd)

flow of urban capital into land speculation in these districts. That the Konkan districts had a much higher incidence of landlessness (except perhaps for West Kandesh, which had a high proportion of tribals in its population), dwarf-holding and non-cultivating landlordism (see Omvedt, op. cit., p.1427, Table 7) suggests the debilitating effects of this form of land settlement. See also R. Cashman, The Myth of the Lokamanya: Tilak and Mass Politics in Maharashtra, (Berkeley, 1975), p.135.

138. Dobbin, op. cit., pp.154-72; Gordon, op. cit., pp.69-72.

139. Kumar, op. cit., pp.47-56. The traditional shastris mounted considerable resistance to the introduction of western learning.

continue to entertain dark - if exaggerated - anxieties about Poona-based Brahman 'conspiracies' to regain their lost power.¹⁴⁰ In fact Poona did remain, into the 20th century, a centre of alienated Brahman opposition to the Raj - in contrast with the Bombay elites' profitable collaboration; and within Bombay, the Maharashtrian Brahmans remained, to a significant extent, 'outsiders' in a city dominated by the Gujarati, Parsi and other business communities.¹⁴¹

The Intelligentsia and Maharashtrian Tradition

It was not until the second half of the 19th century that a substantial westernised Maharashtrian intelligentsia was formed - Kumar's 'new Brahmans'.¹⁴² However, even the most Westernised sections of the 'new Brahmans' sought to retain strong links with the pre-colonial Maharashtrian tradition and with contemporary popular culture. This contrasted with the bhadralok rejection of the immediate, Mughal past in favour of a distant and highly romanticised mythical past, and with its contempt for popular, quietist Vaishnavism.

The Maharashtrian contrast was exemplified very clearly even in the case of the leading exponent of Western-inspired reform of Indian society - M.G. Ranade. For example,

140. Cashman, op. cit., Chapter II and pp.140-41.

141. See ibid., Chapter VII, which contrasts the politics of the two cities.

142. See his op. cit., Chapter VIII. In the mid-19th century the westernised intelligentsia remained a small proportion of the Brahman intelligentsia.

Ranade's keenest interest during his university days was 18th century Marathi poetry; and in his later The Rise of the Maratha Power he found the potential cultural roots of regeneration, and the ideological foundation for a unified Maharashtrian society, firmly within the Maharashtrian tradition of the not-too-distant past.¹⁴³ The role of this tradition was to be asserted even more vehemently by the extremist, Poona-based, Tilak - especially in his Shivaji festivals and his 'political recruitment of God Ganapati'.¹⁴⁴ The Brahman terrorists, such as the Sarvarkar and Chapekar brothers, drew on the same cultural heritage for their political ideology.¹⁴⁵ Another example - which serves as an interesting contrast with Rammohan's prose style - reinforces the point we are making here: while Rammohan displayed an ignorance of, and lack of interest in, popular idiom, and a preference for the Sanskritised sadhu bhasa, G.H. Deshmukh (an important figure in early modern Marathi prose) did not sharply demarcate the written from the spoken form, frequently used idiom, and attacked the use of Sanskritised prose.¹⁴⁶

The Brahmins' return to the past, and their concern to maintain a cultural bond with the masses - if partly to

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143. See: E.E. McDonald, 'The Growth of Regional Consciousness in Maharashtra', in IESHR, Vol.V(3), 1968, pp.225-39; I.Rothermund, 'Gandhi and Maharashtra: Nationalism and the Provincial Response', in South Asia, No. 1, 1971, pp.56-7; Cashman, op. cit., pp.9-10, 43-4 & 103-04.
144. This apt phrase is the title of Cashman's Chapter IV (ibid.). For Tilak's development of the Shivaji festival see ibid., Chapter V.
145. ibid., p.91 & 114-15.
146. M.L. Apte, 'Lokahitavadi and V.K. Chiplunkar: Spokesmen of Change in Nineteenth-Century Maharashtra', in MAS, Vol.7(2), 1973, pp.197-8. (Deshmukh was known popularly as 'Lokahitavadi' - 'the advocate of the people's welfare'.)

provide an ideological justification for their continued hegemony in Maharashtrian society - could fairly readily be harmonised. This was because of the unique quality of the Maharashtrian tradition and because colonial Maharashtrian society had not been sundered from it.

Pre-colonial Maharashtra was distinguished from the other sub-continental societies by the relatively much higher level of cultural integration between the elite and the masses. The contrast with Bengal in this regard appears to have been particularly marked. In fact Kumar, in his survey of Maharashtrian society on the eve of the British conquest, places the following emphasis on this feature:

The key to the vigour of Maharashtra lay in the secular and spiritual values which inspired the people of the region ... and which affiliated the elite castes, like the brahmans, and the lower and middle castes, like the kunbis and mahars, to a common corpus of religious ideas. ... Maharashtra was able to bridge a gulf which bedevilled Hindu society elsewhere and prevented it from offering effective resistance to Muslim rule.¹⁴⁷

Very broadly, this integration rested culturally on two foundations: the devotional, spiritually egalitarian and quietist bhakti tradition; and the militant 'Kshatriya' Shivaji tradition.¹⁴⁸ The bhakti movement's contributions were its

147. Kumar, op. cit., pp.6-7; Also E. Zelliott, 'Mahar and Non-Brahman Movements In Maharashtra', in IESHR, Vol.VII(3), 1970, pp.397-415, and particularly p.408. While Kumar may have accorded values too central a role in determining the uniqueness of traditional Maharashtrian society (see, e.g., Satish Chandra, 'Social Background to the Rise of the Maratha Movement during the 17th Century in India', in IESHR, Vol.X(3), 1973, pp.209-17), his emphasis on the uniqueness of the society, and on the importance of its cultural and social cohesion, are warranted.

148. See: Kumar, op. cit., pp.6-11; Cashman, op. cit., Chapter I.

translation of the philosophy of Brahmanical Hinduism into an accessible vernacular poetry, its stress on devotion, rather than more intellectual modes, as the most effective path to salvation, and its insistence on the equality - or at least the spiritual equality - of high and low castes. The bhakti movement was responsible for a remarkable, burgeoning tradition of vernacular poetry which sustained, in a popular form, the values it sought to transmit. The bhakti saints included both Brahmans and non-Brahmans. The Shivaji tradition also contributed to the cultural integration of Maharashtrian society, while complementing the particular value system of the bhakti tradition. The latter had in fact facilitated Shivaji's efforts to mobilise a resistance, based on the Maratha peasants, against the Mughal intruders. In throwing off the Mughal domination Shivaji - himself of lowly caste - created a movement and a state which had 'every semblance of mass support', and which bequeathed a militant tradition of popular armed struggle against invaders.¹⁴⁹ These Kshatriya values became an integral

149. S. Chandra, op. cit., p.211; Kumar, op. cit., p.4. There is perhaps a useful parallel to be drawn here with Vietnam. Vietnam's tradition of armed resistance to foreign domination played an extremely important role in the development of 20th century Vietnamese nationalism. Moreover, France's final defeat of Vietnamese resistance and establishment of a formal empire came relatively late (1885), and a succession of militant patriots managed to keep the tradition alive until a significant nationalist movement began in the late 1920s. (See Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism.) Compared to Bengal, Maharashtra exhibited similarities with Vietnam in both its militant tradition and the relative lateness of its colonisation.

part of the Maharashtrian tradition. Both cultural 'poles' included significant egalitarian tendencies. The egalitarianism was limited in scope - for example it did not attack the caste system as such, and the Brahmans retained spiritual and social dominance. After Shivaji's death, they also attained a formidable political power which often brought them into conflict with other sections of the society. But the Maharashtrian ideology did legitimise an unusual degree of social mobility within the varna scale, and its culture remained, to a remarkable degree, common to both the elite and the masses.

Intelligentsias and Society in Colonial Maharashtra and Bombay

The major changes of the 19th century attenuated this social and cultural bond. Brahman exploitation of the cultivating and artisan classes appears to have increased markedly under colonialism.¹⁵⁰ Brahman relations with non-Brahmans became further complicated because of a process of increasing socio-economic mobility within the peasantry. Kumar argues that by the last quarter of the 19th century a class of 'rich' peasants had emerged and that this upwardly mobile class increasingly opposed the dominance of the Brahmans.¹⁵¹

150. Omvedt, op. cit., pp.1418-22. Omvedt cites, in particular, Brahman money-lending activity and the associated Brahman alienation of non-Brahman agricultural holdings. Brahmans were also prominent in the legal apparatus which sanctioned the land transfers.

151. Kumar, op. cit., p.298 and pp.313-17. Kumar has been criticised for overstating the 'rich peasant' case for the 19th century (see Catanach, op. cit., pp.224-25; Omvedt, op. cit., ps.1423 & 1428). There is evidence, nevertheless, of significant upward mobility of sections of the peasantry. Twentieth century literacy statistics for certain of the artisan and menial castes also suggest considerable mobility: see the relatively high and increasing literacy figures for 1921 and 1931 in Omvedt, op. cit., p.1418, Table I.

Concurrently, a few non-Brahman urban intellectuals from substantial peasant or small scale commercial backgrounds began actively to agitate against Brahman dominance. Their ideology claimed that the 'bahujan samaj' (the 'majority community' or the 'masses') was systematically oppressed by the 'shetjis' and the 'bhatjis' (literally, the merchants and priests, but in fact referring more widely to the merchant and financier classes and the Brahmans).¹⁵² Jotirao Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj, founded in 1873 in opposition to the Brahman-dominated Sarvajanik Sabha, initiated this anti-Brahman challenge. Phule attacked Brahman elitist arrogance and dominance of the bureaucracy and professions, and charged the Brahmans with having betrayed their social responsibilities to the masses.¹⁵³ The non-Brahman movement gathered momentum in the first decades of the 20th century. Under the leadership of the urban non-Brahman intelligentsia and businessmen and the more prosperous peasants, the movement attracted considerable support from the non-Brahman masses, and gained additional strength from the support of certain Maratha princes - most notably the Maharaja of Kholapur. Paradoxically, the movement was reinforced ideologically by the Brahmans' resurrection of the Shivaji tradition, which accorded a central role to the Marathas.¹⁵⁴

152. Omvedt, op. cit., p.1430; Zelliott, op. cit., pp.397-415; Kumar, op. cit., pp.304-08 and 313-16.

153. See Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Nationalists in Poona', in EPW, Vol. IX(6-8), 1974, pp.201-16, for subsequent non-Brahman elite grievances against the Brahmans, and for the gathering momentum of the non-Brahman movement.

154. Zelliott, op. cit., p.408.

But despite this conflict the Brahmans and non-Brahmans remained linked by a strong cultural bond.¹⁵⁵ For example, the non-Brahman movement adapted to its own ends the same tradition-based ideological vehicles that had earlier been developed by their Brahman opponent Tilak:¹⁵⁶ the conflict was at least being fought in the same language. Moreover, the Brahmans were far from completely alienated from non-Brahman audiences. From the early 20th century Brahmans, as well as non-Brahmans, began to adapt the traditional tamasha (a popular, earthy dance-drama) and hari-kirtan (a one-man recital of bhakti devotional poetry) to convey modern political messages.¹⁵⁷ Tilak's success in working class mobilisation, even though it was limited and ambiguous, was further evidence of the continuing possibilities for Brahman communication with the masses.

The bond persisted largely because the Brahman intelligentsia, unlike the bhadralok, did not become completely divorced from productive activity - nor, therefore, from the social and economic life of the masses. The Chitpavans, for example, had traditionally engaged in a wide range of occupations, including agriculture, and were able to continue to demonstrate this adaptability under colonialism.¹⁵⁸ For example, they continued to engage in cultivation¹⁵⁹

155. Kumar, op. cit., pp.316-17 & p.332.

156. Cashman, op. cit., Chapters IV and V.

157. G. Omvedt, 'The Satyashodhak Samaj and Peasant Agitation', in EPW, Vol. VIII(-4), 1973, pp.1973-74; McDonald, op. cit., pp.230-31.

158. M.L.P. Patterson, 'Changing Patterns of Occupation Among Chitpavan Brahmans', in IESHR, Vol. VIII(3), 1970, pp.375-96.

159. ibid...

largely, perhaps, because the virtual absence of zamindari-type systems in Maharashtra prevented a large-scale move into rentier landlordism. Brahmins did not become significantly involved in the ownership or management of industry. Nevertheless the Brahman intelligentsia in Bombay did at least participate in a milieu in which Indian industrial entrepreneurship was dominant, and it was in close contact with intelligentsias drawn from the industrialist communities.¹⁶⁰ For this reason Bombay's Brahman intelligentsia, though not in immediate contact with the industrial world, was not separated from it by the structural barriers between the intelligentsia and industry which existed in Bengal.

The vitality developed by the non-Brahman movement from the late 19th century attested to the continuing relative strength and assertiveness of the intermediate levels of the Maharashtrian social structure, and to these intermediate classes' ability to produce an intermediate intelligentsia.¹⁶¹ This middle level vitality and assertiveness posed a considerable barrier against 'elitist' attempts to mobilise a subordinated mass following, yet it also provided a potential bridge to the labouring population for an elite leadership with an egalitarian political program. Bombay city's 20th century industrial working class inherited a late 19th century legacy of labour reform work by non-Brahman movement activists such as

160. See, eg.: Dobbin's section on 'Shetias and Intelligentsia', op. cit., pp.154-72; J.C. Masselos, 'Bombay in the 1870s: a Study of Changing Patterns in Urban Politics', in South Asia, No. 1, 1971, pp.29-55.

161. See Zelliott, op. cit., p.414 on this.

the mali (gardener caste) intellectual, N.M. Lokhande. Lokhande's work, though very limited in its effectiveness, contrasted with that of his Bengali contemporary, Sasipada Banerjee, in that its inspiration was indigenous and in that it attempted to resolve concrete industrial problems as perceived by the labourers.¹⁶² Whereas Banerjee left behind no legacy of reform work, nor a significant place in the collective memory of the millhands, Lokhande's work was to be continued into the 20th century and, as late as the 1920s, his name was being invoked in the mill area.¹⁶³ This tradition was a potential legacy for subsequent labour organisers of whatever caste background or political persuasion.

The non-Brahman movement was not ideologically and politically homogeneous,¹⁶⁴ and this enhanced the possibilities for Brahman mass politics. Non-Brahman elite figures - such as the government minister and non-Brahman Party leader B.V. Jadhav, the wealthy Jedhes of Poona and the prosperous Bombay merchant G.R. Shinde - led the anti-Brahman campaign. They argued in strictly communal terms; but for significant sections of the movement, particularly at its base, the ideological thrust was not so narrowly defined. Rather, they expressed a broader antagonism to all forms of elite exploitation.

162. Chakrabarty makes this point, as well as stressing the very different social origins of the two contemporaries: in 'Sasipada Banerjee', p.347, fn.6.

163. G. Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists in Bombay', in EPW, Vol.VIII(16), 1973, ps. 752 and 755.

164. ibid., pp.749-50; Omvedt, 'The Satyashodhak Samaj', pp. 1972-80; and 'Non-Brahmans and Nationalists', passim; Rothermund, op. cit., pp.57-8.

This antagonism threatened non-Brahman as well as Brahman elites, and hence could possibly be harnessed by a radical Brahman intelligentsia.

Bombay in the Post-War Period

The complex pattern of indigenous politics in Bombay in the post-war years reflected the distinctively high levels of both differentiation and continuity in the western Indian social order, and the contradictory effects upon this order of the great changes attendant upon the First World War. These effects were magnified by the city's geographical constriction and the consequent pressure upon its resources, and by the very serious epidemics which broke out in 1918. The new mass nationalist politics which developed from this background rested on quite different socio-economic bases to the nationalism of contemporary Calcutta - a difference highlighting the underlying structural differences between the two regions. One consequence of the Bombay situation was the increasing viability during the 1920s of a radical mass politics based on the industrial working class.

Bombay's politics in the post-War period were shaped by a great variety of social classes and communities: the industrialist and merchant princes, and the leading professionals who were closely associated with them professionally, socially and politically; the smaller merchants and businessmen; the lower-level professionals, the office workers and the students; and the working classes. The pattern was made more complex by the community and cultural divisions which cut across this occupational stratification. The 'modernising' industrialists,

and particularly the Parsis who predominated, were highly westernised and were culturally close to the British colonisers. The primarily Gujarati and Marwari smaller merchants, and the minority of Maharashtra merchants and contractors, were markedly 'traditional' - socially, culturally and in their business methods. The poorer elements of the educated middle class were drawn mainly from the high caste Maharashtra, the Parsi and the Gujarati communities, with Maharashtra Brahmins being the major component. The working classes, as we have seen, were overwhelmingly Maharashtra and Hindu, though the Muslim minority was to become a significant element politically.

Prior to the First World War an alliance of the leading industrialists, merchants and professionals held almost unchallenged dominance over the economic and political life of Bombay.¹⁶⁵ This position of dominance was reflected in the unchallenged hegemony of their organisation, the Bombay Presidency Association, in the city. Due to the impact of World War I, however, this situation began to change, and the underlying cleavages began to be exposed.

Although the industrialists and the merchants were bound together by their common interests as capitalists, there were substantial inherent conflicts of interest between them, especially over control of the marketing networks.¹⁶⁶ It was

165. J.C. Masselos, 'Some Aspects of Bombay City Politics in 1919', in R. Kumar (Ed.), Essays on Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919 (London, 1971), pp.149-50.

166. The following two paragraphs are based on Gordon, op. cit., Chapters I, III and V.

in the industrialists' interests to secure the flow and prices of their raw materials by replacing the traditional speculative trading network into the mufussil with a modern capitalist system under their control. This conflict came to a head during the War-post-War boom, when speculation in the trade of now scarce commodities became rife - an activity which contributed to the escalating inflation of the period. The industrialists' need to control the markets was increased by the millowners' economic difficulties after the post-War boom.

The government supported the industrialists against the merchants on this issue. Alarmed at the political unrest which the spiralling inflation promoted, the government introduced a number of measures, such as the imposition of legal controls on the marketing system, which benefited the industrialists but curtailed the merchants' freedom and profitability. The relationship between the state and the two groups was further complicated by other effects of the War. In particular, the great demands placed upon the government's financial resources by its war-time imperial commitments could no longer be met by the inelastic, land-based revenue system.¹⁶⁷ Accordingly, new sources of revenue were drawn upon, despite the political risks involved. Prominent among these new sources were direct taxation of the urban business groups and increased customs duties. For the industrialists the new taxation burden was offset by the competitive advantage gained vis a vis

167. See also Tomlinson, 'India and the British Empire', pp. 351-58.

imports from the customs duties and by government promises of subsequent fiscal autonomy and a more satisfactory tariff policy. There were no such immediate or future compensatory advantages for the trading community. In fact those traders involved in importing were further hurt by the tariff increases. Consequently these government innovations increased the alienation of the merchants from the colonial state. These economic considerations contributed to the merchant community's positive response to Gandhi's post-War agitations against the Raj. Moreover, the economic factors were reinforced by a cultural sympathy with the religious mode of Gandhi's ideology and a political sympathy with his careful, non-violent tactics. For the industrialists, however, the risks of social and political upheaval attendant upon the Gandhian agitations confirmed the wisdom of a close relationship with the government: the great majority of the industrialists actively opposed the Rowlatt and Non-Cooperation campaigns, choosing instead to grasp the limited concessions embodied in the 1919 Mont-ford reforms. However their political stance changed again in the early 1920s. Because of its wider imperial commitments the Government of India was unable to honour its earlier economic promises to the industrialists - who were now, additionally, in a state of economic crisis. Simultaneously, the nationalists' abandonment of agitational politics in favour of constitutional politics removed the industrialists' earlier inhibitions about opposing the colonial state. Consequently they moved from their traditional politics of influence to direct pressure group activity, in alliance with the Swarajists, to secure the desired fiscal, tariff and monetary policy changes. They maintained

this stance throughout the 1920s.

The political divergence of the industrialists and the merchants during and from the War years altered the previous political balance of the city to a very marked extent. But the responses of the other classes to the War and post-War changes also contributed to the differentiation.

By the end of the 1910s the Besant Home Rule League, which was based primarily on the middle and lower-middle class Gujarati community, had become Bombay's most active political organisation.¹⁶⁸ To a large extent this development reflected the politicisation of the merchants. The merchants also provided the backbone of the Congress's support in Bombay during the 1919 Rowlatt Satyagraha and the Non-Cooperation movement.¹⁶⁹ However the non-merchant sections of the Gujarati middle and lower middle class were also very important participants in both the League and the mass agitations. Prior to the Non-Cooperation movement, in contrast, the Tilak Home Rule League, and the Maharashtrian intelligentsia who supported it, played a more subdued role in the city's political life.¹⁷⁰ The Maharashtrian business community supported the anti-Congress non-Brahman movement rather than the Congress.¹⁷¹ The non-Brahman movement's lines of support extended into the non-Muslim section of the working class, adding a community dimension to

168. Masselos, 'Bombay City Politics', pp.154-60.

169. loc. cit.; Gordon op. cit., pp.228-42; R. Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj: Nationalist Politics in the City of Bombay, 1920-32', in D.A. Low (Ed.), Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle, 1917-1947 (London and New Delhi, 1977), p.85.

170. Masselos, 'Bombay City Politics', pp.153-54.

171. Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', pp.749-50; Rothermund, 'Gandhi and Maharashtra', pp.63-4.

the class factors inhibiting proletarian participation in the middle class nationalist agitation.

Nevertheless the Non-Cooperation movement did touch both the Muslim and the Hindu sections of the workforce. In the Muslim case, community bonds worked against the class factors inhibiting working class involvement in the Gandhian movement. Shaukat Ali, who set up his national Khilafat headquarters in Bombay in the poor Muslim locality, politically mobilised the Muslim workers and urban poor of the city for the first time.¹⁷² The Gandhians' cautious appeals to the Maharashtrian mill workers brought large numbers of them on to the streets for the demonstration against the Prince of Wales in November 1921.¹⁷³ But these links between the nationalist middle class and Bombay's labouring population remained tenuous. The Muslim poor were soon to end their brief appearance on the nationalist stage, following behind their community leaders after the post-Non-Cooperation collapse of the Congress-Khilafat alliance. The even more brief Gandhian experiment in mobilising Maharashtrian millhands collapsed in mutual disillusion immediately after the Prince of Wales demonstration: Non-Cooperation produced no tangible benefits for the workers; and Gandhi's earlier fears that the Maharashtrian millhands' would

172. Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj', pp.79-82. The wealthy Muslim patrons of the city had not previously made any attempt to organise the Muslim poor - in striking contrast to Calcutta. This contrast was probably directly related to the structural differences between the two cities and, therefore, reflected the very different nature of politics in Bombay and Calcutta.

173. ibid., pp.92-3.

prove not to be amenable to controlled non-violent politics in the Congress's cause¹⁷⁴ were confirmed by their violent response. When Non-Cooperation receded, nationalist contact with, and organisation among, the millhands was virtually as negligible as before, despite the opportunities for outsider intervention provided by the 1919 and 1920 general mill strikes.¹⁷⁵

However one group of middle class nationalists who participated in the Non-Cooperation movement did take a more abiding interest in the proletariat. One of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation successes in Bombay was his ability to attract the support of Tilak's primarily upper caste, middle caste Maharashtrian followers.¹⁷⁶ Despite Gandhi's concerted campaign to win him over, Tilak had reacted ambivalently to Gandhi's program prior to the launching of the movement. Tilak's death in August 1920 came at a critical moment in the preparations for Gandhi's movement. Following his death the Gandhians won over the suddenly leaderless Tilakites, achieving a particularly significant success among the radical 'Young Tilakites' who were students at Wilson and Elphinstone Colleges. These students became active non-cooperators, and they were prominent in the nationalist politics of Bombay after the

174. Eg., Gandhi told the Bombay Commissioner of Police in April 1919, during his Rowlatt satyagraha organising, that he intended not to bring the millhands into the movement 'for many a long day': in G of Bom, Source Material for a History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol. II, (Bombay, 1958), p.743.

175. Newman, op. cit., pp.164-67.

176. Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj', pp.85-7; Rothermund, op. cit., pp.62-3.

withdrawal of the movement. These student radicals included among their leading elements those who would become Bombay's first communists.

Through their participation in the Non-Cooperation movement the Maharashtrian radicals were able to establish themselves as a substantial minority in the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC). There they found themselves in conflict with the business-oriented majority - with BPCC figures such as the prominent Gujarati lawyer, Bhulabhai Desai, who was close to the city's merchants, and Jamnadas Mehta, the organisation's leading representative of the industrialists.¹⁷⁷ For the time being this radical intelligentsia's conflict with the 'shetias' and their representatives could be little more than ideological. The radicals' only firm support against the 'business faction' came from the Maharashtrian intelligentsia - particularly in Girgaum. They had very few points of contact with the working class to whose eventual leadership the socialistically inclined among the BPCC radicals aspired.

But developments in the textile industry augered well for the future. The general strikes of 1919-20 were the beginning of a decade of industrial strife during which the existing rudimentary forms of trade union organisation were transformed.

During the first two decades of the century a number of organisations and individuals competed for the allegiance of the millhands and other workers.¹⁷⁸ Prior to the 1919 strike

177. For an analysis of the relationship between the BPCC and business in Bombay between 1922 and the mid-1920s see Gordon, op. cit., pp.250-69.

178. Newman, op. cit., pp.122-29; Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', p.752.

two organisations claimed to represent the millhands - the Kamgar Hitawardhak Sabha (KHS) and the Social Service League, both of which had been founded in 1909. The KHS had been founded by the non-Brahman political leader, S.K. Bole, and was a welfare and community organisation which sought particularly to mobilise a following among Bombay's Maratha workers, both in the mills and elsewhere: 'a vehicle for politicians and philanthropists, dependent upon the cooperation of the traditional leaders'.¹⁷⁹ The Social Service League was the social welfare organisation of the Servants of India Society. Its driving force was the moderate Brahman welfare worker, N.M. Joshi. Joshi - a man of unquestioned integrity, great ability and unrivalled knowledge of Indian industrial issues - became India's leading moderate, non-political trade union leader. The League sought to maintain its independence from the community organisations and the jobbers, and so had even less influence than the KHS. Two new organisations were formed during the 1919-20 strikes - the Besant Home Rulers' Girni Kamgar Sangh and the Tilakite Home Rulers' Indian Labour League.¹⁸⁰ These 'front' organisations, which sought to increase the influence of their parent bodies by gaining recognition as labour's spokesmen during the strikes, established links with jobbers in a few mills. The Girni Kamgar Sangh managed to survive as an organisation - though barely - after the strikes and political agitation of the period in which it was born.

179. Newman, op. cit., p.125.

180. ibid., Chapter V, passim.

But neither of the Home Rulers' organisations had significant influence on the millhands and very little in negotiations with the mill managements. The founding of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in Bombay in July 1920 did nothing to change the situation, except to encourage factional competition and realignments among the contending organisations.¹⁸¹

All of these labour organisations maintained a conciliatory approach towards the millowners, seeking improvements within the existing industrial framework only. The Social Service League was, additionally, dependent on millowner financial and moral support for many of its activities. The activity of these proto-unions was marginal to the lives of the millhands and the outcome of strikes. But they did have a limited basis for their existence because the millowners, who at that stage were continuing to reap large profits, were prepared - though only under the pressure of strikes - to grant wage increases and other limited concessions.¹⁸²

From 1922 the situation in the textile industry changed markedly. The interest of several of the outsider groups in mobilising labour in the nationalist cause began to wane with the ending of the Non-Cooperation movement. At the same time the ending of the industry's economic boom transformed the character of industrial relations.¹⁸³ The changed conditions

181. ibid., pp.165-67.

182. ibid., p.144

183. ibid., Chapter VI.

began to make the conciliatory approach of the various moderate labour organisations even less relevant than before, and the gap between their moderation and the workers' militancy began to widen. A succession of strikes erupted in the mills throughout the 1920s, and in each major strike the outsiders followed rather than led. Nevertheless each strike contributed to the progressive development of trade union organisation in the industry.¹⁸⁴ In 1925 a new union - the Bombay Textile Workers' Union (BTLU) - was formed, under N.M. Joshi's initiative, through the amalgamation of all of the existing unions except for one which will be discussed below.¹⁸⁵ The BTLU was the first mill union to have the clearly delineated, centralised, bureaucratic structure of a modern trade union. During the next two years the BTLU had an average paying membership of some 5,000, making it by far the biggest union in the industry's history. But its strength was limited because of its continued dependence on the mediation of the traditional community leaders, because of its regional limitations within the mill area, and because, in the growing economic crisis, the millowners were much less prepared than before to grant the concessions essential to the credibility of reformist trade unionism.

In this context the union which did not amalgamate into the BTLU - the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal (GKM) - was in a better position to meet the challenges of the second half of

184. ibid., p.105.

185. ibid., pp.200-09.

the decade, despite its relative lack of numbers and funds.¹⁸⁶ The GKM was formed during a strike in 1923. Unlike the other mill unions, the impetus for its formation came from within the workforce itself. Its emergence demonstrated the relative assertiveness of the intermediate levels of the Maharashtrian social structure. Its leaders were D.R. Mayekar, a Bhandari caste mill clerk and storekeeper, and D.A. Bhatavdekar, a Brahman jobber. However, a number of militant, mainly Maratha, workers were also active in the union's leadership. The most prominent of these were A.A. Alve, a Maratha weaver, and G.R. Kasle, a Maratha fitter. These men came from the more skilled and influential section of the workforce and, in common with the other leaders, occupied positions of community influence among the workers of their area outside the mills. Alve came from a peasant family of Santvari state and had served in Mesopotamia in the British army during the war - an experience which developed in him a level of independence, political awareness and distrust of authority unusual among millhands. On his return to India he had participated in the Non-Cooperation movement. Kasle came from a family of Ratnagiri tenants forced from the land to the mills by high rents. The GKM, under Mayekar's personal and authoritarian mode of leadership, initially followed in the welfare-humanitarian-reformist mill union tradition. However as the decade progressed the Maratha militants became more interested in the economic issues

186. For the formation, development and characteristics of the GKM see *ibid.*, pp.181-85, and Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', pp.752-53.

underlying the millhands' worsening situation. Another characteristic of the new union was its determination to maintain its independence from the outsider leaderships which traditionally had dominated labour organisations in the textile industry. In part this reflected the anti-Brahman legacy of the old KHS, whose former social base the GKM incorporated. The GKM was a weak union, without an effective central structure, dependent upon the support of the jobbers, and with its influence in the mill area limited to a few localities. But because of its particular characteristics it possessed a potentiality for development not possessed by the larger BTLU.

The character of the GKM made it a promising point of contact with the working class for the young Maharashtrian socialists in the BPCC. The problem of the radicals' 'outsider' status, compounded by their mainly Brahman caste composition, would have to be overcome, and this would not be an easy task. But their militant conception of politics was unburdened by Gandhian inhibitions, and ideologically they went beyond humanitarian paternalism to challenge the fundamentals of the existing order. These features provided a potential basis for cooperation with the GKM militants. Moreover, although Bombay's emerging Marxists shared with their Calcutta counterparts the problem of initial distance from the working class, the very existence of recognisable trade union organisations, and of outsider contact with the working class through them, made the problem of bridging the gulf much less formidable than in Calcutta. This contrast with Bengal reflected the overall

structural differences between the social orders of western and eastern India that we have outlined in this chapter.

In Bombay, therefore, greater potential existed for linking the new Marxist ideology to the social classes that could give it real content and rescue it from the fate of becoming simply one more ideological, factional trend in middle class politics.

4. INDIA'S FIRST COMMUNISTS

In both Bengal and Maharashtra the young, largely university-educated intellectuals who became communists in the 1920s had, by the beginning of that decade, already reached a fundamental turning point within the intellectual and political streams within which they had previously participated.¹⁸⁷ In both cases, moreover, their arrival at this watershed coincided with the momentous international and national ideological transformation of the War and post-War years. The atmosphere was both highly political and, as one Calcutta communist described it, 'bohemian'.¹⁸⁸ Dange has attested that a similar ambience prevailed in Bombay.¹⁸⁹ In both regions most of those

187. The bio-data on the communists is taken from: interviews with several of the participants; IB, Communism, (1927), 'Who's Who', pp.293-346; BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: educational qualifications of Bombay communists; and the bio-data on communist leaders collected by Professor S.K. Sen and associates, and very kindly supplied to the author by Prof. Sen. Most of the communists were about 20 years old in 1920.

188. Interview with S. Lahiri, 9/8/74.

189. S.A. Dange, 'Comrade Ghatge - Our First Secretary', in (CPI), S.V. Ghatge, Our First General Secretary, (New Delhi, 1971), pp.2-3. Dange even describes Ghatge as having been a precursor of the modern 'hippie'.

who were later to become communists were attracted, in varying degrees, by this 'bohemian' element of the ideological-cultural environment. Through this transitional 'bohemianism' the young radicals sought to resolve two inter-related sets of problems. The first was essentially personal - the problem for radical intellectuals of casting off the outmoded, irrational and constricting orthodoxy of their backgrounds to make way for freer and more rationally-based conceptions. The second was the problem of finding a new political philosophy, adequate to the challenges of the new world that was revealed after the War had disintegrated the old. Dange has recalled that:

All of us of that generation had to begin with such revolts [against religious and social orthodoxy], challenging "established" values in some way or other. Some halted there with growing age. A few went further, to politics and revolution, each in his own way.¹⁹⁰

A small minority of this searching and highly suggestible generation discovered Marxism and the Soviet experience. For them Marxism - 'scientific socialism' - provided an intellectual resolution of both the personal and the political dimensions of their dilemma, while the Russian Revolution provided a practical political model for the struggle ahead. Each of these features - the 'bohemianism', the openness to new ideological currents, and the distinct attractions of Marxism and Soviet Russia - are highlighted by Somnath Lahiri's rather idiosyncratic experience.¹⁹¹ Lahiri,

190. *ibid.*, p.3.

191. Interview with S. Lahiri.

who joined the Bengal Party and became one of its leaders in the early 1930s, was strongly influenced by the atheism and the Bakuninite anarchist philosophy popular in intellectual circles in post-War Calcutta. Through Bakunin he discovered the anarchist's foe, Karl Marx. The more he learnt of Marx's analysis and politics the more impressed he became. Then, subsequently:

As a science student I noticed that [the Soviet scientist] Mendeleev had used Sanskrit characters to designate the missing elements in his Periodic Table. In those days it was unthinkable for Europeans to use "inferior" Sanskrit, and so I thought to myself that these Russians must be good fellows. I then began looking for Russian literature and books about Soviet Russia.¹⁹²

Lahiri, like others, was sufficiently impressed by what he discovered of Marxism and the Bolshevik model, and sufficiently unenthusiastic about the other available political choices in India, to adopt communism as his politics. But until 1926-27 the political progression of India's first communists was restricted essentially to the ideological level. Marxist theoretical texts were very scarce in India - mainly because of the Raj's censorship - and it took time for these budding Marxists to digest what was available. Moreover, there were few opportunities in this period to implement a specifically Marxist political practice.

But the similarities in the evolution of the two groups of communists were matched by considerable contrasts. Firstly to describe the communists of both Bombay and Calcutta as 'middle' or 'lower middle' class misses an important distinction. The Bombay group could adequately be described by

192. ibid.

the Marxist category of 'petty-bourgeois', for the social groups from which most of its members came did occupy an intermediate class position between a bourgeoisie and a proletariat. The Calcutta communists, in contrast, did not occupy such a position, for their class existed essentially outside capitalist productive and social relations. Secondly, the Calcutta group that began to be formed in the mid-1920s was composed of politically more diverse elements than its Bombay counterpart. This was related to the wider crisis of Bengali politics - a wider cross section was seeking an alternative. One of the consequences in the 1920s was that while 'The group in Bombay formed so close a corporation that the records of their individual activities made a more or less connected story, ... the Bengal group was much less of a happy family'.¹⁹³ Finally, for the Bengalis the search for a Marxist alternative was fuelled, by and large, by a sense that they were seeking to break with moribund political traditions. There was little continuity between, for example, the terrorist and the Marxist conceptions of politics. The young Tilakites of Bombay, in contrast, felt a strong sense of continuity in the transition from the old to the new ideological and political modes. Paradoxically, however, the Bombay communists were to make a much more definite break with the past than would their Bengali comrades. The roots of this apparent paradox lay in the very different social structures of the two regions.

193. IB, Communism, (1935), p.122.

Bengal

Four aspects of the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movement and its aftermath in Bengal had a direct bearing on the development of communist politics in Calcutta in the 1920s. The first was the impact of this unprecedented mass movement, and then of the manner of its withdrawal, on several young bhadralok revolutionaries who had already been strongly influenced by the example of the Russian Revolution. The second was the drawing of a number of Muslim radicals into the joint mass movement against the British, the ideological impact upon them of Azad and, following the collapse of Hindu-Muslim unity, their later disillusion with community-based politics. The third was the politicising effect of the national and international events of the period on a group of Muslim radical literary figures. The fourth was C.R. Das's ideological radicalism - his propagation of the ideals of 'Swaraj for the 98 percent' and Hindu-Muslim unity - and the failure of his main lieutenants to take up these themes in the factional struggles which followed his death.

The future bhadralok communists were primarily the sons of poor east Bengali families, and most were members of the revolutionary organisation, the Anushilan Samiti.¹⁹⁴ The economic impulsions towards new political alternatives appear to have been particularly strong for the contemporary east Bengali

194. ibid., p.232-5. Those in the Jugantur group who were attracted to revolutionary mass action tended to join up with the north-Indian based Hindusthan Revolutionary Army - later to become the Hindusthan Socialist Republican Association.

bhadralok,¹⁹⁵ and this may partly explain the ideological openness of these young Anushilan members. Nor should we forget the internationalist, 'socialist' legacy, stressed by Sarkar, of earlier revolutionaries in the Swadeshi period.¹⁹⁶ But the most immediate catalysts were the World War, the Irish rebellion, the Russian Revolution and the failure of the revolutionaries' war-time plans (in which they had been involved) to stage a coordinated armed uprising across north and east India.¹⁹⁷ At the time of the Russian Revolution they were under detention following the Raj's crack-down on the revolutionaries. While they were contemplating the failure of the attempted armed uprising, news of the Revolution began to filter into the detention centres. Among those whose imaginations were fired by this news were Gopen Chakravarty and Dharani Goswami. Chakravarty, who was from Dacca, recalls that he first heard of the Russian Revolution through the Statesman, the 'mouthpiece of British imperialism', which was 'abusively fulminating every day against Soviet Russia, particularly Lenin. This convinced us that something really progressive had taken place'. They became 'near-convinced that this was the way forward for us too', though they could not see very clearly what that way was.¹⁹⁸ News of the Revolution led Goswami, from Kishoreganj, and an important member of the

195. Ray and Ray, 'Zamindars and Jotedars', pp.98-101.

196. See fn.85, above, on Dutt and Kanungo.

197. See Laushey, op. cit., pp.10-16.

198. G. Chakravarty, interview with G. Chattopadhyay et. al., (hereafter, Chakravarty, Interview) in G. Chattopadhyay, Communism and Bengal's Freedom Movement, Vol. 1, (1917-29), (New Delhi, 1970), pp.127-28.

Anushilan Samiti,¹⁹⁹ to ask himself: 'how could such a miracle happen? ... We only knew that Lenin had done it'.²⁰⁰

The advent of the Non-Cooperation movement soon after their release in 1920 wrought further changes in their thinking. Although disagreeing with Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence²⁰¹ Goswami, for example,

... joined the movement nevertheless because I saw before my eyes the unprecedented event of peasants, workers and intelligentsia - all the people, including a section of the upper class - joining ... with enthusiasm. This was a turning-point in my thinking - such a gigantic movement we had never seen before.²⁰²

The effect of the Assam-Bengal Railway strike during the exodus of the Assam tea plantation coolies made a particularly strong impression.²⁰³ In the Non-Cooperation movement the Anushilan revolutionaries now had an Indian precedent to synthesise with the Russian model. The ideological progression was furthered by visits from two of M.N. Roy's associates in Europe - Nalini Gupta and Abani Mukherji - who managed to catalyse a further polarisation between the conservative, and now inactive, Anushilan dadas and their radicalised youthful followers.²⁰⁴ Chakravarty, and a few others, were sufficiently impressed to

199. IB, Communism, (1927), p.126.

200. Interview with D. Goswami, 8/8/74.

201. For example Goswami was part of the contingent of revolutionaries recruited by C.R. Das to attend the Nagpur session of the Congress in 1921 in order to defeat Gandhi. Goswami sought particularly to defeat the non-violence proviso (interview with Goswami).

202. ibid.

203. ibid.

204. IB, Communism, (1927), pp.10-11, p.40; interview with Goswami; Chakravarty, Interview, p.128; G. Basak, 'Face of Nalini Gupta that I Did Not See', in Chattopadhyay, Communism, pp.157-62; NAI, H.Poll, 253/1925: statement of Nalini Gupta to the police, Jan. 1925; NAI, H.Poll, 300/1924: note on Abani Mukherjee by Kaye, 20/8/22.

set out in 1923 surreptitiously for the Soviet Union.²⁰⁵

He arrived with doubts: 'why should not intellectuals lead the revolution? how can workers and peasants effectively run a state?', he asked Roy after reaching Europe.²⁰⁶ He returned from Moscow, after two years of work with the Comintern there, a convinced communist.²⁰⁷

By that time the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation movement, the malaise in Congress and terrorist politics, and Roy's propaganda material sent from Europe, had produced a significant group of dissenters in the Anushilan Samiti.²⁰⁸ Goswami and Chakravarty decided in 1926 to break with the leaders and form a separate, Marxist group.²⁰⁹ They maintained contact with the Comintern through Roy, and made unsuccessful attempts to send representatives to Moscow. The Intelligence Bureau subsequently described this schism as 'a landmark in the history of terrorism in Bengal' - the forerunner of the large scale defections of the 1930s from terrorism to Marxism.²¹⁰ Goswami and Chakravarty then moved to Calcutta to establish the headquarters of a Bengal communist group. They hoped to win other intellectuals from the terrorist organisations and elsewhere and to establish a working class base.²¹¹

205. IB, Communism, (1935), ps. 234 and 238; Chakravarty, Interview, pp.128-9.

206. ibid., p.129.

207. ibid., pp.130-32; IB, Communism, (1935), p.235.

208. IB, Communism, (1927), pp.122-23; H.W. Hale, Political Trouble in India, 1917-37, (republished) (Allahabad, 1974), ps. 12 and 14; NAI, H.Poll, 253/1925: Note on activities of revolutionaries in Bengal from 1/9/24 to 31/3/25.

209. IB, Communism, (1927), ps. 124 and 126; IB, Communism, (1935), p.239; interview with Goswami; Chakravarty, Interview, p.133. The Anushilan dadas resisted their efforts vigorously - to the point of making death threats.

210. IB, Communism, (1935), p.240.

211. ibid., p.239; Chakravarty, Interview, p.134.

Prominent among the young Muslim nationalists who were influenced by Maulana Azad during Non-Cooperation were two who were to become communists - Abdul Halim and Abdur Rezzak Khan. Rezzak Khan came to Calcutta from Hakimpur in the 24 Parganas district.²¹² He was from a family with a remembered Wahabi background - an important factor contributing to his anti-imperialist sentiments. With Abdul Halim, from Birbhum, and other Muslim students, he formed a group of radical nationalists. They maintained contact with bhadralok revolutionaries such as Santosh Mitra of Anushilan.²¹³ On joining in the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movement they met Azad, with whom they began working closely. Through discussions with him they became greatly interested in the Russian Revolution, the Bolshevik policy of synthesising the Muslim minority movements with the wider social revolution, the careers of the north Indian Muslims who left India for Soviet Russia during the hijrat movement in 1919-20,²¹⁴ and in Azad's work with the local working class.²¹⁵ They also met M.N. Roy's emissary, Nalini

212. Interview with Abdur Rezzak Khan, 7 and 8/8/74.

213. ibid.; IB, Communism, (1927), p.293.

214. The hijrat (literally 'flight', particularly flight from religious persecution) movement was a post-War Muslim protest against current British policy on a range of Muslim issues. India was declared to be a land unfit for Muslims, and a number (mostly students) left India for the neighbouring Islamic countries. These emigrants were known as the muhajirs. A number of them went to Tashkent and elsewhere in Soviet Russia. They were impressed with Soviet policy towards the Muslim minorities of central Asia. Several of the muhajirs were recruited by M.N. Roy into an expatriate CPI, founded in Tashkent in 1921. The Tashkent CPI had little direct bearing on the formation of the CPI proper, but it did help to attract Muslims towards communism in India. For an account of these events see M. Ahmad, The Communist Party of India and Its Formation Abroad, (Calcutta, 1962).

215. Interview with Rezzak Khan.

Gupta, who furthered their interest in the Soviet connection.

Rezzak Khan says that at that stage

... my main interest was in advancing the cause of Indian independence and my experience was leading me more and more to the conclusion that the present nationalist leadership would not be able to deliver the goods - what was needed was an alternative revolutionary leadership. How far would M.N. Roy and the Comintern be capable of supplying such an alternative leadership? ... all in all, I was still a firm nationalist ... I was starting to look towards the [international] communist movement as a dependable and good ally - nothing more than that yet.²¹⁶

The Muslim radicals' great disillusion with Gandhi's decision to call off the Non-Cooperation movement added urgency to their search for a socialistic, revolutionary nationalist alternative - a search which Roy then began to guide.

In early 1922 these radicals also made contact with a small group of Muslim radical litterateurs centred around Muzaffar Ahmad and Kazi Nazrul Islam. Ahmad was soon to acquire fame through his inclusion, as M.N. Roy's principal Bengal contact, in the 1924 Cawnpore Conspiracy Case, and he subsequently remained a crucial figure in Bengali communism. Islam was then beginning to make his name as a talented, radical poet, soon to be recognised by Tagore.²¹⁷ Muzaffar's background was quite different to those of any of the other early communists. He came from the isolated island of Sandwip, in the Bay of Bengal.²¹⁸ His family was descended from the Muslim petty

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216. Rezzak Khan, interview with G. Chattopadhyay et. al., (hereafter, Rezzak Khan, Interview), in Chattopadhyay, Communism, p.154.
217. G. Halder, Kazi Nazrul Islam, (Calcutta, 1973), pp.34-6 and p.42.
218. The following account of Ahmad's background is based on M. Ahmad, Myself and the Communist Party of India, 1920-1929, (Calcutta, 1970), pp.1-27 and pp.79-82.

aristocracy and was devoutly religious. This contributed to Muzaffar's great interest in the Muslim contribution to Bengali culture and to his desire to escape family constrictions. His father was an impecunious official at the Sandwip court and Muzaffar had, therefore, to struggle to attain the English education he ardently desired. In 1913 he moved to Calcutta to begin his tertiary education. In Calcutta he became involved in the Muslim literary association, the Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Samiti, which was formed as a Muslim counterpart to the bhadralok literary association, the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. Its goal was to resurrect and 'present before the Bengalis, especially the Bengali Hindus, different aspects of Muslim civilisation'.²¹⁹ In 1919 he became assistant secretary of the association and editor of its journal. In this capacity he made contact with Nazrul Islam, quickly recognised his youthful talent, and began publishing his poetry.²²⁰

Muzaffar, who had been alienated from the Swadeshi movement by the communal overtones of the revolutionary organisations, had not previously become politically involved. But events from 1919 began to politicise him, though only gradually. C.R. Das's efforts to bridge the communal divide between Bengal's Hindu and Muslim intelligentsias, and the agreement reached between the Muslim League and the Congress, partially offset his objections to the hitherto bhadralok-dominated Bengali nationalist movement. After several years of

219. ibid., p.25.

220. See also Haldar, op. cit., pp.14-15.

attending nationalist demonstrations and following the industrial strikes of the period with interest, and having been greatly impressed by the 1917 Revolution, he decided in 1920 'to make politics the profession of my life'.²²¹ In particular, he sought out whatever literature was available to further his knowledge of socialism, communism and the Russian Revolution. However, with few political contacts, he had no idea how he was going to translate this knowledge into political activity. A possible answer emerged in late 1921 when Ahmad and Nazrul Islam met Nalini Gupta. They expressed their willingness to work with Roy and the Comintern, and Gupta returned to Europe with their names.²²² Muzaffar, through his diligence as a correspondent, subsequently became Roy's main contact in Bengal.

The communist activists of the 1920s were drawn essentially from these three directions. The organisation in which they eventually came together, however, had different origins. The organisation was formed as the 'Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress' (LSP). Its founding fathers were Hemanta Kumar Sarkar and Kutubbin Ahmad. Sarkar was a Swarajist MLC and had previously been C.R. Das's private secretary, the editor of Das's newspaper, Bangla Katha, a leader of the Press Workers' Union and of a peasant association.²²³ He became a CPI member later in the 1920s but never played an

221. Ahmad, Myself, p.27.

222. ibid., pp.84-103; Chattopadhyay, Communism, pp.59-60.

223. IB, Communism, (1927), p.338; IB (Bengal), 'List of Labour Unions', op. cit..

active role. Kutubbin Ahmad was one of Azad's radical Muslim followers, had ambitions for the Legislative Council, and had become marginally involved in trade unionism.²²⁴ They formed the LSP in November 1925, in the impasse reached by Bengal Congress politics after the death of C.R. Das.²²⁵ It attempted to preserve the Hindu-Muslim unity fostered, and the ideological radicalism propagated, by Das: of the 22 members of its Executive Committee, 14 were Muslims,²²⁶ and the party took a radical stand in the contemporary debate on tenancy legislation.²²⁷ In practice it functioned - initially at least - primarily as an anti-Sen Gupta faction,²²⁸ and it directed its attention mainly towards Legislative Council politics.²²⁹

224. IB, Communism, (1927), ps. 128 and 158.

225. MCCC, P.52: Peasants' and Workers' Party, EC Report for 1927-28. (This report includes short histories of the LSP and its successor, the PWP.) For the state of BPCC politics at this time see: Broomfield, op. cit., pp. 226-75; Gallagher, op. cit., pp.593-97.

226. MCCC, P.549(8): Executive Committee of the LSP/PWP for 1926.

227. Chattopadhyay, Communism, pp.94-5, which contains excerpts from the 1925 Atmasakti polemic between Sarkar and the BPCC on this issue.

228. For example it had the support of T.C. Goswami, one of Calcutta's 'Big Five', an opponent of Sen Gupta and a supporter of Subhas Bose: NAI, H.Poll, 112/1925: Bengal FRI, Dec.; see also IB, Communism, (1927), p.129.

229. Eg., there were three other MLCs on the Executive besides Sarkar, and two of these were Muslims (MCCC, P.549(8): op. cit.). Moreover, Kutubbin Ahmad had previously been defeated in his attempt to win election to the Legislative Council (IB, Communism, (1927), p.128). During 1925 Sarkar attacked the Sen Gupta faction for representing only the 'vested interests' and betraying those of 'the people' (NAI, H.Poll, 112/1925: Bengal FRI Dec.; fn.227). The Sen Gupta faction responded by branding Sarkar as a police spy because he was supporting the government on the Tenancy Bill and in its policy of promoting peasant organisations. Sarkar responded by resigning from the Swaraj Party and the AICC: Chattopadhyay, Communism, p.95; Ahmad, Myself, pp.414-15.

The LSP, which changed its name several months later to the Peasants' and Workers' Party (PWP), drew in others besides those preoccupied with Legislative Council and BPCC politics. Kutubbin Ahmad had connections with the Halim/Rezzak Khan group of Muslim radicals and with the literary group around Muzaffar Ahmad and Nazrul Islam.²³⁰ Halim and Islam joined soon after the party's formation and Islam became the editor of Lungal (the Plough), the party's organ. Muzaffar joined in early 1926, soon after his release from jail. Rezzak Khan came in some time later. Another group of litterateurs, of which the Calcutta High Court advocate, Naresh Sengupta was the most prominent, also joined. Saumyendranath Tagore, a grand-nephew of Rabindranath, was another. The party's membership grew to about 40 during 1926.²³¹

The LSP/PWP based itself on a populist ideology. Citing Aurobindo Ghose as an authority, the party's program declared that 'the salvation of India ... lies in the combination of young declassified intellectuals and the workers, industrial and agricultural'.²³² Thus,

... the only means yet left for enforcing the demands of the people ... lies through the organisation of labour and peasantry ... so that they ... may become conscious of their political rights and wrest freedom from the unwilling hands of vested interests by their own might and for their own interest.²³³

The party's declared object was 'the attainment of Swaraj in the sense of complete independence of India based on economic

230. IB, Communism, ps. 32 & 128; Ahmad, Myself, ps. 291 & 358.

231. ibid., pp.414-16; MCCC, P.52: op. cit..

232. MCCC, P.549(13): Policy and Programme of the LSP.

233. ibid..

and social emancipation and political freedom of men and women', through 'non-violent mass action [as the] ... principal means'.²³⁴ But despite its stated goal of organising the masses, the program gave almost no attention as to how this was to be done. Instead, it provided a set of tactical guidelines for work in the Legislative Council. Moreover, Congress membership was a necessary pre-condition for membership of the party.²³⁵

The party initially made some impact in Calcutta through its journal, which carried a dedication by Rabindranath Tagore.²³⁶ For example, all 5,000 copies of its first issue were sold. But this popularity appears to have been largely due to that of its 'rebel poet' editor, Nazrul Islam, who published a series of long populist pieces in Langal.²³⁷ Much of Langal's content was literary, and there is no evidence of a revolutionary Marxist class analysis - even in Muzaffar's article calling for the building of a communist party, or in the series of articles on great Marxist leaders.²³⁸ M.N. Roy decided, nevertheless, that the PWP was the most promising available basis for a Bengali Marxist party, and encouraged its further development.²³⁹ In 1926 he directed the Anushilan group,

234. ibid..

235. ibid.: Constitution of the LSP.

236. Adhikari, Documents, Vol. 2, p.680.

237. ibid., p.676. English translations of 'Samyavadi', the poem Nazrul Islam published in this issue, and of his subsequent Bengali translation of the Internationale, appear in the MCCC evidence: P.49-T and P.519-T respectively.

238. See the synopsis of the first eight numbers of Langal (Dec. 16, 1925 - Feb. 11, 1926) in Adhikari, Documents, Vol. 2, pp.676-79, and the extract from Muzaffar's article on pp. 622-23.

239. IB, Communism, (1927), ps. 98 & 129. See also Roy's Mar. 1926 article, 'Langal', in Adhikari, Documents, Vol. 2, pp.687-89.

with whom he had maintained separate contact until then, to merge with the PWP.²⁴⁰

The PWP began its career under unpromising circumstances:

'The nationalist movement was still in a state of apathy and disorganisation, and funds being short and the political level of the membership low, the Party was able to make little progress'.²⁴¹ The shortage of funds encouraged the party to look (largely unsuccessfully) to M.N. Roy as a potential financier. It also encouraged bickering and suspicions over the use - and misuse - of the limited funds which Roy did provide.²⁴² In addition to the PWP's financial problems, it was badly affected by the escalating communalism leading to, and aggravated by, the April 1926 Calcutta riots, which also sealed the fate of C.R. Das's rapprochement with Calcutta's Muslim elite.²⁴³ The communal hostility affected Langal's sales so badly that it had to cease publication.²⁴⁴

But through Muzaffar's correspondence it had developed

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240. Interview with Goswami; Ahmad, Myself, pp.426-27.
241. MCCC, P.52: op. cit.; see also NAI, H.Poll, 112/1926: Bengal FR2 Feb.
242. IB, Communism, ps. 99, pp.101-02, ps. 129 & 133. Part of the reason for the suspicions about the misuse of overseas remittances was that, unknown to the communists, Intelligence regularly intercepted sums which Indian communists knew had been sent from Europe. Resentment at Roy's not sending significant amounts of his substantial Comintern-supplied funds ran high in Bengal. For example in April 1926 one group wrote to Europe: 'The boss [Roy] and family are living as Princes ... and the boys here - real, sincere workers - are starving. You hypocrites mean no business; you are simply exploiters' (quoted in ibid., p.99). According to Charles Ashleigh, who worked with Roy in Berlin, Roy did live like a 'Prince': interview with C. Ashleigh, 18/1/74.
243. See Broomfield, op. cit., pp.276-9, for the riots, their context and their consequences.
244. MCCC, P.52: op. cit.; Ahmad, Myself, p.417. Ahmad says that,

its international communist and inter-provincial contacts²⁴⁵ and, through the Anushilan group's merger with it, it was now in closer contact with Bengali revolutionary circles.²⁴⁶ In late 1926 it also began a new organ, Ganavani ('Voice of the Masses'). By this stage the Intelligence Bureau could describe the PWP as 'to all intents and purposes the Bengal branch of the Indian Communist Party'.²⁴⁷ All of Calcutta's existing proto-communists were now gathered together in one organisation. This marked a certain advance towards the establishment of a specifically communist organisation.

Nevertheless, the PWP, in early 1927, was still not in a very promising position. As a small faction existing largely outside the ambit of the provincial Congress organisation, it exercised little influence on Calcutta's nationalist politics. Nor had its members taken any significant steps to bridge the enormous gulfs which separated the Bengali middle class from the peasantry and the industrial working class the party intended to organise.²⁴⁸ Moreover, the PWP maintained only a fragile unity.

244. Cont'd
in particular, Hindu patronage declined markedly because the paper's editor was a Muslim.
245. Eg., MCCC, P.1140: Ahmad to Joglekar, 19/1/26, which is typical of many such letters; MCCC, P.447(5-12): a series of letters to and from the Kresintern (the Comintern's Peasant International), Mar.-Jun.1926.
246. The old Anushilan group claims that the PWP became a political force of any significance at all only after its group merged with the party: interview with Goswami.
247. IB, Communism, (1927), p.129.
248. Bhadralok inhibitions appear to have been partly responsible for this. Lahiri, eg., has said that the communists' becoming involved in labour organising led to very serious conflicts with their families, who were unhappy about their children mixing with 'coolies' (interview with Lahiri). See also Spratt's comments in: MCCC, P.527(8): 'The Split in the W.P. Party' (Feb. 1928); Blowing Up India; Reminiscences of a Former Comintern Emissary, (Calcutta, 1955), pp.50-51.

The older patron-figures such as Naresh Sengupta had little in common politically with the aspiring Marxists. But, more seriously, there was an unresolved political division between the former terrorists and those who had not been involved in the revolutionary nationalist organisations. The consequent tensions were strongest between Muzaffar Ahmad, on the one hand, and Goswami and Chakravarty on the other. The central difference was over the question of what relationship the party should adopt towards the terrorists and, more specifically, towards those who were disillusioned with the terrorist way and who wanted to join the party. This question would remain a live one into the 1930s.

Maharashtra

The original nucleus of the Bombay communist group emerged from the radical young Tilakite students who joined the Non-Cooperation movement from Wilson College. The chief figure in this nucleus was S.A. Dange, the 'John the Baptist of Indian Communism'.²⁴⁹ Others who were prominent were R.S. Nimbkar, R.V. Nadkarni and V.D. Sathaye (the son of the prominent Home Ruler, Dr. D.D. Sathaye). The Wilson College group were in contact with another group at Elphinstone College which included

249. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Note on the Girni Kamgar Union, 1928-1934. The following two paragraphs are based on: Dange, 'Comrade Ghatge', pp.2-10; 'Who's Who', in IB, Communism, (1927), pp.293-346; BSAI extracts, 1920-24; and interview with S.S.Mirajkar, 19 and 22/8/74.

S.V. Deshpande, who in the early 1930s was to become one of the CPI's leaders. The Bombay group also made contact with students outside Bombay, such as K.N. Joglekar at Poona and Lalji Pendse at Baroda. These contacts later moved to Bombay. Others gravitated towards the group after Non-Cooperation: S.V. Ghate, a St. Xavier's College student and an escapee from an orthodox Mangalore family; S.S. Mirajkar, a young Shimpi (tailor caste) bank clerk; a group, prominent among whom was V.H. Joshi, who had been Non-Cooperators in the satyagraha against the Tata hydroelectric works at Mulshi; and C.G. Shah, a Gujarati Jain. As with the Bengal communists, these students' evolution to communism also began with the first, filtered reports of the Russian Revolution, the impact of the working class strikes of the post-War period, and the launching of the Non-Cooperation movement.

Bombay's 1920s Marxists were overwhelmingly Maharashtrian Hindus, and most were Brahmans. Some were born in Bombay, others were from the Deccan, and several were from the Konkan districts. Most came from comfortable middle class families while others - like Joglekar, who was the son of a postman and the brother of a millhand - were not so comfortably off.

The interesting exceptions to the general pattern were Shah and Mirajkar. Shah, from Gandhi's home state of Kathiawad, was an intellectual in whom 'familiarity, powerfully aided by Marxism, had bred a deep contempt for the Mahatma'.²⁵⁰ He became Bombay's most learned Marxist, and was the only Gujarati

250. Spratt, Blowing Up India, p.33

in the Bombay group. Nor did any Parsis become communists, although one - S.H. Jhabvala - became an important trade union contact.²⁵¹ In the late 1920s a number of working class figures - most notably Alve and Kasle - moved close to the middle class Marxists, but in this decade Mirajkar was the only person from a lower-caste or peasant background who became a communist. Mirajkar's career - as with those of Alve and, to a lesser extent, Kasle - is also interesting in that it exemplifies the vitality of the intermediate levels of the Maharashtrian social structure; it is significant that there were no Bengali communists equivalent to Mirajkar, nor any working class allies equivalent to Alve and Kasle.

Mirajkar came from a Kolaba family which had moved from its traditional occupation of tailoring into land-ownership.²⁵² His father became a rich peasant, but was later ruined by litigation. The impoverished family devoted itself to Mirajkar's education nevertheless. He was supported by his postman brother, by his mother, who took a job as a mill worker in Bombay, and by himself working as an apprentice tailor. Eventually he attained a secondary education in both English and French. He then got a job in the local French bank, where he remained until becoming a full-time communist activist in 1927. Mirajkar's politicisation began during a three months long postal strike in 1915 when he was still in his village. The extreme hardship this caused his family led him to the question "Why so? Why

251. This will be seen in Chapter 3.

252. The following is based on my interview with Mirajkar.

should some people starve and some people enjoy comfort?'''. His political awareness was greatly stimulated when he moved to Bombay after the War. He was impressed by the contemporary nationalist agitations - the Tilak and Besant Home Rule League activities, and then the Non-Cooperation movement. He left school and became a Congress volunteer during Non-Cooperation. He then discovered the concept of socialism through the writings of Upton Sinclair. It was therefore a natural step for the young Mirajkar to contact Dange's group when he heard of its activities and to begin making trade union contacts. These were the first steps in a long political career which led to - among other achievements - his becoming Mayor of Bombay.

But Mirajkar and Shah were the exceptions. The communist group emerged overwhelmingly from the militant Brahman nationalist tradition of Maharashtra. We will examine the career of Dange, who was the group's most prolific writer as well as its most prominent member, to see what this background meant for the development of communism in Bombay.

Dange's background was very different to that of Mirajkar. He was from a reasonably wealthy family descended from a 'landlord-cum-banker' family established by the Maratha rulers in Nasik.²⁵³ His father was employed in a solicitor's firm in Bombay and, additionally, made money by share-dealing during the War/post-War boom. As a child in Nasik city Dange had been strongly influenced by the exploits of such Maharashtrian

253. S.A. Dange, 'Dange on "Gandhi Vs Lenin"', in Adhikari, Documents, Vol. 1, p.305.

revolutionaries as the Savarkar and Chaphekar brothers.²⁵⁴

Above all, however, his political consciousness was moulded by Tilak's example. Dange and his radical colleagues were attracted by Tilak's reshaping of Maharashtrian tradition to fashion a militant anti-imperialist ideology and politics, his challenges to both the British and the Indian moderates, and his efforts to mobilise the peasantry and the industrial workers. Their interest in the Russian Revolution stemmed in part from Tilak's.²⁵⁵ Several of the student radicals worked with his relief organisation in the mill area during the 1918 epidemic, and Tilak 'instructed' them to involve themselves in long term working class organisation and in the founding of the AITUC.²⁵⁶ The student organisation that they formed in 1917 campaigned openly for Tilak, and against his moderate opponents.

In his recent study of Tilak's political career, Cashman has stressed the deeply ambiguous nature of his political legacy.²⁵⁷ After his death most of Tilak's followers interpreted this legacy in centrist or right-wing terms.²⁵⁸ But for the student

254. B. Deshpande, 'Editor's Note', in S.A. Dange, Selected Writings, Vol. 1, (Bombay, 1974), pp.11-22.

255. For an example of Tilak's response to Lenin and the Russian Revolution see his 1918 Kesari article 'The Russian Leader, Lenin', in, D. Kaushik and L. Mitrokhin (Eds), Lenin: His Image in India, (Delhi, 1970), pp.4-5. See also the Aug. 1920 Kesari article 'Moral Victory of Lenin', in ibid., pp.58-9. The articles reproduced on pp.49-146 of this volume present a useful index of how Lenin was perceived in the sympathetic nationalist press. See also: P.C. Joshi et. al., Lenin in Contemporary Indian Press (New Delhi); P.B. Sinha, Indian National Liberation Movement and Russia (1905-1917), (New Delhi, 1975), Chapter 5.

256. S.A. Dange, Origins of Trade Union Movement in India, (New Delhi, 1973), p.61; BSAI, 1920, para.390.

257. Cashman, op. cit., Chapter IX.

258. ibid., p.217.

radicals Tilak was an 'instinctive socialist',²⁵⁹ and they believed that they were following the trajectory that he would have taken had he remained alive. Dange's writings of the period (and since) constantly offer this interpretation of Tilak as a socialist.²⁶⁰ Dange attempted to synthesise the Lokamanya's ideology - or, rather, certain elements of his ideology - with his own early conceptions of Marxism and aspects of the new politics of Gandhism. Dange's 1921 booklet, Gandhi Vs Lenin, was his earliest such attempt. This study did not achieve the desired resolution of the three philosophies. Although it strongly suggested that, for Tilak's followers, Lenin was more relevant than Gandhi, the book did not get far beyond a syncretic cataloguing of the respective merits of the two men.²⁶¹ It finally recommended a social democratic path forward.²⁶² Nevertheless Gandhi Vs Lenin was a creative attempt

259. Joglekar, quoted in Newman, op. cit., p.213.

260. Eg. the following piece, written in 1921: Tilak 'became a joining link between the intellectuals and the masses. Through him the intellectuals came to realise their duty and to lead the masses and love them. The yawning cleavage was filled up. He taught the masses their individual rights to freedom, to free speech, to be left alone in their land and not to be exploited for the sake of foreigners' (from Gandhi Vs Lenin, in Dange, Selected Writings, pp.56-7). For an example of Dange's retrospective interpretation of Tilak in this light, see Dange, Origins of Trade Union Movement, pp.39-62.

261. See particularly the comparative list of Gandhi's and Lenin's respective merits, in Dange, Gandhi Vs Lenin, pp.93-5

262. Eg.: 'We cannot accept the communist plan, in all details, because it is too much fraught with coercion and violence. It must be accepted to this extent that great concerns like railways, mines and vast factory plants may be nationalised' (ibid., p.121). This was a constant theme in Dange's writings. Eg. in Dec.1922 he wrote that socialism could be brought about by non-violent evolutionary means. This would be the only possible method in India, because the masses were 'dumb and illiterate', and the 'national temperament' was peaceful and conservative (quoted in BSAI, 1923, para.

to relate Leninism, as Dange saw it, to the 'socialist' aspects of Tilak's ideology. In the process he was attempting, implicitly, to synthesise Leninism with Tilak's interpretation of Maharashtrian tradition. Dange was very conscious of the political importance of Tilak's experiments in linking modern political themes with traditional forms. He wrote, for example, that one of the reasons for Tilak's greatness was 'his treasure of independent philosophy':

[Through] his masterly treatise on the Geeta, [Tilak] ... put before the people ... a new conception of Man's action. ... The people of India are always in a mood to accept anything that came from a religious source. Geeta was the only source through which anybody could speak to the people. ... he revealed to the world ... the underlying principle of continuous Karma, without egoistic covetousness for the fruits of it, ... for the realization of the divinity in man.²⁶³

Thus the continuing vitality of the pre-colonial tradition in Maharashtrian politics meant that the question of 'Indianising' received Marxist doctrine was present from the beginning in Bombay.²⁶⁴ Partly for this reason, the Bombay group were critical of Roy's attempts to 'direct' the Indian movement from afar, believing him unable to understand Maharashtrian conditions and incapable of adapting Marxist doctrine to these conditions.²⁶⁵

262. Cont'd

58). The BPC 'socialist faction' - perhaps echoing Tilak - also advocated council-entry after the withdrawal of Non-Cooperation: BSAI, 1922, para 1232(b). He reiterated a similar point of view in 1927 (MCCC, P.2311: police report of a communist public meeting, 28/8/27).

263. From Gandhi Vs Lenin, p.59.

264. Further evidence of this concern is provided by many of the editorials in his journal, Socialist, between 1922 and 1924 (in Dange, Selected Writings, pp.137-294). See especially the piece titled 'The Geeta Supports Marx's Economic Determinism', in ibid., pp.147-51.

265. Eg.: Socialist, 16/12/22 and 12/3/24: in BSAI, 1923, para. 58, and 1924, para 435, respectively; a letter by Dange to a friend in early 1923 (in BSAI, 1923, para. 294) in which

Initially the Dange group's activities centered on a journal called the Socialist, which Dange began in August 1922. It was this activity which attracted Mirajkar and several others to the group. The Socialist devoted itself, in the context of the Gandhian failure, to a search for a left-wing nationalist alternative. The editorial of the first issue outlined this alternative:

With nothing to offer the toiling masses we cannot move forth. ... The cause of our misery lies in two things: the foreign domination and the indigenous vulture; the class that preys upon the wealth of the nation and the bread of the toiler. ... The conscious and the cultured must take this new message to their unconscious and unknowing comrades. Let the educated and the cultured be fired by the new creed, to preach it to the masses, and the hosts of India will win true Swaraj for them and for all.²⁶⁶

Of the 'indigenous vultures', Dange identified the capitalists as the primary target. 'And who are the Indian capitalists?', he asked rhetorically in his Gandhi Vs Lenin

Most of our trade, foreign and inland, is centred in the hands of the Shethias of the Gujarati community, the Marwaris, the Parsis and the Bohras. Allied as their interests are with the foreign Government and foreign capitalism, these capitalist communities of our society are naturally opposed to our attempts at emancipation. And they in turn exhibit all the

265. Cont'd

he commented on Roy's efforts to get Indians to go to Europe for a communist conference: 'I think it is a mad venture for Indians to go hunting Communism in European conferences; whatever has to be done must be done in India. Moreover, there must be less talk of revolution than what Roy indulges in; when even the preliminary rights of labour are not obtained it is a dream to talk of proletarian revolutions'. However Dange's public criticism was also a response to the political liabilities in Congress circles of association with Roy's name: see the section on 'The Raj and 'Communism'', below.

266. In Dange, Selected Writings, pp.139-40. See also the police report of a contemporaneous meeting held to rally support for this political alternative (in BSAI, 1922), para.1224). At the same time the Socialist took up the cause of the tramwaymen who were then on strike: Socialist, 23/9/22, in BSAI, 1922, para.1328(e).

greediness, idleness, cruelty, luxurious and demoralized life consequent upon capitalism in every ... country. The capitalist landholders ruin the middleclass-man by cornering large land-areas and then charging exorbitant rentals for the tenants. Some of them make a sham of starting industries for public benefit... . 267

Dange later absolved Indian capital from the charge of complete compradorism, but the force of the critique remained:

If the differences between [colonial and Indian capital]... come to a head ... the Indian capitalist class will ally itself with the popular mass-movement, and try to squeeze out concessions. If the British bourgeoisie distracted by other circumstances just chooses to give in, that bourgeois wing will leave the mass-movement ... though it may profess some sympathy ... Then the mass movement will have to ... face an opposition of the Foreign and Native Bourgeoisies Allied together. 268

These excerpts provide interesting examples of the first, tentative, Marxist-inspired critique of Indian society. This level of analysis was absent in contemporary Calcutta. One of the reasons for this contrast was, undoubtedly, the Maharashtrians' relative proximity to an actual bourgeoisie, which allowed them to develop their Marxist perspective by applying it to a situation it 'fitted'.²⁶⁹ These excerpts also show that in the eyes of this young Bombay Maharashtrian,

267. p.72.

268. Socialist, 28/10/22, in Dange, Selected Writings, p.191.

269. For example Dange who, during his youth, assisted his father in his share-dealings in Indian companies, has written that 'It is because of this that I began to know what the mills were, how profits were made and what speculations by the big bourgeoisie on the exchange meant to finance and industry. This knowledge helped me in my work in my later days and was reflected in the writings in the Socialist and the struggle of the textile workers' ('Dange on "Gandhi Vs Lenin"', p.306).

indigenous capital was not only exploitative, decadent and collaborative, but essentially foreign to Maharashtra as well. We can perhaps see here a continuation of the old Poona critique of Bombay, as well as the influence of the Marxist critique: Marxism fitted well with the militant Maharashtrian viewpoint of these youthful members of an 'outsider' element in Bombay's elite society. An alliance with Bombay's Maharashtrian working class, too, made sense in these terms as well as Marxist ideological terms. Resistance to Gandhism grew from the same perspective. Thus, in a real sense, Marxism was a natural progression from 'Tilakism' - in a way that it was not for other Indian nationalist trends - while at the same time going beyond it. This may help to explain why Bombay's early communist movement was overwhelmingly composed of Maharashtrian Brahmans.

Ironically, in the light of the Dange condemnation of Indian capitalism, the progress of the socialist group was aided considerably by a wealthy, middle-aged flour mill owner and merchant called R.B. Lotwala. Lotwala, a capitalist with Arya Samajist convictions and socialist tendencies,²⁷⁰ provided the patronage that made a number of the young proto-Marxists' ventures possible. He employed Shah as his secretary, financed the Socialist and other publishing efforts, and provided a library stocked with socialist (though not Leninist) literature

270. BSAI, 1922, para.1714.

and a hostel for those in need.²⁷¹ Apart from playing an important role in the Bombay group's development, Lotwala's 'big and generous purse' allowed it to look less towards the Comintern for financial support than was the case elsewhere.²⁷² Earlier, the Wilson College student group, too, had received aid from a capitalist - the nationalist millowner, Umar Sobhani.²⁷³ Sources of support of this kind were not available for the comrades in Bengal.

All of the young socialists were active Congressmen and their political activity until 1927 was conducted primarily within the BPCC. In this, too, they contrasted with the Calcutta communists. The Bombay group sought to win over adherents to their left faction and to transform the Congress's Labour Sub-committee into a viable organisation,²⁷⁴ and attacked the BPCC 'merchants', 'whose God was Capitalism'.²⁷⁵ In 1923, during a major mill strike, they also attempted seriously, for the first time, to make direct contact with the working class.

271. Dange, 'Comrade Ghaté', pp.5-11; S.S. Mirajkar, 'Comrade Ghaté - the Leader of Leaders', in (CPI), S.V. Ghaté, p.31; BSAI, 1922, para. 1659 and 1923, para. 1232. The Bombay group's other publishing ventures included a 'Socialist Series' of reprints of Marxist and socialist works such as The Communist Manifesto, R.P. Dutt's Communism, W.F. Hay's The Logic of the Machine and Lucien's The Coming of Socialism.

272. Dange, 'Comrade Ghaté', p.11.

273. Dange, Origins of Trade Union Movement, p.66.

274. BSAI, 1924, para. 454; Socialist, 20/2/24.

275. These were the terms of a 1922 attack on prominent BPCC figures, by Dange, for their alleged manipulation of the Tilak Swaraj Fund for their personal gain (BSAI, 1922, para. 409(23) - which also reports that the 300 present at the meeting were 'mostly Deccani Hindus').

However the attempt met with millhand resistance and was unsuccessful.²⁷⁶ But Joglekar did form a relationship with the GKM's Mayekar which was to bear fruit later in the decade. Dange and Mirajkar also began working with some of the existing outsider trade unionists. The socialist group's activity was disrupted by Dange's arrest in 1924 for the Cawnpore Conspiracy Case and his imprisonment between 1925 and 1927, and it was inhibited by the political quiescence of the mid-1920s. Little progress was made. Even the Socialist did not long survive Dange's arrest. An attempt to intervene in the 1925 strike did not produce tangible results.²⁷⁷ The group remained only a faction of left-wing Congressmen.²⁷⁸

From 1923 the Bombay socialists began, under Roy's urgings and together with like-minded individuals in other provinces such as Ahmad in Calcutta and Singaravelu Chettiar in Madras, tentative attempts to establish an all-India organisation. Before Dange's arrest this 'correspondence club' produced little more than vague plans for a social-democratic-type party.²⁷⁹

276. V.H. Joshi was deputed to work in the mill area during the strike in order to establish influence there. The Socialist (Feb. 20) advertised him as 'an educated "de-classed" intellectual with a decisively proletarian outlook'. 'Unfortunately', comments Newman (op. cit., p.185), 'the millhands saw him as a Brahman and the representative of an alien middle class, conspicuous in white khaddar'. Several of his meetings broke up in a shower of stones.

277. ibid., p.216; IB, Communism, (1927), pp.94-95.

278. ibid., pp.134-35.

279. The description is Petrie's: NAI, H.Poll, 109/1934: Petrie to Hallett, 7/10/33. See also: BSAI, 1923, paras, 755, 943 and 1041; IB, Communism, (1927), p.33, pp.42-44 and 63-5; NAI, H.Poll, 25/1923: Bengal FRI Feb.. For the continuing (and inconclusive) Bombay debate on the question after Dange's arrest, see the correspondence in the Socialist till the end of 1924, in Dange, Selected Writings, pp.396-416.

Then, in December 1925, after the conclusion of the Cawnpore Case, a utopian socialist in Cawnpore named Satyabhakta took the initiative by convening a 'Communist' conference to coincide with the Cawnpore session of the National Congress. Satyabhakta intended to establish a legal, open party, independent of Comintern direction. A contingent from the Bombay group went to Cawnpore and, with others from other provinces, 'captured' Satyabhakta's organisation on the grounds that they disagreed with his conception of a communist party.²⁸⁰ However they retained its legal, open character and, despite Roy's pleadings, made no attempts to have it affiliated with the Comintern. The CPI founded in December 1925 was to have only the most nominal existence in the following few years.²⁸¹ Its formation made no discernable difference to either the modes or the results of the Bombay or Bengal groups' political activity. The most definite outcome of the early attempts at inter-provincial and international communication was that the Raj used them as a pretext to launch a conspiracy case against several of those involved.

5. THE COMMUNISTS AND THE RAJ - THE FIRST PHASE

The nature of the Raj's response to political opposition

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280. IB, Communism, pp.157-65; interview with Satyabhakta, 23/10/74. The documents of this conference, together with an introductory article by Adhikari, are reproduced in Adhikari, Documents, Vol. 2, pp.591-670.
281. IB, Communism, (1927), pp.99-103, 106-07, 110-17; MCCC, P.1207(1): CPI, Executives' Annual Report, May, 1927.

in general, and militant mass politics in particular, was crucial to the future of Indian communism. The nature of the response would determine the extent to which the communists' organisations could function openly, the extent to which the communists would need wider political support to help counter repression and, to a large extent, the level of support that the communists could attract as a consequence of their repression.

The Raj's Strategy Towards Opposition

The Raj was both very discriminating in its response to opposition and very sensitive to radical mass activity. Its characteristic approach to the latter was to isolate and repress. It proved to be particularly sensitive to communist activity - both because of the possible domestic consequences of communist politics and because of the international connection with that arch foe of British imperialism, Soviet Russia. Each of these features of state policy were demonstrated in the first half of the 1920s, before an Indian communist movement had actually come into being. In a sense, indeed, the Raj's 'Bolshevik' conspiracy cases against India's first, tentative explorers of the road to Marxism, created India's first 'Communists'.

The Raj's overall political strategy was determined very much by its need to make the empire pay for itself and, thus, by its need to collect revenue as cheaply as possible.²⁸²

282. For this paragraph see: Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism', pp.328-32; Tomlinson, 'India and the British Empire', pp.338-49; Gordon, op. cit., Chapter I.

The inexpensive collection of the land revenues upon which its administration was based required Indian agents and a minimum of opposition to its rule. The Raj was therefore obliged to foster an extensive system of collaboration among the more dominant elements of Indian society. As Britain's wider imperial demands upon Indian revenue increased, so did the Raj's need to extend the system of collaboration - either to forestall potential resistance to to neutralise opposition by isolating it. But the extent to which collaboration could be bought was limited by the Raj's need to satisfy the wider imperial demands upon its resources. This situation of dual responsibility - to ensuring inexpensively maintained political stability in India and to meeting its imperial commitments - was one of inherent tension for the Raj. The 'liberal' character of the colonial state in India - its emphasis on, and careful commitment to, the rule of law, and its periodic devolution of certain of its powers to Indians - was largely a product of this imposed dynamic. So, too, were the frequent conflicts over policy priorities between the different levels of the administration. But that a considerable tension between imperial and Indian demands did exist was also testimony to the strength - actual or potential - of Indian opposition to colonial exploitation. More precisely, it attested to the strength of those politically dominant elements of Indian society whose opposition could be - and often was - bought off (if only temporarily) with concessions by the state. In other words the tension was in part an index of the relative strength of

what the communists categorised as 'bourgeois' nationalism.²⁸³

In contrast to 'bourgeois' nationalism, communist revolutionary mass demands would be inherently non-negotiable, for there would be no grounds for compromise with imperialism.

The Raj and Post-War Political Opposition

The tension between imperial demands and Indian resistance approached breaking point during and after World War I.²⁸⁴ The Raj exemplified its strategy towards Indian opposition by granting the constitutional concessions embodied in the Mont-ford reforms in order to win over the moderate elements (including the industrialists), while passing the Rowlatt Act to repress the (hopefully, isolated) militant opposition. However the Government of India revised this broad strategy in 1920, when it became apparent that nationalist opposition had reached unprecedented levels and that 'stern repression was likely to cause a great deal more trouble than it was worth'.²⁸⁵ The brutal Punjab repression of 1919 was not to be repeated. The spirit of the Rowlatt Acts, which had culminated, logically enough, in General Dyer's indiscriminating repression, was replaced by New Delhi's policy-makers with a far more liberal and discriminating policy. New Delhi made this tactical shift despite its deep anxiety about the situation and despite considerable pressure from London²⁸⁶ and some of

283. This theme will be taken up in Chapter 5.

284. Tomlinson, 'India and the British Empire', pp.349-65.

285. Low, 'The Government of India and the First Non-Co-Operation Movement', p.300. The remainder of this paragraph is based on this article.

286. See also Tomlinson, 'India and the British Empire', p.362.

the provinces. The new policy recognised that although Gandhi led the challenge to the Raj, his stated commitment to non-violence was genuine. Given the violence of the passions that had been aroused among very large numbers of Indians, it would be politically unwise, New Delhi reasoned, prematurely to suppress this non-violent leadership. Moreover, repression would alienate the moderates' support upon which the government had become, for the present at least, very dependent. Guided by the Home Member, Sir William Vincent, New Delhi charted an initial course of careful non-interference, watching at the same time for signs of the emergence of autonomous mass revolt, independent of the Gandhian leadership. Gandhi's sudden suspension of the movement after the violence at Chauri Chaura saved the Government of India from the incalculable consequences of the repressive policy urged upon it with increasing insistence by both London and the provinces. The government was then free to recover its political authority and to make its point about the illegitimacy of mass agitation - by arresting Gandhi - without having to face the earlier hazards.

The first repression of India's proto-communists took place against this background and accorded with this pattern. It was both a footnote and a counterpoint theme to the government's response to the political unrest of the post-War years.

The Raj and 'Communism', 1919-24

The Government of India implemented a sequence of anti-'Bolshevik' measures between 1919 and 1924. They were taken largely in response to pressure from an anxious Home

Government. In November 1919 New Delhi reluctantly²⁸⁷ instituted the first such measure - the establishment of a 'Special Bureau of Information', whose function was to prevent an influx of Bolshevik agents and propaganda, to watch for signs of emerging Bolshevism in India, and to prepare anti-Bolshevik propaganda to discourage its emergence.²⁸⁸ The Bureau set about its work with enthusiasm and imagination: for example it warned government officials that 'the Bolshevik agent' was 'not necessarily a surly individual in dirty clothes', and it saw in the current political unrest 'the danger, to use the language of electric science, of an induced current of Bolshevism'.²⁸⁹ But by the end of 1920 the Director of the Bureau, Colonel O'Connor, was forced to agree with the Home Department that its investigations had proved that 'Bolshevism is non-existent' in India.²⁹⁰ Accordingly, the Special Bureau was abolished and its surveillance functions were subsumed by the central and provincial Intelligence branches.²⁹¹

However the India Office continued to display anxiety, particularly after M.N. Roy began his work in Europe. Apart from the dangers posed by the Comintern's new program, the Secretary of State informed New Delhi, he was under considerable

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287. NAI, H.Poll, 103/III/1923: Note by Hailey (Sec., HD), 17/12/22, who wrote: 'We were ... entirely opposed to this ... it was started mainly to satisfy the Secretary of State.'
288. NAI, H.Poll, Progs, Feb. 1920, Nos. 398-412: Viceroy (hereafter V) to Secretary of State for India (hereafter S of S), 28/1/20.
289. NAI, H.Poll, Progs, Feb. 1920, No. 52: Director, CID, Weekly Report, 19/1/20.
290. NAI, H.Poll, A, Jan. 1921, Nos. 45-46: DIB (Kaye) to McPherson, 25/10/20.
291. ibid., Notes in the HD, 3 & 16/12/20.

domestic pressure to ensure that the existing anti-communist measures in India were adequate. Moreover, the matter was 'of world-wide interest to all Governments' and the British government had a corresponding international responsibility to take all necessary measures against the Bolshevik danger.²⁹² In particular, the Government of India should investigate the feasibility of legislating to make it an offence to be a communist or to propagate communism.²⁹³

New Delhi believed that London, through failing to understand both the real character of the Non-Cooperation movement and the government's strategy towards it, was taking an 'unduly alarmist' view of the situation.²⁹⁴ But New Delhi, in assuring the Secretary of State that the post-Non-Cooperation situation was under control and did not contain any significant potential for 'Communist' advances, decided that it was necessary to 'give proofs that our assurances are well founded'.²⁹⁵ More-

292. NAI, 103/III/1923: S of S to V, 3/12/22.

293. ibid.: S of S to V, 15/12/22; Ferard (Sec., P & J Dept., India Office) to G of I, 18/1/23. This was possibly desired as a legal precedent for use elsewhere.

294. ibid.: Notes in the HD, 17 & 18/12/22; V to S of S, 21/12/22; G of I to all Local Governments (hereafter, LGs), 1/3/23. The India Office failed to understand, the Home Department believed, that the chances of a future, unchallenged, mass agitation equivalent to NCO, or of a serious communist-led agitation, were minimal. This was for three reasons: the government's need to woo the moderates during a critical period was most unlikely to be as great in the future, and the government would therefore have much more freedom to repress; the masses were disillusioned and made passive by the failure of NCO; and because even if a communist program developed momentum it would alienate the 'respectable classes' and so could be much more readily isolated and more safely repressed than the Gandhian movement.

295. ibid.: Note by Crerar (Sec., HD), 6/1/23.

over the Home Department, after further consideration, discovered certain domestic advantages in taking anti-'Bolshevik' measures: it could use the Bolshevik issue to warn Indians of the government's firm intention not to allow further mass agitations.²⁹⁶ The Home Department wished, in particular, to discourage the political extremists - and particularly the Bengali revolutionaries, and 'C.R. Das and the extreme left of the Congress Party' who were seeking to 'organise the proletariat' - from making tactical alliances with M.N. Roy and his representatives.²⁹⁷ It was also hoped that an anti-'Bolshevik' action would 'open the eyes of the public, the men who have any stake in the country ... including ... the small zemindar and ryotwary profitor (sic.), the tradesmen and the intellectuals' to the hazards of 'Bolshevik' mass politics.²⁹⁸ Finally, New Delhi was sensitive to its wider imperial responsibilities - it believed that an anti-'Bolshevik' action would be 'additionally opportune' in that it would provide ammunition for the Home Government's current propaganda attack on Soviet and Comintern activities.²⁹⁹

The government's first initiative was imaginative. In 1922 Roy prepared a manifesto to attempt to influence the proceedings of the Gaya session of the National Congress.³⁰⁰

296. There was, therefore, a partial parallel between the reasoning employed by the government in its arrest of Gandhi and that behind its anti-'Communist' measures.

297. NAI, H.Poll, 261/1924: Note by Crerar, 2/6/23.

298. ibid., Note by B.N. Sharma, 7/6/23.

299. ibid.: Note by Crerar, 2/6/23. For the British government's propaganda campaign against the Soviets see: Government of Great Britain, Papers Dealing With Relations Between His Majesty's Government and the Soviet Government, 1921-27. Parliamentary Papers, 1927, Cmd. 2895 (London, HMSO, 1927), pp.20-24.

300. IB, Communism, (1924), pp.53-54.

The government was concerned to dampen Congress radicalism during this transitional period. It was particularly concerned about C.R. Das's recent propaganda for 'Swaraj for the masses and not for the classes' and about Roy's possible influence upon him.³⁰¹ To minimise the effect at Gaya of Roy's manifesto, New Delhi arranged with Reuters to have it published in the press in December.³⁰² The government hoped thereby to discredit it by having it categorised as 'Bolshevik'. This temporary lowering of the Raj's rigid censorship blockade against communist literature appears to have been very effective in achieving its goal. The public ridicule of Roy's program was sufficient for an embarrassed Dange - who had recently been selected by Roy as his main contact in India³⁰³ and who had published the program in his Socialist - to publicly dissociate himself from both it and Roy.³⁰⁴ And there were no Royist echoes at the Gaya Congress.³⁰⁵

New Delhi's second initiative was more substantial. Around this time a number of the Muslim youths who had gone to Russia during the hijrat movement began to return to India, ostensibly to establish a communist movement.³⁰⁶ Although their revolutionary potential was not rated very highly by the Home Department, New Delhi decided in January 1923 to launch

301. Eg. NAI, H.Poll, 18/1922: Bengal FR1 Nov. & FR2 Dec..

302. See NAI, H.Poll, 128/1922: passim.

303. BSAI, 1922, para. 1659.

304. BSAI, 1923, paras 2 & 58.

305. IB, Communism, (1924), p.53. See also Z. Imam, 'The Rise of Soviet Russia and Socialism in India, 1917-1929, in Nanda (Ed.) Socialism, p.54.

306. see fn.214, below.

a conspiracy case against seven of them.³⁰⁷ The government decided to use a conspiracy case, rather than the simpler executive action under Regulation III, because the former was more amenable to propaganda purposes. The Home Department chose Peshawar as the site of the trial because under the North West Frontier Province's legal system conviction would be certain there.³⁰⁸ Despite the particularly shoddy nature of the case,³⁰⁹ the convictions were secured. Having established a legal precedent, New Delhi then proceeded to prepare another conspiracy case against a number of Roy's emissaries and correspondents in India. From an original list of 168 names the Home Department selected eight for inclusion in the trial. Of these only four were eventually brought to trial in the Cawnpore (Bolshevik) Conspiracy Case of 1924. Again, the conspiracy case method was chosen, despite the fragility of the 'conspiracy'. This was because a conspiracy case provided the propaganda platform that Executive action could not, because it was a more satisfactory method of producing a firm legal finding against Indian communism, and because it was less likely to risk a wider Indian protest on constitutional grounds.³¹⁰

307. NAI, H.Poll, 103/1923: Note by Crerar, 6/1/23.

308. loc. cit.

309. In the Legislative Department's view the Peshawar judge used an 'extraordinary process of reasoning' to arrive at his verdict. Among other lapses, when he was unable to legally establish one piece of evidence crucial for the government's case he pronounced that 'in the interests of the State a certain latitude must be allowed to the Prosecution': NAI, H.Poll, 261/1924: Legislative Dept., Opinion, 5/6/23.

310. ibid.: Hailey (Home Member) to S.R. Das (Govt. Advocate) 11/2/24. Hailey wrote that 'our main object is less to obtain a heavy sentence ... than to thoroughly expose the whole conspiracy'; also Note by Crerar, 2/6/23.

Section 121-A of the Penal Code defined 'conspiracy' in very wide terms, and the government was confident of conviction. The government chose Cawnpore, on the grounds of Shaukat Usmani's activities there, rather than the other cities (Bombay, Calcutta, Lahore and Madras) from which the original eight defendants came. It selected Cawnpore because it was politically less sensitive and because a jury trial was not mandatory there.

The case against Usmani, Muzaffar Ahmad, Dange and Nalini Gupta took from March 1924 until the hearing of the appeals in November. The court sentenced the accused to four years Rigorous Imprisonment each. The government had secured its convictions and legal precedent with ease and, this time, unimpeachable legality. It was also happy with the effect of its propaganda: the case had been justified, 'not only legally but politically' in that it had met with a favourable response from moderate opinion, had had a sobering effect on the press and had not provoked any significant nationalist protest.³¹¹ Moreover, although the launching of the case publicised the existence of 'Communist' activity in India, the defendants did not use the case as an effective

311. NAI, H.Poll, 272/1925: Petrie (DIB) to HD, 20/1/26. For the government's exaggeratedly propagandistic approach, see Judgement of the High Court of Judicature at Allahabad in the Revolutionary Conspiracy Case, Cmd. 2309 (London, HMSO, 1924).

propaganda platform for communism.³¹²

The Cawnpore (Bolshevik) Conspiracy Case was, thus, little more than an exhibition of shadow boxing, arranged by the government primarily for purposes other than that of defeating a perceived communist threat. The unfortunate and tentative 'conspirators' themselves became the victims of a complicated, wide-ranging plot, the consequences of which they could hardly have anticipated. With the conclusion of the Cawnpore Case the government had no further need of the communists - for the time being at least. But the repression of the early 1920s served as a warning to India's future communists: the Raj would, for a number of reasons, be very interested in the development of their movement, and it could be expected to respond severely, if periodically. Further, the repressive mode would be of a distinctive kind. The cautious, discriminating and legalistic approach adopted by New Delhi after the 1919 excesses might allow the communists more leeway initially than would a more extreme policy; but it also facilitated the isolation of communist politics from the nationalist mainstream. On balance, it was to the communists' disadvantage that Dyer's Jalianwala Bagh massacre was an aberration in British political policy and not a harbinger of the future.

312. The accused were not anxious to increase the risks of conviction or heavy sentences by proclaiming from the dock their full commitment to a doctrine, and an international connection, the potentials of which they had only recently and uncertainly begun to explore. (See, eg., the Socialist, 12/3/23, which declared that Dange knew Roy to be 'an objectionable person' and 'had given the CID ... to understand that he received certain communications from [Roy] ... though he did not want his contact at all': in BSAI, 1924, para.435.) This reticence was understandable enough in the circumstances. But Roy was incensed: 'Poor fellows', he fulminated, 'If they could only have put up a better defence, four years in jail would have been worthwhile. We must have better Communists than this lot; ... the Cawnpore case could have been an epoch-making event': quoted in IB, Communism, (1927), p.89.

6. HELP FROM ABROAD: THE COMMUNISTS' RECEIVED MARXISM

During the early and mid-1920s the Indian proto-communists passed through an ideological transition from a 'pure' nationalism, in its various guises, towards a Marxist perspective. However, they did not develop, even in Bombay, a systematic Marxist theory of Indian politics. For this reason they could not judge precisely where or how their politics should fit into the existing situation. As S.V. Deshpande put it in late 1924, 'socialist thought in our country has hardly advanced so far as to be capable of being embodied in the practical programme of ... [a communist] party'.³¹³ Therefore energies were directed, during the politically quiescent mid-1920s, into the necessary Marxist 'educational spadework'.³¹⁴

But the paucity of Marxist texts in India greatly limited the possibilities for theoretical advance. Routine censorship measures prevented most Marxist and all Leninist works from reaching the bookshop shelves. The communist literature which did arrive did so primarily through underground channels. M.N. Roy, India's main point of contact with the outside communist world and communist commentator on the Indian world, despatched an avalanche of printed material during these years, a significant amount of which reached its destination. But for the most part Roy restricted his despatches to his own

313. S.V. Deshpande, Letter to the Editor, Socialist, 3/12/24, in Dange, Selected Writings, p.411.

314. The phrase is T.V. Parvate's: Letter to the Editor, Socialist, 15/10/24, in ibid., p.401.

prolific writings.³¹⁵ Roy played an important role in the early ideological development of the Indian communists.³¹⁶ But until 1926 his writings - even his several books on Indian politics - did not have a sound theoretical basis. Moreover, the additional literature that he did send was limited primarily to the Comintern's 'agit-prop' and news publication, International Press Correspondence (Inprecor), and Stalin's theoretically impoverished observations and prescriptions.³¹⁷ In particular, he sent little of the limited Comintern theoretical work on the colonial issue which did exist. For example, he did not make known in India the important 1920 Second Comintern Congress debate on the 'national and colonial question'. In this debate Roy and Lenin had taken opposing stands. The documents adopted by the Second Congress provided the ostensible theoretical basis of subsequent Comintern policy on the colonial question. But Lenin's position, and the fact that there was cause for debate, remained hidden from the Indian communists.³¹⁸

From 1926 the theoretical situation in India began to change. One reason was that India's overseas specialists finally developed a systematic theory of Indian politics. Another was that, for the first time, international communist specialists began working in India, helping the Indian Marxists to develop

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315. The many H.Poll files on intercepted communist literature show this. See also IB, Communism, (1927), pp.12-13, 22-24, ps. 47 and 60.
316. This has been acknowledged by all of the early communists that I interviewed. For most of them Roy's 1922 book, India in Transition, was their introduction to a Marxist perspective.
317. See fn.315. Only a few copies of the Comintern's theoretical journal, Communist International, were located in the searches accompanying the 1929 Meerut Conspiracy Case arrests (see the exhaustive MCCC search lists). These searches uncovered the communist literature that had accumulated during the decade.
318. This was confirmed by my interviews. For example P.C. Joshi,

theory and policy and guiding their political activity. Finally, from 1927 new political opportunities became available, thus allowing the development of theory through practice. The question of the quality of the Indian communists' received Marxism became, thereby, a much more pressing one than before, for it began to have a direct bearing on the communists' political fate. In this section we will examine the important question of the Indian communists' international theoretical inheritance and leadership.

Until the mid-1920s M.N. Roy remained the undisputed international leader of Indian communism.³¹⁹ However the 1924 Fifth Comintern Congress resolved that the communist parties of the colonising countries should play a much more active role in guiding the respective colonial communist parties.³²⁰ Roy and the CPGB maintained a somewhat uneasy coexistence³²¹ as joint-guides until late 1926, when Roy was

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the CPI's General Secretary from 1935 to 1948, reported that he did not see a copy of the debate until 1950 (interview with P.C. Joshi, 3/9/74). This is confirmed for the 1920s by the MCCC search lists. None of the communists had a copy of the 1920 debate or of Lenin's contribution to it.
319. M.N. Roy's role in this early period is covered by Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., Chapters 2, 3 and 4, and Haithcox, op. cit., Chapters 1, 2 and 3.
320. Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., p.70.
321. Eg., a meeting between the Roy group and CPGB representatives in Amsterdam in July 1925, called to discuss work in India, revealed that considerable tension existed between the two groups on the question of the foreign leadership of the CPI (Great Britain, Parliament, Communist Papers, Parliamentary Publications, 1926, Vol. 23, Cmd.2682, (London, HMSO, 1926), pp.80-88: captured records of the conference). The Roy group and the CPGB subsequently constituted themselves as a joint leadership called the 'Foreign Bureau' of the CPI, in which Roy played the leading role. However the CPGB began independent organisational work in England during 1925-26, (ibid., pp.75-6, and pp.76-105) culminating in the despatch of agents to India.

sent by the ECCI to work in China.³²² Concurrently, the Indian communists' resistance against Roy's leadership had reached a sufficient level to undermine much of his personal influence in the country.³²³ When the CPGB managed during 1926-27 to get three of its members - Goerge Allison, Phillip Spratt and Ben Bradley - into India, its leadership role was secured. That these activists were Englishmen and were prepared to work with the Indians as comrades, on an equal footing and under the same conditions, had a great impact on the thinking of the Indians.³²⁴ The CPGB's view of the Indian situation now held sway.

But although the CPI's international leadership had changed, the perspective on Indian politics had not. During 1926 both Roy and the CPGB's Rajani Palme Dutt, published studies of the current state of Indian politics, and Dutt adopted the Royist rather than the Leninist perspective.³²⁵

The Second Comintern Debate: Royism and Leninism

India figured prominently in the debate on 'the National and Colonial Questions' at the Second World Congress of the Comintern in 1920: India, the largest colony of the world's

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322. See *ibid.*, pp.90-94 and Haithcox, *op. cit.*, pp.62-73 for Roy's interlude in China during 1927.
323. We noted earlier some manifestations of this resistance. Additional evidence is provided by the CPI's annual report in May 1927, which rejected the Foreign Bureau's claimed directive powers. The report defined the Bureau as simply the CPI's 'representative in Europe', and it should 'not in any way work inconsistent with the Party's Programme and resolutions': MCCC, P.1207(1): *op. cit.*.
324. Eg. Mirajkar recalls that 'the solidarity that they exhibited with us, being British comrades, was very important. In jail and outside they lived with us just like Indians. They did not behave like "Tommys", and that was a big thing': interview with Mirajkar. It was also a factor which disturbed the Raj's officials.
325. There is no evidence of the directness of Dutt's debt to Roy, but it would appear to have been substantial.

dominant capitalist power, was accorded a role of considerable importance in Lenin's theory of imperialism; and at the Congress it was the Indian, M.N. Roy, who challenged Lenin. Lenin presented a set of theses on politics in the colonies based on his analysis of the dynamics of imperialism and of Russian politics.³²⁶ He argued that nationalist politics in the 'backward', weakly industrialised colonial countries, 'in which feudal or patriarchal, and patriarchal-peasant relations predominate', would inevitably be dominated by 'bourgeois democratic' movements. He argued, further, that the colonial bourgeoisies were 'objectively' revolutionary vis a vis imperialism, for the interests of the two were in conflict. Because the proletariat was weak the colonial communist parties would, initially at least, also be weak, and they would be able to increase their influence only by participating in the bourgeois-democratic nationalist movements. The communists of the colonial countries should therefore adopt a 'united front' strategy: they should involve themselves in such nationalist movements and play the most revolutionary roles within them; simultaneously they should seek to mobilise an independent mass base among the workers and the peasantry and the intellectuals, both to radicalise the nationalist movement against colonialism and to prepare for a subsequent social revolution. Roy presented a diametrically

326. Lenin, 'Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions', in Collected Works, (Moscow, 1966), Vol. 31, pp.144-51. Bipan Chandra provides an excellent analysis of the relationship between Lenin's theory of colonial revolution and his general theoretical position: 'Lenin on National Liberation Movements', in India Quarterly, Vol. 27(1), 1971, pp.40-56.

opposed, 'left-sectarian' position.³²⁷ In relatively industrialised colonies such as India, he argued, the interests of imperialism and the colonial bourgeoisie were not contradictory and, moreover, strong mass movements, and 'organised socialist or communist parties, in close relation to the mass movement', already existed.³²⁸ The bourgeois democratic nationalist movements, he argued on the eve of Non-Cooperation, 'are limited to the small middle class, which does not reflect the aspirations of the masses'.³²⁹ 'Consequently', Roy concluded, 'in the colonies, we have two contradictory forces; they cannot develop together'.³³⁰ The communists, therefore, should not support the bourgeois democratic nationalist movements. Rather, they should devote all of their energies to the mass movement. Roy supported his argument that Indian politics were being polarised into two antagonistic movements by exaggerating the size of the industrial proletariat (he claimed that it numbered five million), by arguing that the vast majority of the peasantry had been converted into an agricultural proletariat, and by suggesting that the British had recently reversed their earlier policy of obstructing the industrial development of India.³³¹

327. Roy's draft theses, reproduced in Adhikari, Documents, Vol. 1, pp.178-88. This is the first time that Roy's draft theses have been published.

328. ibid., p.186.

329. ibid., p.184.

330. ibid., p.188.

331. Minutes of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions, reproduced in H.d'Encausse and S. Schram, Marxism and Asia (London, 1969), pp.150-51; Roy's draft theses, in Adhikari, Documents, Vol. 1, p.182; the Second World Congress of the Communist International, Proceedings, (Moscow, 1920), p.118.

The level of industrial and agricultural proletarianisation, Roy argued, and, as the post-War strikes demonstrated, its political consciousness, were now sufficient for the emergence of a proletarian alternative and opposition to bourgeois nationalism. The 'rapid development' of capitalism in India and other colonies since the War ensured that the new trends would become permanent.³³²

At the Second Congress Lenin cut and amended Roy's theses to remove the dichotomisation of the bourgeois democratic and the mass movements, and to mute the proletarian revolutionism.³³³ The Second Congress then adopted the amended document as a set of 'supplementary' theses to highlight the distinctiveness of the situations in the relatively industrialised colonies. In the light of Roy's arguments Lenin, also, revised his theses, thereby emphasising more strongly the 'dual' character of the strategy of the bourgeoisie.³³⁴ He distinguished between non-revolutionary and revolutionary bourgeois nationalist movements - between, that is, those that did not oppose colonialism

332. loc. cit... Roy claimed that capital investment in Indian industry had increased by 2,000 percent.

333. Roy has since described Lenin's amendment of his theses as 'verbal alterations' (M.N. Roy, Memoirs, (Bombay, 1964), p.381). In fact the revision was basic (see Adhikari's juxtaposition of the original and amended theses, in Documents, Vol. 1, pp.178-88). Lenin regarded Roy's views to be 'to a large extent unfounded' and, in criticising his 'left-sectarianism', pointed out that the Bolsheviks had 'supported the liberation movement of the liberals when it acted against tsarism. The Indian communists must support the bourgeois-democratic movement, without merging with it': reproduced in d'Encausse and Schram, op. cit., pp.151-2.

334. Second Congress, Proceedings, ps. 109 and 574.

and those that did. The communist parties should support and participate in bourgeois democratic nationalist movements only when they remained revolutionary, and only as long as they did not attempt to block the communists' independent mass work.

These schematically outlined and universalist principles were the guidelines for subsequent Comintern policy on the complex 'national and colonial question'.³³⁵ However Roy, apart from not publicising Lenin's position in India, soon began to revert to his 'non-dialectical' characterisation of the politics of the Indian bourgeoisie and to his exaggeration of the significance of the proletariat. From 1925 he also had the support of Stalin's widely publicised declaration that, in India, capitalism and the proletariat were 'developing rapidly' and that the bourgeoisie had formed a 'coalition' with imperialism.³³⁶ This was the perspective which guided the early ideological development of the Indian communists.

Between 1920 and 1926 Roy felt his way towards a stronger theoretical foundation for his arguments. In his 1922 book, India in Transition, he argued that during and since the War there had been a 'very rapid' development of industry, an 'enormous' extension of commerce and a 'spectacular' growth

335. For the evolution of Comintern policy, in the 1920s, on this question, see D. Boersner, The Bolsheviks and the National and Colonial Question, (Geneva, 1957).

336. Stalin declared that the 'national bourgeoisie' had split into a 'revolutionary' 'petty-bourgeois section' and a 'compromising' 'great-bourgeois section', and that the latter had 'wholeheartedly thrown in its lot with the irreconcilable enemies of the revolution, has made common cause with the imperialists against the workers and peasants'. Stalin contrasted the Indian and Chinese 'compromising' bourgeoisies: in China the bourgeoisie had 'not yet made common cause with imperialism'. (Stalin, 'Speech to students of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East', 18/5/25: reproduced in Adhikari, Documents, Vol. 2, pp.572-78). Many copies of this speech and of Stalin's Leninism, in which it was reproduced, were found in the MCCC searches: see MCCC search lists.

of India's bourgeoisie and proletariat.³³⁷ These developments had occurred because the Indian bourgeoisie's increased strength during the War period had enabled it to force the British into a 'remarkable' change in long term policy on the issue of industrialisation. In his 1926 study, The Future of Indian Politics, Roy provided this argument with a theoretically (if not empirically) stronger foundation: the 'remarkable' change in colonial policy, he now reasoned, was determined not so much by the political situation in India as by the post-War dynamics of British metropolitan capitalism.³³⁸

R.P. Dutt's Modern India: The CPGB's Royism

R.P. Dutt adopted the same argument and the same theoretical basis in his 1926 book, Modern India.³³⁹ Because from this point the CPGB took over the role of international mentor to the CPI, it was Dutt's version of the argument which had the greatest influence on the Indian Party's theoretical and political development. For this reason, and because Dutt's and Roy's versions were, apart from minor tactical differences,³⁴⁰ essentially the same, we will confine our attention to Modern India.

337. (Calcutta, 1971) (Republished), pp.39-40.

338. (Calcutta, 1971) (Republished), p.14.

339. (Bombay, 1926). A version of this political analysis (though not including its theoretical underpinning) had been published earlier by Dutt's brother: C.P. Dutt, 'Indian Politics: an Analysis', in Labour Monthly (hereafter, LM), Vol. 7(7), 1925, pp.399-409.

340. The most significant difference was that Dutt did not regard the need to form a new revolutionary nationalist party to be as pressing as did Roy.

Dutt, the son of a Bengali doctor resident in England and his Swedish wife, was a First Class Honours graduate from Oxford. Rajani and his brother Clemens became foundation members of the CPGB. R.P. Dutt became the CPGB's main theoretician and, with the publication of Modern India, he also began a long career as theoretical guide to the CPI. In Modern India Dutt, like Roy, argued that British capitalism, in common with the other imperialist metropolitan economies, had entered a crisis which could only be resolved by the export of capital into industrial investment in the colonies: 'Today Industrial Development is the keystone of British Government policy' in India (p.37), and 'it is taking place with as definite a purpose as the previous opposition to industrial development' (p.50). Thus, Dutt argued, the industrialisation of India was taking place not as a short-term response to political contingencies, but as a long-term policy initiated by British capital for structural economic reasons. This was one aspect of a 'new Imperialist policy'. The startling consequence was that 'one of the most important facts of the post-War world' was 'the lightening development of modern industry in India' and in other Asian colonies and semi colonies (pp.37-8). As part of this policy British imperialism was seeking to incorporate the rising Indian bourgeoisie into a 'junior partnership'. It was doing so partly to gain an additional source of capital, partly to increase political stability by splitting the bourgeoisie from the nationalist movement, and partly to establish the Indian bourgeoisie as imperialism's 'parasitic agents' in the country (ps. 2 and 6). Thus the 'new Imperialist policy' had a political dimension as well as the economic dimension:

the British were initiating a process of political devolution which would find eventual expression in Dominion Status (p.2). Under Dominion Status the Indian bourgeoisie would act as the agents and junior partners of imperialism. This was an offer they could not refuse, for it offered a great deal and it obviated the otherwise necessary and dangerous game of mobilising the masses in order to win concessions from the colonialists.

Several important conclusions followed logically from this analysis. The first was that the Indian bourgeoisie was an objectively counter-revolutionary, pro-imperialist class. In 1926 Dutt remained ambiguous on this, but in a 1927 edition he firmly drew the conclusion.³⁴¹ However even in 1926 he was unambiguous about the second conclusion: 'if the future of India lies with large-scale industry, then the political future equally certainly lies with the industrial proletariat'. (p.48). Thirdly, capitalist relations were spreading increasingly into the countryside, transforming the old 'feudal' social relations: 'while the older social forms increasingly decline (sic.), Capitalism spreads more and more rapidly ... and it is from Capitalism, and not from the earlier social forms, that the new stage [of politics] must be expected to come'. (pp.180-81). Thus the peasantry was being increasingly 'proletarianised' and was, therefore, becoming increasingly amenable to a revolutionary alliance with the industrial proletariat. The other objectively - though, in practice, vacillating - class was the 'petty-bourgeoisie'. The 'petty-bourgeoisie' was defined as an aggregation of the small artisans, traders and merchants and,

341. R.P. Dutt, Modern India (London, 1927), .p.17.

most significantly, the 'petty-bourgeois intellectual elements'. The latter contributed the majority of the Congress organisation's personnel. The class interests of most of the 'petty-bourgeois intelligentsia' lay with the masses, but in practice they 'feared to break with the propertied interests of the bourgeoisie' (p.78), and tended to collapse during periods of crisis. This had happened under Gandhi's leadership during the Non-Cooperation movement. The Gandhian 'betrayal' proved that the Congress leadership, though not directly controlled by the bourgeoisie, had nevertheless been under bourgeois hegemony and, therefore, was ultimately aligned with imperialism:

Gandhi failed as a leader ... because he could not cut himself loose from the upper-class interests and prejudices in which he had been brought up. ... The "spirituality" of Gandhi is only the expression of this class interest ... [and serves to obscure] the practical bourgeois policy in every actual question that lies behind it. From this class alignment inevitably follows his cooperation with the Imperialist Government (pp.76-8).

The collapse of Non-Cooperation constituted, Dutt continued, the 'final' collapse of Gandhi and Gandhism. Likewise, the Swarajists,

who had begun with the language of a revolutionary movement ... ended as the direct apostles of upper class interests against the national cause and the defenders of the government against the masses. The bourgeois forces ... had overcome the weak and uncertain popular elements' (pp.84-5).

Swarajism, too, was dead as a nationalist force.

Thus, Dutt argued, the lessons of the past were clear. Because of the capitulation of the bourgeoisie and the collapse of the proxy-bourgeois Congress leaderships, the only possible way forward for the Indian nationalist movement was the formation of a new 'Peoples' Party' (later called the 'Workers' and Peasants' Party' (WPP)) based on the workers,

peasants and revolutionary elements of the petty bourgeoisie. It would have a program of revolutionary mass action against the Raj and Indian exploiters, and a goal of Complete Independence. It was not important to attempt to determine in advance the way in which the Peoples' Party would come into being or the precise form it would take. It was even possible that the Congress could be captured and transformed into such a party. The immediate task was to 'carry on a battle of clarification within the existing movement and organisations. Within both the Congress and the Swaraj Party the left Nationalist elements should gather themselves around a popular national programme' (p.175). The workers and peasants should then be mobilised around programs of demands based on the immediate issues affecting their daily lives.

Finally, a disciplined, centralised vanguard working class party would 'organise and centralise' the wider nationalist struggle, while simultaneously preparing for the social revolution subsequent to the successful anti-imperialist struggle. India's political future lay with the working class; the establishment of a communist party was 'the supreme point of working class organisation, and the necessary prerequisite for reaching to the workers' society of the future' (p.196).

The Roy-Dutt arguments about the economic and political changes of the War and post-War periods did have a certain plausibility.³⁴² The War did lead to a significant expansion of industrial output (though not of industrial investment) to a

342. For the economic changes, see: Tomlinson, 'India and the British Empire', pp.349-65; Bagchi 'Private Investment', p.70-89.

modest growth of import-substitution industries under Indian capital, and to government concern to win the 'loyalty' of the Indian Moderates. The post-War period had witnessed a spurt of industrial investment in which British capital had been involved. Moreover there had been a major strike wave and major rural unrest in the post-War period, and Non-Cooperation had indeed been called off largely because of the Congress leadership's concern that it was getting out of control. Finally, it could conceivably have been argued during the political lull of the mid-1920s that Gandhi's and the Swarajists' retreats were permanent and not tactical.

But the central argument of the (Stalin-supported) Roy-Dutt 'new Imperialist policy' thesis was fanciful - if imaginative. By exaggerating a short-term tendency arising from the exigencies of the extraordinary War/post-War situation, and by then extrapolating that tendency as a permanent trend, it produced an analysis which was virtually diametrically opposed to both imperial and Indian realities in the 1920s. Largely by misjudging the nature of British policy towards India, the 'new Imperialist policy' thesis provided a very misleading, 'undialectical' and 'left-sectarian' view of the logic of Congress nationalism and the strategy of the Indian bourgeoisie. It would therefore prove to be an equally misleading guide to communist strategy in relation to the Congress. Dutt's analysis was in obvious trouble soon after it was published: the British government's hard-line attitude towards Indian demands for representation on the proposed Statutory Commission, and the bitter 'bourgeois' response in India, could not easily be accommodated into the 'new Imperialist policy' thesis. The only mitigating factor in Dutt's version of the

analysis was that, for the moment, communist participation in the Congress was recommended.

But perhaps even more serious than its 'left-sectarianism' was its extreme 'proletarian orthodoxy'. By arguing that India's proletariat was rapidly increasing, and that the traditional pre-capitalist agrarian relations had been undermined by capitalist relations, the Dutt analysis encouraged a complacent, urban-proletarian oriented communist strategy and ideology. To argue that 'the future of Indian politics lies with the proletariat' was greatly to underrate the importance of developing a specifically peasant strategy and a peasant-oriented ideology. Thus, Dutt could write:

The social conditions which gave rise to the old conceptions [pre-capitalist ideology] have passed away. The endeavour to build upon the past means not only to follow a socially reactionary policy, ... but ... also to build upon a foundation of sand. ... The relics of obsolete forms remain long quiescent until the moment of crisis comes, and then they are thrown off in an instant ... (ps. 122 & 124).

This led Dutt to conclude that 'The spiritually reactionary propaganda of Gandhism is an enemy of the masses. ... The ideology of the future is and can only be the proletarian ideology' (pp. 124-25). That is, there was, in Dutt's view, nothing that the communists could learn from the remarkable relationship that Gandhi had developed with the rural masses. This viewpoint would also have serious consequences for the communists' program for the 'semi-peasant' working class. Because of the strength of, and the functional role played by, pre-capitalist community consciousness and organisation among the industrial working class, Dutt's 'proletarian orthodoxy' provided a particularly inadequate ideological approach even to the proletariat.

Finally, we need to note the extremely mechanistic character of the conceptual categories employed by Dutt. Modern India was vitiated not only by its linear, dichotomous and erroneous political-economic analysis, but also by the crude reductionism and 'Westernism' of its concepts. Dutt presented political and ideological levels as mere epiphenomena of economic class categories - as is evidenced by the above quotation on the 'false consciousness' of the 'old conceptions'; and the conceptualisation of Indian classes was a direct transposition from a western Marxist manual. These features were particularly inadequate for Bengal, where intensive colonialisation had reinforced pre-capitalist modes rather than transforming them. The social bases of Bengal provincial Congress politics, for example, could be described as 'bourgeois' only in the most metaphorical of senses.

But despite the shortcomings of Dutt's analysis and conceptualisation, Modern India found a receptive audience among India's mid-1920s transitional Marxists. In large part this was because of its clearly stated and apparently plausible logic and its bright and readable style. But it was also because the book's categorisation of the bourgeoisie and Gandhian and Swarajist politics as 'objectively' pro-imperialist and in retreat from the masses, and its promise of a proletarian revolutionary future, corresponded with the Indians' own, less clearly rationalised, conceptions and hopes. This was particularly the case for the Bombay communists, who had already formulated an analysis of the roles of the Indian bourgeoisie and Gandhism.

The correspondence between Modern India and the early writings of Dange, for example, was close. Thus when the British communists arrived in 1926-27 with these guidelines there was little resistance: as the program adopted by the Bombay party in March 1928 stated, 'An almost correct interpretation of the Party's views ... is lucidly put forth by Comrade Palme Dutt in his "Modern India"'.³⁴³ The Bengal party formally adopted a similar position.³⁴⁴

British Communists in India

The first of the CPGB visitors to arrive was the Scottish coal miner, George Allison. He landed at Bombay in April 1926, and during the remainder of the year he devoted himself primarily to making trade union contacts and surveying the trade union situations in Bombay and Calcutta. Towards the end of the year he began working more closely with the communists, helping them constitute themselves as definite Marxist groups.³⁴⁵ In December the BPPC leftist faction formed itself into the 'Congress Labour Party' - remaining within the BPPC.

343. MCCC, P.1373(19): Resolution on Congress and Labour leaderships, adopted by the Bombay WPP at its annual conference, Mar. 1928. The Dutt analysis was also apparent in the program adopted by the WPP at its foundation conference in Feb. 1927: MCCC, P.1016.

344. Eg.: MCCC, P.2510: Program of the Bengal PWP, adopted at its annual conference, 19 & 20/2/27; MCCC, P.523: 'A Call to Action' - a lengthy statement of the Bengal WPP's political position, adopted at its annual conference, 31/3/28 - 1/4/28. The documents of both the Bombay and the Bengal parties incorporate the Dutt analysis from early 1927. Eg.: MCCC, Ps. 1013, 1980, 1325, 441 and 23: pamphlets titled 'What the Workers' and Peasants' Party Stands For' (ca. Mar. 1927), 'Contemporary Political Situation in India' (Aug. 1927), 'The National Congress' (ca. Nov. 1927), 'Manifesto of the Workers' and Peasants' Party to the Indian National Congress, Madras, December 1927', and 'Manifesto of the Workers' and Peasants' Party of India', (Jan. 1928).

345. IB, Communism, (1927), pp.103-4, p.126, pp.135-6; Spratt Blowing Up India, p.32; MCCC, P.1144: Allison to Joglekar,

It formally adopted a constitution and program based on Modern India's outline for the 'People's Party'.³⁴⁶ However Allison's work was terminated in January 1927 when he was arrested, and then convicted, for entering India with a false passport.³⁴⁷ But his place was immediately taken by Spratt, who had arrived in Bombay at the end of December.³⁴⁸ Spratt, who entered India legally, was to stay much longer than Allison and to achieve more substantial results.

Spratt was the son of a school teacher and was formerly a scholarship student at Cambridge. A shy and intellectual man, his transition to Marxism in the post-War ferment of ideas he discovered at the university was further encouraged by his alienation from the exclusivist Cambridge social world.³⁴⁹ He joined the CPGB while still a student and began working as a researcher for the Party after graduation. The Party selected him for its next Indian mission because he was unknown to the police. He was offered the opportunity to be the CPGB's 'messenger and reporter' there for six months. 'I was 24', Spratt has recalled, 'with no ties, and in the full flood of enthusiasm for the cause. I jumped at it'.³⁵⁰

345. Cont'd
26/11/26.

346. MCCC, P.1354(4).

347. IB, Communism, (1927), p.104.

348. ibid., p.104.

349. See Spratt, Blowing Up India, Chapter 1, titled 'Clothes and Communism': a psychoanalytical account of his intellectual and emotional conversion to communism at Cambridge. (Spratt writes (p.35) that he was 'Oppressed by my fear of social and intellectual failure' and, on discovering Marxism, 'grasped what was presented to me as the master-key to all knowledge'.) Also: interview with Spratt's widow, Mrs. S. Spratt, 18/8/74.

350. Spratt, Blowing Up India, p.29.

It was a fateful decision, for he was to remain in India not for six months, but for the rest of his life.

Spratt prepared for his mission by 'hastily read[ing] two or three books for background, fixing firmly in my mind that Bombay is on the west coast and Madras on the east', and left with Clemens Dutt's warning 'not to take the Indian bourgeoisie too seriously: they were just putting up a show of opposition to deceive the masses'.³⁵¹ He was joined in September 1927 by Bradley, the son of a communist working class family and an activist in the Amalgamated Engineers Union in London.³⁵² Bradley's arrival, also, was legal. Spratt's and Bradley's strengths were complementary. Spratt was an able theoretician and, despite his innocence of Indian realities, a valuable guide in the formulation of Marxist conceptions of, and programs for, party activity. Moreover, his 'new Imperialist policy' dogmatism was tempered by strong eclectic tendencies, and he was eager to learn about India.³⁵³ His education began soon after arrival: he was surprised to find that although the nationalist press's nationalism 'might be bourgeois, there was not much I could teach them about imperialism'.³⁵⁴

351. ibid., p.31.

352. IB, Communism, (1935), p.115; MCCC, Judgement, p.162. Bradley arrived claiming to represent a firm with the imaginative name of the 'Crabb Patent Underdrain Tile Company'.

353. Interview with D. Goswami and P.C. Joshi. Spratt traces his eclectic intellectual biography in Spratt to G.A. Hutt, 19/2/36, in NAI, H.Poll, 7/2/1936.

354. Spratt, Blowing Up India, p.31.

but it would be some years before he resolved to his satisfaction the discrepancy between his theory and Congress practice. Spratt, however, was not a particularly effective organiser.³⁵⁵ This was the forte of the eminently practical Bradley. An experienced and effective trade union organiser, his contributions in this field during the next two years were considerable.³⁵⁶

Spratt was instructed to encourage the Indian communists to form Workers' and Peasants' Parties and to engage more actively in the trade union sphere. He began a survey of local trade unions, contacted the Bombay group and began working with them, soon after arriving.³⁵⁷ There was a marked upswing in activity soon after his arrival. The Congress Labour Party became the Workers' and Peasants' Party on February 8, 1927, and immediately began planning its future work. At that point it claimed the allegiance of about 20 of the BPCC's 75 members.³⁵⁸

355. This point was made by several of the communists that I interviewed and by Mrs. Spratt. Spratt frequently chastised himself on this score in the letters he wrote to the CPGB.

356. Interview with Mirajkar.

357. MCCC, P.1006: Spratt's diary; MCCC, P.1954 and 1955: Spratt to R. Page Arnott, 18/2/27 and 10/3/27; MCCC, Judgement, p.97.

358. MCCC, P.1942: BSB Report, 23/1/27; MCCC, P.855: Mirajkar to Thengdi, 26/1/27; MCCC, P.1355(7)E: Agenda for CLP meeting, 8/2/27; MCCC, P.1355(7) A & B: Notice of and agenda for WPP meeting, 13/2/27; MCCC, P.851: Notice of formation of WPP in BC, 24/2/27; MCCC, P.1344: EC of WPP, minute book, meetings 30/4/27 and 4/5/27; Spratt, Blowing Up India, p.35.

Only a quarter of the WPP members were communists; but these few were keen to begin work after their period of ideological transition. Spratt first made contact with representatives of the Calcutta group during an AITUC session in March and found them enthusiastic and responsive,³⁵⁹ but he did not move to Bengal until 1928. Bradley remained in Bombay throughout. The period of direct CPGB involvement in Indian communist activity - the 'new Imperialist policy'/WPP phase - and the formation of the CPI, had begun.

359. MCCC, P.2328(P2): Spratt to C.P. Dutt, 14/6/27.

CHAPTER 3

'TAKING MARXISM TO ITS CLASS'¹

In the preceding chapter we followed the uneven ideological transition of a small number of Indian intellectuals from a 'pure' nationalism to a vaguely Marxist socialistic nationalism. The British communists who had arrived during 1926 and 1927 had assisted them in forming, first in Bombay and then in Calcutta, the first Indian proto-communist groupings with clearly formulated programs of action based on Marxist-Leninist theory. These results achieved, the next task was the implementation of the new programs.

Two distinctive features of the situation in the late 1920s enhanced the prospects for the first stage of this exercise. The new Marxist mass programs were drawn up at the beginning of India's second great working class upsurge, arising from the intensified economic constraints on industry in the second half of the 1920s. The sporadic and spontaneous strikes of 1926 and 1927 began to gather force; 'By the end of 1928', the Director of the Intelligence Bureau later wrote, 'hardly

1. The phrase is taken from an interview with B.T. Ranadive (Bombay, 15/8/1974). He used it to characterise the significance of this phase of the Party's development.

a public utility service or industry remained which had not been affected by the wave ... which swept the country during the year'.² Secondly, this upheaval coincided, for most of its course, with an atypical 'moratorium' on extreme state repression of communists, allowing a period of relatively uninterrupted leadership development.³ Here was an opportunity for the miniscule communist groupings in India's two major industrial centres to begin to implement the working class section of their recently formulated mass programs - to begin the project of 'taking Marxism to its class'.

The outcome of this attempt, at this time, was, for a number of reasons, crucial for the later fortunes of Indian communism. An independent mass base was the essential prerequisite for communist influence in Indian politics, and the building of a working class base was, necessarily, the first step in the communists' overall mass program. Their theoretical perspectives predisposed them to begin there. But a number of situational factors reinforced this theoretically-based choice. In 1927 the communists were still limited to urban centres, their (marginal) links with trade unions constituted their only mass contacts and, without an urban base, they did not possess the manpower or material resources to attempt to extend their activities to the peasantry. These factors,

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2. I.B. Communism (1933), p.98. (This account characterised it as a wave of 'communism'.)
 3. The reasons for this contingent 'moratorium' will be investigated in Chapter 5.

combined with the currently higher level of working class unrest, made trade union work the logical starting point.

Success among the working class during these two years could lead, in turn, to success elsewhere. Conditions were more favourable than usual not only for working class activity, but also for the expansion of communist influence in nationalist politics. A working class base might improve their weak, provincially-limited position within the National Congress, during a period when its rank-and-file was increasingly expressing its discontent with the conservative leadership. If an alternative, mass-based nucleus could be established in the Congress during this transitional phase the communists would be in a better position to challenge the policies of the existing leadership, attract rank-and-file radicalism, and initiate alternative programs in the subsequent social and political upheavals.

The most important of these potential initiatives was the attempt to extend communist operations to the villages, at a time when new opportunities for doing so were starting to become available. The turn of the decade was a period of increasing agrarian radicalism, and the limited political 'space' available for agrarian revolutionary activity in India had not yet been further reduced by the consummation of the urban capitalist-rich peasant alliance. A working class base would provide, through the 'semi-peasants' who made up much of the industrial workforce, one possible point of entry to the villages, as well as new resources for making that step. A mass-based position of strength in the Congress could augment

these resources, and further increase village contacts as that organisation became more involved in rural agitation. Further - and also very importantly - it would considerably reduce the Party's existing vulnerability to repression by the colonial state. The movement would no longer be as extremely dependent upon the original few leaders, and the state would find it more difficult to make, for the purposes of selective repression, the propagandistic distinction between 'Communists' and 'nationalists'.

A working class base would also provide the Indian communists with their first opportunity to become 'Indianised' and 'proletarianised' Marxists. This new context would allow them - indeed force them - to confront theory with practice, and the 'elitist' consciousness of their backgrounds with the very different cultural world of the working class and, given the latter's rural origins and contacts, of the peasantry. These confrontations were essential for the creative adaptation and re-shaping of received doctrine into a concretely Indian Marxism, for the development of an ideology, culture and political practice which would be accessible and relevant to the workers and peasantry, and for building an intermediate cadre structure from within the working class itself. A working class base would also provide quite a different context for factionalism within the leadership; factional differences would no longer be, in the words of a subsequent Party critique, mere 'paper differences'.⁴

4. MCG:2.

The timing of the communists' first attempts to implement a working class program was crucial for another reason - it was contemporaneous with the penultimate phase of the Comintern's bolshevisation. The nature of the CPI's relationship with the fully bolshevised Comintern in the following decade would be determined very largely by the prior level of success achieved by the communists in each of the above dimensions.

Success in building a working class base in the uniquely favourable interaction of socio-economic and political conditions of the late-1920s was the key to these wider communist achievements in India, and hence to the possibilities for a strong, non-bolshevised, Indian Communist Party. Such a favourable conjuncture would not reappear in the future. This chapter examines the attempts of the Bombay and Bengal WPPs to implement their working class programs in the two years from early 1927. Following chapters will look at the wider consequences for the communists' political methods, organisation, theory and consciousness, and for the Party's positions in Indian and Comintern politics.

The first attempts to implement Marxist-inspired working class programs in India were also to demonstrate for the first time the much greater difficulty of doing so in Bengal than in Bombay. The industries of both provinces shared major working class upheavals, but these upheavals occurred within social structures which, as we saw in Chapter 2, exhibited some marked differences. Of these the most

crucial for the communists' programs were: the much greater economic, political and organisational strength of industrial capital in Calcutta than in Bombay, and the additional racial factor of non-Indian ownership and management of Bengal's industry; the far greater distance in Bengal between the intelligentsia and the masses, and the 'psycho-cultural' characteristics of the Bengali intelligentsia associated with this separation; and the far higher levels of extra-provincial labour within, and heterogeneity of, the working class in Bengal - a factor which, additionally, increased the distance between the Bengali intelligentsia and labour. All of these distinctions between the two regions had arisen primarily from the far more profound and extensive colonisation of east India than of the west. The British colonial political economy had produced in Bengal a socio-economic and political structure which not only made it more difficult than in Bombay for a socialist intelligentsia to 'take Marxism to its class'; it had also made it much less likely that its working class would 'recognise' and accept the ideology and politics of class struggle.

1. BOMBAY

The Bombay WPP developed its theory and tactics of revolutionary trade unionism in the course of the general discussions on theory and policy initiated by Spratt in early 1927. The trade union plan was based on Spratt's theoretical perspectives, his preliminary survey of trade unionism in Bombay, Allison's observations, and the Bombay group's own limited experiences. Although modifications were later introduced, in the light of experience,⁵ the guidelines developed in these discussions remained the basis of the party's working class policy from this point until the Meerut Case arrests two years later.

The Bombay WPP's Theory and Policy of Working Class Organisation

The WPP's theory of working class organisation, based on Marxist-Leninist principles and using the role of the industrial workers in the Chinese revolution as a model, held that trade unions performed two main functions.⁶ The first was

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5. Most notably, the 'thesis' adopted by the All-India WPP conference in December 1928: MCCC, P.51.
 6. This account of the WPP's trade union theory, strategy and tactics is based on the following documents, all of which were drawn up by Spratt, in early 1927: MCCC, P.1108: 'Program of Trade Union Work'; P.1981: 'Trade Union Work'; P.1982: 'Trade Union Question'; P.801: 'Lesson 6 - Trade Union Work'; P.1013: 'What the WPP stands for'; and P.1003: 'The Organisation of the International'.

the politicisation and organisation of the workers for their fight for their immediate demands in the factories. The unions were, potentially, 'schools of Communism' for the workers, enabling them to realise the class realities of the industrial world, the fundamental irreconcilability of the class interests of labour and capital, and the consequent necessity of class struggle and working class discipline. The second function of the unions was to extend this awareness and activity into the field of politics, and to prepare the working class for its eventual 'vanguard' role, in alliance with the peasantry and the revolutionary sections of the 'petty-bourgeoisie', in the anti-imperialist struggle. Trade unions introduced the workers 'in the best possible manner' to the underlying realities of politics, 'i.e. the class aspect', and thus to the political struggle for state power led by the revolutionary party.⁷ Sometimes the unions could become direct instruments in this wider struggle.

Based on this theory, the communists' trade union strategy was accordingly two-fold - they were to promote the political education and organisation of the workers for action at both the industrial and political levels.

We must use them to the fullest extent as a means of educating the members, and as a recruiting ground for the party (they are the most desirable type of members). And we must assume the leadership in action, even of the most partial kind, as a preparation for action on the whole front. 8

7. MCCC, p.1981: op. cit.

8. ibid.

To promote these strategic goals in the most effective manner the WPP decided on a combination of organisational forms. Contrary to the existing Indian practice of unions being 'organisations of leaders', divorced from the mass of the workers, the WPP's trade unionism was to be a 'natural organisation of the masses'. It was to be organised 'from the bottom upwards', 'taking the social life of the masses, their real aspirations, as a starting point, and encouraging them to unite in groups according to their real interests in society'.⁹ This form of organisation, the WPP believed, developed 'a unity of purpose ... out of their natural differences in life and occupation', under/^{mining}'trivial and largely imaginary' divisions such as communalism.¹⁰ Accordingly, the mass membership of the unions was to be organised into factory committees and branch committees. Organised at these levels the workers would have the means to collectively formulate their demands and to assert them against both the existing reformist union leaderships and the employers. These committees would also bring new strength to the unions where it was most needed.

The mass committees were to be integrated with central trade union structures based on the principle of industrial unionism - i.e., one union only for each industry. This principle was adopted in preference to alternative forms such as craft unionism, and in opposition to the growing tendency in

9. MCCC, P.1003: op. cit.

10. MCCC, P.1013: op. cit.

the bigger industries to form rival unions.¹¹ Individual unions were to be affiliated to federations at the local, provincial, national and international levels. This would maximise the bargaining strength of the Indian workers as a whole as well as assisting the formation of a unified national working class. Unions and federations were also to be affiliated to political organisations at each level to politicise the trade union movement, bring a 'mass character' to nationalist organisations, and mutually reinforce the strength of the unions and nationalist politics.

The communists would seek to enter existing unions and federations as 'fractions', or where industries were not unionised, to establish new unions - 'we are faced with the task for being not merely the agitators and galvanisers, but the originators, almost, of the movement'.¹² At first, work within the unions and federations would be primarily agitational and propagandist. Clearly defined programs of demands were to

11. Both forms were rejected on the grounds that they created within union organisation a division, overlapping and resulting weakening that could be avoided in industrial unionism. Unions covering more than one industry were rejected because they were too generalised to represent adequately the specific needs of each industry. Rival unions, which had tended to develop from the mid-1920s, were particularly vigorously opposed. The textile industry had several unions, and both of the railways had two competing organisations. (See, eg. RCLI, Vol. I(1), p.106.) None of these were clearly differentiated ideologically. But as political rivalries became more intense in the late 1920s, this form of union rivalry developed also. Multiple trade unionism was facilitated by the social fragmentation of the workforce, and it became more possible with the growing unrest in the late 1920s. However the communists in this period (in contrast to the next), with few exceptions, avoided establishing new unions and sought to amalgamate those which existed. They adhered conscientiously to the principle of 'one union for each industry'.

12. MCCC, P.1982: op. cit.

be drawn up 'for organising and fighting purposes' in the factories, unions, and the National Congress. The programs of immediate economic, organisational and political demands were to be based on a careful survey of the workers' expressed grievances, and set within a Marxist ideological perspective.¹³ They would be used to promote an awareness of common class interests and the tactics and organisational forms of united class action. Finally, the 'leading elements' of the working class were to be brought into the party, which would become the hegemonic leadership of the workers.

Great importance was attached to the work methods of the cadres. They were to be constantly aware that the most important goal of their activity was the activation of the workers themselves. They were not to seek simply to replace the existing 'reformist' leaderships by 'militant' leaderships. Rather, they were to transform the whole structure of trade unionism in India by creating leadership from within the working class itself. An important part of this process was the 'proletarianisation' of the middle class party members - they were to 'sincerely adopt a working class political outlook'.¹⁴ The cadres were to function as members of a

13. Examples of the programs which were developed are: MCCC, P.720: 'Programme of Immediate Demands'; and 'Programme of the WPP' in MCCC, P.1013: op.cit. The demands were based on the conditions and rights currently enjoyed by the European working class, and incorporated the notion of a minimum 'living wage' set at Rs. 30 per month.

14. MCCC, P.1013: op. cit.

disciplined party, adhering to agreed procedures and goals and reporting regularly on their activity, and not as undisciplined individuals.¹⁵ Finally, the communist 'fractions' were to operate openly within the unions:

The members should never hide their Party membership, nor take any precautions to hide fraction work. Though this should not be advertised ... it should be always justifiable ... and should never have any doubtful motives¹⁶

This strategy was a total challenge to the community forms of organisation and leadership which were dominant among the industrial working class in India, and to the existing reformist unions which were superimposed upon them. The new unionism required the transformation of all of these modes. Four overlapping, though distinct phases were involved in this transformation: the first would lead to the communists' becoming influential as a disciplined and clearly differentiated group, within the existing structure of working class organisation; the second to their recognition by the majority of an industry's workforce as the main union leadership within this structure; the third to the workers' joining the union en masse, and providing much of the leadership at both the base and apex of a radically new, class-based structure led by the communists;

15. A great deal of emphasis was given to the need to introduce regular and accountable procedures into Indian trade unionism. For Spratt's very critical observations on existing practices, see: MCCC, P.2328: Spratt to C.P.Dutt, 18/1/27; MCCC, P.1956: Spratt to R. Page Arnott, 31/3/27.

16. MCCC, P.1982: op. cit.

and the fourth to this new union structure being integrated with the party through a covert political cadre system, consisting of both workers and middle class communists, established throughout the workforce. The magnitude of the task which lay ahead was increased by the negligible resources and influence, and the essentially 'elitist' consciousness, with which the communists - 'the originators, almost, of the movement' - began.

The first two phases, leading to the WPP's becoming the dominant working class leadership, required first a temporary alliance with its much stronger rivals for working class hegemony, the jobbers and the reformist union leaders, and then their neutralisation. As Newman has shown in his detailed study of the development of labour organisation in the textile industry, the formation of a mass trade union 'could only be the result of the elimination of the jobbers or their incorporation into a wider form of organisation'.¹⁷ This was the precondition for the communists' subsequently gaining direct leadership of the workers rather than merely an indirect influence over them, mediated through the jobbers. And this form of direct leadership was the prerequisite for decisively outstripping the communists' reformist rivals in the union movement.

As neither the employers nor the government was prepared to countenance the elimination of the jobbers¹⁸

17. Newman, op. cit., p. 345.

18. See for example the Bombay Government's comments on the jobber system in RCLI, Vol.I(1), pp. 9-10.

they would have to be incorporated, at least temporarily; and incorporation 'depended upon circumstances which would unify the millhands and drive the jobbers into an alliance with the unionists'.¹⁹ This required a sharp and generalised discontent with management, throughout the industry, among both the workers and the jobbers. Further, it would have to be of such a character, and of sufficient dimensions, for the jobbers to perceive an alliance with the communists, rather than the reformists, as the most fruitful method of countering the millowners. The available evidence suggests that, given the pervasiveness of the jobber system and its equivalents, the requirements for communist success identified by Newman for the mill industry applied in most of Bombay's industries.²⁰ Thus success in gaining the leadership of the industrial working class depended not only on the communists' skills in applying their trade union strategy, but also on the development of these particularly favourable 'objective conditions'.

Success in the third and fourth phases - bringing workers into positions of leadership within class-based mass unions, and into the party - required the prior political neutralisation of the jobbers and reformist unionists. Until

19. Newman, *op. cit.*, p.345

20. See *RCLI*, Vol. I(1), pp.9-10 for the general role of jobbers in Bombay industry, and Vol. VIII(1), ps. 5, 11, 14 and 193, for recruitment and supervisory methods in the railways. On the railways there appears not to have been a formal jobber system. Foremen and recruitment officers undertook these functions. Nevertheless, like the jobbers, these officers held a great deal of power over the men, served as indispensable intermediaries with management, and were liable to engage in corrupt practices at the labourers' expense. Though their direct hold over the workers was probably not as powerful as that of the jobbers, their role was analagous.

that was achieved the communists would not have the necessary free contact with the workers. Nor would there be sufficient political 'space' within which the workers could assert their own leadership and institutionalise, through new forms of organisation at the factory level, a relative autonomy from the jobbers, factory managements, and 'outsider' trade union leaderships.

However these external factors were not the only constraints upon a communist-promoted development of leadership from within the labour force. The low cultural level of the working class, characterised by its widespread illiteracy, was a very real barrier. This meant, for instance, that the workers would be dependent for the foreseeable future upon English speaking outsiders for mediation between themselves and the wider political world. The wide cultural gap between the workers and the communist outsiders was another serious obstacle, initially at least. Finally, though not as extreme as in Bengal, the labour force's deeply ingrained, particularistic community consciousness, and its low level of political confidence, inhibited the development of class organisation and working class participation in its own leadership. This consciousness was neither 'trivial' nor 'largely imaginary'. Community consciousness was closely related to the functional role of the community net-works in the workers' lives, and the lack of political confidence to very real features of their daily experience, such as victimisation of activist 'trouble-makers'. Overcoming these inter-related external and internal constraints

to the third and fourth phases of the communists' strategy also depended, therefore, on propitious 'objective conditions'. Only a fundamental dislocation of the system could rupture the existing web and provide the opportunities and motivations necessary for the creation of the new order.

The conditions in the crucial textile industry in this period did favour the communists' strategy at the expense of the reformists. The millowners' attempted to offset their declining profits by introducing major changes in the production process, and in the relations between management and labour. This antagonised both the millhands and the jobbers.²¹ Rationalisation of the technical organisation of the mills, wage cuts and retrenchments, ensured the militant opposition of the workers. The millowners' announced intention to standardise wages, and working conditions and procedures, aroused the hostility of the jobbers, for standardisation encroached directly upon the traditional functions and benefits of the jobber's position. The opposition of both groups was particularly intense because the changes led to much more than economic disadvantage. The millowners' policies, if implemented, would very rapidly transform the social relations of the industry from the relatively informal basis on which it had hitherto existed, to a more impersonal and regularised system; the workforce was being wrenched,

21. See Newman, *op. cit.*, pp.264-71, for a concise summary of the owners' schemes and their implications for the millhands and jobbers.

involuntarily, from tradition, into the unknown world of modern capitalist industrial organisation.

This situation provided virtually no scope for the moderate concessions upon which the viability of reformist trade unionism depended.²² This form of unionism was based on the ideology of the fundamental unity of interests between labour and capital, and of the 'independent' stance of the state. The reformists believed that the proper rôle of trade unions was to maintain a fair balance between the legitimate interests of the employers and the employed. They saw themselves as intermediaries, not as labour's 'vanguard'. Because they accepted that capitalism was not inherently exploitative they limited their efforts to winning economic concessions and more congenial conditions for the workers and resisting 'aberrant', 'unjust' exactions by the owners. When the employers proved impervious to their efforts at the negotiating table they called upon the state to intervene as an impartial arbiter. They sought to avoid strikes at almost all costs. They eschewed the 'importing' of 'politics' into trade union activity, particularly the politics based on the ideology, diametrically opposed to theirs, of the inherent antagonism of capital and labour. The reformists were familiar with the negotiating table, but not with the mechanics of militant mass mobilisation against the employers. Their strategy could produce results only if management was

22. See, eg., the BTLU's complaints in RCLI, Vol.I(1), pp.353-4.

prepared to concede, or the state to intervene to assure this result, without the application of hostile organised mass sanctions by a politicised working class.

The reformists, and particularly N.M. Joshi, had a fair record in securing such results in the first half of the 1920s, and an unblemished record of honesty and humanitarian, if somewhat patronising concern for the interests of the workers. But in the late 1920s the mill-owners, because of the severity of their crisis, were not prepared to volunteer concessions as they had earlier. Nor was the state prepared, for some time, to intervene; apart from its awareness of the economic constraints upon the mill-owners, and the absence at that point of any legal machinery for either compulsory arbitration or the suppression of 'political' trade unionism, it did not anticipate any serious 'law and order' problems arising from the situation.²³ In these conditions there were no bases for the winning of concessions through a reformist strategy or, in the short-term at least, for the elimination of a politically inspired trade unionism which stayed within the boundaries of the existing law. Nor, in these conditions, was the reformists' ideology likely to inspire confidence among the beleaguered workers. Here was an ideal opportunity for the exponents of the ideology of class struggle to demonstrate their relevance to the Bombay millworkers and, through them, to the increasingly discontented working class of the area in general.

23. The changing attitudes of the provincial, central and metropolitan administrations towards the situation is examined in Chapter 5.

The First Phase

At the point at which the WPP was drawing up its trade union policy the Bombay communists were little more than a socialist faction within the city's Congress Committee. The party's only significant point of contact with the working class was Joglekar's role as one of the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal's advisors. Further, the communists faced established reformist unions in the textile industry and on the GIP and BB & CI railways, Bombay's three major concentrations of labour. Most of the remaining labour force remained unorganised.

A year later the communists were in quite a different position. They exerted much more influence on the GKM and, in association with this union, had participated for the first time in a strike. Joglekar was on the executive of the important GIP Railwaymen's Union (GIPRU) and Bradley, the British communist who had arrived in September 1927, sat on the executive of the BB & CI Railway Employees' Union (BB & CIREU). The WPP had formed several unions among previously unorganised workers - the Municipal Workmen's Union, of which Nimbkar became the Secretary, the Tramwaymen's Union under Dange, Mirajkar had formed a union from the different branches of the dock workers, and Joglekar a Press Workers' Union. Finally, several of the WPP activists sat on the executive of a newly formed local federation called the Bombay Trades Council, and on the executive and a sub-committee of the AITUC.²⁴

24. RCLI, Vol.I(1), pp.104-13; MCCC, P.826: Bombay WPP's Annual Report, Mar.1928; P.1344: (WPP Minute Book), Trade Union Leaders' Report, 1/4/28.

The party had also organised an impressive mass working class demonstration against the arrival of the Simon Commission in February 1928. The WPP, in the first year of its existence, had taken the first step towards becoming the major working class leadership in Bombay.

This advance was won through the dual tactics of entering existing unions or, where none existed, establishing new unions, while simultaneously addressing themselves directly to the mass of the workers. Both tactics were facilitated by a somewhat unlikely alliance with a formerly moderate trade unionist, the Parsi S.H. Jhabvala. Jhabvala was a curious figure. A 'professional outsider' union leader par excellence, he proudly proclaimed himself 'the father of fifty trade unions'. He held more union offices than any other leader, and in 1927 was on the executives of some twenty unions or federations. Something of an eccentric, he was capable of erratic emotional and ideological changes - 'a queer, dreamy but energetic person' was Spratt's description.²⁵ Jhabvala decided that he stood to gain from an alliance with these radical aspirants to working class leadership. In the space of a few months he changed the ideological content of his public pronouncements to a militant anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, joined the WPP, and began introducing the communists to his working class constituencies and to local and national trade unionism. The alliance proved to be unstable. Jhabvala

25. Spratt, Blowing Up India, p.36; see also RCLI, Vol.I(1) p.112, and Newman, op. cit., pp.221-2, for accounts of Jhabvala's unionism.

was disinclined to accept the dictates of party discipline or the implications of his new ideology and, by October of the following year, tensions were severe.²⁶ By the end of 1928 Jhabvala had resigned, was engaging in public conflict with the party, and had begun an open ideological retreat.²⁷

Though the alliance was unstable and introduced later problems for the party it proved to be of great immediate value. Apart from the communists' independent influence on the GKM it was primarily this contingency which enabled them to take their first step.²⁸ It was also Jhabvala's influence which enabled Spratt and five other party members to attend the Seventh AITUC session at Delhi in March 1927, even though, not being union officials, they had no formal right to attend as delegates.²⁹ This was the

26. MCCC, P.1344: op. cit., 21/10/28 & 15/11/28.

27. ibid., 15/11/28, 15/1/29 & 3/2/29; MCCC, P.421: Ghatte to M. Ahmad, 11/11/28; Kranti, 13/1/29 & 20/1/29. Jhabvala's political change of heart did not, however, save him from the Meerut Case. During the case his ideological retreat continued, and his eccentricity remained undimmed. He sought to convince the Magistrate of his 'hermetic temperament' and 'true Christ-like spirit' and of his consequent abhorrence of militance. However, despite his political liabilities for the communists, Jhabvala's eccentricities did provide them with some welcome entertainment during a protracted and exceedingly boring trial. H.L. Hutchinson, Conspiracy at Meerut, (London, 1935), pp.95-6.

28. MCCC, P.2328(P.2): Spratt to C.P. Dutt, 14/6/27; RCLI, Vol.I(1), p.112.

29. MCCC, P.1955: Spratt to R. Page Arnott, 10/3/27; Spratt, Blowing Up India, p.37.

beginning of the communists' later advance within the AITUC.³⁰

From these local union bases the communists began their 'agit-prop' activity among the workers around their programs of demands and the new ideology of 'Workers' Raj'. They made themselves accessible to the labourers at the workplace,³¹ organised public meetings and demonstrations, attended popular cultural functions, and attempted to reach the workers through the pages of their new weekly vernacular newspaper, Kranti (Revolution).

The party, with Jhabvala's assistance, established the nucleus of a working class base among the labourers at the Municipal workshops.³² It decided to use this base for its first attempt to organise a mass rally - the first celebration of May Day in Bombay and the communists' first public demonstration of their presence.³³ They began a march, complete with red flags, banners and a band, from the

30. The communists' work in the AITUC will be looked at in the following chapter. Here we may note that their growing influence in the AITUC did not significantly benefit their mass work.

31. eg. see Kranti, 9/7/27 (MCCC, p.909-T), for an account of a typical meeting between WPP activists and workers in the Municipal workshops to formulate a list of grievances. See also MCCC, P.2328; op. cit.; and P.1010: Mirajkar to Spratt, 21/8/27.

32. Recruitment at the workshops was undertaken by the mechanical engineer, not directly by jobbers or foremen. (RCLI, I(1), p.567). This reduction of the jobbers' hold over the workers may have facilitated this early communist success.

33. The following account of May Day is based on: H. Poll, 32/1927: Bombay FR1 May 1927; Spratt, 'The Indian Trade Union Movement', LM, V.9(10), Oct. 1927, pp.616-17; and S.S. Mirajkar, Interview, Bombay, 19 & 22/8/74.

workshops through the main mill area, timing it to coincide with the change of shift in the mills. Four hundred municipal workers, with Spratt and the other activists at their head, emerged from the mills with over 2,000 enthusiastic millhands, attracted by the spectacle, in procession. 'Until then the workers had not seen such an organised procession' Mirajkar, one of the organisers, later recalled.³⁴ Nor, presumably, had they previously seen a European participate in this way in their activities.

'There had been textile strikes, but not such an organised march-past. They joined us'.³⁵ The procession ended with a mass meeting presided over by N.M. Joshi, the leading trade union moderate, who had agreed to co-operate. Speeches and pamphlets³⁶ explained the significance of May Day, condemned the Trade Disputes Bill, presented a program of workers' demands, and called on the workers to join unions for their own protection. The communists could describe the results as 'quite successful', while noting that although the WPP leaders and the idea of working class solidarity had been honoured in the workers' 'continual chant of "ki jai's"', Gandhi had been, 'unfortunately, the chief hero celebrated in this way'.³⁷

34. Mirajkar, Interview.

35. ibid.

36. eg. MCCC P.1985: a pamphlet titled 'The Meaning of May Day'.

37. MCCC, P.1974: Spratt to R. Page Arnott, 6/5/27.

It was apparent to the leaders that the concept of 'Workers' Raj' was as yet imperfectly understood.

Nine months later, on the occasion of the arrival of the Simon Commission on February 3, the party organised another, but more impressive working class demonstration. Once again, it used its current 'stronghold', the Municipal workshop employees, as its base, and relied upon Jhabvala's working class contacts to facilitate the organisation of a one-day strike.³⁸ The planned working class action was projected as being 'not so much against the Commission, as a preparation for the day when the organised workers shall by direct action win Swaraj for India and themselves'.³⁹ Labour was participating in the demonstration as an 'independent force', not as a mere adjunct to 'bourgeois nationalism'. After extensive preparations in the industrial area of the city in the preceding weeks some 25,000 to 30,000 Municipal, textile and railway workshop workers struck work and marched from Parel to the anti-Simon rally, contributing more than half of the crowd at the first of the series of demonstrations against the Commission throughout India.⁴⁰ The working class hartal was an index of both the progress which the communists had made towards finding and mobilising a working class base and the remaining limits to their access to the workers. The

38. MCCC, P.826: op. cit.

39. MCCC, P.548(5): a collection of WPP letters to the Bombay press.

40. MCCC, P.544(1): WPP notes of a planning meeting; MCCC, P.2096(P); Spratt to M. Ahmad, 16/1/28; IQR, 1928, Vol.1, p.2; NAI, H. Poll, 18/XVI/1928: BCP to G of Bom. 17/8/28, reporting that the hartal's success was due mainly to the WPP's working class mobilisation.

numbers involved in the Simon demonstration - a ten-fold increase on the May Day rally - and the explicitly political subject, indicate the former; the continuing reliance upon Jhabvala and his contacts the latter.

The WPP leaders began to participate in the workers' cultural life. Joglekar, for instance, frequently addressed gatherings for traditional festivals and tamashas. In the same month as the May Day procession a similar function was organised by the GKM to celebrate the tercentenary of Shivaji's birth. Joglekar, Spratt and others participated, calling on an audience which had gathered to watch a play on Shivaji's life to follow his example by fighting for Swaraj, but with 'the sword of the general strike'.⁴¹ This tentative experiment in synthesising traditional Maratha symbolism with the themes of nationalist and, implicitly, class struggle, was to be developed and extended in the following year.⁴²

At this stage the experiment in communicating Marxist ideology to the workers remained very uncertain. This is apparent in the ideological modes employed in Kranti

41. Newman, op. cit., p.225.

42. This early experimentation by one group of 'young Tilakites' with the Shivaji tradition, as a possible vehicle of the notion of working class participation in the nationalist struggle, can be viewed as continuous with Tilak's earlier efforts to mobilise Bombay's industrial labour. The communists had not yet developed from the Shivaji symbolism an unambiguous conception of class struggle. Cf. Cashman, op. cit., Chapters VIII & IX, (pp.172-217).

in 1927. Kranti's format was based on the principles of 'agitational journalism' decided upon at the same time as the party was drawing up its overall policy. It was intended that national and international items and labour and political news be presented together, within a simplified Marxist perspective, in such a way as to 'convey the impression that the fight is going on in a militant manner', and that 'they are the same fight'.⁴³ In practice, international events predominated, and although some pieces managed to find a level that may have been intelligible to the workers, the overall impression is one of irresolution in choosing the appropriate level of abstraction.⁴⁴ This reflected the communists' still limited contact with the cultural world of the workers,⁴⁵ and their doubt about the wisdom of expending the party's meagre

43. MCCC, P.1013: op. cit.

44. See the selection of Kranti articles in MCCC, P.1375-T.

45. This is evident from the following selection from an article on the Sacco-Vanzetti trial in the USA. While it demonstrates an imaginative skill in explaining an international issue in familiar terms and in developing domestic implications from it, it also reveals the communists' continuing pre-conception that community differences were 'trivial and largely imaginary' for a supposedly completely 'proletarianised' labourforce.

... a Purbhaiya of Banaras, (or) a Punjabi of Lahore has to set aside his manners and customs after beginning work as a labourer in Bombay and he belongs to no province ... his religion and his language consists in strikes, ... (and) the owner who squeezes him out is his God; the condition of labourers in America is like this. In such a cosmopolitan flood Sacco and Vanzetti ... (came) from Italy to America for the sake of making a living. ; from Kranti, 27/8/27.

resources, at that stage, on a vernacular organ for the workers rather than an English language weekly directed at an educated audience.⁴⁶ No attempts were made to mould Marxist revolutionary content with popular forms, such as poems and songs, which could then be transmitted orally to increase the ideological impact upon a predominantly illiterate audience. Kranti was eventually suspended towards the end of the year after reaching the discouraging circulation figure of only 400, with most being distributed free.⁴⁷

Although Kranti was suspended another newspaper directed at a working class audience had, under communist influence, begun partially to fulfil the same ideological purpose. Through 1926 and 1927 the GKM's vernacular organ Kamkari progressively introduced Marxist concepts. In April 1927, for example, it described the state as essentially an instrument of the ruling classes designed to facilitate their exploitation of the masses, and declared communism to be the goal of the workers.⁴⁸ This ideological progression, undoubtedly due in large part to Joglekar's influence, indicated a growing militance among the working class activists who constituted the union's managing committee.

46. MCCC, P.1011: Ghate to Spratt, 22/8/27; and MCCC, P.1009: Spratt to C.P. Dutt, 4/9/27.

47. BCP, 1036/B/IV/1935: report, 17/10/27; and MCCC, P.1010; Mirajkar to Spratt, 21/8/27.

48. Newman, op. cit., p.224-5

This emerging working class radicalism was crystallised further during the GKM's participation in two strikes in the Sassoon mill group, in August 1927 and January 1928, and was directed subsequently towards the democratisation of the union. In March the managing committee, dissatisfied with Mayekar's conduct of the union's affairs and particularly his dominating style, misuse of funds, and compromising policy during the strikes, expelled him from his position as secretary. The result was 'the rise of ordinary millhands to positions of real responsibility in the union'.⁴⁹ From this point militant workers, such as the weaver A.A. Alve and the fitter G.R. Kasle, were to be the leaders of the union. This also provided a firmer basis for a WPP-GKM alliance. Alve's joining the party in late March, at the time of Mayekar's expulsion from office, symbolised the growing strength of this link.⁵⁰ Two other GKM militants, Kasle and K.A. Desai, joined later in the year.⁵¹ Having reinforced its alliance with the GKM leaders it only remained for the communists to forge direct contacts with the ordinary workers. This possibility, too, was enhanced by the rise of the new GKM

49. ibid., p.236. See also pp.225-37 for an account of these two strikes and the associated developments in the GKM.

50. MCCC, P.1344: op. cit., 25/3/28.

51. ibid., 22/8/28 & 7/12/28.

leadership, which was more responsive to the sentiments of the workers than had been Mayekar.

The Sassoon mill conflicts also provided the communists with invaluable practical experience. This was their first opportunity to participate in strike activity. Moreover, the issue which sparked these strikes - rationalisation - was the same as that which led to the 1928 general strike. The communists, through participation in a joint strike committee and negotiations to settle the conflict, came into contact for the first time with the technological and social complexities of the industry, the rationalisation issue, and the conduct of a strike. Dange, mystified, began a detailed private study of these issues.⁵² This was to prove invaluable during the general strike.

The strikes also led to increases in the organisational strength of both the GKM and the WPP. This was another invaluable preparation for the general strike. The union was able to expand its organisation through the affected mills during the course of the conflict. This extension of its influence, combined with the democratisation and radicalisation of the managing committee, placed the GKM in a much better position to initiate and organise future strike activity, rather than simply responding to spontaneous strike outbreaks as previously. The strength of the WPP was increased because the Sassoon strikes brought it into textile

52. Newman, op. cit., ps.232 & 237.

unionism as a party for the first time. Until the second strike Joglekar had remained almost the sole point of contact between the WPP and the GKM, and he had acted more as an individual, often in conflict with the party, than as a party representative.⁵³ The party's dissatisfaction with Joglekar's conduct led to increased concern for party discipline, and the WPP participated more collectively, if still imperfectly so, in the January strike and subsequently.

When, at its first annual conference in March 1928, the WPP assessed the progress of its working class program during its first year, it was sufficiently satisfied to reconfirm the general principles and tactics it had established at the beginning of 1927.⁵⁴ It had effectively implemented the first phase of its strategy. With its membership in several trade unions, including the important railway unions, its demonstrated capacity to mobilise large numbers of workers for political goals and, most importantly, the developing strength of its alliance with the GKM, the Bombay WPP was in a promising position to benefit from the approaching convulsion in the textile industry. The strikes in the Sassoon mills against the first attempts to introduce rationalisation had

53. MCCC, p.1010: op. cit. The conflict in this case was around the issue of industrial unionism - Joglekar resisted the WPP's efforts to amalgamate the GKM and the BTLU.

54. MCCC, p.826: op. cit.; P.831: 'Thesis on the Trade Union Question'. Nevertheless, criticisms were voiced on the issues of party discipline and worker-recruitment to the WPP.

been merely the prelude to a conflict which was to set new records in India's industrial history. The general textile mill strike was to absorb most of the party's energies in the following six months.

The Textile General Strike of 1928 : the Second Phase.

The communists contributed only indirectly to the launching of the general strike in late April 1928.⁵⁵ It was a direct and spontaneous consequence of the generalised and accelerated introduction of the millowners' new economy measures in the early months of 1928. In the final fortnight of April separate strike protests within individual mills or departments became endemic throughout the industry. Outrage at a fatal police firing on a strikers' demonstration completed the process and by the end of the month all but a few outlying mills had shut down. At this point the pattern of the conflict was directly continuous with the general strikes in 1919-20 and 1924-25 - it was initiated and established by the millhands,

55. The following account of the relevant features of the 1928 textile general strike is based on Newman's comprehensive study in op. cit., Chapter VIII, pp.238-90. I am using his study to establish the most significant features of the process of ideological and organisational transition within the workforce during the strike, and the communists' role in these changes. I am not attempting a detailed history of the strike. Besides Newman's work, summary accounts of the conflict appear in RCLI, I(1), pp.122-24; Report of the Bombay Strike Enquiry Committee, (Bombay, 1929), pp.1-8; and, from the communists' perspective, in a series of articles in LM, Vols.10(7) to 10(11), (Jul. - Nov., 1928).

and it was little more than an aggregation of essentially discrete stoppages. It was not the result of the WPP's call for a general strike, nor was it an expression of class solidarity.

Nevertheless two new factors did distinguish this strike from its predecessors. The first was the systematic character of the underlying cause - the millowners' rapid introduction of policies leading to profound structural changes throughout the industry. The second was the presence from the outset of a new type of working class leadership, determined to co-ordinate the disparate individual struggles against particular managements and convert them into a unified conflict with the millowners as a whole. For both reasons the 1928 strike possessed unprecedented opportunities for creating class awareness and organisation among the millhands.

The communists were the first of the working class leaders to call for a general strike. They retained the initiative in mill unionism from this point. Even before the strike had become established the party had set out to implement its trade union policy of creating a strong and unified central union structure from the existing labour leaderships,⁵⁶

56. The GKM had special need of an alliance with the BTLU apart from the general principle of creating the strongest possible working class leadership for the confrontation with the main enemy, the millowners. Most of all it needed access to the moderates' much more substantial funds to finance the organisation of the strike, and N.M. Joshi's influence with the millowners and the government for the negotiations which eventually would become necessary. The alliance would also facilitate access to the mill areas where the BTLU was influential, thus helping to overcome the GKM's regional limits. The BTLU too, once it decided to participate in the strike, needed the GKM - for the latter reason, and because of the GKM's rapidly increasing

and an active and organised mass foundation. By the end of the year they had succeeded, largely, in achieving this goal, even though on the eve of the strike they were no more than advisers to a union with very limited resources and influence in only one district.

To create a strong central strike organisation which included themselves the communists pursued two tactics - that of gaining a firmer footing in the GKM and securing its commitment to a militant promotion of the strike, and that of bringing the BTLU into a 'united front' joint strike organisation.⁵⁷ The first advance began in early April when Joglekar, and the intransigence displayed by the millhands in a number of partial strikes at that time, persuaded the GKM's managing committee to call for a general strike and to take the initiative in forming a joint strike committee. The Joint Mill Strike Committee (JMSC) was formed in the GKM's Prabhadevi area on April 18, and as union membership was not made mandatory the 'outsider' communists were able to stand

56. Contd.

influence over the mass organisation of the strike. Ironically, two contributions from Russia (totalling Rs.35,000) to the strike funds did not lessen their dependence on the moderates, for these were received either by N.M. Joshi, or by Jhabvala after he had begun to break with the WPP: NAI, H.Poll, 10/22/1928, 18/6/1928; and 1/1928: Bombay FR1 May and September; Newman, op. cit., pp.280-81.

57. The WPP's policy of a 'united front' was ratified, after some conflict over the issue in the party, on April 29: MCCC, p.1344, op. cit., 29/4/28. This general policy subsequently became official for all WPP's in India at the Calcutta All-India WPP Conference in December 1928. The 'thesis' adopted there is the fullest available statement of the 'united front' trade union policy: MCCC, P.51: 'The Trade Union Movement - Thesis'.

for election. Bradley, Mirajkar, Nimbkar and Dange were elected to the JMSC, along with GKM activists and ordinary strikers from Prabhadevi. The party was now in a position to exert a more direct, if still very limited influence on the course of events. However this position was still very tenuous. Even the GKM leadership, concerned about the militance of the communists' public speeches, initially gave only qualified support to its allies in the JMSC. But by mid-May, when it had become clear that the communists had correctly gauged the mood of the workers and had predicted the course of events, the managing committee dropped its caution by expanding its advisory committee and bringing in four more communists. Dange, Mirajkar, Nimbkar, Ghate, Joglekar and Bradley now sat on this committee.

These gains were consolidated in late May. On May 21 Mayekar, the deposed secretary of the GKM, made a last-ditch attempt to recover his influence by registering a small regional branch of the GKM as the official Girni Kamgar Mahamandal, with himself as its secretary. The main branch of the union in Prabhadevi responded to this appropriation of its name by forming a new union, the Girni Kamgar Union (GKU), with a constitution allowing outsiders to become union members. The constitutional change was a major break with the union's past, and it provided the communists with their first opportunity to become bona fide officials in an existing union. It was a measure of the level of good faith that they had won. This was confirmed at the public meeting on May 22 at which the new union was formed, when communists were elected as five of the

eleven officers, while another was elected to the managing committee.⁵⁸ The new union was registered on May 23 with an initial membership of 174. The prolonged efforts of the communists to break down the traditional barriers of distrust of outsiders, and to become union members in their own rights, had finally been rewarded. Even so an implicit warning to the communists was served at the May 22 meeting. A significant number of GKM members expressed their doubts about the wisdom of allowing the new outsiders to become members. This hesitation was overcome only after Alve 'managed to convince [them] ... that the communist outsiders were "selfless unionists" and Congressmen, necessary to the mill-hands because of their administrative abilities and knowledge of English'.⁵⁹ The communists were now, in effect, on probation.

The second tactic - that of bringing the BTLU into the strike organisation - was effected in two stages. The JMSC, before the strike had become general, invited the BTLU leadership to join. The moderates, who desired neither a

58. The five were: Bradley and Nimbkar as two of the four Vice-presidents (Jhabvala was third), Dange as Secretary, Joglekar as one of the three Assistant Secretaries, Ghate as one of two Joint Treasurers, Mirajkar, along with Pendse, was elected to the twelve-man Managing Committee. Alve was elected as President of the union: MCCC, P.958-T: Minute Book of the GKU.

59. Newman, op. cit., p.256.

general strike nor an alliance with the militants, declined. But once the strike had become a fact the moderates had little choice. With their own followers on strike they were forced to participate and to seek as favourable a settlement as possible. Both sides now shared the same immediate goal. At the end of April a second Joint Mill Strike Committee (JMSC) was constituted from ten millhands and five outsiders nominated by each union. Four of the GKM's outsiders - Dange, Nimbkar, Mirajkar and Bradley - were communists, and the fifth was Jhabvala.

The JMSC immediately set about drawing up a list of demands as a basis for possible negotiations with the owners. The demands were based on the workers' specific grievances. But it was also stated that the JMSC was prepared to consider particular rationalisation proposals on their merits and the committee advocated the principle of standardisation of wages and working conditions throughout the industry, with wages fixed at the levels of 1925. The JMSC also appointed three sub-committees to undertake negotiations, organise the picketing of mills, the exodus of strikers to their villages, and the distribution of relief to the strikers.⁶⁰ The JMSC

60. These three functions were crucial to the success of the strike. Picketing was necessary to discourage strike-breaking but it also served the very useful psychological role for the strikers of 'dramatising their hostility to the owners' (*ibid.*, p.275). The exodus of a large number of strikers was necessary to limit relief expenditure. It was made possible because of the large number of workers from agriculturalist families relatively close to the city, and according to the government's calculations some 50,000 left Bombay for their villages. (NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928). More must have left in later stages because an average of only 24,000 were receiving relief during the second half of the strike, when dependence on relief must have become

remained the central organisation throughout the strike's duration.⁶¹ Its organisational connection with the strikers was exercised through the relief and picketing sub-committees. These mass contacts were further extended when the jobbers gave their full support to the strike organisers from early July, soon after the Millowners' Association had published their Standardisation Scheme.

Another important function of the mass committees was to reduce the possibility of communal conflict. The GKU issued special appeals to the North Indian strikers to sustain their participation when signs that they were wavering appeared in May. Specific appeals were also directed at the untouchables, for Ambedkar's Depressed Classes Association had recently begun a campaign against the exclusion of Untouchables from the higher paid positions by the caste workers and the Muslims. Both the GKU and the BTLU also felt it necessary to address the Muslim strikers in Madanpura regularly to ensure their support. But, overall, the JMSC's careful concern to anticipate and contain conflict between the communities, and the level of commitment of all groups of workers to the strike, were sufficient to maintain its solidarity. Ambedkar and the Untouchable workers

60. Contd.

fairly general (Newman, *op. cit.*, pps.278-9). Although the strikers had to depend to a large degree on traditional sources of credit during the strike, the relief system did much to lessen the debt burden and the suffering, and thus to maintain the strike for a much longer period than any previous general strike.

61. In line with the policy of temporary alliance for the duration of the strike both unions refrained from separate activity outside of the JMSC. There was no competitive recruitment campaigning until the strike's termination.

did decide to support the JMSC, and the Muslims also continued their participation. Although some tension developed between the relief committee, which was manned mainly by Maratha volunteers, and both the Untouchables and the Muslims, who had less access to alternative income,⁶² this did not become serious.

The most important immediate task for the JMSC was mass organisation to consolidate the strike, for attempts to negotiate favourable terms with the millowners would be pointless until this was achieved. The militants took the lead in this field, and it was their success at this level which was the basis for their later rise to almost unchallenged leadership of the textile workers. They dominated the picketing and relief activity from the beginning, partly because of the moderates' diffidence about this type of work. This placed them in direct contact with the ordinary strikers and gained the communists far more recognition and good will than their rival outsiders, the moderates. Because of this strategic location it was also the militants who gained most directly from the contacts and communication networks which the incorporated jobbers brought to the strike organisation. The GKU leaders consolidated their mass influence through their general accessibility to the workers, their organisation of and participation in a constant round of mass meetings designed to politically educate and involve the strikers, their willingness to share

62. Neither the Muslims nor the Untouchables had agricultural incomes to fall back upon, the lower wages of the Untouchables meant lower financial reserves and credit worthiness with the moneylenders, and the Muslims' wives, being in pardah, could not look for alternative casual work. These groups were therefore the most dependent on relief, and the main recipients of the doles.

the strikers' situation by, for example, courting arrest, and through their printed strike news and propaganda. The WPP revived Kranti as a bi-weekly in late-June and it quickly became the main printed source of strike news, with a circulation exceeding 2,000. Selling at a pice, by September it was returning a monthly surplus of Rs.50, thus becoming the first self-supporting Indian communist newspaper.⁶³

The consolidation of the mass base of the strike reinforced the bargaining position of the JMSC vis a vis the millowners and, at the same time, the position of the militants within the negotiations sub-committee. For both reasons the JMSC became more determined to resist the millowners' new plans, and more capable of mobilising sufficient force to bring them to the negotiating table.⁶⁴ The first significant result of these sanctions was the Millowners' Association's reluctant publication of their Standardisation Scheme. This was the first time that the owners, as a group, had produced a comprehensive scheme and made it public. In addition to mobilising the jobbers' support for the strike, the publication of the scheme allowed the strikers to see much more clearly the systematic nature of the measures they had struck against and the class character of their opposition. This new awareness did much to consolidate the strike.

63. MCCC, P.526(39): Spratt's notes of an inter-provincial WPP conference, Bombay, 6/9/28. Dange became the editor, assisted by Mirajkar and Pendse. As Indian newspapers were generally widely circulated, and because Kranti's content was no doubt transmitted widely to the illiterate, the paper's audience would have been much more than its circulation figure.

64. The details of the negotiations during and after the strike are reproduced in the Report of the Bombay Strike Enquiry Committee, op. cit.

Periodic rounds of negotiations continued from this point. After the failure of attempts to reopen the mills on the owners' terms, and on the verge of a collapse of both the mills and the strike, a compromise settlement, which was a considerable victory for the workers,⁶⁵ was finally reached at a government-convened conference on October 4, and the mills reopened on October 6.⁶⁶ The strike had lasted more than five months, several times longer than any previous general strike, cost 22,000,000 man-days and Rs. 3½ crores in wages,⁶⁷ and demonstrated an almost unbelievable capacity to resist on the part of the millhands. As Newman has commented:⁶⁸ 'What began as an apparently suicidal gesture succeeded'.

The communists 'had gained most of all',⁶⁹ in both political influence and political education. Their later claim that 'the main policy [in the strike] was considered and decided upon by the Executive Committee' of the WPP was, from the point at which the jobbers had joined at least, essentially

65. eg. see the Government of Bombay's comment in RCLI, Vol.I(1), p.109.

66. Both sides agreed to have an independent government-nominated body, the Bombay Strike Enquiry Committee, investigate the situation. Until it gave its report wages were to be returned to the rates in operation in March 1927 except for those departments and mills which had already introduced rationalisation schemes, where wage rates were to be those applying in March 1928. Despite this acceptance of existing rationalisation schemes and the associated wage cuts, the strike was a victory, if only a defensive victory, for the workers. It had forced the owners to negotiate and finally to accept terms they had previously rejected.

67. RCLI, I(1), p.124.

68. Newman, op. cit., p.288.

69. ibid., p.289.

correct.⁷⁰ The GKU emerged from the strike with the prestige among the workers that followed from this role within a successful strike, a communication network potentially capable of superseding those of the jobbers, influence in areas where previously it had had none, organised groups of working class volunteers who could form the nucleus of a union and party cadre structure, a much more intimate knowledge of the industry and the conduct of a strike, and the recognition by the millowners which was necessary for independence from the moderate leaders in future conflicts.

The prestige of the communists in the eyes of the workers was clearly demonstrated at the mass meeting on October 5 at which Nimbkar and Mirajkar explained the terms of the compromise settlement.⁷¹ It was attended by more than 20,000 strikers, a significant proportion of those remaining in Bombay.⁷² The speakers described the terms as a victory for the workers and a defeat for the owners. The strikers had managed to defend the status quo against the attacks of their powerful enemies. Nevertheless, they continued, the settlement

70. MCCC, Joglekar's Defence Statement (which was a collective statement on behalf of the entire Meerut communist group), p.1936. Once the close WPP-GKU alliance had been established, and the GKU had become the main directive force in the mass committees of the strike, the WPP was in fact the decision-making body for this level of the strike and thus, increasingly, in the negotiations sub-committee as well. As early as the beginning of May the communists were convinced that the GKU was the undisputed leader of the strike in the eyes of the workers (MCCC, P.129: Mirajkar to Aftab Ali, 5/5/28).

71. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928, KW XI.

72. See fn.60.

was merely a defensive 'truce'. The owners' attacks would be resumed after the enquiry committee handed down its report. It was therefore essential that the millhands use the temporary reprieve to recover their strength, build a strong mass union, and collect a large reserve strike fund. Further, in order to consolidate the present gains it was imperative that the workers develop the capacity to launch an offensive strike in the future.⁷³ These themes were to be repeated constantly in the following months.

The audience acclaimed the speakers with enthusiasm. The descriptions of the strike's achievements and the tasks for the future were hailed with shouts of 'Victory to the Red Flag', 'Victory to the Girni Kamgar Union', 'Long Live the Workers' Fight', and 'Victory to the Workers' and Peasants' Party'. Red flags were, in the words of a police reporter, 'enthusiastically displayed' and, 'where they were not available, the workers even used their red turbans as flags'.⁷⁴ The meeting was followed by a 'huge' procession to the GKU office, 'where it saluted the Red Flag amidst cheers'.

The leaders had won this acclaim and confidence through their 'intense effort' during the strike.⁷⁵ The enthusiasm for the red flag at the October 5 mass meeting suggests that the WPP's ideology, also, was crucial to 'a few

73. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928, KW XI.

74. ibid.

75. RCLI, Report, p.319.

Communist leaders' being able 'to capture the imagination of the workers'.⁷⁶ The specific role of ideology thus requires more detailed investigation.

The Role of Ideology

The party devoted a great deal of attention to propaganda during and after the strike. Kranti was revived in late June after the WPP executive decided that 'the need for Party propaganda was ... urgent at this stage'.⁷⁷ During the strike it was 'actually a strike bulletin' rather than a conventional 'agit-prop' organ.⁷⁸ However, frequent ideological pieces were interspersed with the strike news, a format which was also used in the party's speeches at the daily meetings⁷⁹ and in their handbills. This intermingling of propaganda and news enhanced the process of making a Marxist ideology relevant to the workers. As in Kranti in 1927, the WPP sought to communicate an analysis of the context of the working class's condition in terms related to its everyday experience; but in 1928 the attempt was more successful. This was because of the communists' closer contact with the mill-hands' world as a result of the strike and their close collabor-

76. loc. cit.

77. MCCC, P.1344: op. cit., 24/6/28. (The fact that this was the point at which the jobbers gave full support to the strike, thus providing the leaders with new communication networks, may not have been coincidental to the WPP's sense of urgency.)

78. MCCC, P.526(39): op. cit.

79. See the police reports of these meetings in the MCCC records. Bradley considered the daily meetings to be the medium having the greatest educative effect on the strikers. (MCCC, P.2412: Bradley to J. Potter Wilson, 26/10/28). The following Kranti selections represent this oral propaganda also.

ation with workers such as Alve, as well as the much more favourable political context within which it was read in 1928. The worker-leaders also contributed to the paper. The new Kranti was much more definitely a working class paper than its predecessor.

The central concepts in the party's working class propaganda were class and class struggle, the state and revolution, and the nature of the 'Workman's Raj' of the future. The basic reality of Indian society, Kranti argued, was the class-based exploitation of the workers and the peasants:

If we ... glance around us we shall find that a struggle is going on amongst all classes. We shall find the owner class struggling against the workers for safeguarding their own interests. We find a big landlord struggling against a poor peasant. We shall find that the khot has opened his mouth wide to swallow the tenant. We shall find that the house owner is sitting thinking over how to ... get his rent enhanced. All these examples lead us to say that two classes of people with conflicting interests are always struggling against each other and that one class keeps all authority in his own hands and lords it over the other. ... This power lies in political authority.⁸⁰

This exploitation was conducted by an alliance of the Indian and British 'owners', and the political authority of the state was exercised, particularly through the police - 'the helpers of the owners' - on both their behalfs:

80. Kranti, 3/3/29, in MCCC, P.989-T. The following selections from Kranti are taken from MCCC, P.930-T, P.953-T, P.986-T, P.989-T and P.1263-T. I am quoting fairly extensively from Kranti in order to communicate the form as well as the conceptual content of the WPP's working class propaganda. Clearly the former was a crucial factor in the propaganda's effectiveness.

Both are speculators and profit makers. But the Indian owners have no guns, troops or much power. That lies in the hands of the English owners. But both of these want to squeeze the workers and to get possession of the heap of gold, earned as profits, raised on the blood of the workers. For this purpose the Indian owners have agreed to give a share of their profits ... to the English owners and they in turn took the help of the guns and troops of the English and both of them in partnership have come forward to take the life of the workers.⁸¹

These exploitative social relationships were inherent to the

'Capitalists' Raj':

... the struggle between the capitalists and the workers can never be finally settled. There is no necessity of the capitalists for the working of our society. Factories, railways etc. are worked by the labour and intellect of the labourers. But the owners exercise their authority wrongfully and themselves appropriate the profits derived therefrom and employ the workers in suffering and filth. The workers will remain poverty stricken and will not get happiness as long as the profiteering owners exercise possession ...⁸²

Only the 'Workman's Raj', based on the workers' control of their own lives, could provide a decent and dignified life for the exploited and impoverished masses:

Profiteering is given a go-bye and the Workman's Raj manufactures goods of the quality and in quantity suited to the convenience of all and supplies it to the workers. ... He establishes his own power and works the machines of capitalists their system of accounts, ... and the factories of capitalists, in the interests of the working class and ... of the country.⁸³

81. ibid., 12/8/28.

82. ibid., 3/9/29.

83. ibid., 30/8/28.

But the 'Workman's Raj' would not be volunteered to the workers. It could only be won through protracted class struggle by an alliance of the workers, peasants and 'poverty-stricken educated people' against the owners and the state, a struggle going beyond immediate economic demands and culminating in the revolutionary seizure of state power.⁸⁴ Striking for improved working conditions was only the first step, though an important one, towards this eventual goal.

... if demands are not granted by resorting to strikes the working class takes a more dangerous weapon into its hands. ... He sets aside the owner class and takes the power into his own hands and destroys Capitalism by effecting a revolution.⁸⁵

Because the struggle was necessarily protracted, Kranti stressed, strong revolutionary organisation was imperative. Immediately after the conclusion of the strike the WPP urged the workers to create 'a huge Union ... of one lakh and fifty thousand members' and to expand the 'Red Army' of volunteers established during the strike; 'Do not remain idle and be misled by this victory'.⁸⁶ But trade union organisation was not enough:

Just as fire is necessary for baking bread, and air, water and food are necessary for life, so it is necessary to have a party of real workers for strengthening the organisation of the workers and to bring into the hands of the workers the economic and political power that has been usurped by the capitalists⁸⁷

84. ibid., 23/8/28.

85. loc. cit.

86. ibid., 5/10/28.

87. ibid., 3/3/29.

The workers should therefore join the WPP 'without fear, and secure their demands and happiness by co-operating with that Party'.⁸⁸ Kranti assured its audience that the WPP would 'train up workers to become leaders and thus make preparations for the establishment of the Labour Raj'.⁸⁹ The communists would educate the workers in Marxist theory. This education was essential for two reasons: communism was both the 'creed of the workers' and the irreplaceable 'science' which guided their struggle.⁹⁰

With the workers united in their unions and through a party based on Marxism, the communists could then lead them decisively in the struggle for their immediate and long-term demands - a minimum wage of Rs.50, an eight hour day, two rooms per family, paid holidays of four days per month and one month per year, 'at least one visit to a theatre or a cinema every month' and, finally, the 'Destruction of profiteering Capitalism'. 'You demand this much ... Every Communist demands this and fights for it'.⁹¹ But tactical flexibility was required to counter the wide range of measures which would be employed by the owners and the government against their struggle: 'we must devise rules to suit the enemy's strength, ... we must gather our strength first and avoid provocation', eschewing violent responses to violent

88. ibid., 23/8/28

89. ibid., 5/10/28.

90. ibid., 23/8/28.

91. ibid., 20/8/28.

repression until the time was ripe for revolution.⁹² But throughout this changing struggle the workers should remember their 'very lofty' goal: 'continue to repeat the mantra: "Establish Labour Raj and destroy Capitalism" a thousand times every day'.⁹³

Kranti argued that the masses could expect little help from existing political organisations in India. The National Congress in its present form 'belongs to the owners ... They go a-begging before the English ... [and help] the Tatas and other owners'. The workers should therefore join the Congress: 'Bring the National Congress under your control and beat down the dominance of the owners'.⁹⁴ The workers should also be wary of those outsiders who were 'actuated by philanthropic motives' but sought to ensure that 'the workers and peasants may not be disposed to become revolutionaries and dig out capitalism root and branch'.⁹⁵ The Indian masses could, however, rely on international support from the workers and peasants of the world, and particularly from the Soviet Union. It was many times emphasised that while the BPCC had voted against providing significant financial assistance to the striking millworkers, Russian and British trade unions had contributed generously. The workers of India should therefore participate actively in this international solidarity - for example by preparing to oppose any attempts by the British capitalists and government to wage war against the Soviet Union.⁹⁶

92. ibid., 12/7/28.

96. ibid., 2/8/28.

93. ibid., 27/9/28.

94. ibid., 29/7/28

95. ibid., 3/3/29.

The party also resumed and extended its earlier experiment in synthesising Marxist ideological content with traditional cultural symbols, but this time the concept of working class struggle for its own specific interests was more developed. The following example is taken from an article by Alve in which he used the Bhagavad Gita to develop a very non-Gandhian theme.⁹⁷ The capitalists, Indian and British, he wrote, 'live in wealth and glory like that of Indra, ... become rich like Kuber, ... their wives become likewise like Rambha'. The workers, on the other hand, remained in the same pitiable condition. But, Alve warned, they were becoming more demanding. He warned the capitalists and their 'ally', the Government:

You may be proud of your wealth, you may think much of your army; but proud Ravana was fully prepared ... like you, but you must have heard what the unarmed monkeys did to him when he exceeded all bounds. The workers will strike again if necessary.

The communists' ideology began to evoke a definite working class response. In Bradley's view, the development of the 'wonderful consciousness' of the workers had been the strike's most important achievement.⁹⁸ It is clear that the strikers' concerns had not been limited to immediate economic issues and that a significant ideological shift had occurred between the May Day procession in 1927 and the strike settlement mass meeting in October 1928. There is sufficient evidence to show that in this shift a working class understanding and acceptance of the essential Marxist concepts had occurred.

97. 'The Capitalists Have Grown Fat But the Worker Is Still Starving', in Kranti, 29/1/29.

98. MCCC, P.2412(P): Bradley to J. Potter Wilson, 26/10/28.

Alve's articles demonstrate that this was the case for the leading working class elements;⁹⁹ a long narrative poem authored by two Maratha workers and published by K.R. Arsekar, one of the millworkers in the GKU's managing committee, is one indication that the new ideology had permeated even further downwards.¹⁰⁰

The poem is a remarkable document. It is in the form of an epic, and depicts the strike and the GKU's subsequent struggles as a battle between two class armies, the workers' army being led by the GKU and the party. Again, symbols from the Mahabharata are used as vehicles for the ideology of class struggle: 'Just as a mighty struggle was waged between the Kauravas and the Pandavas in the Dwapar age, in the same manner the workers fought in a terrible manner with the capitalists in Bombay. ... Just as the monkeys fought with the demons in Lanka, ... the workers struggled against capitalism in Bombay'. The Marxist concept of the inherent antagonism of capital and labour is recognisable: 'The capitalists thought of effecting a cut in the wages of the workers, ... [who] were greatly enraged [and said] what a curious justice is this that they take away what belongs to us'. So too are the

99. eg. Alve's 'How should the Workers Fight?', in Kranti, 12/7/28; and see also Alve's and Kasle's Defense Statements in the Meerut Case records.

100. MCCC, P.940-T: 'Girni Workers' Phatka (poem)', by Ganga Ram Devag and Jayaram Pandu Devag. The poem reproduced in the Meerut Case records was only one of a series, selling at ½ annas each. It was published in February 1929. Because of the rarity of working class documents I am quoting from it at some length.

concepts of the international scope of capital, and of the state: 'Owners join hands with owners, they exercise authority over the world, governments have made common cause with them, there is no end to misery'.

Great stress was placed upon both the possibility and the necessity of united working class action in class struggle against the capitalists and the state: in response to the millowners' plans the workers 'assembled ... as if it was another National Congress'; they resolved to 'take revenge upon the capitalists ... let us unite and declare a general strike'; a 'struggle of the class war' began and the workers formed a united army under the leadership of invincible heroes, distinguished by 'the lustre of heroic sentiments' - Alve, Joglekar, Pendse, Ghate, Kasle, Arsekar, 'Bradley Saheb'; 'the sword of Mirajkar does not rest satisfied in its scabbard, that of Dange is really electricity ... better than lightning ... Mr. Alve ... is like the great serpent Takshaka in swallowing the enemies'. United, and under this leadership, the workers, 'Soldiers ... of the new spirit and new discipline', possessed great power: 'You have weapons in your hands, the machines are in your hands, ... the Red Flag is in our hands, now we have no fear of anything'. The workers had the additional strength of international solidarity: 'workers and peasants have become united all over the world' for the struggle against international capitalism, and 'Russia and other foreign countries' had sent money to the Bombay millhands to help them sustain their strike. For good measure, the potency of this secular unity was reinforced by the protection of partisan divinities: 'the workers went to invite King Shivaji to have

a look at the fight'; the poets called 'to the Lord of the World to protect us'. But this support would be of little value unless the workers' unity did not cross community barriers and was not consolidated through disciplined class organisation: 'Look, brother workers, what harm has been effected by disunity ... Let there be no such distinction as this is a Mussalman [or] this is a Mahar, let there be unity ... we are children of the same mother'; 'increase the power of organisation ... To whom do you show the fear of arms, machines and armies when the workers possess the invincible powers of strikes and organisation? ... organised power is feared all over the world'.

Finally, the workers' struggle was for more than 'bread' - it was a struggle by 'the protectors of the world' for 'the regeneration of the world', and would have to be conducted in a spirit of love:

... cries of liberty are reverberating. O, manly people, rise in an organised manner for breaking the bonds of oppression, give cheers to the authority of the workers ... Who can now tolerate their impertinent orders? ... lead a life of manliness and ... let others lead a life of manliness. This song ... is really for loving brother workers'.

The workers' fight, being universal in scope, was therefore, identified with the national struggle against the British, even if it went far beyond the National Congress's conceptions and aims: the workers 'see before their eyes the example of the Satyagraha of Bardoli', 'Brothers, cry out "Victory for India"'. .

The poem reveals a masterly synthesis of 'modernity' and tradition. Traditional millenarian themes were fused with the new conceptions of class and class struggle to provide a

world-view with which to cope with the present crisis, and a striking vision of future possibilities. Both the militant Shivaji tradition of justified warfare against oppressors, for righteous aims, and the devotional-egalitarian bhakti ideals, were drawn upon as inspirations for a self-sacrificing struggle for a future world of harmony, free from exploitation; a faith in the efficacious power of heroes and the protection of Shivaji and the Gods was linked to an equal faith in labour's capacity to establish its own autonomy and dignity, through the voluntarist assertion of organised working class power and with the assistance of the oppressed in India and throughout the world. Marxist categories were integrated comfortably with the workers' culture and daily experience. Traditional cultural modes provided a framework for new conceptions and for using them, 'the weapons of words',¹⁰¹ to grasp new possibilities.

The concepts expressed in the poem show a very close correspondence to those propagated by the communists in Kranti and at public meetings. This correspondence and Kranti's circulation figures suggest that, to a very significant degree, the communists' ideology had provided a comprehensible, holistic and persuasive explanation to the workers - or to the Maratha workers at least - of the determinants of their experience: their initial dispossession from their landholdings and their forced move to the cities and the factories, their chronically miserable working and living conditions, the wage cuts, increased work-loads, retrenchments, and the police

101. ibid.

actions against their attempts to resist these changes. It had been presented in a form which made the poets' creative integration of Marxist ideology possible. This analysis made more sense to the millhands in 1928-29 than the reformists' alternative based on the notion of the 'partnership' of labour and capital, and appears to have begun displacing community ideology. It possessed the added attractions of a militant, unambiguous attack on the hated 'owners', and the promotion of the ideal of 'workers' control'.

Equally importantly, the party now had a network through which it could distribute its printed propaganda, ideology was linked to a clear strategy for social change, and the exponents of the ideology actively involved themselves with the workers in effecting the strategy. And this strategy had led to an immediate success - the millowners had been forced to suspend the introduction of their scheme. Ideology, in the opportunities available in 1928, had received apparent confirmation in action. The workers could now believe that the communists' overall goals were possible. This was further demonstrated, unambiguously, by their response to the GKU leaders' call to build a mass union and the way that they defended it against a series of counter-attacks in the first half of 1929.¹⁰²

Building the Girni Kamgar Union: the Third Phase.

Despite their widespread indebtedness to the money

102. The following schematic account of the building of the GKU is based on Newman, op. cit., pp.291-318.

lenders the millhands, as soon as they received their first wages, flocked to the GKU to pay their 4 annas membership fees and the special Rs 1 contributions to the strike fund, and to seek 'help in all things' from the union.¹⁰³ The following months saw a dramatic increase in the union's membership figures and financial reserves. Within a month there were 27,000 paying members, which was about a third of those who had returned to work.¹⁰⁴ By the end of the year 50,000 had enrolled, and in January the union had a paying membership of more than 100,000, or more than two thirds of the normal workforce. This had declined to about 80,000 by March because of communal riots in February and a shorter working month, providing lower wages, in that month. Nevertheless, the average membership of 58,000 for the six months between the end of the strike and the Meerut arrests made it by far the largest union in India and astounded veteran trade union leaders.¹⁰⁵ By March the union had a balance of more than Rs.70,000, freeing the militants, for the first time, from financial dependence upon the moderates.¹⁰⁶

The GKU's membership figures and financial resources, convincing in themselves, are only a partial indication of its

103. MCCC, P.2412(P): op. cit.

104. The membership figures are taken from Newman, op. cit., p.300.

105. N.M. Joshi told Bradley that he would previously have thought the membership figures 'impossible': MCCC, P.2417: Bradley to J. Potter Wilson, 2/2/29.

106. MCG: 2 & 3. The union's new financial resources also allowed the militants to make their first act of inter-provincial material solidarity - a Rs.1000 contribution to the striking jute workers at Bauria, in Bengal: MCCC, P.958: GKU Minute Book, 16/1/29.

significance; it was also the union's structure and modes of operation that made it a radically new type of Indian working class organisation. The communists' vigorous promotion of the idea of factory committees, the key concept in their theory of trade union organisation, found a ready response among the workers. They were a natural extension of the pattern of mass organisation the GKU leadership had established during the strike, and the conditions in the textile industry after the settlement favoured their development. Despite the settlement there continued to be a high level of dissatisfaction with the mill managements among the workers.¹⁰⁷ Further, because the millowners were anxious to rebuild depleted stocks as quickly as possible they were keen to negotiate over disputes in order to maintain production. This combination of factors provided the GKU leadership with a great many opportunities to intervene, organise the aggrieved millhands, and win further recognition as working class representatives from both the workers and the managements. The immediate post-strike situation also sustained the GKU's fruitful alliance with the jobbers for, in addition to their continuing fear of the millowners' standardisation plans, they often found that they were being used by the managements to introduce changes in contravention of the strike settlement terms, and as scapegoats for disturbances created by the millhands. The GKU found that the jobbers 'greatly

107. Ambiguities in the settlement terms, surreptitious attempts by certain mills to introduce further rationalisation or to victimise activists, genuine misunderstandings, and new types of conflict between management and an increasingly assertive workforce, all combined to create this continuing unrest.

assisted' its early development, and decided to maintain the alliance despite its fundamental opposition to the jobber system.¹⁰⁸

With the momentum carried forward from the general strike, the tireless involvement of the GKU leaders in the large and small details of negotiation, union organisation and ideological activity, and under the opportune conditions of the post-strike situation, the mill committee movement flourished. By December the system was established, and by April committees were functioning in two thirds of the industry's mills. Each committee, consisting of some 30 to 40 departmental representatives, elected delegates to one of 7 branch committees.¹⁰⁹ Each branch was under the secretaryship of a central leader, and co-ordinated the union's work in its area. The mill and branch committees and the workforce at large elected delegates to the central managing committee. This reached the size of approximately 80. Each level of the union led a lively existence. The mill committees were particularly vigorous, more than fulfilling the functions anticipated for them in the communists' theory.¹¹⁰ They

108. MCCC, P.2412(P): op. cit.

109. The figures are taken from Newman, op. cit., ps.303 & 306.

110. The mill committees were especially important to the union. They actively involved the millhands, promoted rank-and-file enthusiasm, confidence, and organisational and leadership skills. They provided channels for the two-way flow of information between the factory floor and the leadership. They also provided the central leadership with organisations to which authority could be delegated. This strengthened the mass base of the union as well as relieving the enormous pressure of work which fell to the small, over-taxed executive. The mill committees were soon taking responsibility for many of the routine union matters which arose in the mills, and educating the leaders in the detailed technical matters of the industry.

began to take considerable initiative within the mills in their dealings with the jobbers and management. Both the jobbers and management, to their increasing discomfort, were forced progressively to recognise the authority of the mill committees, if not their legitimacy. The committees also developed a significant level of autonomy within the union. They were not passive units subordinate to the leadership.

The rise of the GKU meant the decline of the BTLU. The moderates remained divorced from the millhands and the mill committee movement, and thus from the forces which produced the mass GKU.¹¹¹ Because of the BTLU's declining influence over the workers the owners, in their desire to maximise immediate production, were forced to pass over the heads of the 'legitimate' trade unionists and deal with the GKU.¹¹² This further weakened the moderates' position.¹¹³ The BTLU's membership declined from 8,400 in November to 5,400 in April. Its paying membership was even less.¹¹⁴

111. For instance Bradley commented in October that while the workers were flocking to the GKU, 'Joshi and the others cannot hold a meeting in the mill area': MCCC, P.2412(P): op. cit.

112. The moderates were scandalised by this behaviour of the millowners: See the BTLU submissions in RCLI, Vol.I(1), pp.353-4, and (2), p.261.

113. The growing impotence of the BTLU, relative to the GKU, in all areas of textile trade unionism is illustrated in an incident during a November sitting of the Strike Enquiry Committee. After the GKU representatives had walked out in protest on a procedural point the BTLU representative, Bakhale, 'explained rather pathetically' to the committee that although he disagreed with their action, 'unless he followed ... he would lose his influence' over the workers, and so walked out also: NAI, H.Poll, 1/1928: FR2, Bombay, November.

114. Newman, op. cit., pp.319-20; RCLI, I(1), p.167

However, the new industrial order profoundly upset the existing political balance in Bombay. No sooner had the foundations of the GKU's lively class-based organisation been established than it had to face, during the first half of 1929, a sequence of concerted attacks which were to prove a severe test of its strength:¹¹⁵ the non-Brahman movement launched a concerted campaign to discredit and replace the communists and resurrect their disintegrating working class community; a fracas between the workers and Pathan strike-breakers and moneylenders was used by communal politicians in an attempt to promote a hostile, generalised Hindu-Muslim division among the millhands; the state ended its 'moratorium' by arresting the leadership, along with activists in Bengal and elsewhere, for the Meerut Conspiracy Case; and the mill-owners, once freed from the temporary constraints imposed by depleted stocks, and increasingly concerned about the mill committees, began to confront the new union structure.

Moreover, these attacks coincided with the progressive collapse of the alliance between the GKU and the jobbers.¹¹⁶ This added to the gravity of the situation. As the mill committees became established they began to usurp many of the jobbers' functions, then to attack the abuses of the system, and finally to confront the system itself. The implicit ambiguities of the alliance became overt and, although some of the jobbers (such as G.L. Kandalkar, who later became an

115. The background of these attacks will be examined in Chapter 5.

116. Newman, *op. cit.*, p.305 and pp.307-8.

important GKU leader) remained with the union, for most the GKU became a more immediate threat than the millowners' intended standardisation scheme. A potentially dangerous new opposition, waiting for opportunities to reassert its recently held but rapidly vanishing power, now existed within the workforce. The attacks upon the union in the first half of 1929 provided opportunities for this attempt.

The union's response to all of these attacks demonstrated the high degree of unity, resilience and independence from the jobbers that it had achieved after only a few months of existence as a mass union. Neither of the two communal campaigns was able seriously to erode the GKU's base or the authority of the communists.¹¹⁷ After the Meerut arrests the membership immediately rallied under a relatively unknown and inexperienced leadership, including a new group of middle class outsider communists.¹¹⁸ But the most impressive demonstration of the character of the GKU was the membership's response, in the wake of these attacks, to the new leadership's April 1929 call for a general strike to defend the union against the millowners' attacks on it. As Newman has shown, this strike 'marks a turning point in Bombay's industrial relations':¹¹⁹

Never before had the millhands struck work on a union's orders to defend a union's existence. Their discipline was impressive. ... The ... managing committee issued orders and explained its decision; the mill committees saw that it was obeyed.

117. *ibid.*, pp.321-7.

118. *ibid.*, pp.328-9.

119. *ibid.*, p.332.

Two months later, the Government of India noted, the Bombay millhands, in contrast to the workers in other industrial centres, were 'still ... infected with the Communist spirit', despite the absence of definite party activity.¹²⁰ It is clear that within the Bombay mill workforce a major transition from an insular community consciousness towards class consciousness and organisation had occurred during the previous two years. The strikingly new conceptions expressed in the millhands' poem appeared to have taken root.

The Expansion of Communist Influence in Other Industries

The communists' success in the mills enhanced their prospects elsewhere. The party followed essentially the same tactics in other unions as it had in the textile industry prior to the strike. From its existing footholds within union executives it sought to increase its influence at that level while agitating and organising directly among the workers for the goals of strong industrial unions based on active and organised mass memberships. It introduced new forms of 'agit-prop' such as contesting the February 1929 Municipal Corporation elections with a working class program, a campaign having an appreciable effect upon the workers.¹²¹ It decided to extend the circulation and content of Kranti to cover a wider working class audience. The WPP managed to consolidate its

120. NAI, H.Poll, 179/1929: G. of I. to all Local Governments, 24/6/29.

121. MCCC, P.2417: op. cit.; Mirajkar, Interview. Bradley commented that although the WPP candidates did not win any seats, the great majority of the workers not being enfranchised, they 'polled well, ... created a good impression and ... [got] the workers to take an interest in the affair, at the same time pointing out what the Corporation as a body really is'.

position in most of the small unions that it had entered during 1927 and 1928,¹²² but most effort was directed into the strategically important railways, particularly the GIP railway, the second biggest single employer of labour in the Presidency.

The GIP workers shared the pattern of grievances common to railway workers throughout India at this time - longstanding dissatisfaction with low wages, long hours, racial discrimination, and victimisation of union activists, was aggravated from 1927 by a range of new threats arising from the gradual introduction of economy measures.¹²³ Rationalisation and retrenchments of workshop staff, following the recommendations of the 1926 State Railway Workshop Committee, had been introduced on other lines during 1927 and 1928,¹²⁴ and there was the added possibility of wage cuts. Major strikes against these measures had occurred in Bengal and Madras.¹²⁵ When the WPP turned its attention to the GIP

122. Although the party lost the Dockworkers' Union to the moderates (MCCC, P.1344: op. cit., 29/8/28), and was unable to make their Bombay Trades Council any more active or influential than its reformist counterpart (RCLI, Vol.I(1), p.107), they did consolidate their positions within and extend the membership of their unions (see the figures provided by RCLI, Vol.I(1), p.170).
123. RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), pp.450-55 & 257-8, & (2), pp.232-48; V.B. Karnik, Strikes in India, (Bombay, 1967), pp.216-17.
124. RCLI, Vol. VIII(1), pp.17-18.
125. For an account of the South Indian Railway strike in Madras in July 1928 see David Arnold, 'Labour, Police and Politicians: the South Indian Railway Strike of 1928', Paper presented to the ASSA Conference, Melbourne, May 1976. The Bengal strikes are covered below.

in the second half of 1928 unrest on the railway, already high, was increasing. The discontented included not only the labourers in the urban workshops and along the line but also middle level, educated officials such as station masters.¹²⁶ Two individuals from this level - D.B. Kulkarni and V.B. Purandare - were to become prominent activists in the GIPRU and important WPP members.¹²⁷ They provided an extremely useful bridge to the lower level workers for the communists and a natural 'vanguard' for worker participation in the union's affairs.¹²⁸ The GIP railway provided fertile grounds for militant unionism.

Joglekar was detailed to GIP work from April and Bradley was able to contribute his considerable organisational skills more fully after he could be spared from textile unionism, at the conclusion of the strike.¹²⁹ After assessing the workers' expressed grievances they prepared a program of immediate and long-term demands, finalised at a conference of workers and union officials organised by Joglekar at Bhusawal, in East Kandesh District, in June.¹³⁰ The 'Bhusawal Demands'

126. RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), p.163.

127. Kulkarni, an Assistant Station Master at Parel and described by Intelligence as 'a man of brains and intelligence' (NAI, H.Poll, 10/19/1929: Home Department meeting, 6/6/29) became a particularly important activist for the communists. He joined the WPP in March 1928 and the CPI a year later, and became a Vice-president of the GIPRU. Purandare joined the WPP in November 1928 and became General Secretary of the union: MCCC, P.1344: op. cit. 25/3/28 & 15/11/28; P.1296: CPI meeting, Bombay, 17/3/29; MCG:2.

128. For communist appreciation of the value of this bridge see MCCC, P.653: a pamphlet by Bradley titled 'Worker Leads Deputation to the Agent'; also MCG: 1 & 2.

129. MCCC, P.1344: op. cit., 8/4/28; P.2412(P): op. cit.

130. MCCC, P.1348(2): Report, June 1928, P.1344: op. cit., 2/8/28.

formed the basis of further agitation among the workers to involve them in the union and to overcome the dominance of the moderates in its executive. Following the Railway Board's November response to these 'ill-considered and impossible demands' they were also used for more concerted agitation and organisation for strike action.¹³¹ The party envisaged an eventual general strike, but only after the workers and the union had been sufficiently prepared. Premature strikes, especially before the workshop and traffic workers had been integrated, were eschewed.¹³² The communists attached great importance to the amalgamation of the existing three unions on the line.¹³³ Their campaign had its first success in August when two of these unions merged. The new GIPRU was registered in October. Although moderates continued to dominate the official positions four party members were elected to important positions.¹³⁴

By the time of the Meerut Case arrests the communists' agitation in the railways was showing definite results. The union, with a membership of 41,000 and regarded by the communists as one of their best organised sections, had established many active branches in the urban workshops

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131. RCLI, vol. VIII(1), p.163; P.653: op. cit.; MCCC, P.1344: op. cit., 2/8/28.
132. ibid., 22/5/28, 2/8/28 & 29/8/28; P.2078(P): Joglekar to Spratt, 30/11/28; NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Home Department, G of Bom., meeting on 18/8/18, & Home Member, G of I, to Viceroy, 29/7/28.
133. MCCC, P.1344: op. cit., 8/7/28, 15/7/28, & 22/7/28 - at these meetings the issue of amalgamation was discussed at great length, and Kulkarni's proposal to form a new militant union was rejected.
134. RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), p.163, & Vol.I(1), p.105. Bradley and Kulkarni became Vice-presidents, Jhabvala General Secretary, and Joglekar Organising Secretary. See also MCCC, P.2078: op. cit.

and along the line.¹³⁵ The militants were gaining the growing allegiance of the rank-and-file members, the reformists were on the defensive, and a bitter conflict between Jhabvala and the party developed from this situation because of the former's increasing concern about the communists' erosion of his personal following in the union.¹³⁶ Despite the arrests the communists and their militant allies continued to increase their influence. At the union's annual meeting at Chalisgaon in May they, including the recent WPP recruit B.T. Ranadive, were elected to a majority of the official positions, and the moderate Ginwala was not re-elected as President.¹³⁷ The subsequent secession of Ginwala and other moderates to form another rival union was a reflection of their declining influence in the union and among the workers.¹³⁸ With the success of the militants at Chalisgaon, and the continuing intransigence of the Railway Board during 1929, the outbreak of a major strike, which might provide the communists with opportunities similar to those of the textile general strike, was only a matter of time.

135. RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), p.163; MCG: 1 & 2. Unfortunately, in the absence of a study of Bombay railway unionism equivalent to Newman's work on the textile industry, we do not have any information on the precise nature of the union at this stage. Presumably it was, roughly, in 'phase 2' as defined above.

136. MCCC, P.1344: op. cit., 3/2/29; P.2417(P): op. cit.

137. RCLI, Vol.I(1), p.105; NAI, H.Poll, 10/XIX/1929: op. cit., & 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Nov.; MCG:1.

138. As Kulkarni had believed less than a year previously that the radicals should secede, because of their impotence, from the moderate-dominated union (see fn.133) the moderates' secession is a particularly clear index of the rise of radical influence.

Remaining Structural Weaknesses.

In the GKU the communists had built a working class base with an impressive degree of strength and unity and, as their progress in the GIPRU demonstrated, it provided a powerful nucleus for the further extension of their political influence among the industrial labour of the province. Nevertheless, despite this remarkable achievement, the security of the WPP's new working class base was by no means absolute. The ideological transition of the mill workforce, the foundation of the communists' base, and the institutionalisation of this transition within a class-based organisation, were still far from completed. In this transitional state the new structure remained vulnerable at certain points in both dimensions of the dual role - trade union, and mass base for a revolutionary party - which the GKU performed. First, potentially divisive community distinctions continued to exist within the workforce, posing a continuing threat to the union's class solidarity and placing community limits on its mass base. Second, the problems of integrating the two basic levels of the GKU's structure, and of consolidating the relationship between the communists and the working class leaders, were not completely resolved. And finally, the workforce had not been linked structurally to the revolutionary party. The absence of a working class political cadre system, trained and organised to provide an alternative leadership, and the resulting high level of dependence of the union on the existing leadership, heightened the vulnerability of both the union and the party to state repression.

The first two problems were inter-related. The success and novelty of the combination of structures that

constituted the GKU lay in the degree to which it had superseded the roles of the jobbers and other traditional community leaders - the degree to which they had been made redundant for the workers. The point reached in this process was determined by the extent to which the inter-dependent mill committees and central organisation were integrated, fulfilled the total needs of the millhands throughout the workforce more satisfactorily than the traditional modes, and politically neutralised the old leaderships. This required the extension of the grass-roots organisational structure throughout the industry, across the multiplicity of religious, regional and occupational communities. It was equally dependent on the central leadership's capacity to link itself organically with the union's mass structure, provide an effective co-ordinating and directive role, and mediate between the workers and the wider industrial and political worlds. The communists' ability to 'de-class' and 'de-caste' themselves to overcome the deep-seated working class distrust of their social group, was a crucial element of this overall leadership requirement.

At the end of the strike the unity achieved during its course was only very informally organised, and thus vulnerable. The class links across the cleavages which traditionally had separated the workforce were still very tenuous. The emerging 'class community' had not yet replaced the aggregation of traditional communities built upon patron-client relationships - it had merely been superimposed upon them. The organisation of the millhands was, at that point, a rather fluid and unresolved combination of the old and the new. Nor had the GKU leadership completely displaced the jobbers from

their role as occupational and community leaders, as the latter's important recruiting role in the first stage of the building of the union demonstrated. For these reasons it was urgent that the relatively informal unity created under strike conditions be fairly rapidly transformed into a more permanent, organised form. As the GKU poets emphasised, only strong organisation could prevent the recently won solidarity from fracturing along the only partially dissolved community interfaces within the workforce.¹³⁹

The urgency of the task of organisation was increased by the fact that the millhands' ideological transition was uneven. All sections of the workforce participated enthusiastically in the strike and joined the union subsequently.¹⁴⁰ But the Maratha community, on which the old GKM had been based, provided the leading elements during the strike,¹⁴¹ and thus the strongest base for the GKU's recruitment and mill committees after its conclusion. The unevenness of the

139. The poem was in fact written during the communal crises of February, when the class solidarity of the union faced the most serious risk of community-fracturing.

140. This is clear from the maximum membership figure of 100,000 reached by the union. This must have included significant numbers of the minority Muslim and Untouchable communities. Newman has identified Muslims in 10% of the union's managing committee positions but does not say whether or not Untouchables were represented at this level.

141. The leading role of the Maratha weavers is suggested, for example, in a report of the strike, sent from Bombay to London, which described the original GKM as 'the weavers' union' (in LM, Vol.10(7), Jul.1928, p.439). The relative militance of the weavers, already the most activist section of the mill workforce despite their relatively privileged wage conditions, was further increased by the millowners' schemes, which hit the weavers hardest. This ensured that the Maratha weavers would be the leading element in the strike.

union's base was reinforced by the important recruitment role played by those jobbers who had formed an alliance with the union. Many of the union's members joined in blocs from departments where these jobbers held influence. The overall community pattern of the union was strong organisation in the majority of weaving departments, in which the Marathas were dominant, under-representation in the spinning departments, in which the Untouchables and north-Indians were the majority of the workforce, and particularly weak organisation among the Muslims. The GKU was essentially a Maratha 'class-community'. Because of the regional concentration of the mills in which most of the Muslims worked, and the fact that those mills were manned almost totally by Muslims, the mill district of Madanpura remained largely outside the GKU's organisation. Although no section of the workforce was unrepresented in the GKU it proved much more difficult than for the Marathas to rupture the community relationship between the Muslim workers and their jobbers, religious leaders and politician patrons.¹⁴² The BTLU, acting through these intermediaries, remained the dominant union in Madanpura. Fortunately for the GKU, the Marathas formed a majority of the workforce and the Muslims a particularly small minority.

142. This failure, which arose primarily from the greater strength of the Muslims' community bonds, also arose partly from GKU-WPP policy shortcomings. For example, the party did not initiate a culturally-specific policy of winning over the Muslims until just before the Meerut arrests; and after the February communal riots the WPP came to the conclusion that the GKU and the party had shown 'a definite Hindu bias' (MCCC, P.1170: minutes of WPP meeting, 17/2/29). Attempts to counter this bias, eg. by launching an Urdu paper, Pyam-i-Mazdur, under a Muslim editor (Shaukat Usmani), and to cultivate influence in Madanpura - significantly, through the mohalla leaders - were soon terminated by the Meerut arrests (MCCC, P.1085: S.S. Josh to Usmani, 7/3/29; Newman, op. cit., pp.325-6; MCCC, P.1170: op. cit.)

Grounds for conflict between the workers as a class and their leaders, both working class and 'outsider' communist, also existed. The leaders' advocacy of a standardisation scheme, albeit one far more generous to the workers than that of the millowners, was one potential source of disaffection. The strike was initially a reaction - a rejection of the effects of the millowners' attempts to reorganise the industry, in favour of the informality and protective paternalism of the traditional jobber system.¹⁴³ During the strike the force behind this reaction was harnessed to the communists' forward strategy and after the strike it had developed spontaneously into an attack on the jobber system itself. However the popularity of the communists' policy depended on the millhands' continuing to perceive it as preferable to the old system or to non-communist alternatives. The only ways in which the party leaders could prevent or contain disaffection were persuasion, the development of closer links with the workers, the recruitment of ordinary millhands into leadership positions, and continued success in the advancement of their policy.

143. Newman has explained this situation in the following way, (op. cit., p.271.):

'In the widest sense the 1928 strike had been launched by the millhands against their exposure to market forces and in favour of a return to the old paternalistic management, exercised in practice by the jobbers, which informally cushioned the workers against redundancy, helped them to bargain for higher wages and treated their individual preferences with a certain indulgence. To this extent the strike was reactionary and the jobbers were the exemplars of reaction. Paradoxically, the trade unionists, both moderate and militant, had accepted the principle of standardisation in order to negotiate details more favourable to the men'.

These tasks remained urgent even after the formation of the mill committees. The GKU was still very young and remained only imperfectly integrated. In practice it often functioned as two distinct unions: 'the union of the militant workers and the union of the leaders'.¹⁴⁴ Ironically, the millowners and the central leadership shared a common concern, if from very different perspectives, in their respective relationships with the committees. Both desired an orderly workforce, and sought to control the impetuous tendencies of the emerging factory-level organisations.¹⁴⁵ This relationship between the union's apex and base contained obvious potential for serious conflict within the GKU should 'the union of the militant workers' be persuaded, rightly or wrongly, that 'the union of the leaders' was acting against their interests. The communists, being non-worker outsiders, were even more vulnerable than the other leaders. This vulnerability as outsiders existed within the GKU leadership and the WPP as well as in the wider union. The communists' hard-won alliance with the working class militants was not inviolable. The probationary period had not yet been completed.

The third area of weakness - the relationship between the union and the revolutionary party organisation - was due to a combination of factors. Two of these were inter-related: the political 'backwardness' of the workers, reinforced by their

144. *ibid.*, p.318

145. *ibid.*, p.295

fear of victimisation by the employers; and, in Spratt's words, an initial tendency among the communists, and shared by their comrades in Bengal, to 'exaggerate' this 'backwardness' and thus 'to look upon themselves as groups of "leaders", who need not get any membership around them'.¹⁴⁶ The first problem had initially been a serious obstacle to involving workers actively in the organisation of their immediate industrial life, and it was an even bigger inhibition to their participation in a wider political sphere. However the political and intellectual achievements of militants such as Alve and Kasle, and the qualities of leadership and assertiveness which the ordinary workers were demonstrating in the mill committees once the traditional constraints had been removed, showed that their initial 'backwardness' was not an insuperable barrier to the creation of working class political cadres in Bombay. Further, the political education of the communists during the strike and the building of the union and, very importantly, the novel political imperatives imposed by 'the union of the militants' on 'the union of the leaders', also did much to transform the consciousness of the communists. They were neither as able nor as inclined as before to assume that 'the masses will follow when required'.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, although increasing attention was being given to the issue, no concerted campaign to recruit workers into the WPP or to develop a working class political cadre system was implemented before the Meerut Case arrests. This problem merged with the wider

146. MCCC, P.546(10): Spratt to F.C. Mallonie, 26/8/28.

147. ibid.

issue of Communist Party organisation and discipline which, also, was taken up in a serious manner by the Bombay communists only belatedly.¹⁴⁸ Thus by March 1929 the communists had become a revolutionary trade union leadership, but were not yet the leadership of a Communist Party; the organised millhands constituted a mass base for the communists, but not the mass base of a Party.

Each of these three areas of vulnerability produced problems for the union and the party during the early months of 1929, particularly under the strain of the political reaction against them following the first phase of the GKU's development. But in the first half of 1929 these tensions appeared to be little more than the inevitable 'growing pains' accompanying the process of class formation. The leadership was able to recognise and contain them, thus confirming the very considerable advances of the previous two years. In the second half of the year this changed. Under the new leadership, and continued class and communal attacks and state repression, the tensions within the GKU increased. Eventually they were to become systemic. By the end of the year the union was broken and the communists' mass base dissipated. From this later perspective what, in the earlier context, were the growing pains of class formation, become the prefigurements of class dissolution. The tensions within,

148. The factors contributing to these problems in the organisation of the revolutionary party, are investigated in Chapter 4.

and the community and political limits of the GKU revealed in early-1929 will be re-examined, from this longer-term perspective, in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

In the two year period between Spratt's arrival and the Meerut arrests the Bombay communists successfully completed three of the four phases necessary for the formation and consolidation of a revolutionary working class movement. This was, despite the remaining limitations, a remarkable success. It had been achieved through the communists' ability to develop and apply a clearly formulated Marxist policy of trade unionism in a situation providing real possibilities of success. The favourable situation was provided by an interaction between the existing social structure in Bombay, the economic and political conditions of the period, and a number of fortunate contingencies facilitating communist intervention in local working class politics.

The most important features of the social structure were the existence - and predominance - of the Maratha community, with its special characteristics, within the working class, and the relative social and cultural proximity of the Maratha workers and the Maharashtrian middle class from which the communists were drawn. Meaningful contact between the markedly independent Maratha workers and a 'proletarianised' Maharashtrian intelligentsia was possible. Further, the worlds inhabited by the communists and industrial capital were not totally divorced. The relative fluidity of local nationalist

politics, and the prior history of negotiations between millowners and labour leaderships, facilitated the possibility of direct negotiations between the communists and the BMOA. This contact, too, was important for a sustained trade unionism, of whatever political hue, in a pre-revolutionary situation. The previous history of significant trade unionism in the city was both an indication of the possibilities provided by the industrial social structure of Bombay, and an important foundation upon which the communists could build the necessary bridges to both the workers and the millowners.

The depression in the mill industry favoured a militant trade union leadership and, because it deeply affected all millhand communities and the jobbers, provided a unique opportunity for beginning the process of class formation within the working class. Further, because the economic crisis had been protracted, a significant nucleus of militant working class organisation had already been established by 1928. The communists did not have to start from the beginning. Their task was eased further by certain contingencies, and particularly the following: the successful entry into India of the British communists, despite a vigilant and usually effective Imperial intelligence system, and thus the introduction of invaluable theoretical and practical experience; the unusual opportunity to work openly and continuously, free from serious repressions, for a two year period coinciding with the major crisis point¹⁴⁹; and the fortuitous alliance

149. The freedom from immediate repression was, it should be stressed, due to a very significant degree to the

with Jhabvala which, though temporary, and despite the ambivalence of his motives, provided a significantly easier entrance into local unionism than would otherwise have been the case.

The above conditions provided the possibilities for building a mass working class movement and politically educating the leadership. But it was the skill, energy and dedication of a very few communists and radical allies that translated potentiality into actuality. With a strategy appropriate to the situation, and maintaining a close correlation between theory and practice, the Bombay communists, assisted by their British comrades, developed and vigorously applied the skills for the combination of roles necessary for success: militant ideologists to a working class audience and patient analysts of the complex industrial and political details of the situation; revolutionists for the eventual 'Workers' Raj' and cautious, pragmatic negotiators of today's political alliances and tomorrow's wage rates. The communists' ability to grasp the available opportunities created a situation in which two types of intellectuals - both working and middle

149. Contd.

communists' success as mass organisers - the remarkable degree of order maintained by the strikers greatly reduced the level of police 'law-and-order' actions. Eg., the DIB commented in Aug.: '... discipline is being carefully reinforced to prevent any premature outbreak and it is remarkable that up to the present time rioting and the outbreak of serious violence has been avoided', despite the constant speeches proclaiming revolution to be the final goal: (NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: note by F. Isemonger, 29/8/28, after a visit to Bombay.) This situation frustrated the Bombay Government in its efforts to find a justification for intervention against the communists and the strike. (*ibid.*, G of Bom. to G of I, 27/7/28 and 5/8/28.)

class - could meet and complement each other, providing a radically new mode of political leadership for an emerging mass politics based, to a significant degree, on class. Though this complex process was far from completed or consolidated by the time of the Meerut arrests there appeared to be no inherent socio-economic or cultural barriers to its further development. The significance of all of these features will become even more apparent when compared with the Bengal WPP's experience in Calcutta.

2. CALCUTTA

150

The Bengal WPP in 1927 faced the approaching wave of industrial unrest from an even more humble starting point than its fraternal party in Bombay. Sharing with all forms of Bengali industrial trade unionism the relatively more disadvantageous location of industrial politics within the region's socio-economic and political structures, it also shared the same debilitating syndrome of characteristics arising from and reinforcing this position of weakness.

This was immediately obvious to Spratt during a brief visit to Calcutta at the end of 1927, on the eve of the great strikes of 1928. In his preliminary survey of Bengali trade unionism he confirmed Allison's conclusion a year earlier that it was 'not very convincing'.¹⁵¹ 'It is far weaker than Bombay', Spratt reported to London, 'and suffers far more from bad leadership'.¹⁵² He found primarily bhadralok leaderships, riven by factional rivalries, competing for the 'control' of unions

150. Although the Bengal party did not change its name from the Peasants' and Workers' Party (PWP) to the WPP until March 1928, I will use the latter title throughout this chapter in the interests of simplicity.

151. MCCC, P.1144: Allison to Joglekar, 20/11/26.

152. MCCC, P.526(29): Spratt to C.P. Dutt, Ca.Feb. 1928. Spratt's impressionistic survey tends to be supported by the available evidence on Bengali trade unionism in this period - see e.g., the G of Ben.'s summary in RCLI, Vol.V(1), pp.119-21; and MCCC, P.544(3): a list of trade union office bearers and membership figures prepared in late-1928.

153

and the provincial federation. The factionalism was motivated by personal ambitions and hostilities, expressed in some cases in a communal form, rather than by serious political incompatibilities; and it was dominant enough within the BTUF to prevent that body from formulating definite policy alternatives. Further, neither the unions nor the federation commanded significant support from industrial labour - trade unions in Bengal were even more pronouncedly 'organisations of leaders', operating above an even less organised workforce, than in contemporary Bombay. Finally, he was unable to identify any clearly differentiated Marxist trade union influence, even at this relatively late stage. Although he found the WPP-affiliated Bengal Jute Workers' Association at Bhatpara, led by Kalidas Bhattacharya, 'quite a good union, in its way', the membership was very small and the leadership made the factional mistake of 'keeping aloof from the other unions'.

Thus Bengali trade unions, 'reformist' and 'revolutionary' alike, faced the imminent working class upsurge from a less advantageous position from which either to exert an

153. The much more serious rivalries for power within the BTUF, compared to the politics of Bombay's Central Labour Board, were probably symptomatic of the relative weakness of the bases of trade unions in Bengal - the attractions of office in the federation were correspondingly greater.
154. The emergence of the new communalist politicians, such as H.S. Suhrawardy and Fazlul Haq, as leaders of Muslim trade unions, and the 1926 riots' legacy of intensified communal division among the working class of the Calcutta region, compounded the problems of developing sustained non-communalist trade union organisation in Bengal. See MCCC, p.52: Bengal WPP, Annual Report 1927-28; Punekar, op.cit., pp.129-30.

appreciable immediate influence upon it or to gain rapidly during its course. They were further disadvantaged by the fact that in the jute industry, the province's major industry, the economic context of working class unrest - and therefore the character of the unrest - was of a different order to that in the Bombay cotton industry. The growing economic constraints upon the industry before 1930 did not reach crisis proportions and so did not lead to the profound structural changes attempted by the Bombay mill-owners, nor, therefore, to the correspondingly more favourable opportunities for militant trade unionism which arose there. Further, the jute industry's constraints were of more recent origin and so had not provided an equivalent stimulus during the preceding decade for the development of working class resistance and organisation.¹⁵⁵

WPP Organisation and Trade Union Policy in 1927: Some Problems

In 1927 the Bengal WPP remained very weakly integrated as a party. Intra-party politics intruded directly into its working class activity, hampering its initial attempts to take an independent initiative in local trade unionism. We saw in the previous chapter how the Bengal WPP was formed from more diverse elements than the Bombay party. At the end of 1927 this diversity was still reflected in a 'polar' quality in the party's organisation - one group being centred around

155. The economics of the jute industry in the late-1920's will be examined in more detail in the section on jute mill strikes below. It should also be remembered that the greater geographical dispersion of industry in the Calcutta region, compared to Bombay, was also a significant problem for TU organising.

Muzaffar Ahmad, the editor of the party's organ, and another around the former Anushilan Samiti members Gopen Chakravarty, the Moscow returnee, and Dharani Goswami.¹⁵⁶ The WPP entered the decisive year of 1928 with considerable tension still dividing these two groups. The division adversely affected the party's trade union activity.

The Chakravarty group continued to retain close contacts with their former terrorist comrades, sought to bring larger numbers of them into the WPP, and attempted to develop direct working class influence - primarily through their membership of Kalidas Bhattacharya's BJWA. By the end of 1927 they had established a close personal and working relationship with the BJWA leaders Bhattacharya and Shibnath Bannerji, and had brought them into the party and affiliated the union. The BJWA became the party's de facto labour committee, though it continued to maintain its autonomy from formal party direction. Muzaffar, 'legitimised' as 'Bengal's first communist' by his inclusion in the Cawnpore Case and his continuing contact with M.N. Roy, retained his distrust of this group and its extra-party associates. Suspicious of their credentials as bona fide communists because of their Hindu-bhadralok social origins and terrorist political backgrounds, and concerned about their attempts to develop independent and potentially competitive contacts with the Comintern, he resisted the entry of more of

156. The following information on intra-party politics is drawn from - MCCC, P.527(8): 'The Split in the WPP' (written by Spratt Ca. Feb. 1929); IB, Communism, (1935), p.239; G. Chakravarty, Interview, pp.134-5; Ahmad, Myself, pp.429-31; D. Goswami, interview; and A.R. Khan, interview.

their comrades into the party. He participated only marginally in their trade union activity, but did not, however, establish significant alternative avenues to the working class. Instead, he devoted himself primarily to secretarial correspondence with other groups in India and Europe, seeking finance from the latter, and producing the WPP organ Ganavani when resources permitted - running it, M.N. Roy chided him, as if it was 'his personal business' and producing it in a mode intended 'more for "Tagorian" literary effect than for saying something to the workers and peasants'.¹⁵⁷ The conflict between the 'bhadralok petty bourgeois' BJWA group and the 'autocratic sectarian' party secretary, as they regarded each other, remained only covert. But its adverse effects were primarily responsible for the party's labour organisations' having functioned 'only in an unorganised manner' up until the annual conference in March 1928;¹⁵⁸ and for provoking Spratt to comment soon after:

If the Party could become, from a Party of theorists, a Party of newspaper boys, it would have the most beneficial effect, not only on the paper's circulation, but on the influence, organisation and efficiency of the Party.¹⁵⁹

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157. NAI, H.Poll, 190/1928: 'J' (M.N. Roy) to the CPI, Central Committee, 30/12/27. Despite Roy's critique, however, Ganavani continued to exhibit the same predilection for 'Tagorian' effects during 1928. Unlike Kranti in 1928, it did not become a paper seriously directed towards a working class audience: see, e.g. the selection of Ganavani articles in MCCC, P.369-P.371, P.518, P.553 & P.594.
158. MCCC, P.52: op.cit.
159. MCCC, P.526(32): 'Selling Ganavani'. In addition to his concern about the effects of factionalism Spratt was critical of the Bengali communists' 'petty-bourgeois' inhibitions about selling the paper in the street. See also his Blowing up India, pp.50-1.

The WPP did manage to establish a formal Labour Group in May 1928, but as four of its five members were from the BJWA that organisation remained the WPP's de facto labour committee.¹⁶⁰

This organisational obstacle to concerted party involvement in working class politics was paralleled by another, related problem: although the overall political program in 1927¹⁶¹ was the same as that of the Bombay WPP, it was not able to develop a trade union policy of equivalent clarity and detail until its annual conference in March 1928.¹⁶² In the absence of a coherent party centre, and without the guiding influence of an experienced international comrade during 1927,¹⁶³ no clear policy was developed; and without a definite Marxist policy there could be no distinctively Marxist working class activity. These were the factors underlying the essential continuity, observed by Spratt, between the BJWA and other Bengali trade unions, despite the greater 'militance' of the former.

Thus, not only did the situation in Bengal not

160. MCCC, P.446(1): Abdul Halim to Labour Group, 16/5/28. The members were: Goswami, Chakravarty, Bhattacharya, Pyari Mohan Das and Aftab Ali - the first four being in the BJWA group. That the WPP held its 1928 annual conference at Bhatpara, the BJWA's base, and that the BJWA group did much of the organisational work for it, also attest to the weight of this group within the party.

161. MCCC, P.2510.

162. 'Resolution on the Trade Union Movement', in MCCC, P.523: 'A Call To Action'. This set of guidelines was essentially the same as that adopted by the Bom.WPP at its AGM earlier in the month, embodying the principles developed in Bombay through 1927: see the sub-section on the Bom. WPP's TU theory and policy, above.

163. Spratt took up residence in Bengal only in late March 1928.

provide the same opportunities as in Bombay for a Marxist alternative trade unionism; even by early 1928 no clear Bengali Marxist alternative, capable of maximising the opportunities that did exist, had yet been formed. Compared to Bombay the Bengal party faced the additional problem of forging a definite organisation and policy at a later stage in the industrial upheaval. But, given the essentially similar forms of working class structure in the two provinces, particularly the jobber-community forms of occupational and social organisation, it would have to pass through the same four phases outlined in the preceding section to become a hegemonic trade union and political leadership of a class-based organisation of industrial labour. The following section traces the WPP's involvement in the strikes from late 1927 till mid-1929 in order to assess comparatively, against this criterion, the progress it achieved.

Beginnings

By mid-1927 the BJWA activists exercised a modest influence at the strategically important¹⁶⁴ jute mill centre of Bhatpara. By then its influence among the workers of the area exceeded that of its rival, the reformist and loyalist Kankinarrah Labour Union, based in neighbouring Kankinarrah. This was for a number of reasons. The BJWA maintained a

164. There was a particularly heavy concentration of jute mills in the Jagatdal-Bhatpara-Kankinarrah area, north of Calcutta, and it was subsequently to become the 'storm-centre' of a very extensive jute mill strike in 1929. RCLI, Vol.V(1), ps. 127 & 129.

'continuous existence', and a 'close interest' in the workers' welfare - for example by pressing compensation claims.¹⁶⁵ It actively involved itself in the day-to-day life of labour. Chakravarty, for instance, who spoke Hindi, worked as a mill-hand and lived in the chawls for nine months - an impressive attempt by one bhadralok to bridge the gulf between intelligentsia and masses.¹⁶⁶ Finally, and very significantly, the Kankinarrah Union had conducted a long-standing 'crusade against corrupt sirdars' and this had mobilised the jobbers of the area against their union, with telling results.¹⁶⁷ From its Bhatpara base the BJWA, through its 'roving propagandist-cum-organiser', Chakravarty, began agitating in the neighbouring jute mill areas and across the Hooghly at Chandernagore.¹⁶⁸ It also adopted the policy of 'suddenly descending on any area where trouble had broken out' further afield.¹⁶⁹ In this way the BJWA group in the WPP involved itself during late-1927 in three separate attempts

165. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.145.

166. Chakravarty, Interview, p.135.

167. The Kankinarrah Union reported that their campaign had 'antagonised hundreds of sirdars... who openly dissuaded the mill-hands from joining the union, with the connivance of the managers', (RCLI. Vol. V(1), p.271). In late 1928 the BJWA claimed a membership of 8,778 of the 50,000 workers employed in the area, though this claim was almost certainly inflated, while the registered Kankinarrah Union submitted to the RCLI that it had 1,000 members. MCCC, P.544(3): op.cit.; RCLI, Vol.V(2), pp.119-20.

168. Chakravarty, Interview, p.135. Chakravarty says that he became widely known as 'the Union Babu'.

169. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.145. Chakravarty claimed that this policy was one of fighting 'the entire employing class' and was based on Marxist theory (MCCC, Chakravarty, Statement, pp.151-2). This is a claim which will be tested.

to extend its union base - among Calcutta's municipal workers, and at the railway workshops at Kharagpur and Lillooah.

Goswami began working with the non-party trade unionist Prabhati Das Gupta to organise the 14,500 disaffected scavengers of the Calcutta Municipality.¹⁷⁰ In January they managed to form a union, and on March 4, after several months agitation, Calcutta's second scavengers' strike began.¹⁷¹ The demands were for a wage increase and improved living and working conditions. The strike, which brought the union leaders into sharp conflict with the Swarajist Calcutta Corporation, lasted for a week.¹⁷² In a compromise settlement the Mayor, J.M. Sen Gupta, undertook to extract from the Corporation a Rs.2 wage increase and consideration of the other demands - a compromise which enhanced the popularity of the leaders among the scavengers. The strike also brought the existence of the WPP into public awareness in the most prominent way yet.¹⁷³ The publicity, and the limited extension of the party's footing among the working class was a useful start to 1928.

170. Goswami, interview; MCCC, P.52 op.cit.; RCLI, Vol.V(2), pp.136-7. Das Gupta, one of India's first trade unionist women, became involved in labour work from 1927 after returning from post-graduate study in the U.S.A.

171. MCCC, P.52: op.cit.; MCCC, P.1348: Goswami to Ghate, 8/3/28; Statesman, 1/7/28, p.16. Das Gupta became President and Goswami, General Secretary. The first strike was in May 1924, lasting for three days.

172. MCCC, P.52 op.cit.; MCCC, P.28: report of a Scavengers' Union mass meeting, 5/3/28; MCCC, P.2505: speeches by Goswami and R.R. Mitra; MCCC, P.546(10): Spratt to F. Malonie, 26/8/28.

173. Statesman, 1/7/28, p.16; Goswami, interview.

A lock-out strike at the Kharagpur workshops of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway (BNR) in the latter half of 1927 provided the BJWA with its first opportunity to 'descend' on a railway conflict.¹⁷⁴ Chakravarty, Bhattacharya and Bannerji from the BJWA group 'soon arrived on the scene',¹⁷⁵ to join both militant and moderate trade unionists from Bengal and elsewhere.¹⁷⁶ The lock-out was the railway administration's response to a 'determined' stand by the workshop men against the former's decision to retrench 1,600 of the approximately 11,000 employees.¹⁷⁷

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174. The strike/lock-out followed a month long BNR strike by 21,000 workers, including half of the Kharagpur employees, in Feb.-Mar. 1927. The issues had been low wages, racial discrimination in employment practices, victimisation of union activists, and corruption among supervisory staff. The strike failed, the men returning unconditionally. See RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), pp.171-3, and ps. 257, 534 and 545, and Vol.VIII(2), pp.436-9, 473-4; IB, Communism, (1927), pp. 275-7; Karnik, op.cit., pp.154-63, provides a narrative account of this strike and the later lock-out.
175. Chakravarty, Interview, p.136.
176. Trade unionists from several provinces involved themselves at Kharagpur because of its inter-provincial implications. Among the militants were Singaravelu Chettiar, Mukundalal Sirkar, Dange and Mirajkar, as well as Chakravarty and Bhattacharya from the Bengal WPP. The moderates were led by V.V. Giri and C.F. Andrews. Chakravarty, Interview, pp.136-7; Mirajkar, interview; K. Murugesan and C.S. Subramanyan, Singaravelu - First Communist in South India (New Delhi, 1975), p.118. 'The Bengal-Nagpur Railway Lock-Out', in LM, Vol.9(12), Dec. 1927, pp.765-6.
177. The retrenchment was in line with the recommendations of the State Workshop Enquiry Committee (1926). During the War railway workshops had been used for the manufacture of munitions in addition to their normal functions. By the mid-1920's the re-adjustment to peace time operations was complete and the Enquiry Committee established the guidelines for the resulting rationalisation and retrenchments. The Kharagpur block-retrenchment was one of the first and was a particularly heavy and sudden cut-back. The Kharagpur conflict which resulted led the central government to recommend to the Railway Board that future retrenchments be staggered. RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), pp.171-2.

The strikers were militant, rejecting the calls of the moderate trade union leaders for an early return to work.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the WPP's annual report concluded, the party activists, 'in the absence of close contact with the men and with inadequate resources, were unable to take any useful action'.¹⁷⁹ The strike eventually collapsed, and the men returned unconditionally on December 8.¹⁸⁰ Union organisation as a whole declined subsequently, despite continued retrenchment, after the strain of two unsuccessful strikes in a year and a resurgence of communalism in 1928.¹⁸¹

Nevertheless the Kharagpur strike provided the WPP with its first experience in a major industrial struggle. It demonstrated the weakness of a railway strike which remained

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178. The moderates had a difficult time at Kharagpur. Andrews commented that the men were much more determined and bitter than during any previous strike in which he had been involved, and 'at one time it was as much as I could do to get a hearing'. (IOL, Halifax Papers, Vol.21: Andrews to Irwin, 29/10/27). The advantages for the militants were partly vitiated, however, by Mukundalal Sirkar's factional ambitions: MCCC, P.526(29): op.cit.
179. MCCC, P.52: op.cit.
180. The Agent's compromise, otherwise nominal, included the unusual concession of payment of full lock-out wages to the men.
181. Kharagpur had previously been sufficiently prone to communalism for the Administration to find this an effective means of social control, and it remained a continuing problem after the strikes of 1927. Two serious communal riots between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs broke out in Kharagpur in 1928, and in 1929 H.S. Suhrawardy was able to capitalise on these tensions by establishing a rival communal union among the minority (approx. 11%) Muslim community. The BNR union subsequently charged the administration with favouring the communal union. RCLI, Vol. VIII(1), pp.546-8, and Vol.VIII(2), p.470; MCCC, P.544(2): minutes of BTUF meeting, 2/9/28; Statesman, 1/7/28, p.9.

confined to the workshops,¹⁸² the difficulty of influencing events in the absence of previous party activity among the workers, and the potential for eliciting a more enthusiastic response from workers under attack than the moderates could attract. It also brought them into contact with the Secretary of the Khagaul (Patna) branch of the East-Indian Railway Union (EIRU), K.C. Mitra.

BJWA activists, and particularly Chakravarty, began working with Mitra from October 1927 to establish a union among the 14,000 employees of the EIR's workshop at Lillooah, near Howrah. The response was 'one of enthusiasm' from almost all communities.¹⁸³ They were able very quickly to form the nucleus of a union organisation and draw up a list of grievances. The grievances centred on the issue of corruption among and exploitation by the supervisory staff and included demands for wage increases to the level of those paid at the EIR workshops at Lucknow and Lahore and for improved housing facilities. Soon the charge of victimisation of union activists by foremen was added to the list. However the substantive demands were rejected by the Agent. In response, on March 7, 700 of the Lillooah workers repeated the Kharagpur tactic of 'industrial satyagraha' - entering the workshops but refusing to work. The EIR Agent

182. Allison had earlier emphasised to Bengali trade unionists the importance of this point, in relation to a proposed strike at Kharagpur: IB, Communism, (1927), p.276.

183. RCLI, Vol. VIII(1), ps. 162 and 165; Chakravarty, Interview, p.137. Chakravarty says that the Bengali workers were least active (this may have been because Bengalis were mostly in skilled jobs) and that UP Muslims were the most active in the union, followed by 'up-country' Hindus. At least one Bengali worker - K.D. Chatterjee, an electrical fitter - became a union activist: RCLI, Vol.VIII(2), p.425.

responded immediately and intransigently, declaring a lock-out throughout the workshops, thus involving all workers. This action began the most bitter conflict in Bengal's preceding industrial history.¹⁸⁴ Occurring in early 1928, and situated near the major industrial centres of the Calcutta region, the timing and location as well as the scale of the Lillooah strike ensured that its outcome would be crucial for the subsequent fortunes of the WPP's working class program in the late 1920's.

The Lillooah Railway-Workshop Strike

The WPP's prospects at Lillooah were more favourable than at Kharagpur. Having been involved in the initial stages of the union organisation leading to the lock-out, its 'descent' on the troubled workshop had not been so 'sudden'. The predominant up-country sector of the workforce was actively involved in the union and in the subsequent struggle and Chakravarty's knowledge of Hindi provided the party with an independent point of contact with the migrants. The workers were militant, assertive, demonstrated a high level of unity in their opposition to the authorities, and were determined to defend their fledgling union;¹⁸⁵ and, importantly, the jobbers (or their equivalents)

184. RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), ps. 172 & 481. Karnik provides a narrative of the Lillooah strike in op.cit., pp.205-11. For a communist perspective see 'The Lillooah Railway Strike' (probably by Spratt) in LM, Vol.10(9), Sept. 1928, pp.572-4.

185. This is apparent from the nature of the men's grievances and actions - e.g. their attack on supervisor corruption and their resistance to victimisation of union activists. A large proportion of the men attended the union's mass meetings, e.g. 12,000 on March 1: RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), p.482.

were in an ambiguous position in the conflict - some siding with the workers and others with the administration - thus providing room for more initiative from among the ordinary men.¹⁸⁶ The union had 'substantial' funds at the outset of the strike, and received quite generous public contributions during its course.¹⁸⁷ Finally, it was during the early stages of the lock-out that the WPP adopted its more definitive trade union policy. This guideline, together with the Kharagpur experience, made it more possible than previously to develop and implement a clear party strategy.

But there were also a number of negative features. Comprehensive railway unions and successful railway strikes were inherently difficult to organise,¹⁸⁸ and in this case the Railway Board and the government were determined from the outset that the workers should not win any concessions for fear that this 'may be interpreted as a victory' and encourage further strikes.¹⁸⁹

186. Many foremen, the key personnel involved in recruitment, and mistris (skilled artisans, with dominant roles within the work force structure) came under attack. This indicated the labourers' preparedness to attack abuses within the existing system, if not the system itself. However mistris such as Atul Behary Santra, Ram Autar and Shara Gurdit Singh, were also among the leading union activists, and were a crucial bridging group between the union leadership and the ordinary workers: RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), pp.478-8, 481-2 & p.489 and Vol.VIII(2), p.425; Chakravarty, Interview, p.141.

187. MCCC, P.415(15): 'EIR Dispute', a pamphlet written by Spratt; Chakravarty (Interview, p.140) says that Rs. 50,000 was raised in Bengal for the strike fund. The fact that the strike was directed against a government agency was undoubtedly an important factor contributing to the level of public support, which was in sharp contrast to that received by the Bombay mill strikers.

188. The main problems were: the strength of the employer - the government - and its determination to defeat strikes

This intransigence, emphasised at an early stage by violent police and railway auxiliary force repression at the Lillooah suburb of Bamangachi,¹⁹⁰ made it imperative that the workshop stoppage be rapidly extended along the line in order to bring traffic to a halt. Without this sanction a workshop strike was in a very weak position for, as the Railway Board later noted, its immediate effect was simply 'a considerable saving to the administration in wages and materials'.¹⁹¹ But the extension of the strike would require clear thinking and a concerted effort on the part of the leadership, for the organisational work at Lillooah preceding the lock-out had been limited and there was no organisation along the line.¹⁹² Finally, the alliance with Mitra was a somewhat hazardous one for a Marxist trade union leadership. Despite his 'militance' Mitra was far from being a champion of class-based organisation and worker leadership of the union, and he was a wily and charismatic fellow, capable

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on the strategically sensitive railways; the organisational difficulties of co-ordinating the widely separated departments; and the difficulty of neutralising the loyal, strategically placed European and Anglo-Indian traffic staff.

189. IOL, Halifax Papers, Vol.22: Jackson to Irwin, 29/3/28; RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), pp.482-5, which includes the G of I communique (3/6/28) giving full support to the Railway Board's stand.
190. On March 28 strikers returning from a mass meeting were fired upon by a contingent of police and railway auxiliaries, backed by Gurkha soldiers. Four were killed and over 30 wounded.
191. ibid., p.171. (And Cf. D. Arnold, op.cit., on the reasons for the failure of the SIR strike).
192. Cf. the GIPRU leadership's concern to delay strike action until strong organisation, covering both the traffic and workshop departments, had been established.

of keeping the initiative in his own hands. Mitra, a former station master in Bihar and an 'eloquent' Hindi speaker,¹⁹³ was able to establish a strong personal following among the men. It is significant that he cultivated this following through a populist religious appeal. Known to the workers as 'Jatadhari Baba', he affected the style of a sadhu. While Sir Stanley Jackson found him 'decidedly capable ... with a decided personality',¹⁹⁴ a frustrated Spratt later spoke of his use of 'his religious reputation, intrigue and a rather low type of demagogy' to effect the main goal of his policy - 'keeping the men under his own personal control'.¹⁹⁵ The communists' alliance with 'Jatadhari Baba' brought the party into closer contact with the workers. But if they were to use the alliance to develop a Marxist influence and a party base among the Lillooah workers they would need to attain a similar independence to that exercised by the Bombay communists in their united front with reformist unionists. This was, however, inherently more difficult, for the Bengali communists at Lillooah did not have an equivalent to the Maratha workers to be mobilised as readily as an independent base.¹⁹⁶ This situation gave added emphasis to the need for a clear party policy and for skill and determination in its execution.

193. Chakravarty, Interview, p.137

194. IOL, Halifax Papers, Vol.22, p.158: Jackson to Irwin, 20/5/28.

195. MCCC, P.2419(P): Spratt to R. Page Arnot, 23/10/28. He regarded the EIRU leadership as a whole as 'Congress reformist': MCCC, P.527(8) op.cit.

196. Bengali workers averaged less than a quarter of the workforce in Bengal's railway workshops: RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.14.

The communists' policy in the Lillooah struggle passed through two stages, separated from each other by Spratt's arrival in Bengal in early April. In the first stage the BJWA group working with K.C. Mitra - Chakravarty, Goswami and S.N. Banerji - appears not to have made any attempt to initiate an independent party policy, nor even to have recognised the necessity of doing so.¹⁹⁷ In the second stage this situation was slowly¹⁹⁸ rectified, under Spratt's constant pressure.

In the first stage Mitra appears to have been able to retain unchallenged control of the overall strategic and tactical direction of the strike. The BJWA group simply adopted the subsidiary role of 'agit-prop' shock troops in the mobilisation of the workers at Lillooah and elsewhere. There is no evidence of the Bombay communists' clear overall strategic perspective, the careful assessment of their strengths and weaknesses to determine the extent and forms of their dependence upon the reformists, or the equally careful tactical deliberations within the party, the GKU and the JMSC during the general strike.¹⁹⁹ Not only was there no significant policy discussion within the Bengal party, Mitra, even after Spratt's arrival,

197. The BJWA group was later criticised for its 'mere subservience' to the Mitra leadership (MCCC, P.527(8): op.cit.) and it is perhaps significant that Chakravarty, in his recent extended memoir of the strike, makes no retrospective critique of either the Mitra leadership or the BJWA group's political relationship with it.

198. Eg., it was not until June 21 that Ganavani published a party critique of the Mitra leadership's policy in, and conduct of the strike.

199. The MCCC records do not include any EIRU or WPP evidence of formal meetings by the strike leadership to decide strike strategy and tactics. Given the comprehensive nature of the collection of evidence for the

'delayed by all possible means' the formation of a strike committee. He kept personal control over strike tactics and the expenditure of funds, and when a committee was finally formed, mainly of outsiders, he 'prevented its working'.²⁰⁰

Mitra's strategy was to use a limited strike in an attempt to bring about negotiations with the railway administration or the intervention of the government²⁰¹ - his 'militance' was very limited. After the union's initial attempt to force a compromise had foundered on the obduracy of the authorities, underlined by the Bamangachi police action, the Mitra leadership decided on a limited extension of the strike in the Calcutta-Howrah area to place greater pressure on the railway administration.²⁰² Chakravarty was put in charge of the volunteers and S.N. Banerji became the 'mass spokesman'.²⁰³ After leading marches of the Lillooah men through the adjacent areas, and after the Bamangachi fatalities, they managed to catalyse sympathetic strikes in several of the already turbulent EIR installations and in the private engineering works in Howrah. These, however, were not sufficient to halt traffic on the line

199. (Cont'd.)

Meerut Case this lacuna, which contrasts strongly with Bombay, is not just a problem of source materials - it also provides strong circumstantial evidence that, in marked contrast to Bombay, such meetings did not occur.

200. MCCC, P.2419(P): op.cit. It is probable that Mitra's informal style of leadership depended significantly on the mediation of the influential mistris who joined the union.
201. RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), pp.482-4; IOL, Halifax Papers, Vol.22 p.518: Jackson to Irwin, 6/6/28.
202. MCCC, P.415(15): op.cit.
203. Chakravarty, Interview, p.138.

and force the administration to the negotiating table. Accordingly, Chakravarty recounts, the strike leadership 'realised that our struggle must be extended or we shall lose in isolation'.²⁰⁴ But the direction in which they chose to extend it was not along the EIR line, but through the jute area.²⁰⁵ The leadership organised a series of 'long marches by workers' jathas' along the Hooghly, with two aims in mind: 'the first was to rally the support of the entire working class of Bengal behind this struggle and secondly to rouse and organise the jute workers'.²⁰⁶ This tactic consumed a great deal of the time and energy of the strike leadership and the Lillooah strikers during this period.

These were grand objectives. And it is very possible that, as Chakravarty claims, 'the whole Hooghly working class belt was electrified' by the marches.²⁰⁷ They also helped to sustain the morale of the Lillooah strikers. And, although there is no evidence of the marches' having catalysed

204. loc. cit.

205. This tactical choice was consistent with the motivation behind the BJWA group's initial attempts to organise the Lillooah workers - they had sought to create a strike there in sympathy with the Kharagpur strike, (ibid., p.137), even though this would not have contributed in any tangible way to the latter's success.

206. ibid., p.138.

207. ibid., p.139. Chakravarty (pp. 138-141) provides an extended account of these marches. See also MCCC, P.2173 and 2174, and PWS 47, 83 & 94 - police reports of the marches and communist speeches (with Chakravarty frequently translating into Hindi).

further unionisation of jute workers,²⁰⁸ some jute mill strikes did occur²⁰⁹ and the party managed to establish a few unions in other industries.²¹⁰ But these limited advances contributed little towards the immediate prospects of the situation at Lillooah. They brought no additional pressure on the railway authorities - traffic continued to run as normal - and, despite the temporary effect of the marches on the spirits of the strikers, morale began to sag from mid-April.²¹¹ By May there were also signs that significant numbers of strikers had begun to resent the additional burden on their dwindling funds imposed by the small number of 'sympathetic strikes' that did occur in

208. Chakravarty (p.141) says that jute strikes occurred both during the marches, and after the Lillooah strike when dismissed Lillooah activists got jobs in the mills.
209. IOL, Halifax Papers, Vol.22, p.449: Jackson to Irwin, 20/5/28. There were a large number of limited jute strikes during the year, many of them associated with the conversion from a multiple shift to a single shift system (see the figures provided in RCLI, Vol.V(1) p.126). These may well have been influenced, if not caused by the Lillooah conflict.
210. Unions were begun among the 4,500 workers at the Kesoram Cotton Mills in the Calcutta suburb of Matiaburz, the 2,000 employees of the Angus Engineering works at Shammagore, up-river from Howrah, the ordnance factories at nearby Ichapore, and among the carters of Burrabazar (Chakravarty, Interview, pp.140-141; MCCC, Judgement, p.499). The Kesoram Textile union was formed during an 11 day strike, involving all sections of the millhands (75% migrant) against the reduction of the weavers' rates. The new union was not able to influence the strike, which ended with the restoration of the old rates, but it became the nucleus for later expansion. (RCLI, Vol.V(1), pp. 412-13, & 422-23; MCCC, P.2256: Ahmad to Tagore, 19/7/28). It is perhaps significant that both the Angus works and one of the ordnance factories employed a majority of Bengali labour (RCLI, Vol.V(1), ps. 395, 203 & 208). This may have contributed to the BJWA group's 'unionisation' of these factories. Nevertheless neither of these unions achieved significance. In contrast, the contact with the carters was to become politically significant

in other industries.²¹²

It was in this 'very serious' situation, that Spratt sought to convince the strike leaders, whom he found 'difficult people to deal with', that a quite different strategy was required.²¹³ Spratt took the view that their tactical errors flowed from theoretical misconceptions: 'the syndicalist notions in regard to the "active minority"' - the belief that the Lillooah workers, the most active and militant group on the railway, could alone 'secure gains for the whole line'; and 'the very similar theory of the "spontaneous" reaction of the masses to a proper stimulus' - the belief that unorganised workers elsewhere would respond spontaneously to and in sympathy with the 'example' set by the Lillooah workshop. '.... both theories', Spratt added, were 'merely excuses to escape from the hard drudgery of organisation'.²¹⁴ Although there is no available evidence to show that the BJWA group totally abandoned these views, they did accept Spratt's tactical alternatives. He persuaded them to discontinue their latest 'stupid' tactic-

210 Contd.

in 1930.

211. IOL, Halifax Papers, Vol.22 p.375: Jackson to Irwin, 18/4/23.
212. ibid., p.449: Jackson to Irwin, 20/5/28. Spratt thought that the strike funds were spent 'rather recklessly': MCCC, P.415(15): op.cit.
213. MCCC, P.1322: Spratt to Ghatte, 12/5/28.
214. MCCC, P.415(15): op.cit. (There are clear continuities between these theories and bhadralok terrorist ideology).

performing mass 'satyagraha' outside the Howrah Magistrate's Court to protest the dismissal of charges against those responsible for the Bamangachi shootings.²¹⁵ He convinced them that they should concentrate instead on forming a strike committee, including ordinary workers, extending the strike along the line, and mobilising further funds.

Despite Mitra's resistance - to the first two goals at least - these tactics were adopted as EIRU policy. An appeal for financial assistance was sent to the Profintern and Rs. 10,000 was received in mid-May although, in line with the request, this was sent to Mitra.²¹⁶ At the same time Spratt, Goswami and Radha Raman Mitra, another of the BJWA group's non-WPP associates, were delegated to agitate for strike action at the previously unorganised EIR workshops at Ondal and Asanol, near the Bihar border. By the end of the month they had managed to bring out Ondal and to initiate a more limited stoppage at Asanol, and had begun attempts to form party branches among

215. MCCC, P.1322: op.cit. He argued that the satyagraha, 'the tactics of middle class impotence, ... coloured by all kinds of false religious and moral ideas', simply provided the police with 'the chance they were waiting for' - to 'bludgeon them mercilessly' and 'strike a little terror into the workers' hearts'. It also burdened funds with bail and defence costs. Forty were injured, some seriously, and 20, including Chakravarty and S.N. Banerji, were arrested: ibid., MCCC, P.415(15): op.cit.

216. NAI, H.Poll, 18/IV/1928; G of Ben. to HD, G of I, 1/5/28; NAI, H.Poll, 10/XXII/1929. Approximately Rs. 5,000 more was sent by communist organisations in Britain, though there is no record of its receipt.

the workers there.²¹⁷ But not only did these strikes meet with military-backed 'police-terror ... probably worse than anything ... seen in industrial disputes for some time',²¹⁸ they coincided with the beginning of the slow collapse of the Lillooah strikers. When, on June 2, the Government of India issued a communique giving full support to the EIR administration's refusal to make any concessions,²¹⁹ K.C. Mitra finally issued an official union call for a general strike along the line. He then left the Lillooah area, for the first time, to assist in the attempt to extend the strike.

It was, however, far too late. The first cracks appeared when the Howrah engineering workers, whom the EIRU leaders had failed to organise or represent during their strike, began to return from early June.²²⁰ By this time the Lillooah workers, too, were exhausted, along with the Profintern's contribution to the strike fund. They began to return in the second half of June, leaving the Asanol and Ondal strikers increasingly isolated. All that could be hoped for was 'an

217. MCCC. P.501: Spratt & Goswami (Ondal) to Ahmad, 25/5/28 - Goswami reported optimistically that their party-building efforts were receiving a 'nice response from the young men' in the workshops, but the response proved to be temporary: MCCC, P.526(12): Ahmad to Spratt & Goswami, 26/5/28; MCCC, PW.68: police report on activities at Asanol.

218. MCCC, P.415(15): op.cit. See also LM, Vol.10(9), op.cit., for an account of police violence at Asanol, Ondal and elsewhere during the EIR strike.

219. The communique is reproduced in RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), p.172.

220. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.390.

honourable settlement' rather than an outright defeat.²²¹ But even this hope faded rapidly. On July 10, Mitra advised a public meeting of strikers that they should call off the strike, and from the next day the men began an unconditional return to work. Many were subsequently victimised by the administration. A final flare-up, in response to the Agent's final terms, quickly subsided without any further gain.

Nothing had been won by the strikers.²²² The strike, a WPP post-mortem acknowledged, had finished 'tragically'.²²³

The results ... seem for the moment to be terrible. Many hundreds of men [250 at Ondal and Asanol and 54 at Lillooah] are victimised, thousands have been for months without proper food; heads and bones have been broken by the dozen.

Adding to the sense of defeat, the Government of India announced on August 17 that 2,600 of the Lillooah employees would be retrenched during the following 20 months.²²⁴ The retrenchments were effected without any further strike attempts.

Nor had the party gained significantly from the event. 'We rather made fools of ourselves over the Lillooah strike', Spratt reflected in October;

221. MCCC, P.1118: Spratt to Joglekar, 23/6/28.

222. The only concessions were a marginal pay increase for some categories of the lowest paid workers and a promise to investigate housing conditions.

223. MCCC, P.415(15): op.cit.

224. Reproduced in RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), pp.483-84. The EIR administration, in addition, withdrew their recognition of the union: RCLI, Vol.VIII(2), p.397.

We merely gave some assistance in agitation etc. but without making any serious difference to the ill-judged and very reactionary policy of Mitra ... When eventually he consented to let us try spreading the strike, it was too late, and the effort failed ... He made clever use of the situation, and succeeded in fooling us pretty completely, while we have little in the way of propaganda achieved to compensate for it.²²⁵

Mitra delivered a final coup de grace by making the communists, because of their advocacy of the extension of the strike, appear responsible for the victimisation of the Asanol and Ondal workers.²²⁶ Mitra was able to retain control of the EIRU, to attract what remained of the strike leadership's waning influence over the defeated Lillooah men,²²⁷ and, gradually and partially, to rebuild the union.²²⁸ The BJWA group's subsequent access to the Lillooah workers remained indirect, mediated by the EIRU leadership, despite their close contact with

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225. MCCC, P.2419(P): op.cit. Mitra's differences with communist policy were further revealed at the Nagpur session of the AITUC in December 1929. When the moderates seceded from the militants Mitra joined the former: (RCLI, Vol.VIII(2), p.425).
226. ibid. Isemonger (DIB) commented that the outcome of the Lillooah strike had 'lowered the influence of Spratt and his Communist associates' in Bengal: NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: note by Isemonger, 29/8/28.
227. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928, KW XI: op.cit. The Railway Board reported that after the collapse of the strike the Lillooah workers, in contrast to their initial enthusiasm for the union, had adopted an attitude of 'indifference', viewing it as 'a well intentioned body which however, cannot achieve anything of benefit to them': RCLI, Vol.VIII(1), ps.165 & 162.
228. Eg., on October 13, K.C. Mitra led a rally of 3,000 workers, carrying red flags and chanting slogans such as 'Lal Paltan ki Jai' (Victory to the Red Army) and 'Mazdur Bhaion ki Jai' (Victory to the Labourers); in December the EIRU was able to organise a mass meeting of 6,000 workers at the workshops to be addressed by a

the strikers for several months. For the WPP little more than 'lessons for the labour movement' could be salvaged from the Lillooah experience; the only consolation that could be offered was a repetition, though with little apparent conviction, of Lenin's dictum that the revolution necessarily passed through successive defeats before winning final victory.²²⁹

Nevertheless Spratt's comment on the communists' failure as propagandists requires further investigation, for it was not a failure to project and make popular a militant anti-capitalist ideology. In fact the K.C. Mitra leadership subsequently adopted this as the EIRU's official ideology. In October, three months after the collapse of the strike, the union began a Hindi weekly called Lal Paltan (Red Army). It featured on its front page the hammer and sickle and a cartoon depicting a worker firing a capitalist from a cannon, and argued for the abolition of capitalism.²³⁰ The ideological choice suggests that these themes were not unpopular with the workers. During the strike the marchers' slogans had included

228. Contd.

visiting international communist, J.W. Johnstone (NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928, KW XI: op.cit.); and in March, Mitra organised a rally of 1,000 workshop labourers (NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929; Bengal FR2 Mar.) And, as will be seen below, Mitra also played an important role in a worker demonstration at the Calcutta Session of the INC. In 1929 the EIRU collected some Rs.12,000 from members, and in Feb. 1930, had a balance of RS.2,500. Most of its office-bearers were mistris. RCLI, Vol.VIII(2), p.430.

229. MCCC, P.415(15). This document is a WPP post-mortem of the strike and the communists' role within it.

230. NAI, H.Poll, 1/1928: Bengal FR2 Oct. 1928: NAI, H.Poll 18/VII/1928, KW XI: op.cit.

'Lal Jhanda ki Jai' (Victory to the Red Flag) and 'Mazdur-Kisan Hukumat Zindabad' (Long Live the Worker-Peasant State),²³¹ and similar slogans were chanted at mass rallies organised by the union after the strike.²³² To this extent the communists had succeeded.

But the change in consciousness was, compared to that which occurred among the Bombay mill workforce, rather superficial. Nor was it accompanied by a transformation of the existing modes of social and political organisation. The evidence provided by the Bombay situation would suggest that these two features mutually limited each other. We have seen that K.C. Mitra successfully resisted the communists' belated attempt to establish worker leadership and class organisation during the strike. For evidence of the limits of the ideological shift we have Chakravarty's account of the strike. Despite his direct experience of the life of migrant labour in the mills and bustees of Bhatpara, he was perplexed by 'the peculiar stage of consciousness' of the strikers during the marches along the Hooghly - at the point when morale was highest.²³³ In addition to the slogans for workers' power and the worker-peasant state the marchers had also, and 'finally', chanted 'Ganga Mai ki Jai'. The BJWA group also 'received a shock' when the strikers, 'who had remained firm in class battle and had not flinched in the face of bullets, would not dine together - so deep was their

231. Chakravarty, Interview, pp.138-39; see also the police reports cited in fn.207.

232. See fn.228.

233. Chakravarty, Interview, p.139.

prejudice of caste and religion'. The men explained to the bemused communists: 'We can give up our lives but not our religious beliefs'.²³⁴

The failure to induce a profound change in the working class's consciousness and organisation at Lillooah arose to a large degree from the objective realities of the situation - community consciousness appears to have been more deeply rooted among the north Indian workers of Lillooah than among the Maratha mill-hands,²³⁵ and the Lillooah strike was in an inherently much more difficult position than the Bombay textile strike. Nor were the migrant majority of the Lillooah workers as accessible to Bengal's communists as were the Marathas to the communists of Bombay. The bhadralok Marxists' 'shock' on discovering the reality of the strikers' consciousness demonstrates their distance from the cultural world of industrial labour, and the romanticisation of the working class made possible by that distance. The previous 'proletarianisation'

234. ibid., cf. Rowe, op.cit., p.p231-2, on the particularly important role of religion for insecure up-country migrants to Bombay. Religion was one way of 'dealing with the dangerous pardesh' (lit.foreign country). In both village and city, 'deities control space and their worship provides an integrating mechanism for the diverse groups making up the population'.

235. Eg., Rowe found that in Bombay in the 1950s his sample group of UP migrants were far less inclined than Marathas to participate in voluntary associations such as trade unions, remaining instead within their primary, village-oriented community forms of organisation: North Indian workers, 'seem to be at the far end of the continuum of involvement in city life, since nearly all of them are so strongly identified with the village'. (ibid., p.232). Rowe's observations of differential community consciousness in the 1950s suggest probable, if not direct parallels with the 1920s. Similarly, up-country migrants in Bombay presumably shared this characteristic with those in Calcutta.

of Bengal's industrial labour, even of its 'active minorities', had not been nearly as complete, nor its acceleration during a major strike as rapid, as the WPP activists had anticipated. The Bombay communists began their venture with similar pre-conceptions, but after making direct contact with labour these were soon modified. However, the former station-master 'Jatadhari Baba', in contrast to his communist colleagues, clearly understood the realities and implications of the workers' community-religious world view and the organisational forms associated with this consciousness. Mitra was able quite comfortably to reconcile the limited change in consciousness which did occur, even though it included an explicit demand for working class power, with his traditional, 'reactionary' conceptions of organisation and leadership. He did not have to contend with an equivalent of 'the union of the militant workers' which developed from the Bombay strike.²³⁶

Nor, however, did he have to contend with a determined alternative communist leadership, posing a systematic challenge to his conceptions and practices. This absence marked the basic political failure of the communists in the Lillooah strike. The difference between the Calcutta and Bombay leaderships in this regard is striking. It can be seen in the

236. Cf. Spratt's comment, on another occasion, on the Bengal working class's 'apparently complete subservience ... even to the worst leadership', a feature which he found more pronounced in that province than in Bombay; MCCC, P.2419(P): op.cit. Nevertheless Mitra's position was not permanent - he was removed from the union in late-1929 'because he did not like to work'. He was replaced by another ex-station master, Santi Mondal: RCLI, Vol.VIII (1), p.425.

different kinds of approaches which the two groups took towards, respectively, K.C. Mitra and Jhabvala. These two trade unionists had much in common: both combined ideological militance with policies aimed at maintaining a personal following among the workers; both were influential within the existing trade union structure; and each provided the local party with a valuable access to trade unionism and the workers, and a convenient alliance against the conventional reformists. But the Bombay communists approached their alliance with Jhabvala from a much more independent position. In so doing they were able, through an energetic and systematic program of organisation and propaganda based on a clearly formulated Marxist strategy, to mobilise an independent base among the Marathas and thus make him increasingly dispensable. The activity of the Calcutta communists in the EIR strike shows that this was not the case for the Bengal party. The detailed trade union policy adopted by the party in March does not appear to have benefitted the BJWA group's strike activity appreciably, except possibly towards the end, when it was too late. In their propaganda they failed to project the party as a distinct entity and the most legitimate working class leadership: as Muzzafar Ahmad²³⁷ recognised, the communists were 'not able to lay before the strikers our main points correctly'. That the Mitra leadership should produce a Hindi 'communist' newspaper for a working class readership while the WPP's intended Hindi organ,

237. MCCC, P.2099(C): Ahmad to 'J' (M.N. Roy), 10/5/28.

Lal Nishan (Red Flag), failed to materialise,²³⁸ was both a cause and a symptom of the communists' failure as independent propagandists to the working class.

The Bauria-Chenqail Jute Mill Strikes

The WPP's participation in the Lillooah struggle had foundered principally on its failure to establish a sufficient level of independence in its relationship with the K.C. Mitra leadership. The underlying shortcomings in party policy had been 'difficult to realise ... at the time'.²³⁹ But an opportunity to apply the 'lessons for the labour movement' arising from the Lillooah experience was presented in the second half of 1928 - this time in the strategically crucial jute industry.

In mid-July, soon after the collapse of the Lillooah struggle, the workers of the Fort Gloster jute mills at Bauria, downstream from Howrah, began what was to become the 'most protracted' strike in the previous history of the jute mills.²⁴⁰ The issue which triggered the strike was management

238. The party resolved on August 26 to begin Lal Nishan (MCCC, P.416(14): minutes of WPP meeting, 26/8/28), and Muzaffar subsequently devoted considerable attention to overcoming the obstacles blocking its publication. He failed because of the party's chronic financial problems. (MCCC, P.526 (39): op.cit., MCCC, P.1865(1)(T): Ahmad to S.N. Tagore, 8/9/28; NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: G of Ben. to G of I, 19/12/28). It should be noted that the decision to continue to accord priority to the Bengali weekly meant in effect that 'petty-bourgeois' propaganda was regarded as more important than working class propaganda.

239. MCCC, P.2419(P): op.cit.

240. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.126.

victimisation of workers participating in attempts to unionise the Bauria millhands. But the underlying grievance was the decision of the managing agency, Kettlewell Bullen and Co., to convert the mills from a double to a single-shift system - a change which would result in the retrenchment of 2,000 of Bauria's 15,000 millhands.²⁴¹ But the conversion to a single-shift system had previously been introduced at a large number of mills in the past few years and, though usually accompanied by strikes, these had been short-lived.²⁴² There was another issue contributing to the intensity of the Bauria conflict, and thus to the opportunities it provided.

As we saw in Chapter 2, the Bauria mills, in common with many of the jute mills to the south of Calcutta, employed a higher proportion of Bengali labour - most of it coming from the villages of the immediate vicinity - than did the main mill area to the north. At Bauria this local Bengali labour made up more than half of the total.²⁴³ In the interests of social control over its workforce the management decided to replace its local labour progressively with more manageable up-country migrants. This decision, the immediate effect of which was the intensification of the strike, was a

241. RCLI, Vol.V(2), p.153. The Bauria mills were all under the same managing agency.

242. See fn.209.

243. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: G. Rainy (Sec., Commerce Dept., G of I) to Haig, 8/1/29, (a report based on a meeting with the managing agents).

direct consequence of the enthusiastic response of the Bengali workers at Bauria to the recently begun efforts of the bhadralok trade unionists at the centre.²⁴⁴ The Bauria situation thus indicates the greater potential for trade union organising among Bengali labour there,²⁴⁵ and it provides strong supporting evidence for the thesis that the overall predominance of migrant labour in Bengal was a major obstacle to the formation of Bengali-led working class organisation in that province.²⁴⁶

244. ibid.

245. Cf. Indrajit Gupta's finding that the Bengali communists subsequently attained a long-term base in the jute industry only among Bengali workers. (I am indebted to Dipesh Chakrabarty for this point. I was unable to obtain a copy of Gupta's book, Capital and Labour in the Jute Industry). At Bauria another factor may have facilitated the trade unionists' penetration - because the Bengali labour was recruited from the neighbouring districts it may not have been as subject to the power of the jobber as was up-country labour. Its ready access to additional, agricultural income probably added to its comparative independence.

246. At Bauria, and presumably elsewhere, the relative difficulties of mobilising migrant labour were not simply socio-cultural. Many of the migrant local workers were housed in 'coolie lines' inside the mill compounds, whereas the local workers commuted daily from their villages. Those living within the compounds were subject to the control of the company's Gurkha guards as well as being isolated from outsider union activists during their off-work hours. One of Kettlewell Bullen's reasons for replacing their local Bengali labour was, indeed, to ensure that a large proportion of its labour would be housed inside the compounds to secure these results: NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Rainy to Haig, 8/1/29. (Rainy also commented on the higher level of social control exercised in this way by the jute mills, compared to the Bombay mills). However, although it was more difficult to mobilise the migrants in the Bauria strike, there is evidence that the non-Bengali communities also gave strong support to it: see fn.314 below.

Trade union work at Bauria-Chengail was begun by Kishorilal Ghosh's BTUF, which had earlier decided to establish a comprehensive jute workers' union. Because of the troubled conditions in the Bauria-Chengail area it resolved to begin there.²⁴⁷ The BTUF delegated R.R. Mitra and Bankim Mukherji to Chengail in March during a strike at its Fort Gloster mill. They were unable to achieve significant results during the strike, but immediately began a union campaign at the neighbouring Ludlow mill.²⁴⁸ When the management victimised those workers who became involved in this effort a strike resulted. Mitra, Mukherji and, after he had been asked by Ghosh to assist the other two, Spratt, helped the Ludlow strikers to formulate their demands - for the reinstatement of victimised workers, the dismissal of two foreman and recognition of the union - and to lead the strike. It ended after two weeks, with most of the demands conceded²⁴⁹ - the first jute strike, Spratt claimed, which had achieved significant success.²⁵⁰

Mitra and Mukherji, occasionally assisted by Spratt, then began a unionisation campaign at the troubled Bauria mills. In early July, after several weeks effort, a union was formed

247. K.L. Ghosh, cited in MCCC, Judgement, p.545.

248. MCCC, D.84(10 & 11), D.87, cited in Judgement, p.254; R.R. Mitra, Interview, pp.144-45.

249. Statesman, 27/6/28, p.6.

250. MCCC, P.1322: Spratt to Ghatge, 12/5/28; MCCC, PW.s 27 & 98. Spratt worked full-time for 2 weeks at Chengail.

with Ghosh as President and Mitra as Secretary.²⁵¹ The management of the Bauria mills was not, however, as amenable to dealing with unions as was that of the Ludlow mills at Chengail. It responded first by preventing union meetings on company property, then by dismissing six union activists,²⁵² and finally by calling in police to quell agitated crowds of workers. After a violent confrontation on July 16 between 4,000 protesting workers and the mill authorities and police, Kettlewell Bullen declared a lock-out, which was then extended to the other Bauria mills.²⁵³ The workers' struggle against the management's attempts to implement its new policies continued until early January, keeping the mills closed for most of that time. Nevertheless, in the face of Kettlewell Bullen's determination,²⁵⁴ the strike finally ended in unconditional defeat for the workers. It was a

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251. MCCC, P.118: R.R. Mitra's note-book; MCCC, P.2221: police report of one of Spratt's speeches.
252. The six activists were dismissed for 'creating trouble by fomenting insubordination among the other employees': Statesman, 18/9/28, p.5.
253. Statesman, 17/7/28, p.9; Amrita Bazar Patrika, 17/7/28, cited in Karnik, op.cit., pp.235-6; IQR, 1928, Vol.2, p.1. In the clash 23 workers, 13 police and 4 mill guards were injured. Many of the injured workers were shot. Karnik, pp.235-39, provides an account of this strike.
254. The IJMA's annual report for 1928 indicates the extent of the management's determination that the strike should not succeed, and also the way in which it was seen as a test-case for the industry as a whole; 'It was thought that if the mill authorities recognised as intermediaries the 'officials' of the 'Union' formed in the Fort Gloster area, work would be resumed at the cost of certain concessions: this, however, the Managing Agents refused to do as it was evident that any success the agitators might achieve in this direction would have far-reaching effects on all mills on the river': quoted in Karnik, op.cit., p.239.

remarkable, if ultimately unsuccessful five to six months-long resistance, costing 1,129,358 man-days.²⁵⁵

But the heroic dimensions of the workers' stand at Bauria stood in sharp contrast to the quality of the leadership supplied by the communist trade unionists who involved themselves in the struggle. The leadership became engulfed in an intense factional struggle, initiated by the BJWA group, which almost totally vitiated its contribution to the strike.

The Bauria factionalism developed from a long-standing conflict between Kalidas Bhattacharya and Kishorilal Ghosh.²⁵⁶ When the BTUF decided to begin a jute workers' union the BJWA's hostility increased, on the grounds that, given the BJWA's prior existence as a jute union, the BTUF was breaching the principle of industrial unionism.²⁵⁷ After the Bauria

255. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.126. These figures provided by the G of Ben. appear however to be questionable, for they mean an average of only 7,500 of Bauria's 15,000 workers' having stopped work for the entire 5 month period. We do not know if the reason for the mills' having remained closed for most of this time was full support for the strike from all sections of the millhands. It is perhaps more probable that some non-striking departments were closed by the effect on mill production of sectional strikes in other departments. Nor do we know how the strikers survived for so long, apparently without significant relief funds; but for the Bengalis their alternative - if meagre - agricultural income must have been important, and the up-country workers probably received assistance from their home village if they did not actually return home; see fn.306.

256. In his late 1927 survey of Bengali trade unionism Spratt referred to a 'perpetual difference' between the two: MCCC, P.526(29): op.cit.

257. MCCC, P.2419(P): op.cit.; Ganavani, 26/7/28, in MCCC, P.593-T.

strike had begun the party group in the BJWA initially resisted Spratt's efforts to bring them into the strike leadership, despite his involvement in it from the beginning, stating that they were not prepared to work with 'reformists'.²⁵⁸ Eventually, in October, Chakravarty and a few others went to Bauria and became actively involved.²⁵⁹ However, a later party document argued, they replaced their original abstentionist mistake with an 'opposite error':²⁶⁰ 'Instead of co-operating with the strike leadership and criticising its lapses or mistakes, they launched a campaign of ... recrimination and abuse' against it in order to undermine the BTUF's attempt to build a separate jute union. The 'feud', Spratt wrote to London, had, 'as usual, assumed an intensely personal form', and he had been quite unable to counter it and initiate a useful party discussion on strike policy.²⁶¹ The BTUF was consequently able to 'make much capital' out of the behaviour of the party activists.

An indication of the level of the hostility against the party arising from the Bauria experience, and an image of

258. MCCC, P.527(8): op.cit.; this document also reported that the BJWA group consistently refused to attend meetings of the BTUF, though entitled to do so, on similar 'ultra-leftist' grounds.

259. MCCC, P.526(9): K.L. Ghosh to Spratt, 29/11/28; NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928, KW XI: op.cit.; MCCC, PW.s 37 & 98, & P.2224: Police reports on activity at Bauria and Chengail.

260. MCCC, P.527(8): op.cit.

261. MCCC, P.2419: op.cit. Spratt attempted to raise the same issues that he had stressed during the Lillooah strike.

Bengali trade unionism as a whole, is provided in a letter written by Ghosh during the strike:²⁶²

I have now begun to realise why there is such a strong feeling of hostility created against the so-called Communists everywhere. From a study of their literature as also from association with Saklatwala and Campbell (Allison) as also with Spratt I had altogether different ideas about the so-called Communists from what I actually found the members of the Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party (sic.). They have hardly any initiative and dash. They are incapable of sustained work. They always delight in hampering other people in the task of organisation. They appear to have a sort of clique of adventurers who because they are pledged to support one another, right or wrong, try to dictate their own terms to other trade unionists who in most cases have to yield to them because they have no solidarity but are rent asunder by petty personal jealousies and intrigues.

The picture painted by Ghosh tends to be confirmed by Spratt - there was 'no doubt' in his mind that 'the demoralisation thus produced' by the BJWA group's factional campaign 'contributed towards the collapse of the strike'.²⁶³ The group did subsequently realise its goal of undermining the BTUF's venture into mill unionism - both R.R. Mitra and B. Mukherji were persuaded to join the BJWA²⁶⁴ - but at the cost of a potential base at Bauria. In contrast to Lillooah, no continuing union organ-

262. MCCC, P.24: op.cit. Ghosh was also attacking Muzaffar for his refusal to release the money sent by the GKU for the Bauria strike. Ahmad was unhappy about Ghosh's accounting procedures. This fight, also, became acrimonious.

263. MCCC, P.527(8): op.cit.

264. MCCC, P.34: Minutes of the BJWA's AGM, 3/1/29. Mitra was elected general secretary and Mukherji became the Bauria centre secretary. Ghosh claimed that the BJWA had bought Mitra's loyalty. (MCCC, P.24: K.L. Ghosh to N.M. Joshi, 7/12/28) and, in February, was complaining that both Mitra and Mukherji were 'acting under ... instructions' from the WPP: MCCC, P.2154: Ghosh to Ahmad, 16/2/29.

isation was sustained at Bauria subsequently and the mills were able to proceed unhampered with their program of replacing Bengalis with up-country labour.²⁶⁵

Thus the WPP at Bauria revealed shortcomings which, though taking a different form, and despite the relative advantages provided by the much larger Bengali component of the workforce, were essentially very similar to its Lillooah mistakes. In neither was the WPP involved as a disciplined, integrated party, and in neither did the actual policy pursued bear any direct relationship to official party policy. In both strikes the contentious issue was the policy to be adopted towards 'reformist' trade unionism, and in both the party activists' policy was based, essentially, on factional considerations, not on political analysis.²⁶⁶

In the Lillooah conflict the BJWA group had participated uncritically with a reformist union, without identifiable gain for the WPP or, in the final analysis, the strike; at Bauria they adopted an attitude of unmitigated hostility towards another reformist leadership - with similar though more

265. By early January the Bengalis in one mill had been entirely replaced, and in the other two had been partly replaced. 'In the end', Rainy reported, 'very little local labour will be employed': G. Rainy, 8/1/29, op.cit.

266. Ghosh, for instance, described the WPP's trade union policy as one of 'interference alternated with aloofness'. 'When there is actual need for your assistance', he wrote to Ahmad, 'your party does not seem to be unanimous for help, while certain men are allowed to speak big in your party's name and with its apparent approval ... really it is time that your party came out with a definite policy': MCCC, P.2154(P): op.cit.

negative results. The continuities between 'revolutionary' and 'reformist' trade unionism in Bengal remained, at the end of 1928, much more pronounced than the disjunctions: both forms continued to be driven primarily by the dynamics of daladali politics rather than being guided by formulated policy; and both remained, essentially, divorced from the working class masses.

The Bengal WPP Splits

The conflicts which broke out during the Bauria strike contributed to the collapse of, not only the strike and the BTUF's jute industry union plans, but also the WPP itself. During 1928 the tension between the Chakravarty-Goswami group and the party secretary, Muzaffar Ahmad, had increased. Frustrated by the latter's autocratic methods and his continued success in excluding their associates from the party, the BJWA group began, from October, a concerted, though initially covert campaign to remove him from office.²⁶⁷ This hostility was also directed against Spratt because of his closer relationship with the 'party centre' group and, probably, his co-operation with Ghosh and his criticisms of their trade union activity.²⁶⁸

267. An analysis of the background to, and the events surrounding the party split are provided in MCCC, P.527(8): op.cit. The split, its significance and its implications will be examined more closely in Chapter 4.

268. One of the reasons for Spratt's move to Bengal was to work with Ghosh, following an AITUC decision, on a survey of Bengali trade unionism, particularly in the jute industry (MCCC, P.479: Spratt to Ahmad, 6/3/28). Spratt and Ghosh subsequently formed quite a close working and personal relationship, despite ideological differences. The BJWA group propaganda against Spratt also emphasised the fact that he was British: MCCC, P.527(8): op.cit.

Accordingly, Spratt claimed, the Chakravarty faction took the opportunity of the Bauria strike to launch an attempt to 'fight us out by propaganda among the workers'.²⁶⁹

The intra-party hostility survived the collapse of the Bauria strike. In February, after failing to remove Muzaffar from power, the BJWA faction resigned en bloc from the WPP to form an oppositional 'Peoples' Party' with their non-WPP associates. The BJWA, whose name was changed to the Bengal Jute Workers' Union (BJWU), became the new party's organisational centre. The union's office was also moved from Bhatpara to Calcutta, and nominal union branches were established for each of the major jute mill centres, in order to reinforce its claim to being the industrial union of all jute workers in the province and not simply an informal organisation based on one locality.²⁷⁰

The effect of the split upon the WPP was, in Spratt's view, 'nothing short of a tragedy':²⁷¹

I write in a mood of despondency ... the work of a year has practically been destroyed. The bulk of the party members remain, but of the active men half have gone ... and what is worse, the other half all seem to be paralysed - through sickness, other occupations, or mere slackness. ... And of course, this affair has resulted in a general withdrawal of support, so that we are absolutely crippled.

The bitterness of the conflict between the two groups continued to escalate until the Meerut Case arrests imposed a forced resolution within the confines of the Meerut jail.

269. MCCC, P.527(1): op.cit.

270. MCCC, P.34: op.cit.

271. MCCC, P.527(1): op.cit.

Against this background an event which has been taken as a sign of the rapidly developing influence of the WPP over the labour of Bengal²⁷² - the working class demonstration on December 30 at the Calcutta Session of the INC - adopts a somewhat different significance.

An earlier demonstration had been organised by the WPP, during the AIWPP conference, on December 23.²⁷³ On that day the delegates to the conference marched with a demonstration of workers from Shradhananda Park to the site of the forthcoming National Congress session. A brief meeting at the site was addressed by Sohan Singh Josh, the WPP leader from the Punjab, and R.R. Mitra. This demonstration, unlike the December 30 march, does not appear to have made a significant political impact. In the second demonstration between 20,000 and 30,000 workers, carrying red flags and chanting slogans ranging between 'Mazdur Hukumat ki Jai' and 'Raja Jawaharlal Nehru ki Jai', marched to the Congress pandal.²⁷⁴ There they were met and resisted by Subhas Bose's volunteers. After a scuffle the volunteers were overpowered and large numbers of the demonstrators entered and demanded that they be allowed to address the

272. Eg. G. Chattopadhyaya, Communism, p.116; Sukhbir Choudhary, Peasants' and Workers' Movement in India 1905-1929, (New Delhi, 1971), p.247.

273. Report of the First AIWPP Conference, in MCCC, P.334; Ahmad, Myself, p.433; NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929, KW: DIB Weekly Report, 17/1/29.

274. MCCC, PW.49; NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928, KW XI: op.cit; IQR, Vol.2, 1928, p.355; Statesman, 1/1/29, p.19; Mirajkar, interview.

session. They remained for an hour and a half, meeting with Congress leaders, including Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and passing a resolution calling on the Congress to recognise and cater for their interests and to adopt as its goal Complete Independence and the abolition of all imperialist and capitalist forms of exploitation.

The demonstration indicated a certain level of politicisation of the local working class - and, presumably, the workers' community leaders - in the turbulent industrial conditions of 1928. It was also significant as an event which firmly registered within the National Congress the existence of industrial labour, its condition, and its potential political weight, in the most direct and forceful manner yet.²⁷⁵ But from our perspective there are a number of features which are more significant.

The first is that the demonstration was not organised by the WPP. The organisers appear to have been K.C. Mitra of the EIRU, Shibnath Banerji, and Bankim Mukherji and R.R. Mitra, the strike leaders at Bauria.²⁷⁶ The workers who marched

275. Eg. P. Sitaramayya, The History of the Indian National Congress, Vol.1, (Bombay, 1946), p.332. (Sitaramayya claims that 50,000 workers were involved). The government, also saw it as 'an indication of the enormous increase in the powers of organisation of the workers' - NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: Survey of communist activities, Sept. 1928-Jan. 1929.

276. Abdur Rezzak Khan, one of those involved in the march, stated categorically to the author that the WPP did not organise the march. He credits Sibnath Banerji, Bankim Mukherji and others in the 'Santosh Mitra Group' with being the main organisers. (A.R. Khan, interview). K.C. Mitra figures prominently as one of the organisers and marchers in the reports by MCCC, PW.49 and in the Statesman, 1/1/29, p.19.

came mainly from the closed Bauria mills (on the eve of the collapse of the strike) and from the Lillooah workshops.²⁷⁷ The BJWA party group, who had worked closely with both the Lillooah and Bauria leaders, were also involved in the organisation of the demonstration. But as they had not become the dominant leaderships in either of these two strikes their role in the mobilisation for the INC demonstration could only be subsidiary - once again they were involved as auxiliaries in an event organised by men criticised by the WPP, if not by the BJWA group within the party, as being non-Marxists and 'Congress reformists'. The second feature of significance - the obscurity of the political motives of the organisers - is related to this last point. Although the evidence is not clear, there are suggestions that the motivations of the demonstration organisers may have owed at least as much to the demands of factional politics in Calcutta as to working class 'vanguardism'.²⁷⁸ Finally, the demonstration was little more than an ephemeral event - it was not part of a definite political trend, despite M.N. Roy's optimistic claim from Europe that 'The Calcutta Demonstration may be compared with the Insurrection of the Parisian proletariat in ... June, 1793.²⁷⁹ Some 10,000 workers,

277. Most of the Bauria marchers were now probably permanently unemployed, and thus no longer strictly working class.

278. This issue will be developed in Chapter 4.

279. M.N. Roy, 'The Role of the Proletariat in the National Revolution' (Ca. Feb. 1929), in MCCC, P.1676. This event was subsequently to be used repeatedly by the Comintern to support its current thesis that the working class had become the leading class in the nationalist movement.

organised in a similar manner, participated in the demonstration against the Simon Commission on January 19.²⁸⁰ But this form of political mobilisation proved to be even more temporary than the industrial mobilisation with which it was associated. It cannot be taken as evidence of rising class political consciousness among Bengal's industrial labour.

The WPP was now a working class party with almost no semblance of meaningful contact with the working class.²⁸¹ Was the new 'Peoples' Party' capable of inheriting the WPP's mission of taking Marxism to industrial labour? Had the seceders, the core of the WPP's former 'Labour Group', finally integrated the 'lessons' of their trade union experience in 1928? And was

280. MCCC, PW.36; Statesman, 20/1/29, p.12; Goswami, interview. The demonstration took place in the Congress's name but most of the marchers were workers; K.C. Mitra and the BJWU leaders marched with Congress figures such as J.M. Sen Gupta and Subhas Bose.

281. This was demonstrated very clearly at the time of the Meerut arrests. In Bombay the arrests provoked considerable working class unrest, and 14 mills struck spontaneously in protest, returning to work only under the restraining influence of the new GPU leaders; (NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Mr.; Newman, op.cit. p.329). In contrast, Calcutta's labour 'showed little interest' in the arrests. (NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929, Bengal FR2 Mar.). By late-1928, the G of Ben. reported, the WPP had influence in 28 unions - 24 in Calcutta, 2 in Dacca and 2 in Mymensingh (NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: G of Ben. to G of I, 19/12/28). But the Dacca and Mymensingh unions were only nominal (NAI, H.Poll, 1/1928: Bengal, FR2, Aug.; MCCC, P.2018-T & P. 2002-T: Gopal Basak (WPP member, Dacca) to Ahmad, 24/7/28 and 23/8/28) and in Calcutta only 2 of the unions (the BJWA and the textile workers' union) had memberships of more than 1,000 (MCCC, P.544(3): op.cit.). Even the Scavengers' Union, which earlier appeared to be facing a promising future, later received a serious set-back: in June the Calcutta Corporation rescinded its March promises, but the union, too weak to mount a serious challenge, 'simply had to acquiesce in being swindled': MCCC, P.2419(P): Spratt to R. Page Arnot, 23/10/28.

the BJWU able to create a relationship with the workers qualitatively different to that exercised by the mainstream of Bengali trade unionism? These questions are of some significance, for within less than four months the BJWU was to become the leading union within an industrial event unprecedented in Bengal, and which has been seen by some as having been conducted under communist leadership²⁸² - a general strike in the jute industry. In answering these questions we will look first at the nature of the BJWU in early 1929 and then at its participation in this strike.

The populist title chosen for the new party indicated its approach to political activity. As we have seen, even by the end of 1928 the dissidents had not managed to base their political practice on the Marxist theory introduced to Bengal by Spratt. Those of the group's non-WPP associates, such as Bankim Mukherji, R.R. Mitra, and S.N. Banerji, who had worked closely with them, were further removed from Marxist trade union theory and practice.²⁸³ Finally, the WPP charged, the BJWU, as an organisation, was becoming 'notoriously and increasingly reformist'.²⁸⁴ Its leaders failed to draw up a constitution,

282. Eg. Punekar, op.cit., p.94.

283. Mitra, e.g., has recalled that 'I had then only a very nebulous idea of communism': Interview, p.145.

284. MCCC, P.527(8): op.cit.; see also MCCC, P.34: minutes of the BJWA's AGM. The WPP critique cited, as an example of the BJWU's increasing reformism, the union's AGM on January 3, when 'three Congressmen were quite unnecessarily placed in prominent official positions' at the instance of the dissidents, in order to increase the strength of their faction within the WPP.

had no membership list, and did not attempt to recruit paying members.²⁸⁵ It was in fact a very fluid organisation.

The state of flux became even more pronounced after the Meerut arrests. Goswami, Chakravarty, R.R. Mitra and S.N. Banerji were included in the Meerut Case, and Kalidas Bhattacharya retired from the union soon after. Kali Sen and Bankim Mukherji, non-WPP associates of Chakravarty and Goswami but later to join the CPI, succeeded to the positions of secretary and organising secretary. In addition Prabhati Das Gupta, who had begun working with the Chakravarty group at the time of the Scavengers' strike in March 1928, was brought in as president. This was a sudden and rather curious rise to prominence for at the time of the Meerut arrests she had been organising a rival jute workers' union at Champdany and as a consequence, had come into conflict with the union. At the end of March she agreed to merge her organisation with the BJWU, and was co-opted to its executive. Even more curious was the manner in which she and the other two leading officials were elected to office - at an informal, unpublicised meeting attended only by these three individuals. This appears not to have been challenged by the remainder of the BJWU executive. And, it was later claimed, there were only two formal executive meetings in the following five months.²⁸⁶ Further, and in contrast to its 'continuous' existence when based at

285. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.s 145 & 149.

286. P. Das Gupta in ibid., pp.148-49; and Kali Sen in ibid., pp.146-48.

Bhatpara, the activities of the Calcutta-based BJWU were 'sporadic'.²⁸⁷ This was the organisation which was to prove itself capable of forcing the powerful millowners to engage in the previously unthinkable activity of negotiating a strike settlement with an unregistered union.

A study of the BJWU's role in the jute mill general strike provides final proof of how little Bengali trade unionism had been changed by the communists during the upheavals of the previous two years. Conversely, it emphasises, once again, the refractory quality of the traditional forms of social organisation among industrial labour in the Calcutta region. Both features are highlighted when compared with the 1928 textile mill general strike in Bombay.

The 1929 Jute Mill General Strike

Superficially at least, the two general strikes shared several features:²⁸⁸ both were catalysed by management responses to increased competition; both strikes spread out from relatively more unionised 'epicentres', found their most active bases among the weavers, and depended upon the active support of the jobbers; both set previously unapproached records in the industrial histories of the respective provinces;

287. ibid., p.145.

288. The following broad features of the jute mill strike are taken from the G of Ben.'s lengthy submission in ibid., pp. 126-61; See also: Buchanan, op.cit., pp.253-4; WBA, Commerce 2-R-14, Progs A37-40, Dec. 1930; and LM, Vol.II(10), Oct. 1929, pp.634-5.

both forced the millowners' associations to deal for the first time with 'political' trade unions, which won significant concessions for the workers at the expense of the less popular 'legitimate' unions; both confronted the managements and the provincial governments, as never before, with the unpredictable and potentially unmanageable consequences of the inchoate structures of wages, working conditions and labour organisation which prevailed in the two industries, and thus raised the issues of standardisation and stable unionism in a much more forceful way than hitherto; and both, while remaining remarkably orderly and free from significant communal tension, caused the provincial administrations unprecedented anxiety and prompted them to initiate (informal) conciliation proceedings for the first time.

Beneath the surface, however, these similarities fade in significance, outweighed by the more profound differences. Most importantly, the economic contexts of the two strikes were, as we noted earlier, quite dissimilar.²⁸⁹ The Bombay textile industry's market problems were critical. Producing for a restricted domestic market which was already intensely competitive, during the 1920's it had also to face the growing incursion of cheaper Japanese and up-country products. This situation produced an extended and intensifying depression of crisis proportions, the result of which was the spate of anarchically competitive wage-cuts, thorough-going

289. This summary of the economic context of the jute strike is based on Bagchi, Private Investment, pp.275-81.

rationalisation measures, and retrenchments attempted in 1927-28. The jute industry, in contrast, did not have to face an equivalent crisis in this period.

About half of the jute mills had found it advisable to meet the modest decline in their profit margins following the post-war boom by utilising the economies of the single-shift system. This had resulted in a large number of retrenchments and corresponding labour protests.²⁹⁰ In the late 1920's the industry also faced increasing competition from the Dundee and continental-European mills and from several new, non-IJMA mills in Bengal.²⁹¹ But these problems were not of the same dimensions as those of Bombay. Despite them the jute industry, producing for an expanding export market, had continued to experience IJMA-regulated stability and continued profitability.²⁹² Although the IJMA mills faced increasing competition during the decade the total world demand for jute products actually continued to increase until the arrival of the world Depression in late 1929.

The management policy-change which led to the jute general strike was an offensive reaction designed to maintain its dominance, unlike Bombay's defensive measures to maintain

290. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.s 15 & 127. The shift conversions resulted in the retrenchment of approx. a half to a third of the workers in the affected mills.

291. On this point see the IJMA submission in RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.307.

292. Cf. Buchanan, op.cit., p.253: 'It is doubtful if any other group of factories in the world paid such handsome profits between 1915 and 1929'.

its survival. During the 1920's the IJMA had used the mechanism of controlled under-production in order to maximise prices. In late 1928 the Association decided to allow its members to increase production from the pre-existing 54 hours per week to 60 hours in order to under-cut its competitors, increase its share of the world jute market and maintain the solidarity of the IJMA. It postponed the implementation of the new agreement until July 1, 1929. The grievances underlying the general strike arose from the rate of the wage increase - exactly proportional to the increase in hours worked - which accompanied the new system. But labour's demand for a more-than-proportional wage increase was a simple one which the still prosperous industry could easily afford to accommodate within its new policy should it decide to do so.

Thus, in sharp contrast to the Bombay textile strike, the 1929 jute strike was the result of a quasi-monopolistic manufacturers' organisations' carefully controlled expansion, unaccompanied by structural changes in the social and technical production relationships of the mills, within a still prosperous industry. The industry was capable of granting economic concessions to its workers, and anxious to do so should the alternative course curtail the intended increase in production. In the contemporary economic context of the jute industry the issue which sparked the general strike was an anomaly, not, as in Bombay, the inevitable denouement of a protracted crisis. Its potential for producing equivalent transformations in working class organisation and consciousness was correspondingly less, even though it did catalyse widespread protest and provide

labour leaderships with unprecedented opportunities for mobilising the workforce's chronic discontent and extending organisation throughout the industry as a whole.

There was another important feature of the jute mill strike not shared by its Bombay counterpart. It was generally accepted in Calcutta that Marwari hessian dealers involved in the speculative futka (futures) market, faced with considerable losses from a fall in hessian prices, liberally financed the strike leadership in order to cut their losses. Their intention was to use the strike to increase the price of hessian and, more importantly, to take advantage of a special strike clause to cancel their existing contracts with the mills.²⁹³ The money was distributed to jobbers and local shopkeepers, the two groups holding the greatest sway over the millhands: 'for a thousand or two of rupees', the government commented, 'it seems possible to close down any mill in Bengal for, at least, a short time'.²⁹⁴ Thus while it is possible, as we speculated earlier, that the history of union organisation and agitation in the Bhatpara area contributed towards its

293. Eg.: ibid., pp.145-6 & p.156; NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bengal FR2 July; MCG:2; see also the references to undisclosed funding in the BJWU documents reproduced in RCLI, Vol.V(1), pp.147-49. According to the G of Ben.: 'Wild rumours became prevalent regarding the hessian gambling, and many names prominent in Calcutta business and politics were connected with the instigation of the strikes ... many Marwaris, never hitherto interested in labour matters, but known to be interested in the hessian market, are known to have taken an interest in the strike': ibid., p.146.

294. loc. cit.

being the epicentre of the general strike, the Government of Bengal placed more stress on another possibility - the Begg Dunlop group of mills at Bhatpara had the largest number of outstanding contracts with hessian dealers.²⁹⁵

In the months preceding the implementation of the new working hours the Kankinarrah Labour Union arranged two conferences of the millhands of the Bhatpara-Jagatdal area to ascertain the attitude of labour towards the proposed changes. It was decided to approach the mill managements to request them to attend a conference to discuss the new wage rates. They refused. The moderate Kankinarrah Union then decided to wait until the first wages were paid under the new system before attempting further negotiations.²⁹⁶

However events soon overtook the union. In late June and early July it met with a dual challenge to its preferred course of action. The first challenge came from powerful liquor-smuggling, gambling and drug-selling interests in the Bhatpara area who, though not directly involved in industrial issues, were anxious to see the demise of the Kankinarrah Union.²⁹⁷ The second arose when the weavers of four Jagatdal

295. ibid., p.145.

296. ibid., p.s 130 & 275. The BJWU does not appear to have become involved in agitation about the new scheme until after it was implemented - another indication of its 'sporadic' activity after its move to Calcutta.

297. ibid., p.s 275, 130 & 144. During 1929 Maulvi Latafat Hossain, MLC, one of the union's leaders, had begun a campaign against these interests. This had resulted in raids by Customs officials. The Bhatpara interests - and, the Union claimed, the local police - immediately began their counter-campaign to destroy the Union.

mills made a direct protest against the new scheme, in the first week of its implementation, by walking out after working 54 hours. The union leadership claimed that the two challenges were related - that the workers' direct action, an implicit vote of no-confidence in its recommended tactic, was instigated by the antagonistic Bhatpara interests as part of their campaign to discredit the union.²⁹⁸ We do not have sufficient corroborating evidence to accept the Kankinarrah Union's claim as a total explanation of the weavers' action.²⁹⁹ Nevertheless a number of unusual features surrounding the weavers' walk-out do lend the Kankinarrah leadership's explanation considerable credence. Of particular interest is the sudden emergence as a labour leader of a figure previously unknown in the area.

The mysterious rise to prominence of the Barrackpore pleader Narendra Chatterji was described by the government of Bengal thus:³⁰⁰

He had no knowledge of the jute industry and had never previously been known to have any business connections in Bhatpara, yet suddenly for no reason which could be ascertained by the employers and without any official position in any union, ... he seemed to get control of a considerable body of men.

298. ibid., pp.275-6.

299. It almost certainly underrates, e.g., the autonomous, protest-motivated element of their decision to take direct action. Given the past history of management - labour relations the weavers may well have doubted the effectiveness of negotiations on this occasion.

300. ibid., p.144 & pp.275-76.

It was on Chatterji's advice that the weavers of the affected mills refused to work more than 54 hours. He offered to take their case against the managements to Court, arguing that this would be more effective than the Kankinarrah Union's negotiations. The extent of Chatterji's hold over the four mills was later revealed when the Kankinarrah Union did manage, in the context of the weavers' direct action, to negotiate an agreement to pay the rates demanded by them. The weavers replied, however, that they would accept the agreement only 'if the employers would simply write a letter to Naren Babu and get his permission for them to return to work.'³⁰¹ The employers 'flatly refused' to do this because of the risk of legitimising Chatterji. They closed the mills instead.

The Kankinarrah Union claimed that Chatterji was hired by the liquor, drug and gambling interests of Bhatpara through the agency of a shopkeeper with influence over the weavers of the affected mills.³⁰² The weavers were persuaded by the shopkeeper that the Kankinarrah Union was collaborating with the management and that only a law suit would satisfy their demands. They were advised against strike action. That the

301. ibid., p.144.

302. As noted in Chapter 2, shopkeepers, as traditional suppliers of credit to the workers, had a great deal of power over them. Further, as the shopkeepers and the jobbers were usually in a close alliance - often, in fact, the jobber being a shopkeeper - the latter's power was increased. And as the Kankinarrah Union had already alienated the jobbers with its campaign against corruption, both the jobbers and the shopkeepers were probably very willing to participate in this particular campaign against it.

weavers of another mill under the same management, but among whom the Kankinarrah Union had a stronger influence, resisted taking direct action, gives further support to this theory. In any case it is clear that Chatterji's sudden ascendancy, given his previous lack of influence, rested upon the foundations of the existing pattern of community leadership among the workers. Without this he could hardly have gained such legitimacy in the eyes of the workers in such a brief period, despite their very real grievances and fears.

It was not until this stage of the dispute, in the third week of July, that the BJWU became involved and the issue of a strike was raised for the first time. The rapidity with which the BJWU - or rather, its president - gained influence in the area, is also remarkable. On a visit to Bhatpara-Jagatdal at this point Prabhati Das Gupta acquainted herself with Chatterji, persuaded him to abandon his policy of avoiding strike action, recruited him to her own cause and, soon afterwards, without reference to the BJWU executive, appointed him vice-president of the union.³⁰³ Das Gupta, like Chatterji, had no more than a superficial knowledge of the jute industry and was previously unknown in the area. But she, too, was able surprisingly quickly to gain the allegiance of the Bhatpara-Jagatdal workers and 'thenceforth took command of the situation'.³⁰⁴ The protesting millhands continued to resist the increasingly liberal concessions of the mill managements and the efforts of

303. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.s 130 & 149.

304. ibid., p.130; NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bengal FRI Aug.

the Kankinarrah Union, replying that 'they would not resume work without the order of their union', the BJWU.³⁰⁵ With Chatterji now subordinate to her, and with the aid of substantial funds, Das Gupta was able to mobilise the aggrieved weavers of Bhatpara-Jagatdal as pickets in the neighbouring areas and to spread the strike very rapidly. In the following weeks, and under Das Gupta's personal leadership, the strike spread progressively to almost all mills along the left-bank of the Hooghly to the north of Calcutta, and to several mills in other centres. By mid-August 192,000 workers had struck, 60 percent of the industry's looms had been stopped, and large numbers of workers had left for their villages.³⁰⁶

Das Gupta's entrance thus transformed the character of the existing dispute. That she was able to gain such influence so rapidly suggests, as with Chatterji, that her ascendancy depended upon the co-operation of the workers' traditional leaders. And the most plausible explanation for this co-operation

305. loc.cit.

306. ibid., p.131. It can be seen from this sequence that the extension of the jute strike followed a roughly equivalent pattern to that of the Bombay general strike. However, despite the significant funding available for the Calcutta strike, no formal relief organisation appears to have been established. Consequently the strikers, as in the first phase of the Bombay strike, had essentially to provide for themselves. The IJMA produced statistics which suggest that the strikers received substantial assistance from their villages for this period. During the strike the Titagarh Post Office received five times the normal remittances sent from up-country villages and there was a corresponding three-fold decrease in the normal remittances sent from Titagarh to up-country centres. (ibid., p.303). These statistics also indicate the close link which labour maintained with the village.

is that offered by the government - that it was bought, with funds provided by the hessian dealers. That Chatterji's original policy had been not to strike, and that the managements were, by late July, anxious to accede to the original demands, thus obviating the necessity of strike action, gives added plausibility to this explanation. With Das Gupta's entrance in late July the Bhatpara-Jagatdal conflict's patronage changed hands.³⁰⁷

To accept the terms of this explanation is not to deny the importance of the role of worker protest in the strike. The millowners' traditional arrogance and distance in their attitudes towards and dealings with labour, their refusal to enter negotiations over this issue until direct sanctions had been applied, and the millhands' corresponding suspicion, anxiety and confusion about the new scheme, all undoubtedly contributed very considerably towards the ease with which the strike began.³⁰⁸ Further, the scale of the strike which followed, and the rapidity with which it developed, could hardly be explained without including the role of widespread and deeply felt protest. But outside funding provided the initial and crucial catalyst; and the continued importance of both outside funding by elements not interested in trade unionism as such, and the mediating role of the jobbers, is suggested by the patterns which emerged during

307. The change in patronage appears to have taken place without any significant conflict of interest between the two groups. While the original patrons may not have preferred a strike, the new policy and leadership nevertheless continued to serve their main policy of discrediting and undermining the Kankinarrah Union, which became increasingly irrelevant to the situation.

308. It is also probable that the industrial unrest of the previous 18 months contributed.

the development and withdrawal of the ensuing general strike, and by the operational modes and the subsequent fate of the BJWU.

The rapidity of the BJWU's rise and the degree of control which it came to exercise in the area north of Calcutta were remarkable. But just as striking was its failure, despite 'intense efforts', to gain significant influence in the other major centres, including Bauria.³⁰⁹ Both sides of this contrast were clearly demonstrated in the second half of August. On August 16, Das Gupta put her signature to a strike settlement which won significant concessions for all mills belonging to the IJMA,³¹⁰ and agreed to recommend a return to work. All of the striking mills on the left bank were working within 24 hours.³¹¹ But at this point large numbers of the mills which

309. ibid., p.132. The failure at Bauria is significant. That this centre did strike subsequently (see below) is proof that the workers had not been completely exhausted by the 1928 strike. The refusal to strike thus indicates the extent of the earlier failure to establish a union there - a failure exacerbated by the subsequent retrenchment of the Bengali workers.

310. Details of the negotiations and settlement are provided in ibid., pp.133-39. It was an unprecedented event on several grounds: it was initiated by a government officer, and despite the resistance of the IJMA; it was the first significant negotiation between mill owners and labour; and the settlement granted very real concessions, going beyond the mill owners' original offer, as a consequence of the strike sanction. (The IJMA was unhappy about the settlement's having given the workers 'something for which they never asked' - RCLI, Vol.V(2), p.170). Nevertheless the settlement did not have the sanction of either a strike enquiry committee (which was opposed by both the IJMA and Das Gupta) as in Bombay, or a board of enquiry to investigate grievances subsequent to the strike settlement (the IJMA 'absolutely and finally refused to have anything to do' with this idea - RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.136). The only guarantee was the IJMA's recommendation to its members that they accept the terms of the settlement.

311. ibid., p.145; NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929; Bengal FR2 Aug.

had previously continued working now struck, 'against every argument that the ... (BJWU) leaders could use to induce them to remain at work'.³¹² This second-stage strike spread through the previously resistant mills like a 'contagious disease', apparently in the belief that if they did not do so they would not share in the concessions granted in the settlement. In the Shamnagore area, for example, which neighboured Champdany where Das Gupta had been working prior to her joining the BJWU, the workers rejected her strike settlement because they did not recognise her authority. When she went to the area to persuade the strikers to return to work she was 'abused and insulted'.³¹³ She was also rejected in the Budge Budge area, while at Bauria the workers now struck for the demands they had formulated in the 1928 strike, in spite of the BJWU's arguments against striking.³¹⁴

Another notable feature of the strike was the extent to which the functioning of the BJWU was dependent on the personal role of its newcomer president. The union did operate

312. RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.132. Some 80,000 workers stopped work and a further 25% of the industry's looms were closed, in the post-settlement strikes. Altogether, the two strikes resulted in 272,000 workers losing 2,896,000 man-days, and closed 42,700 of the industries 51,000 looms: ibid., p.126.

313. ibid., p.132.

314. That the Bauria mills struck again for the demands of the 1928 strike, despite the intervening retrenchment of the Bengali workers, is evidence that all communities supported the original strike. All of the post-settlement strikes eventually collapsed unconditionally, independently of the BJWU's efforts, and by mid-September had returned to normal operations under the terms of the August 16 settlement.

fairly effectively as an organisation.³¹⁵ But the effectiveness of the BJWU was dependent on Prabhati Das Gupta. Her organisational contact with the millhands remained dependent on the pre-existing working class political structures. But she gained an impressive level of genuine popularity, resting in part on a cult of the 'Mataji' (Respected Mother) propagated on her behalf.³¹⁶ She 'had only to lift her little finger and the workers would obey'.³¹⁷ This personal influence over the workers, combined with her apparently monopolised access to the large sums of money which financed the organisation of the strike, assured her autocratic control within the union: she 'ultimately gained complete control of the organisation of the strike,

315. The BJWU produced a constant stream of carefully prepared handbills in several vernaculars and distributed them in the different mill centres through a comprehensive network of Hindi-speaking agents - a process requiring the spending of 'a great deal' of money. (*ibid.*, p.144). The government commented that the leaflets were 'couched in language which might have been used in an orderly strike under the leadership of a well-organised trade union in a more highly organised country'. (Three of the BJWU leaflets are reproduced in *ibid.*, pp.159-61. These confirm the government's approving judgement on their reformist ideological content, and thus present one more contrast with the GKU - little attempt was made during the jute strike to effect an ideological transformation among the workers). The BJWU effectively exercised a controlling influence over those, both Hindu and Muslim, who struck in the pre-settlement phase. The government commented that the strikers remained 'remarkable peaceful' and 'very orderly', 'in spite of the inherent dangers of the position'. (*ibid.*, p.133). Given the history of violent communalism among jute labour, this was an achievement of some significance.

316. See, e.g. the BJWU leaflet reproduced in *ibid.*, p.411., which declared: 'Looking at your unity and the wonderful enterprise of Mother Provatatai Das Gupta, the eyes of the capitalists and mill owners have been opened'; and described her as both 'the father and mother of the poor'.

317. *ibid.*, p.149.

irrespective of any of the other officials or agents of the union'.³¹⁸ It also assured the dominance of her union over others in the crucial north left-bank area. The WPP, for instance, formed the Beliaghata Jute Workers' Union in the Sealdah area, under the leadership of Abdul Halim and Abdur Rezzak Khan.³¹⁹ From this base it then attempted to develop an independent influence in the strike. The Beliaghata union, however, without resources, was unable to produce a significant impact on events outside the few mills in Sealdah.³²⁰

But despite its real achievements the BJWU's power did not long survive the settlement of the strike. Having served its delegated function the union disintegrated, leaving the traditional structures intact. In August, factional strife developed between Das Gupta and the majority of the union's executive, the latter rebelling against her autocratic style, her control of funds and her decision to call off the strike.³²¹ It may also be significant that Das Gupta's source of funds had

318. ibid., p.145.

319. Ranen Sen, 'Communist Movement in Bengal in the Early Thirties', in Marxist Miscellany (New Delhi), No.6, 1975, p.2 -(Sen joined the party after the Meerut arrests and soon became one of the communist leaders); RCLI, Vol.V(1), p.131.

320. MCG:2. This report says that the WPP group, in contrast to the 'pseudo-communists' in the BJWU, refused money offered by the hessian dealers, and that this was a major reason for their lack of influence.

321. NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bengal FR2 Aug. See the accusations published in the press by both sides, in RCLI, Vol.V(1), pp.146-49. Das Gupta signed the agreement despite 'all advice to the contrary' from the BJWU executive, the majority of whom attempted to continue the strike after the settlement: ibid., p.137.

begun to dwindle following the settlement.³²² Bankim Mukherji led a campaign against the president which led to her expulsion on August 24. Das Gupta responded by declaring the expulsion void, electing a new set of office-bearers, and claiming that this was the legitimate BJWU - a sequence made possible by the fluid, unstructured nature of the union. But the subsequent propaganda war which the two factions conducted against each other in the Calcutta press soon proved to be irrelevant to jute mill unionism. Although Das Gupta remained for some time 'mistress of the situation ... in the area where she had power originally',³²³ neither faction (nor the WPP group) conducted systematic organisational work to consolidate and extend the limited advance made during the strike.³²⁴ The considerable degree of recognition which the union had won among the millhands was dissipated by the end of the year, and Das Gupta later left the field altogether. With this failure, and the failure to involve the workers meaningfully during the strike, no effective working class organisation survived the upheaval. Traditional community organisation and consciousness had not been displaced.

322. Das Gupta commented after the settlement that 'I lack the resources' to finance further strike action: ibid., p.149.

323. ibid., p.150.

324. MCG:2; the Bengal FRs for late 1929/early 1930 report only weak union activity. However the BJWU's decline was, no doubt, as with the collapse of unions after the other strikes covered in this chapter, more than a failure of leadership. It also reflected the inherent difficulties of finding a secure trade union base in Bengal.

When the Depression struck the jute industry soon afterwards, comparatively little effort was made to resist the wage cuts and the retrenchment of more than a third of the workforce which then took place.³²⁵ This was a marked contrast with the Bombay millhands' response to the millowners' efforts in 1928 and 1929. There were to be no further general strikes in the jute industry until 1937, after the popular government had come to power.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have studied two contrasting stories: the building of a communist mass base in Bombay and the failure to do so in Calcutta. The outcome of the Bombay communists' working class activities demonstrated the soundness

325. The Depression began to effect the industry seriously in 1929-30. Its effect during the next few years can be seen from the following statistics, showing the value of exports of total manufactured jute products and the total numbers employed, from the record figures of 1928-29 to the lowest point in 1933-34.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Exports ('000 Rs.)</u>	<u>Total Employment</u>
1928-29	569,049	331,899
1929-30	519,268	339,665
1930-31	318,945	328,177
1931-32	219,243	268,289
1932-33	217,118	254,314
1933-34	213,749	246,717

Sources: Exports - Bagchi, Private Investment, p.280;
Employment - Gupta, 'Factory Labour', Appendix A.

But, despite the retrenchment of 30 percent of the workforce, the only jute industry strikes between 1930 and 1934 that the Government of India found worth reporting in its annual survey of India were the following: 548,185 man-days lost in two separate strikes in 1930 (G of I, India in 1930-31, p.244); a two month strike by 5,000 workers at one mill in

of the policy they had formulated early in 1929, its relevance to the Bombay situation in the late 1920s, and their ability to base their activity closely on this model. No such affirmations emerged from their Bengali comrades' attempts. The outcome of the jute industry general strike was a particularly clear demonstration of how little had been changed in Bengal's working class politics by two years of 'taking Marxism to its class'. The Bengal WPP had not even completed the first phase of gaining substantial control over labour through the existing organisational modes. The structural transformation that was achieved in Bombay was not even begun in Bengal.

The Meerut Case prisoners, reflecting on their involvement in the Bengal strikes of the period, provided the following candid evaluation of the results:³²⁶

... the Left Wing had strong ideological influence ... but failed to entrench itself organisationally, with the result that the petty bourgeois politicians and intellectuals are [still] in control of the organisations.

Unlike in Bombay, the Meerut arrests left virtually no communist working class organisation behind; and even the WPP's ideological influence proved to be very temporary.³²⁷ The trade unions had

325. Cont'd
1931 (G of I, India in 1931-32, p.115); a simultaneous strike in four mills, involving 19,000 workers and costing 331,000 man-days, in 1932 (G of I, India in 1932-33, p.96). The 1931 strike was the biggest in India, and the 1932 strike the second biggest, in the respective years. But they did not compare with the Bombay millhands' 1928 and 1929 protests against the effects of the textile industry's earlier economic crisis.
326. ACH, 1929/46: 'The Tasks of the Left Wing Trade Unions of India', November 1929. This pamphlet was produced by the Meerut group (MCG:1) for the Nagpur AITUC and published under Abdul Halim's name.
327. See, eg., the Home Department's contrast between the two provinces in NAI, H.Poll, 179/1929: G of I to all LGs, 24/6/29.

not become 'schools of communism' in Bengal. Moreover, the aftermath of the jute strike showed that even the 'petty bourgeois' organisations had established only a very tenuous connection with the working class; the BJWU had not become an equivalent of the old GKM, nor the Kankinarrah Union of the BTLU.

We have seen in this chapter that a number of factors contributed to this failure. Firstly, the contingencies that facilitated the Bombay communists' industrial advance were absent in Calcutta. For example, Spratt's Marxist theory and organisational principles arrived in Bengal a year later than in Bombay. Nor did the Bengal party have the benefit of Bradley's considerable organisational experience.³²⁸ The greater geographical dispersion of Calcutta's industry was another comparative disadvantage, especially for a small leadership with negligible resources.

But that Spratt's theoretical expertise did not make a substantial difference even when it was introduced indicates that the causes of the contrasting results in the two cities went much deeper.

The greater difficulties for the Bengali communists than for up-country organisers in mobilising an independent base among Bengal's predominating migrant labour were illustrated by the Lillooah situation. The Bauria Bengali workers' more enthusiastic response to the bhadralok unionists' efforts emphasised the same problem from a different angle. Bauria also illustrated the problems posed by the jute mills' powers for social control, their access to the state repressive apparatus, and the solidarity of the IJMA. But Bauria highlighted a further problem - the apparent inability of most of

328. Eg., Spratt believed that Bradley's 'firmness (not to say brutality)' would have made a substantial contribution towards resolving the WPP's discipline problems: MCCC, p.527(1): op.cit.

the middle class trade unionists to become real representatives of even the Bengali workers. Rather, the WPP activists' mode of operating remained closer to that of the 'petty bourgeois politicians and intellectuals'. The differences between the two groups were restricted to the ideological level; they did not encompass a basically different political relationship to the working class. In Bengali trade unionism in the 1920s, the distinction between 'revolutionaries' and 'reformists' did not become a very meaningful one.

The general strike in the jute industry, too, demonstrated the problem of the gulf separating the bhadralok trade unionists from the working class. Yet, paradoxically, the 1929 strike also indicated that this social and cultural barrier was not an absolute one. It showed that, in exceptional circumstances (and, in this case, with the assistance of Hindu-speaking intermediaries³²⁹) effective, large-scale bhadralok-millhand (or at least, bhadralok-jobber) contact was possible. The conditions under which the contact was forged in the 1929 strike were hardly conducive to the development of sound trade unionism. Nevertheless, the wider point remains valid. Thus it was at least conceivable that, under a different set of exceptional circumstances - such as those that developed in the Bombay textile industry - an objective basis for a sounder and more lasting intelligentsia-proletarian relationship could emerge.

But, because of the much stronger economic situation and organisation of the jute industry, the possibility of such

329. See fn.315 above.

a situation arising in the foreseeable future was a remote one. The industry was able to pass through even the Depression without anything like the profound economic crisis - nor, therefore, the necessity to institute the structural changes - that had arisen in the Bombay textile industry.³³⁰ And, in the absence of structural changes of this dimension, the problems posed by working class heterogeneity and community organisation and consciousness, and by the distance between the working class and the Bengali communists, would probably prove to be insurmountable.

330. See Bagchi, Private Investment, pp.280-90; Buchanan, op. cit., pp.251-2.

CHAPTER 4

FROM LEFT NATIONALIST FACTION TOWARDS AN'INDEPENDENT' PARTY: 1927-EARLY 1929

The appropriate expression of the [WPP's] old relations ... was that ... [it] constituted itself as a Left Wing of the Nationalist Movement, and worked as a section of the Congress. This can no longer be the situation. The ... [WPP] is the representative of the advancing mass movement. The dominating leadership of the Congress associates itself with the retreating bourgeois bloc ... The two movements separate, and their leading organisations must do so also. The Workers' and Peasants' Party must henceforth play a definitely independent part.

(From MCCC, p.56: Political thesis adopted by the First All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party Conference, Calcutta, December 1928.)

We have argued that the political momentum which could only be provided by a mass base was a necessary pre-condition for the development of an autonomous, non-bolshevised communist party. From this perspective we will now study the trend in Bombay towards autonomous communist leadership which followed the WPP's success in establishing a dynamic mass base, and the contrasting stagnation of the Bengal leadership associated with its working class failure. In the preceding chapter we examined the Bombay communists' contribution to working class organisation and consciousness. Here we are interested largely in examining what Bombay's working class did for the communists: to what extent did the mass base advance the communists' position in the wider political arena, and what were the effects of both the mass base

and the political advance on their Marxist theory and practice, their organisational development and their perceived relationship to the 'World Party'? Were these changes sufficient to justify - in both the Indian and the Comintern contexts - the December 1928 claim to independence quoted above? We will look first at the fate of the Bengal party. We will then trace the changes in the political position of the Bombay party which followed its working class successes. Then we analyse the effects of both the mass base and the advancing political position upon the Bombay communist leadership. Finally we examine the character of the 'All-India' WPP and communist party organisations which began to be constructed from the end of 1928.

1. THE BENGAL WPP

We observed in Chapter 3 that communist trade unionism in the Calcutta region remained essentially undifferentiated from non-communist trade unionism: the communists, despite their theoretical-ideological differences with the 'petty-bourgeois' unionists, were unable either to implement a qualitatively different working class strategy or to distinguish themselves from their rivals by building a strong working class base. We also observed that the internal tensions within the WPP - present since its birth - eventually split the party, thus further vitiating its political effectiveness. The lack of differentiation in the trade union arena also applied in the wider political context, and the nature of the party split was clear evidence of this fact.

The WPP split arose from a long standing combination of ideological and personal conflicts between the ex-terrorists and most of those who were from non-terrorist backgrounds.¹ Goswami and Chakravarty were convinced that the communist movement would not be able to advance without large numbers of those currently involved in the terrorist organisations being won over to the party as cadres. Muzaffar Ahmad took the lead in opposing this position. Initially hostile to the revolutionary organisations because of their bhadralok bases and anti-Muslim tendencies, he was also able to justify his resistance to direct recruitment from the revolutionary organisations by using the Bolshevik critique of the terrorists and the anarchists.² In fact the party secretary is reported to have been so intransigent that he would not allow non-party bhadraloks into the party office.³ From the time of his arrival in early 1928 Spratt supported Muzaffar's Bolshevik critique of ex-terrorist recruitment. The ex-Anushilanites, however, supported by Rezzak Khan who shared with them a militant nationalist background, believed Muzaffar's non-political background to be a serious liability to the party's effectiveness. But what Muzaffar lacked in wider Bengali political contacts he made up for in the contact he maintained, as a prolific correspondent and diligent party secretary, with international and extra-provincial communist groups.⁴

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1. For sources for this paragraph see Chapter 3, fn.156.
 2. See, eg., Ahmad, Myself, pp.433-4, and Chapter XXIX, titled 'Revolution and Revolutionaries'.
 3. Interviews with D. Goswami and A. Rezzak Khan.
 4. This is revealed by the MCCC evidence. Many of the letters are requests for funds for the impoverished Bengal party's coffers.

The conflict was first manifested openly in April 1927, in an election for a new secretary to replace Saumyendranath Tagore after he left for Europe. Both Ahmad and Rezzak Khan stood, and the former was defeated because he 'was considered unsuitable'.⁵ By late 1927, however, Ahmad was able to find enough support on the executive committee to block an attempt by the Goswami-Chakravarty faction to have a number of their former colleagues admitted to the party. The grounds of the rejection were that those who sought to join the party

... were not genuine supporters of the Party policy of mass action, but were still in their outlook and sentiment terrorists; (and further, that they were persons of almost universal ill-repute, who could only do the party harm in the eyes of the public).⁶

Moreover, Chakravarty - even though he had been trained in the Soviet Union - and Goswami and Rezzak Khan, were refused CPI membership.

Soon after the failure of their attempts to bring in their comrades the Goswami-Chakravarty faction established an independent organisation, with its own office and journal, which, 'could only ... have been intended as a rival to the Party'.⁷ However this exercise was soon abandoned. Instead they renewed their attempts to neutralise Muzaffar's 'anti-nationalist' policy at the party's annual meeting in March 1928, which was held at the ex-Anushilan group's 'stronghold' of Bhatpara. In the election of office-bearers the Goswami-Chakravarty group won a majority of the seats on the executive committee and its sub-

5. IB, Communism (1927), p.132; Ahmad, Myself, pp.428-9; Chakravarty, Interview, pp.135-6.

6. MCCC, p.527(8): op. cit.

7. ibid.; also Ahmad, Myself, pp.429-30.

committees, but were unable to prevent Ahmad from winning the secretaryship.⁸ The political resolutions passed by the meeting reflected the tension between the opposing viewpoints on the political value of retaining connections with 'bourgeois' nationalist organisations. For example it was resolved that:

Our policy and tactics in connection with the national movement and the Congress require careful determination. On the one hand we have not been sufficiently aggressive. ... the public ... has been allowed to suppose that on such important questions as the Boycott of the Simon Commission ... we had no policies at all, or none different from those of the Swaraj Party. On the other hand we must be careful not to oppose the National Congress without sufficient definition of our opinions, or we shall enable our opponents to claim that we are anti-Congress, or even anti-national ... We must maintain our alliance with as large a stratum as possible of the middle class, and can ally with any section, whatever its social basis, which fights against imperialism.⁹

The resolution concluded that 'The basis of our opposition to the Swaraj Party is not that it is bourgeois, but that it is not wholeheartedly for national independence'. It was decided that party members should become actively involved in the Congress and attempt to swing it to the left by allying with its radical rank-and-file. But MuZaffar resolutely opposed these decisions. Writing in May to the CPGB he commented:

... many of our comrades have still got much charm (sic.) for the Congress. I scarcely get any support when I fight for not accepting any office in the Congress which means a waste of energy. On our accepting office we are to commit so many things which we must not do on principle.¹⁰

Nor, he continued, should the party attempt to influence the Congress rank-and-file radicals - 'This sort of tactics (sic.)

8. MCCC, P.514: Constitution of the WPP of Bengal, 1928.

9. MCCC, P.52: 'The Peasants' and Workers' Party of Bengal - Report of the Executive Committee, 1927-28'.

10. MCCC, p.2099(c): Ahmad to 'J' (either C.P. Dutt or M.N. Roy), 10/5/28.

will not be any use in the future'.

Muzaffar's strength was that he had orthodoxy on his side, if not a clear majority within the Bengal party. His position was firmly within the CPGB's 'new Imperialist policy' theoretical framework, and for this reason he received support from both the British Party and from Spratt. For example C.P. Dutt chastised as 'terrible' the Bhatpara conference's statement that the WPP's opposition to the Swaraj Party was not because it was 'bourgeois', and he criticised the tactic of attempting to 'capture' the Congress. The reason for the Swaraj Party's not being 'genuinely' anti-imperialist, Dutt responded, was precisely because it was 'bourgeois', and to spend time attempting to influence it was to waste time.¹¹ At a meeting held in Bombay in September to prepare for the December AIWPP conference, Spratt and Muzaffar took the lead in championing this position as WPP policy.¹² The ex-Anushilan faction continued to resist it.¹³

The Goswami-Chakravarty group sought during 1928 to change the situation by other means. They devoted an increasing amount of time to youth organisations, and in August formed a party youth section called the 'Young Comrades' League', which recruited from among students and ex-students. Most of these recruits were associated¹⁴ with the revolutionary organisations. Within a month the Young Comrades' League was attracting attend-

11. MCCC, p.526 (43): C.P. Dutt to Spratt, 14/6/28.

12. MCCC, P.526 (39) and p.670: Spratt's and Bradley's notes of the meeting.

13. Eg. a circular issued by Goswami towards the end of the year to publicise the AIWPP conference argued that the revolutionary mass movement 'must cooperate, but on an Independent basis, with the general political movement': MCCC, P.1797(P).

ances of about 20 to Marxist study circles run by Goswami and Spratt.¹⁵ Significantly, it became the most successful area of party activity.¹⁶ A number of those who were to join the CPI in the 1930s made their debut through the Young Comrades' League.¹⁷ The ex-Anushilan faction also continued to work closely with their leftist-inclined contacts outside the party. Then, when Goswami was elected in September as the chairman of the reception committee for the AIWPP conference, his faction began to plan another attempt to bring their non-party colleagues into the WPP and to end Muzaffar's dominance. Goswami managed to 'stack' the Bengal delegation to the conference with a large contingent of supporters of his faction - including, it was charged by their opponents, a number of non-party men.¹⁸ As the conference was in Calcutta the great majority of the 300 delegates and visitors who attended were Bengali, and the majority belonged to the ex-terrorist faction.¹⁹ But this faction's efforts to capture the general secretaryship of the AIWPP and all of the Bengali seats on the national executive council - and to oust Ahmad and his associates in the process - were defeated by constitutional rulings by the conference president, Sohan Singh Josh from the Punjab WPP. The president was supported

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14. MCCC, p.546(10): Spratt to F.C. Mellonie, 26/8/28; MCCC, P.527(8): op. cit.; IB, Communism (1935), p.240.
15. As in fn.14; MCCC, P.563-65: Minutes of YCL meetings during August-October 1928.
16. Eg., at the September meeting which prepared for the AIWPP conference the only area of Bengal WPP work to receive favourable mention was the youth program (MCCC: P.526(39): op. cit.; and P.670: op. cit.).
17. See, eg., Pakrasi, Interview, p.147.
18. MCCC, P.527(8): op. cit.; also Ahmad, Myself, pp.430-33.
19. MCCC, p.467(1), p.468(2), p.467(4): lists of provincial delegates; NAI, H.Poll, 10/V/1929: Intelligence report of the conference; MCCC, P.334: official report of the conference.

by the other provincial delegations.²⁰

Thwarted by the other provinces' support for their opponent - or, at least, by the opposition to themselves - the Goswami-Chakravarty faction walked out of the conference in 'indignation at the arbitrary conduct of the President and [because of] their objection on principle to the presence in the National E.C. of the individual against whom they had voted'.²¹ Attacks on the party leadership followed in the press.²² Muzaffar responded by cancelling Chakravarty's membership on the grounds of his not having paid his membership fee.²³ Goswami and the rest of the faction then resigned from the WPP and, with their non-party colleagues congregated in the BJWU and formed the People's Party.²⁴

Apart from the debilitating effect on party activity of the extended factional preoccupation and the eventual disintegration, there are three features of particular interest about the intra-party conflict and the split. First, Muzaffar's success in keeping the bhadralok ex-terrorists out of the party - which depended very largely on the external support he received because of his orthodoxy - merely delayed the inevitable. As is well known, large-scale conversions to communism - to a significant degree a direct consequence of the Goswami-Chakravarty

20. MCCC, P.334: op. cit.

21. MCCC, P.527(8): op. cit.

22. ibid.

23. MCCC, P.1767: Sec., WPP of Bengal to Gen. Sec., AIWPP, 18/2/29.

24. MCCC, p.423: letter of resignation from 12 Bengal WPP members to Sec. WPP of Bengal, 8/3/29; MCCC, P.527(8): op. cit.

faction's efforts during the 1920s - took place in the jails and detention centres during the first half of the 1930s. These ex-terrorists were to form the bulk of the Party's cadres after their release.

Secondly, the intra-party conflict was directly related to the wider factionalism of Calcutta's politics. This wider factionalism was particularly intense in the late 1920s. In a reply to a query from New Delhi about the current state of communism in Bengal, the Bengal government wrote (using a generous definition of 'Communism') as follows:

The present position is confused by the rivalry between the Nationalist and Communist Revolutionists. Although this rivalry to some extent is due to a difference in principle and reflects a dislike of the social and economic dogmas of Communism, it is at present chiefly due to the secret opposition of Subhas Chandra Bose and his ex-detenu supporters of the Anushilan, Jugantar and Madaripur groups to Jawaharlal and his adherents, representing the Independence League. ... The two movements are at present by no means distinct; on the contrary many of their objects and activities and much of their propaganda are common, and each movement reinforces the other. But the jealousies that already exist and the difference in outlook and ultimate aims indicate the possibility of a growing cleavage.²⁵

The struggle between Bose's and Nehru's followers, the government continued, was primarily for control of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee Executive Committee; 'Closely involved in this struggle are the efforts to secure the control of the youth movement and the adherence of the ex-detenus', and to use these elements as cadres to mobilise "the power dormant in the illiterate

25. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: G of Ben to G of I, 19/12/28. Spratt provides a very similar analysis of the causes and patterns of the conflict between the Nehru and Bose factions, in MCCC, P.2419(P): Spratt to R. Page Arnott, 23/10/28. For BPCF factionalism in the late 1920s see also Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline', pp.595-98. The factionalism was also associated with the Bose-Sen Gupta competition for the BPCF presidency.

masses".²⁶ Finally, the government added, the Bose campaign had become more intense following Nehru's recent personal success as president of the All-Bengal Students' Conference.

The WPP had, by early 1928, already incurred the wrath of the BPCC leaders.²⁷ But by entering the competition for the loyalties of the students and ex-detenus the party - and particularly the Goswami-Chakravarty faction - entered directly into the battle described by the government. In fact this arena appears to have absorbed more of the ex-Anushilan faction's energies during the second half of the year than did official party work, and their extra-party loyalties seem to have been stronger than their party commitments. In particular, Goswami and Chakravarty worked closely with Santosh Mitra, another former Dacca Anushilan member who, influenced by Roy's early emissaries to Bengal, had eventually broken with the dadas over the issue of mass organisation.²⁸ Mitra was a leading organiser in what the Bengal government described as the Nehru faction.²⁹ He worked closely with Bhupendranath Dutt and with trade unionists such as Bankim Mukherji (who had become

26. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: G of Ben to G of I, 19/12/28.

27. In fact the BPCC's opposition (and particularly that of the Bose faction) was expressed in a form and with a vehemence sufficient for the communists to describe it as 'fascist'. See, eg., MCCC, P.2419(P) op. cit.. Following the conflict in early 1928 between the WPP and the BPCC-controlled Municipal Corporation during the Scavengers Strike (during which the Corporation used the police and Congress Youth blacklegs) the WPP believed that: 'Recent developments in the policy of the [Bengal] Congress leaders, their action in connection with the Scavengers' Strike... etc., show that there is a tendency to mobilise nationalist sentiment against us in a Fascist manner. ... this development may become an extremely dangerous one for us and for the movement': MCCC, P.52: op. cit.; see also MCCC, P.546(10) op. cit.

28. Laushey, op. cit., p.95; interview with A. Rezzak Khan. Mitra was to be shot dead by the authorities in the Hijli detention camp in 1931.

29. IB, Communism (1935), p.240.

involved in the Bauria-Chengail strikes) and Shibnath Banerji. In 1928 Mitra founded the 'Socialist Youth League', which became the group's organisational base. From it he led his opposition to Bose and the Jugantar and Anushilan leaders - including Mitra's old Dacca leader Pratul Ganguly - with whom Bose formed a close working alliance during the year. Bose's efforts centred around mobilising from revolutionary ranks a volunteer corps which was intended initially for the Calcutta session of the National Congress, but which was subsequently to be maintained, in the service of his faction, as a permanent organisation.³⁰ The workers' demonstration at the Congress pandal during the Calcutta session appears to have been organised by Santosh Mitra's group through its trade unionist members and contacts. One of its targets was Bose's volunteers.³¹ During 1929 the 'People's Party', formed by the Goswami-Chakravarty faction in conjunction with the Mitra group, continued its struggle against the Bose faction. Both factions engaged in rival attempts during the year to mobilise labour for their respective causes. This was in part the context of the People's Party's involvement, through the BJWA, in the 1929 jute general strike, of Subhas Bose's involvement in strikes at Jamshedpur, at the Golmuri tin-plate works and at the Burmah oil installations at Budge Budge, and of the increasing emphasis given by the BPCCL during the year to the question of organising labour.³² However, of the two factions the People's

30. It came to be known as the 'Bengal Volunteers': Laushey, op. cit., pp.58-61.

31. See Chapter 3, fn.276.

32. NAI, H.Poll, 257/1/1930: Notes on the People's Party and on Subhas Bose's activities, in the DIB's abstract on Congress and Labour from Jan. - Sept. 1929; RCLI, Vol. V(1), pp.150-52.

Party group, as we shall see in Chapter 7, was to retain a more long-lasting interest in the labour question.

It appears that the Mitra group was interested in joining the WPP and, with the Goswami and Chakravarty group, in dominating the party. The AIWPP conference officially recorded its opinion that this group was 'jealous of the growth of the Party' and, therefore, 'made an organised attempt to wreck it' at the conference.³³ It seems more likely, however, that it was not so much an attempt to wreck it as to capture it and displace the existing Ahmad-Spratt leadership. This factional situation was further complicated and embittered by its becoming enmeshed in a campaign by one of the expatriate revolutionary groups in Berlin to discredit the existing communist leadership in India. This particular factional campaign was transmitted to Bengal via Bhupendranath Dutt, Jawaharlal Nehru and others who had returned from Berlin.³⁴

Following the failure of the attempt to 'capture' the WPP, and the subsequent formation of the People's Party with 'men of whom the Party could not approve',³⁵ the warfare between the two parties became open. The third feature of interest about the WPP split is the way in which the People's Party group conducted its campaign. Though there were definite ideological differences between the Goswami-Chakravarty and Ahmad factions, the terms of the People's Party attack on the WPP leadership were personal rather than ideological. A frustrated

33. MCCC, p.465: official report on the AIWPP conference; see also Ahmad, Myself, pp.430-33.

34. See Chapter 7, fn.31.

35. MCCC, p.527(8): op. cit.

and bewildered Spratt was struck by 'the curious absence of any political element from the disputes':

Personal motives are throughout of the greatest importance. (Ambition, to become secretary or what not; blind friendship and devotion to individuals or subordinate groups rather than to the Party as a whole; spite, or envy, on the part of certain non-members, who, as is well known, took a prominent hand.) Personal issues were chosen to fight on, with hardly any colouring of principle to disguise their nakedness. ... Personal attacks were employed to conduct the fight. The whole affair depended on a widespread campaign both within the Party and without of slander against individuals. (So-and-so is not a revolutionary; is pro-British; shows favour to such-and-such, and neglects somebody else; misappropriates the Party funds; even - "is a spy". ...) ... Closely related psychologically ... is the conspiratorial method of organisation and attack. ³⁶

Spratt linked these features to 'the apparently unusual predominance of personalities in Bengal politics', and characterised the political mode of the seceding faction as being 'petty-bourgeois' and neo-anarchist rather than communist. In support of this characterisation he cited: the People's Party's divorce from, and alleged lack of faith in the working class; its greater faith in the revolutionary potential of the educated and unemployed youth; its continued sympathy for, and contact with terrorists; and its 'vacillations' between 'ultra-left' abstention from certain 'reformist' organisations and groups and its 'right-reformist' capitulation to others. He drew on the history of the BJWA group's involvement in the trade union movement and in the strikes of the year to illustrate his argument.

Spratt's attack was not completely non-partisan - partly, no doubt, because he himself had been attacked for being

36. MCCC, p.527(8): op. cit... (Emphasis in original.)

an 'English' communist, and his associates for being 'pro-British' because of their association with him.³⁷ He did recognise that the characteristics he condemned were not confined to the ex-terrorist faction within the party. But he did not recognise the importance of the policy differences which divided Muzaffar and himself from the other faction, nor the extent to which the personal, non-ideological terms of the People's Party's attack arose from what the Meerut Sessions Court judge described as 'dissatisfaction with Muzaffar Ahmad's autocratic methods'.³⁸

* * *

Thus, from late 1928 we see a party permeated by mutual hostilities arising from an entanglement of ideological, policy and personality differences, coming apart at the seams and dissolving into the political surroundings. The Bengal WPP could muster up little of substance with which either to hold itself together or to distinguish itself clearly from the wider patterns of Bengali politics. The WPP had originally come together as a coalition of several groups emerging uncertainly from the surface turbulence of urban elite politics in the aftermath of Non-Cooperation. Neither the coalition as a collective unit, nor any of its component parts, proved able

37. ibid.

38. MCCC, Judgement, P.242. If Muzaffar's Myself and the Communist Party of India, 1920-1929 can be taken as a guide to his approach to politics in our period, then we can see that much of Spratt's critique of the Goswami-Chakravarty group would have applied to Muzaffar as well. His book is a curiously titled one for a Marxist history, and it

consists primarily of a vitriolic attack, in highly personal terms, on his 1920s opponents.

to bridge the elite-masses gulf which characterised political Bengal. Without a mass base the party was unable to develop its own centre of gravity and had only ideological means to hold itself together and to differentiate 'communist' politics from the 'bourgeois' form. But because the ideological discourse remained within the confines of the intelligentsia and was not, as in Bombay, shaped by contact with the working class, ideology, too, was only weakly developed. It was, thus, particularly inadequate for the tasks of party-bonding and political differentiation.

In this situation Muzaffar Ahmad, without significant affiliations with Bengali politics, relied greatly on his communist contacts outside Bengal to maintain his position. This was continuous with the way in which he had become 'Bengal's first communist' - essentially through M.N. Roy's having chosen him as his main contact in the province, rather than through a process of 'natural selection'. Conversely, the extreme weakness of communist politics in Bengal, and Muzaffar's vulnerability to an ex-terrorist influx into the party, may partly explain his pronounced extra-Bengali preoccupations. In contrast, the Goswami-Chakravarty group's close contacts with political organisations beyond the WPP, and its preoccupation with converting its non-party colleagues and with bringing them into the party, may partly explain its heterodoxy in relation to the WPP's CPGB-provided theoretical and policy guidelines. Whatever were this faction's political shortcomings, it was at least in close touch with a significant element in Bengali politics and, moreover, it was to prove to be the wave of the communist future in Bengal.

But, in the late 1920s, Calcutta's bhadralok politics reclaimed its own; the WPP all but disappeared - caught in the same undertows from which it had initially partly emerged. Marxist politics, too, was prey to the daladali politics of 'fortuitous rivalry', despite the new ideological component. By March 1929 all that remained of the WPP was the small group who stood around Muzaffar - the advocate of CPGB orthodoxy in Bengal. For the Bengal WPP the AIWPP's December 1928 declaration of independence was, therefore, no more than a forlorn hope. Rather, as Spratt commented in March, on the eve of the Meerut Case arrests, the party remained in a state of 'almost pitiful unpreparedness' for the coming upheavals.³⁹

2. THE BOMBAY COMMUNISTS' POLITICAL ADVANCE

After the 1928 general strike in the cotton mills one of its communist leaders was to comment that 'The strike was not our creation, but we were the creation of the strike'.⁴⁰ This statement is true at two levels. First, the success of the strike 'created' the communists, not only as local trade union leaders, but also as a force in the politics of their city and in national trade unionism. Secondly, the educators were educated: the strike experience began to create a 'proletarianised', 'Indianised' and more disciplined communist leadership from a loose combination of Congress radicals inspired

39. MCCC, P.527(8): op. cit..

40. Dange, quoted in Newman, op. cit., p.238.

by international communism. There were, however, definite limits to the changes in both political influence and modes of leadership. In this section we will chart the different processes and note their limits.

The Communists' Position in Bombay Politics

The communist-led, primarily Maharashtrian leftist faction which transformed itself into the Congress Labour Party in late 1926 was, with about a quarter of the BPCC's membership, a significant force within that organisation. The influence of the communist minority within the left faction was seen in the facts that Nimbkar was the BPCC secretary and that he and Joglekar were among the seven BPCC delegates on the AICC.⁴¹ But the CLP and its successor, the WPP, were hardly parties in any strict sense of the term: the concept of party membership was 'absolutely not understood' among most of the non-communists, Spratt wrote in September 1927.⁴² Only the communists were actively engaged in full-time work on behalf of the party. The rest of its members were little more than sympathisers.

Out-numbered by the primarily Gujarati 'business' faction and even more disadvantaged in terms of resources, the party could initially do little more than cautiously present its program in the BPCC and the AICC - not in the hope of getting it accepted, but 'to find out where the supporters are for the purpose

41. MCCC, p.826: Secretary's Report to the Annual Conference of the Bombay WPP (March 1928).

42. MCCC, p.1009: Spratt to C.P. Dutt, 4/9/27.

of getting some real labour work done on the largest possible scale'.⁴³ The AICC program was kept moderate so as not to 'drive away what little support there is for us'.⁴⁴ The party's long-term goal was to convert the Congress into a WPP-type party. But the initial program called for little more than constitutional changes in the Congress, so that it could better represent the interests of the workers and peasants, and for a policy of militant action against the Raj.⁴⁵ By May 1927, following the formation of the WPP from the Congress Labour Party, the communists felt sufficiently confident to begin criticising the existing Congress leadership. In that month Joglekar presented a program to the AICC which attacked the leadership for representing only 'an insignificant section of the people, the big capitalists and their allies the intellectual and professional upper classes' and for thus being incapable of leading a mass anti-imperialist movement.⁴⁶ The Congress leadership was also condemned for tolerating 'and even encouraging' communal conflict. Nevertheless the program remained a mild version of that recommended by R.P. Dutt. The tactic was still the limited one of attempting to 'discredit' the leadership by allowing it to reject the WPP's program, while testing for supporters.⁴⁷

43. MCCC, P.1144: Allison to Joglekar, 26/11/26.

44. ibid.

45. The program is reproduced in ibid.

46. MCCC, P.843: Program to be presented to the AICC; NAI, H.Poll, 32/1927: Bombay FRI May.

47. After Vallabhbai Patel had disallowed extended discussion on the program Kranti took the opportunity to condemn the Congress leadership (MCCC, P.1375(T): Kranti, 21/5/27). The party was reasonably happy with the response of some AICC radicals to the program and discussion: MCCC, P.1009: Spratt to C.P. Dutt, 4/9/27.

By late 1927 - coinciding with the party's first significant contact with the working class of the city - the communists were prepared to initiate a more active policy within the Congress. At the Madras session of the National Congress in December 1927 the Bombay group, supported by a smaller Bengali WPP contingent, vigorously took up the issue of the impending Simon Commission on future constitutional reforms. At Madras they called for a nationalist united front around a program of mass boycott of the Commission, complemented by a demand for a National Constituent Assembly to decide India's future.⁴⁸ Again, the tactic was designed partly to try to force the Congress conservatives' hand and to attract radical support, and the communists were satisfied that they had 'created an impression' at the Madras session.⁴⁹

But they were primarily interested in organising an effective boycott in Bombay when the Simon Commission arrived there in February. The communists' plan was to generate sufficient momentum among the Congress radicals to neutralise the Congress leaders' 'shuffling and hypocrisy' on the issue and, as we saw in Chapter 3, to mobilise an impressive working class hartal around radical mass demands.⁵⁰ They dominated the BPPC hartal committee and, from January, launched an intensive organisational and propaganda campaign in the press and at public meetings. This was sufficient to neutralise the BPPC

48. MCCC, P.23: Manifesto of the WPP to the INC, Madras, Dec. 1927.

49. MCCC, P.526(39) and P.670: op. cit.. The WPP was able to get a few of its minor resolutions passed - perhaps because of the radicalising presence of Jawaharlal, recently returned from his European communist contacts.

50. MCCC, P.1372(2): Minutes of a communist meeting at Madras, 28/12/27. MCCC, P.441: Manifesto of the WPP (early 1928) is a result of this meeting.

conservatives' opposition to a militant hartal involving the working class.⁵¹ The success of the hartal, the Commissioner of Police reported, was due almost entirely to the communists' preparations and their ability to bring out large numbers of workers.⁵² However the communists were later to criticise their own tactics, for they had acted publicly as Congressmen, not as members of the WPP, and so the latter gained very little in terms of publicity.⁵³

If the communists' still-limited working class influence in February had placed them unmistakably on the Bombay political map at that point, the outcome of the general strike, and of the building of the GKU, made them an increasingly formidable force. The old Bombay conflict between the 'shetias' and the 'intelligentsia' was now taking on a very different form. Throughout the year there was a progressive polarisation within the BPCC. By April, Ghatge reported, the conservatives had firmly 'set themselves against everything labour'.⁵⁴ In June a BPCC meeting which was scheduled to discuss the question of granting Rs.4,000 to the strikers fell through when only the WPP members and their sympathisers arrived, and there were not enough to form a quorum. 'It is believed', the Intelligence Branch noted, 'that members of the other groups in the BPCC, who are jealous of the growing prestige of the Communist Party, purposely absented themselves'.⁵⁵ Kranti took the opportunity to launch

51. MCCC, P.1344: Bombay WPP, EC meeting, 23/1/28; MCCC, P. 1348(49): WPP Manifesto on the Statutory Commission; see also fns.38-40, Chapter 3.
52. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Commissioner of Police, Bombay, to G of Bom, 7/8/28.
53. MCCC, P.526(32) and p.670: op. cit.
54. MCCC, P.821: Ghatge to Thengdi, 4/4/28.
55. NAI, H.Poll, 190/1928: DIB report, ca. mid-Jun.

a scathing attack upon the dominance of the capitalists in the BCC.⁵⁶ Relations with the Congress leadership were also strained in May when Gandhi and Motilal Nehru, in Bombay for the All-Parties Conference, declined an invitation by the WPP to address a mass meeting of the strikers. They gave as their reasons the fact that 'they had no sympathy for the strikers who by their actions were upsetting the plans for the boycott of foreign cloth'. As a result they were condemned by the communists at public meetings for 'being in league with the millowners ... and as caring nothing for the working class'.⁵⁷

The conflict with the national leaders was resumed at the annual session of the National Congress at Calcutta at the end of the year. The Bombay and Bengal parties had prepared four resolutions⁵⁸ which were presented to the Congress Subjects Committee by Nimbkar.⁵⁹ The first resolution called on the Congress to declare its goal to be Complete Independence; the second, reflecting growing Soviet fears of British armed intervention, called for preparations for complete non-cooperation with the government in the event of the British beginning another war; the third called for a Congress declaration on 'the need for the organisation, on the basis of class struggle, of the masses of industrial workers and peasants, as an indispensable preliminary for the attainment of independence and as a means for the advancement of the economic and cultural status of the masses'; and the final resolution, repeating a constant Bengal

56. MCCC, P.1375(T): Kranti, 29/7/28.

57. NAI, H.Poll, 1/1928: Bombay FR2 May.

58. In MCCC, P.1373(8A).

59. MCCC, P.1311: INC, 43rd Session, Subjects Committee - list of resolutions received.

WPP theme, condemned the Bengal Swarajists for opposing the Tenancy Amendment Act and for consistently supporting zamindar interests against those of the cultivators. Again, the resolutions were intended merely to pressure the conservatives and to promote radicalisation through debate on the proposals.⁶⁰ Even so the communists were unhappy with the results. None of the resolutions survived the Subjects Committee and so could not be used in the open session to promote debate. Moreover, discussion on Nimbkar's amendment to Gandhi's resolution on the Nehru Report and the future program of the Congress was avoided by Motilal Nehru's 'stage-managing' in the Subjects Committee and the application of the gag in the open session of the Congress. Bradley was moved to comment that 'I have never seen so much opportunism shown amongst leaders before'.⁶¹ The outcome of the Calcutta session confirmed the communists' growing belief in the 'reactionary' character of the Congress leadership.

The increasingly bitter fight with the BPC leadership during 1928 - a development which inevitably followed from the communists' progression from leftist gadflies to successful militant labour organisers - was matched by a growing rapprochement with the more radically inclined Bombay nationalists. For example, although the communists, despite some effort, were unable to establish a significant footing among the Bombay student community,⁶² they were able to begin to establish a working

60. MCCC, P.526(32) and p.670: op. cit..

61. MCCC, P.2415(P): Bradley to Potter-Wilson, 19/1/29.

62. MCCC, P.1979 and p.1941: Spratt's notes for a speech to the Bombay Students' Brotherhood, 24/4/27, and a file of press clippings reporting it; MCCC, P.546(10): op. cit.; MCCC, P.546(11): Manifesto of the WPP to the Bombay Youth Conference; MCCC, P.420: Report of Bombay WPP to the AIWPP Conference.

alliance with K.F. Nariman's and Yusuf Meher Ali's Youth League. Both sides cultivated the alliance. The communists were seeking a wider nationalist support for the strike, and toned down their public critique of 'petty bourgeois' nationalism accordingly. Nariman also saw potential benefits in an alliance with the emerging mass leadership.⁶³ The communists became increasingly galled by the fact that their rising influence among Bombay's radical intelligentsia was not matched by their numerical strength in the BPCC. Consequently the WPP decided in July to make a concerted attempt to increase their strength at the October BPCC elections, and in August a sub-committee was formed to organise an enrolment drive and electioneering campaign.⁶⁴ In the elections they managed to secure 30 seats for 'members or associates of the Party' - an increase of about 10 - out of the total of 75 seats,⁶⁵ though it was still not enough to over-rule the dominant business faction. Another communist (Dange) joined Joglekar and Nimbkar on the BPCC's AICC delegation.⁶⁶

Similar considerations led the party to decide to contest the February 1929 Municipal Corporation elections. The proposal was first put forward by Dange and J.B. Patel at the WPP's annual conference in March 1928⁶⁷ and received considerable attention during the following year. The party saw participation in these elections primarily as a useful propaganda exercise.

63. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Bombay Commissioner of Police to G of Bom, 7/8/28. See Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj', p.94, on Nariman's Youth League and his political activities in this period.

64. MCCC, P.1344: WPP meetings, 19/8/28 and 2, 9 & 23/9/28.

65. ibid.: WPP meeting 14/10/28.

66. AICC Papers, 1929 (this source was kindly provided by Sandy Gordon).

With only about 10 percent of the population enfranchised under the Rs.10 monthly-rental qualification,⁶⁸ the communists did not anticipate winning any seats - though that eventuality, it was argued, would provide a useful 'loudspeaker' for the party in the Corporation to force discussion of the labour issues 'which have always been disregarded in the Corporation till now'.⁶⁹ However there was considerable disagreement within the party about both the benefit of the exercise and the tactics that should be pursued. The changing consensus on tactics indicates the party's changing conception of its position in Bombay politics. It was decided in October that, in order to have any chance of success, the party candidates should stand on a Congress ticket.⁷⁰ In January, against some opposition, it was decided that they should stand as WPP members - a decision which immediately brought the party into conflict with the Congress.⁷¹

The party directed its campaign towards 'the 98 percent', consisting of the 'workers, peasants, as also men of the clerical profession belonging to the higher castes', who were exploited by 'the imperialists, capitalists and landlords'.⁷²

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67. MCCC, p.1344: WPP meeting, 18/3/28; MCCC, P.1348(16): a copy of the resolution.
68. This percentage is calculated from figures quoted in a Bombay Legislative Council Debate on democratisation of the Municipal franchise (BLC, Debates, Vol.27, 1929, p.401) and from a report on the voting in the Times of India, 30/1/29, p.13. (Both sources provided by Sandy Gordon).
69. MCCC, p.1348(7): Report of the WPP sub-committee on the feasibility of contesting the elections, 8/4/28.
70. MCCC, P.1344: WPP meeting, 21/10/28.
71. ibid.: 13/1/29; MCCC, P.1373(1): notes of the same meeting; Times of India, 28/1/29, p.5. None of the nationalist newspapers would publicise the WPP's election program: interviews with S.S. Mirajkar and M.G. Desai.
72. MCCC, P.791(T): Marathi electioneering pamphlet issued by

The WPP put forward a program, set explicitly within an ideology of class and anti-imperialist struggle, which called for greatly increased Corporation expenditure on public amenities and social services and welfare, a democratisation of the franchise, a more progressive taxation scale, and complete Corporation autonomy from the government.⁷³ In presenting the program the WPP condemned the Congress leaders for their 'treachery' in having 'always sacrificed the interests of the exploited masses by compromising with the capitalists and imperialists'. However, the party hastened to assure its audience, its own candidates were also 'staunch Congressmen': 'the mandates of the Congress are obeyed by us'; 'Do not, therefore, be frightened because we do not go under the Congress ticket'.⁷⁴ That the communists felt this assurance to be necessary indicated the increasingly ambiguous nature of their relationship with the Congress. The educated clerical audience was urged to recognise the essential identity of its interests with those of the exploited masses, to overcome its elitist prejudices, and to act responsibly by voting on behalf of the disenfranchised masses.⁷⁵

None of the four WPP candidates won a seat. But, as

72. (Cont'd)

Joglekar, the WPP candidate for F. Ward. (This exhibit includes a number of WPP electioneering leaflets.)

73. *ibid.*; MCCC, p.577(1): The Spark (Bombay) Vol. 1(1), 27/1/29, p.1. (The Spark was M.G. Desai's creation and he published the party's election program in the first issue.)

74. MCCC, p.791(T): op.cit.. See also MCCC, p.792(T) and p.931(T): leaflets issued by the GKU urging workers to vote for the WPP candidates.

75. MCCC, p.791(T): op. cit.; see also MCCC, p.577(1): op. cit..

the government observed, the campaign had proved 'remarkably successful' for the party.⁷⁶ Although Pendse, the candidate for the middle class ward of Girgaum came last, Joglekar and Nimbkar were both at the top of the list of failed candidates in mill area wards.⁷⁷ Given the franchise qualifications, these results must have depended primarily on non-working class votes; and that the voting for the WPP candidates did not fall within the generally communal pattern of voting⁷⁸ shows that it was primarily their ideology which was found attractive. The communists were greatly encouraged by the effectiveness of the campaign as a propaganda medium and by the index of their growing 'petty bourgeois' support provided by the results.⁷⁹

The Bombay Communists in the AITUC

Though the WPP's increasing weight in Bombay did not significantly increase the party's strength within the Congress at the national level, it did do so within the national trade union organisation. The difference was that while Congress voting was on an individual basis, within the AITUC the communists' voting strength increased in proportion to the membership of their unions.

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76. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: Report on communist activities, Sept. 1928-Jan.1929.
77. NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Jan.; Times of India, 30/1/29, p.13. It is interesting that the WPP did worst in Girgaum, which was their main power base in the BPCC.
78. NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Jan.. However there may have been a convert and unsolicited element of community appeal, since Bombay's clerical population, like the communists, was predominantly Maharashtrian Brahman in composition.
79. MCCC, p.2417(P): Bradley to J.Potter-Wilson, 2/2/29. Mirajkar, one of the candidates, stressed this point to the author: interview with S.S. Mirajkar.

The communists actually managed to establish their first foothold in the AITUC before they had established a trade union base. The Seventh AITUC session in Delhi in March 1927 was called at short notice to enable the visiting communist and British MP Shapurji Saklatvala to attend before leaving India. Saklatvala, Britain's only Indian MP, had received considerable publicity throughout his whirlwind tour of India in early 1927, despite the fact that he was a communist.⁸⁰ The Indian communists had been able to gain some publicity for themselves in the process.⁸¹ With Jhabvala's assistance and AITUC president N.M. Joshi's compliance, the communists were able to participate in the session.⁸² Because the session was called at short notice many of the AITUC's officials and delegates did not attend. Accordingly, although they were 'timid early in the proceedings',⁸³ the WPP delegations from Bombay and Calcutta were able to muster sufficient support to get through several of their political resolutions and a resolution recommending 'one union for one industry', and to win election to several of the AITUC's minor positions.⁸⁴ This was seen as a 'quite important' start for the party.⁸⁵

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80. NAI, H.Poll, 32/1927: Bombay, Bengal, Madras, Delhi and CP and B FRs 1 & 2 Feb.
81. MCCC, P.855: Mirajkar to Thengdi, 26/1/27.
82. Spratt, Blowing up India, pp.36-7.
83. MCCC, P.1828: Mirajkar to Thengdi, 16/2/27: MCCC, P.849: a copy of the resolutions, with a note by Thengdi.
84. MCCC, P.1955: Spratt to R. Page Arnott, 10/3/27; MCCC, p.1828: Spratt's report of the AITUC proceedings; MCCC, p.859: official report of the AITUC (7th Session); LM, Vol. 9, 1927, pp.443-44. Thengdi was elected as administrative secretary, Ghate as assistant secretary and Thengdi and Joglekar were elected to the Negotiations Committee.
85. MCCC, p.1828: op. cit.. However it hardly warrants Puneekar's comment that with this AITUC session the organisation progressed ideologically 'from rose pink to vermilion red': op. cit., p.92.

At the Eighth AITUC session in Kanpur, in November of the same year, the Bombay communists concentrated on forming, with their Bengali comrades and radicals from other provinces, a more coherent leftist challenge to the moderate AITUC leaders. They were able to form a pressure group, numbering 14, which also attracted wider support.⁸⁶ Once again they managed to have some of their resolutions passed - including one backing the boycott of the Simon Commission - and to influence others. Members of the Bombay group were again elected to several executive positions and to its Constitutional Committee and Council of Action - the latter, the result of a WPP initiative, having as its purpose the organisation of 'a mass movement of the workers and peasants'.⁸⁷ But without a significant union base the WPP group was unable to effect any really substantive changes in AITUC policy and was powerless to ensure the implementation of those resolutions which it did get passed. The Council of Action, for example, was unable to function because the Executive Committee simply refused it funds.⁸⁸

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86. MCCC, P.1871(1)C: report on the work of the 'T.C. Left Group' by Dange, early Dec. 1927.
87. MCCC, P.1381: official Report of the Eighth Session of the AITUC. Thengdi was elected as one of the three vice-presidents, Dange as one of the two assistant secretaries and Jhabvala as the organising secretary. Spratt became the convenor of the Constitutional Committee and Jhabvala was elected as the organising secretary of the Council of Action.
88. MCCC, P.826: Annual Report of the WPP, Mar. 1928; MCCC, P. 420: Report of the Bombay WPP to the AIWPP Conference; MCCC, P.479: Spratt to Ahmad, 6/3/28. However the left group in the AITUC was able to block the moderates' attempts to affiliate the AITUC with the social democratic International Federation of Trade Unions.

Following their spectacular successes in Bombay during the year the communists arrived at the Ninth AITUC session, held at the Bihar coal mining centre of Jharia in December 1928, in a much more confident and aggressive mood than before. With the unprecedented strike activity of 1928, and the increased nationalist activity during the year, the Jharia session was much more politicised and heated than the previous sessions.⁸⁹ The WPP group 'worked well', Bradley later wrote, 'but it did not have an easy passage'.⁹⁰ The AITUC constitution ruled that a union delegation's voting strength was determined on the basis of the union's membership at the preceding AITUC annual session. Therefore the Bombay communists could not yet draw upon the GKU's current strength to consolidate their position within the national federation. Even so, as the leaders of India's largest union they were in a position of moral strength and could now, in addition, use their position within the large GIPRU to attain a much greater degree of influence than previously. Consequently they succeeded in getting the AITUC affiliated to the communist dominated international organisation,

89. MCCC, P.1206(1): 'Disruptionists in the Trade Union Congress' - an article by Bradley attacking the anti-communist faction; MCCC, P.527(1): Spratt to C.P. Dutt, 14/3/29 - Spratt reported that the atmosphere was so heated that he could not even take notes; J. Nehru, Toward Freedom: An Autobiography, (N.Y., 1942), pp.186-7. Nehru, who attended the session, described the situation at Jharia in the following way: 'More important than these questions [of international affiliation] was the vast difference in outlook between the two sections of the Congress. ... The radical group, though more powerful in the rank and file, had little opportunity of influencing policy at the top. This was an unsatisfactory position and it did not reflect the true state of affairs. There was dissatisfaction and friction and a desire on the part of the radical elements to seize power ... At the same time there was a disinclination to carry matters too far, for a split was feared'.

90. MCCC, P.2416(P): Bradley to Potter-Wilson, 18/1/29.

the League Against Imperialism, despite the determined opposition of the moderates.⁹¹ But, more importantly, their candidate for the presidency - the GIPRU official and WPP member D.B. Kulkarni - was only narrowly defeated (29:36) by the moderates' distinguished nominee, Jawaharlal Nehru.⁹² They were also able to have more of their political resolutions passed than at the previous sessions, and increased their representation on the Executive Committee.⁹³

Moreover, the communists improved their position within the Railwaymen's Federation at its annual general meeting, which was held at Jharia concurrently with the AITUC. The moderates on the AIRF had been preparing their opposition to the militants since August.⁹⁴ But even so the moderates only narrowly defeated the WPP group's resolution that the AIRF prepare for a general strike on the GIP Railway should the Agent refuse, or not respond to, the GIPRU's demands. In addition, Bradley was elected as a vice-president and Jhabvala as the organising secretary.⁹⁵

On the basis of their increased strength at Jharia the communists could confidently anticipate dominating the

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91. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: note on the Jharia AITUC. Part of the reason for the passage of the affiliation resolution was the strong reaction of most delegates against the arrest of the visiting LAI representative (Johnstone) at the Jharia session.
92. Nehru was nominated at the last minute by the moderate D. Chamanlal when it became apparent that Kulkarni might win. Nehru, who was not present at this point, says that he was embarrassed at having defeated an actual worker and would not have stood had he been aware of the situation: Toward Freedom, p.187.
93. Joglekar was elected as an assistant secretary, Kulkarni, Ahmad and Abdul Majid (of the Punjab WPP) became vice-presidents, and Bradley, Spratt and Ruikar (a non-party radical ally in the GIPRU) were elected as EC members.
94. MCCC, P.2416(P): op. cit.
95. MCCC, P.2416(P) (4): report of the AIRF Conference 17-19/12/1928.

AITUC at the next annual session, when they would be able to use their recent union gains to great advantage. Control of the AITUC would provide them with greatly increased prestige and with very valuable new material and propaganda resources. It would also enable them to move beyond Bombay, into their first significant national political base.

3. TOWARDS THE FORMATION OF AN INDEPENDENT COMMUNIST LEADERSHIP IN BOMBAY

S.A. Dange has recalled that during the 1920s the communists 'got moored (sic.) into [Royist] sectarian dogmatism from the very beginning', but that eventually 'sheer pragmatism and the mood of the masses' enabled them to find a way out of this initial trap.⁹⁷ Dange's statement indicates much about the changes which began to take place within the Bombay communist leadership from early 1928. It indicates the fact of an important transition, the crucial role of their interaction with a mass base and nationalist politics in bringing it about, and the 'pragmatic' limits of the changes which did occur. From 1928 the Bombay communists, under the pressure of events in which they were now directly involved and no longer merely observing and analysing, were forced for the first time to engage in 'praxis'. The radically new Marxist analysis of Indian society which they had earlier discovered, via M.N. Roy and R.P. Dutt, and whose synthesis of political radicalism and logical

97. Dange, When Communist (sic.) Differ, p.39.

coherence they had appreciated so much, had now to be applied. The Bombay communists would now have constantly to evaluate against their immediate experience the theoretical perspectives, conceptual categories, policy guidelines and organisational recommendations provided them from abroad. Under novel pressures to work as a disciplined and cohesive leadership, and now operating within a new context within which to develop these qualities, they would begin to appreciate more fully the importance of the Roy-Dutt emphasis on the necessity of effective organisation. But in other areas the fit between received doctrine and Indian realities would be perceived - if 'pragmatically' - to be less than perfect. In what ways, then, and to what extent, did the acquisition of a mass base and the consequent advance in the nationalist arena change the modes of communist leadership in Bombay? Was the December 1928 claim to political independence a justifiable one - and was it justifiable in both the Indian and the Comintern contexts? To what extent, that is, had the Bombay communists created a disciplined and 'proletarianised' Indian leadership, clearly differentiated from the prevailing 'bourgeois' mode of nationalist politics; and to what extent an 'Indianised' communist leadership, capable of an autonomous relationship to the Comintern?

For the first year of its existence the Bombay WPP remained a small - if hardworking - coalition of activists rather than a disciplined party: 'Party consolidation is a great necessity of today', Mirajkar wrote in September,

1927.⁹⁸ However Spratt saw little chance of this situation changing until a more marked political differentiation had occurred within the Bombay Congress, with more of its rank-and-file being radicalised and attracted to the party.⁹⁹ Under present conditions, he added, it would be premature, and essentially meaningless, seriously to consider developing - or even maintaining - the CPI. Until early 1929, in fact the CPI was to continue to exist 'but in name only', as its Delhi members complained in early 1928.¹⁰⁰ The WPP's problems were increased by the tendency of its new full-time active members - only about five during 1927 - to act as individuals, often disregarding party directives, rather than as disciplined members of a Marxist party. For example the executive met only very irregularly during the year,¹⁰¹ and the problem of discipline was sufficiently pronounced for the March 1928 annual conference to acknowledge it in the following way:

... other parties ... have attributed the misdeeds of individuals to our Party as a whole. There might be many who may go and do something individually, without a mandate from the Party, there may be many who may not be our Party men, yet declaring themselves to be ours. How can we or our principles and theories be held liable for personal deviations and lapses? A principle cannot be vilified because its exponents turned sometimes a wrong way.¹⁰²

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98. MCCC, P.1010: Mirajkar to Spratt, 21/8/28. In the following month, Intelligence noted of the WPP that 'there is no regular membership, and there is only a clique ... who number not more than fifteen': BSB, 1036/B/IV/1935: Report, 17/10/27.
99. MCCC, P.1009: op. cit...
100. MCCC, P.1891(C): circular from M. Shafique, H.A. Nasim and P. Mansur, to 'the Members and Sympathisers of the Communist Party of India', 19/2/28. The Bombay Special Branch had observed in December 1926 that the CLP (the forerunner of the WPP) was much more active than the Communist Party, 'which does little but bemoan its collective and individual poverty' (BSB, 1036/B/IV/1935: Note, 20/12/26). This description applies to the whole of this period until the end of 1928.
101. The EC met formally only eight times during the year: MCCC, P.1344: op. cit...
102. MCCC, P.1209: From a resolution on the WPP's attitude towards the Congress and existing TU leaderships.

During 1927 the party also uncritically accepted the 'new Imperialist policy' analysis as its theoretical framework, seeking simply to apply the theory to the Indian situation.¹⁰³

When the party held its March 1928 annual conference it was on the verge of its transformation from a group of ideologues isolated from the masses into the cohesive leadership of a mass movement. It had recently made a major contribution to the Bombay anti-Simon Commission hartal, it had established a much stronger relationship with the GKM worker militants and had been involved in its first strikes, and there were clear signs that a major strike could break soon. In this situation the problem of organisation became a more pressing one, and was accorded a high priority at the annual meeting. Part of the resolution on organisation read:

... the success of any group of individuals lay (sic.) in their state of organisation. Scientifically organised, ... the Party can become a power to be considered in the Industrial and Political world. It must also be on such a basis that decisions can be easily transmitted, correctly understood and carried out. ... look to it as being the very first task to set about.¹⁰⁴

That the party's executive met regularly - on a weekly basis - during 1928, showed that the concept of organisation was being taken more seriously than in 1927. The annual conference also recognised the 'urgent need' of propagandising 'the admittedly unfamiliar but profoundly important idea of the function of a Party' among trade union and Congress radicals in order to expand the party's membership.¹⁰⁵ The WPP now took

103. MCCC, P.1372(2): Notes of a communist policy discussion at the Madras INC session, 28/12/27.

104. MCCC, P.832: Resolution on Organisation.

105. ibid.

seriously - in a way it had not during the first year of its existence - the task of removing the misunderstandings of 'sympathisers', 'admirers and neutral elements', though 'without essentially compromising our principles or outlook'. In February it began a more concerted recruitment drive, particularly among trade unionists, which resulted in nine new members in the first month.¹⁰⁶ Membership, however, was to remain 'strictly limited ... idle membership is not canvassed for'.¹⁰⁷ Part of the concern to expand the membership arose from a growing realisation of the need for a Marxist leadership to include the 'leading elements' of the working class. During 1927 Spratt had found the WPP members' outlook 'very petty bourgeois', and was constantly 'gibing at them for it'.¹⁰⁸ By the beginning of 1928, however, 'their psychology was undoubtedly changing'. A few of the new recruits - most notably Alve - were workers. The conference documents also indicate a new sensitivity to the changing political situation. The Roy-Dutt theoretical framework was retained. But the argument that the British had drawn the Indian bourgeoisie into a partnership which would lead to the voluntary granting of Dominion Status did not explain why the Simon Commission had excluded Indians from its personnel, nor the growing antagonism of Indian capital, the Moderates, and the Congress conservatives, towards the Raj. Thus the following 'pragmatic' qualification

106. MCCC, P.1344: EC meetings, 8/2/28, 15/3/28 and 25/3/28.

107. MCCC, P.826: op. cit...

108. MCCC, P.546(10): op. cit...

was added to the WPP's policy declaration: 'when the Indian oppressors of the Indian Masses oppose Imperialism when their interests are threatened, we unhesitatingly lend our support to the anti-Imperialist section and strengthen their hands' - but from an independent revolutionary working class basis.¹⁰⁹

It was an essentially Leninist formulation. The annual conference resolved that party 'fraction' work in the BCC and AICC were 'very important'.¹¹⁰ The party was also anxious to establish that its opposition to the reformist trade unionists was not a factionalism based on personalities: 'we do not look to their personal motives. We only look to the ideology with which they enter [the] Labour field'.¹¹¹

Thus we see an apparent correlation in early 1928 between, on the one hand, the WPP's increased concern to become a disciplined, independent minded, politically differentiated and larger party and, on the other, its concurrent transition from being an isolated and uninfluential group towards a leadership linked to a mass base and wielding influence in the city's nationalist politics. That the former process was related to the latter is further suggested by the subsequent development of these trends in the modes of communist leadership during 1928.

The party's changing context also changed the character of its internal tensions. Formerly, factional differences within the WPP were simply 'paper differences'; because there was no

109. MCCC, P.1209: op. cit...

110. ibid...

111. ibid...

context within which to work them out, such disagreements remained only hypothetical and were easily entangled with personality differences. With first the prospect, and then the reality of a mass base, the same differences could be 'externalised' by being translated into practical terms. We can demonstrate this point by comparing the character of factional differences within the party in 1927 and 1928.

We noted in Chapter 3 that during the Sassoon mill strike in August 1927 differences arose between Joglekar and the rest of the membership over the issue of whether or not to merge the GKM with the BTLU. At that point Joglekar, working closely with Mayekar, the GKM's leader, was virtually the party's sole point of contact with textile unionism. The party had decided that, in accordance with its policy of industrial unionism, it should take the opportunity provided by the strike to attempt to merge the GKM with the BTLU to form 'one formidable union'.¹¹² Mayekar, jealous of his union's separate identity, firmly resisted this proposal. The party, exasperated by earlier manifestations of Joglekar's individualistic 'rascality'.¹¹³ was convinced that he was supporting Mayekar's stand, and 'for the same old reason - Egoism'.¹¹⁴ Consequently Joglekar was 'practically dropped' from the party, and its involvement in an important strike was seriously undermined.

The problem did not arise, however, in the second

112. MCCC, P.1011: Gbate to Spratt, 22/8/27.

113. MCCC, P.2328(P): op. cit... Joglekar had also 'jealously guarded' Dange since his release from his Cawnpore Case imprisonment.

114. MCCC, P.1010: op. cit...

Sassoon mills strike in January 1928. The strike itself was more extensive - providing greater opportunities for the WPP's involvement as a party.¹¹⁵ Further, the developing split between Mayekar and the working class militants in the GKM provided greater WPP access to the union. This correspondingly reduced the party's dependence on Joglekar's personal relationship with Mayekar. Because of these factors and the party's increased stress on party discipline, the WPP was able to participate more collectively.

The 1928 general strike deeply affected the ways in which inner-party tensions were manifested and dealt with. The working class unrest rapidly developed momentum in the mill area throughout April. But the WPP, divided between 'moderates', such as Dange and Bradley, and 'militants', like Mirajkar, Nimbkar and Joglekar, were unable until late April to reach a firm decision on the strike policy to be adopted towards the reformist BTLU.¹¹⁶ Bradley, with his considerable strike experience in England, calculated that the strike would be seriously weakened without the BTLU's support. The 'militants', however, impressed by the millhands' radicalism and enraged by the BTLU's efforts to defuse the situation, now believed that the strike would be weakened by the constraints of an alliance with the conciliatory BTLU.¹¹⁷ The issue was resolved by the millhands. At the mass meeting on April 18 which formed the Joint Mill Strike Committee both Bradley and Nimbkar put forward

115. See Newman, *op. cit.*, pp.228-35.

116. MCCC, P.1344: EC Meeting, 25/3/28.

117. They condemned Joshi and the BTLU as 'enemies of labour and the friends of the capitalists': NAI, H.Poll, 1/1928: Bombay FR2 Apr.

their differing views. The strikers supported Bradley.¹¹⁸
The party consequently formally adopted a 'united-front'
policy on April 29.¹¹⁹

The choice having been made, the relative merits of the two approaches could then be continuously evaluated at the practical as well as the ideological levels. The party 'militants' were involved primarily in the mass committees and were thus in close touch with the militance of the workers, which they also helped sustain. They therefore tended to oppose on ideological grounds the concessions necessary to maintain the BTLU alliance.¹²⁰ Bradley and Dange, however, engaged in the equally necessary administrative functions in the upper levels of the strike organisation, were in a position to see clearly the strike's limitations and its continuing dependence upon the BTLU's resources and contacts. In the context of the general strike, therefore, ideological differences led to (and were sustained by) functional specialisation rather than to the acrimonious and destructive factional disputations which fractured the isolated Bengal WPP. Moreover, the functional differentiation within the Bombay party, and the ideological differences associated with it, strengthened both the strike and the party. The same strike context also welded together the primarily Brahman communists and the Maratha worker activists - and brought some of the latter into the party - in a

118. Newman, op. cit., pp.249-50.

119. MCCC, P.1344: EC meeting, 29/4/28.

120. Newman, op. cit., pp.251-2.

way that otherwise would probably have been impossible.

However the strike did not bring about a complete transformation in the modes of intra-party relations. A conflict between Dange and the rest of the party during the course of the general strike demonstrated the continuing difficulties in overcoming individualistic indiscipline and, in addition, the potential problems arising from functional specialisation. In July the party appointed a sub-committee, consisting of Dange, Joglekar and Pendse to prepare its counter-standardisation scheme.¹²¹ Dange's views on the terms of the scheme brought him into conflict with the rest of the executive. Then, on August 26, Dange, the party's specialist on technical issues following his private study of the structure of the industry, was charged with deliberately withholding information from the party so that 'the resultant ignorance of the Party-members may facilitate the continuation of ... [his] "high post in the public eye"'.¹²² He also met 'severe criticism' for allegedly having disregarded party policy during his informal negotiations, in association with N.M. Joshi, with the millowners.¹²³ Finally, he was accused of having made a statement contrary to party policy at a mass meeting of strikers.¹²⁴ He was formally censured on each of these grounds. Dange, however, was unrepentant. He had not withheld information, he retorted; it was simply that the other members of the party did not have the intellectual rigour and initiative necessary to understand

121. MCCC, P.1344:: EC meeting, 1/7/28.

122. Quoted in P.1373(13): Dange to the EC, WPP, 27/8/28.

123. MCCC, P.1344: EC meeting, 26/8/28.

124. *ibid.*: 2/8/28.

the intricacies of the textile industry.¹²⁵ Party decisions were 'not preceded by any scientific study .. based ... on pure Marxism' and 'verified by the working class instinct', he continued, but merely upon 'impressions, whims'. In these circumstances, Dange concluded, party discipline 'does in no sense carry that same iron meaning that a "Leninist" would apply to it'. He tendered his resignation from the party in protest.

Dange was in a strong position, for the other members of the party were, indeed, 'Reds' rather than 'Experts'. They did not have his grasp of technical detail nor, apparently, his interest in mastering it. He was therefore indispensable, particularly at that point in the strike negotiations, and so the party executive resolved that they could not accept his resignation.¹²⁶ Dange agreed to return. The executive then accepted Dange's original proposals for the strike negotiation terms which had been the original cause of the conflict.¹²⁷

The Dange controversy had both similarities and differences with Joglekar's earlier conflict with the party. In each case a party member who had the power arising from contacts necessary to the party and, in Dange's case, irreplaceable knowledge and skills, had used that power to defy party authority. But in Dange's case the issue was a more substantive policy disagreement and it was discussed and resolved within a party which, largely as a result of its 1928 experience,

125. MCCC, P.1373(13): op. cit... (Dange's resignation letter).

126. MCCC, P.1344: EC meeting, 26/8/28.

127. ibid., 27/8/28.

was more structured than before. Moreover, the Dange experience contributed to a party decision to reduce its dependence on particular leaders by training replacements in the necessary skills.¹²⁸

The issue, and particularly the nature of Dange's defence, raised in a concrete way a fundamental problem for the party: was the WPP a Marxist party if its strategy and tactics were based essentially on broad ideological perspectives alone, without these perspectives being grounded in the concrete realities of its immediate situation? At the time of the founding of the WPP in early 1927 Spratt had stressed the absolute necessity of intensive and constant Marxist theoretical study, complemented by a program of detailed research work into the specifics of the Indian situation with which the communists were dealing.¹²⁹ The study circle which he instituted at that time had produced a broad trade union strategy which later stood the Bombay communists in good stead. Moreover, although he took R.P. Dutt's analysis as his starting point in explaining Indian politics, Spratt also displayed a sophisticated grasp of basic Marxist categories which was far removed from the 'vulgar Marxism' of the Stalinist era.¹²⁹ But the study circle survived for only a few months and was not revived in 1928 (perhaps partly because of the demands of the general strike) and, apart from Dange's

128. ibid., 13/1/29.

129. MCCC, P.1976: 'Party Training'; P.1013: 'Suggested Syllabus'. The bibliography for the course was: The Communist Manifesto; Lenin's State and Revolution, Left Wing Communism, Imperialism, and The Proletarian Revolution; Stalin's Leninism; and R.P. Dutt's Modern India and Communism. Spratt's conceptual framework was Leninist rather than Stalinist. Nevertheless the course is a study in applied Leninism. There is no evidence of a critical evaluation of Leninist conceptual categories in

individual initiative, no research program was initiated.¹³⁰ Without both theoretical sophistication and concrete studies of Indian realities, the Indian communists' response to received doctrine from international sources would necessarily be either uncritical or based only on 'impressions', 'whims' - on 'sheer pragmatism and the mood of the masses'. That the latter was the case for the Bombay WPP can be seen in the way it contributed towards the drawing up of the political thesis adopted by the AIWPP conference in December 1928.

R.P. Dutt's 'new Imperialist policy' theory provided the starting point for the formulation of the December thesis. As we have observed, Dutt's analysis had difficulty in accommodating some new features of the 1927-28 situation: the British government's hardening attitude towards even moderate Indian political opinion and towards the economic demands of Indian capital; and the increasingly bitter opposition to the Raj of the moderates and the industrialists as well as of the Congress leadership. After a period of uncertainty both Dutt and Spratt reasserted, with some makeshift adjustments, the CPGB analysis.¹³¹ They now argued that these new economic and

129. Cont'd
the light of Indian realities. The analysis of agrarian relations is particularly inadequate.
130. MCCC, P.2419(P): op. cit.; Dange later wrote from the Meerut Jail that in Bombay 'The theoretical calibre was never attended to. Even the trade union organisation [and] the simple workers' grievances and problems were not studied by the most leading men': MCCC, P.2512: 'The Situation in India'.
131. R.P. Dutt, 'Notes of the Month', in LM, Vol.10(6), June 1928, pp.223-41; MCCC, P.526(41): pamphlet titled 'The Role of the WPP', written by Spratt and published in early July. Spratt wrote to London in late October of the 'apparent increase in the acuteness of the conflict between the British and Indian bourgeoisie' (my emphasis), and informed them that he had been 'rather puzzled throughout to account for the behaviour of the government in connection

political developments arose from temporary readjustments within British capitalism during a period of difficulties. The overall British strategy of industrialising India and incorporating its bourgeoisie through progress towards eventual dominion status, however, remained. The Indian bourgeoisie's current protests, the revamped analysis argued, were no more than attempts to win a few immediate concessions. The significance of these protests would vanish in the longer term when British imperialism resumed its fundamental strategy. The crucial feature of the Indian situation as far as the mass movement was concerned was that, despite the bourgeoisie's protest against current British policy, it was continuing its retreat because of its fear of the rising mass movement. Further, the National Congress, as an organisation, and not merely its leadership, was now declared to be firmly under the control of the retreating bourgeoisie. This was evidenced by the resurrection of the old guard leadership which had betrayed the Non-Cooperation movement, its disregard of the resolution for Complete Independence passed at the Madras session of the Congress in December 1927, and the subsequent decision to adopt the Nehru Report strategy. Further, because the Congress no longer possessed any significant anti-imperialist potential, neither did its radical wing - Jawaharlal's Independence

131. Cont'd
with the [Statutory] Commission. It seems unnecessarily provocative; and I have been driven to various more or less improbable explanations on grounds of tactics. ... I don't think, on the other hand, that there has been any very important change in the attitude of either side, to judge e.g., from the Anglo-Indian press, and the Nehru Committee's Report. I mean that there is no fundamental change in the situation from our point of view' (MCCC, P.2419(P): op. cit.). Spratt and Dutt made their theoretical adjustments independently of each other.

for India League (IIL). Rather, the IIL, too, was firmly linked to the bourgeoisie. Its political function was to disorganise the revolutionary mass movement by attempting to win its leadership through radical phrases and then leading it astray. Therefore the communists should not participate in the Congress organisation, except for the temporary and purely tactical purpose of winning over the remaining Congress radicals to the genuine revolutionary movement led by the WPP. Nor should WPP members join the IIL, nor enter into any permanent alliances with it. It was now time for the WPP finally to take the initiative in establishing an independent revolutionary mass anti-imperialist movement outside the framework of the Congress.

This analysis was discussed at the September meeting of a provisional AIWPP committee at which both Bombay and Bengal members were present.¹³² While Spratt and Muzaffar Ahmad advocated this 'ultra-proletarian' and anti-Congress strategy, the Bombay communists' response was ambiguous. The ambiguity arose from their experiences during the year. The Dutt analysis appeared to be partly congruent with that experience, but in other respects practice appeared to call both the analysis and its conceptual categories into question.

The partial congruence arose from the communists' proletarian perspective. In Bombay there was a substantial, militant proletariat, large sections of which had begun to progress from purely community modes of organisation and consciousness towards class modes. The Bombay proletariat did

132. MCCC, P.526(39) and P.670: respectively, Spratt's and Bradley's notes of the meeting.

appear during 1928 to be playing a 'vanguard' role in Indian politics. The BPCCC leadership was largely representative of Bombay's Indian capital and, as such, had adopted 'reactionary' or 'vacillating' policies towards the working class radicalism and the major anti-imperialist event of the year - the anti-Simon boycott. The communists, basing themselves on the workers, had played the leading role. This had also brought them up against the Congress's national leadership, who did appear, too, to be closely allied with Indian capital against the working class. Gandhi's 'feudal' ideology was used in practice to justify his policy of maintaining the Bombay workers in a state of political passivity.

There were, nevertheless, some apparent discrepancies between theory and reality. Bombay's industry and proletariat, though substantial, were hardly increasing - on the contrary they were suffering the effects of a protracted crisis. Though the example of the textile workers, or at least the Maratha section, was encouraging, the communists had eventually discovered the deeply entrenched character of 'feudal' community consciousness within the working class. This realisation contrasted with their earlier optimism about the consciousness of industrial labour being incipiently 'proletarian'.¹³³ Community consciousness was not - as Roy and Dutt had argued - essentially an artificial, residual 'false consciousness' bearing little relationship to contemporary socio-economic realities. It could not, therefore, be 'thrown off in an instant' in a period of crisis. Finally, the Bombay

133. See, eg., Dange's observations in MCCC, P.2512: op. cit...

communists were not convinced of the wisdom of a total break with the Congress. They had found membership of the organisation useful for their purposes, despite the dominance of the business faction. The support provided by radicals such as Nariman was also regarded as valuable. The September AIWPP meeting agreed that attempting to 'capture' the Congress was now 'hopeless'.¹³⁴ But after the meeting Spratt wrote to London:

... in Bombay [and UP and the Punjab] ... a great difficulty will arise about the relations of the Party to the Congress. There may be trouble about it in the forthcoming ... [December AIWPP] conference, and it is certain to arise sooner or later. The Congress in these places is not at all acutely class conscious [as in Bengal], and all the leading ... [WPP] members are also staunch Congressmen, and find little inconsistency in it. I believe that a sharp break with the Congress is inevitable, but we cannot bring it about yet.¹³⁵

Consequently, largely as a result of Bombay's pressure, the policy conclusions following from the current CPGB-Spratt analysis were modified at the December AIWPP conference. The political thesis adopted there was based on the premise that 'It is British imperialist policy to industrialise India, in partnership with Indian capital, though in such a way that British predominance is maintained'.¹³⁶ But the Congress was not yet completely controlled by the bourgeoisie:

For some time ... the Congress will maintain its composite character, as a loose organisation, with indefinite creed, under bourgeois leadership, but with a petty-bourgeois following including different social strata and different political tendencies, some of a potentially revolutionary nature.

134. MCCC, P.526(39): op. cit...

135. MCCC, P.2419(8): op. cit...

136. MCCC, P.56: op. cit...

Therefore, during a transitional stage while the Congress retained this character and the WPP remained relatively weak, it would

... be necessary to follow the traditional policy of forming fractions within Congress organisations for the purpose of agitation, of exposing its reactionary leadership and of drawing the revolutionary sections towards the ... Party. This policy, however, is only temporary. The ... Party can have no intention of dominating or capturing the Congress: the function of its members within the Congress is a purely critical one. Party members cannot, therefore, be allowed to take office in Congress organisations (except with the special permission of the N[ational] E[xecutive] C[ommittee]). The object of the ... Party can only be to build up its own independent organisation so that it can as soon as possible dispense with the necessity of agitation within the Congress.¹³⁷

This compromise, allowing continued work within the Congress for the time being, was largely a consequence of the Bombay viewpoint. It was not until February that the Bombay WPP decided to implement the December decision to withdraw from the Bombay branch of the IIL,¹³⁸ and there was no further discussion within the party restricting the work of communist Congress office-bearers.

The Bombay communists intuitively recognised the lack of political wisdom in isolating themselves by breaking with the Congress, particularly when the WPP was such a small and weak

137. ibid.

138. MCCC, P.1344: EC meeting, 3/2/29.

party.¹³⁹ However they were not able to establish in theoretical terms their disagreement with the Roy-Dutt analysis. They did not recognise the 'Janus-like' quality of the bourgeoisie and the Congress leaderships which they opposed; the communists did not see that both the class and the political leadership were simultaneously 'genuinely' anti-imperialist and anti-revolutionary.¹⁴⁰ Consequently, although they pursued a 'united-front' policy, their theoretical legacy to the next period remained 'left-sectarian'. This absence of a sound communist 'united-front' position in the 1920s would contribute to the problems of Indian communism in the early 1930s. This was the price of 'pragmatism'.

A Problem Area - the Peasant Question

The inadequacy of the received 'new Imperialist policy' theory also contributed to the urban 'petty bourgeois' communists' failure to come to terms with the peasant question. The Roy-Dutt theory's formal emphasis on the importance of agrarian politics in India was offset by the argument that the political future lay with the proletariat. Thus, even in early 1929, Spratt could still assert (and in a public manifesto) that

139. Guillermaz (*op. cit.*, pp.140-2) has stressed the equivalent dependence of the Chinese Party upon the KMT during the former's early years. As the KMT had been established 25 years before the CCP and had an established organisation and a great deal of prestige in the eyes of China's nationalist intellectuals, the CCP began its career at a considerable relative disadvantage. Its only means for fairly rapidly expanding its influence in both town and country was by working within the KMT, despite the attendant risks. The Indian National Congress had been functioning for 50 years when the Indian communists began their career. Their initial dependence would, for this reason alone, be considerably greater than was the CCP's on the KMT.

140. We will explore this theme in Chapter 5.

'The peasants will be but passive followers of the working class'¹⁴¹; and, elsewhere, that the peasantry was 'naturally very reactionary and backward'.¹⁴² In Bombay this particular consequence of the theory was magnified by the fact that proletarian political practice in the late 1920s tended to 'confirm' the 'ultra-proletarian' doctrine.

In theory, the WPP was to be based on both the working class and the peasantry. When the party was founded in early 1927 it decided to concentrate initially on the proletariat, but to take up the peasant question 'as soon as possible'.¹⁴³ Throughout 1927-28 the WPP had a formal peasant Sub-committee.¹⁴⁴ In practice, however, the peasant committee remained inactive. Even in 1928, when the massive exodus of the mill strikers to their villages provided an unusually favourable opportunity to establish rural contacts, the communists went no further than urging the returning strikers to 'raise the Red Flag' in their villages by agitating for the non-payment of rents and taxes.¹⁴⁵ During both the 1928 and 1929 strikes the Bombay government worried about this possibility - but, significantly, its particular concern was not that the communists, but, rather, the Congress, would capitalise on the rural radicalisation.¹⁴⁶

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141. MCCC, P. 527(8): 'Manifesto of the CPI to all Workers'.
142. MCCC, P. 527(4): 'Elementary Course' (for cadres), early 1929.
143. MCCC, P. 1335(7)D: Spratt's Notes for a WPP Meeting, 26/1/27
144. In 1927 J.B. Patel was the secretary of the peasant committee, and in 1928 it was Parvate: MCCC, P. 851: article in BC 24/2/27; MCCC, P. 826: Bombay Annual Report, Mar. 1928
145. NAI, H. Poll, 18/XVI/1928: G of Bombay to G of I, 10/9/28.
146. loc.cit.; NAI, H. Poll, 303/1929: record of conversation between Haig and Kelly (Bombay Commissioner of Police) 4/6/29.

In late 1928 the Bombay party had to report to the Calcutta AIWPP conference that its 'main work has been essentially confined to the industrial workers in the City, and owing to certain insurmountable difficulties the work of organising the Peasants has been left in the background'.¹⁴⁷ This situation had still not changed significantly by the time of the Meerut Case arrests.

But the problem went deeper than the inadequacies of received doctrine. Nor can the great demands on very limited manpower resources of the general strike and the building of the GPU completely explain the failure. At least one member could have been spared for full-time work on this important question - both in research and in making rural contacts. In Dange's view this was certainly possible after the ending of the 1928 strike.¹⁴⁸ But these urban intellectuals were extremely reluctant to leave the cities for the alien world of the villages, and were not even enthusiastic about research work on agrarian relations and conditions. In April 1928 the comrade in charge of the peasant committee reported to the party that so far no members had responded to his calls for recruits for peasant work and, consequently, nothing had been done.¹⁴⁹ He appears to have been reluctant to work on the question alone. The communists' displayed this reluctance right

147. MCCC, P. 420.

148. MCCC, P. 2512: 'The Present Situation in India', late 1929 or early 1930.

149. MCCC, P. 1344: minutes of EC meeting, 1/4/28

up until the Meerut arrests. 'There is a psychological reason for it', Dange wrote after the arrests:

It is the remnant of petty bourgeois psychology. The T.U. movement in the cities gives a tremendous all-India publicity [to] the leadership, which the leader does not like to leave and (sic) sink himself in the tedious peasant work¹⁵⁰ which for a long time gives you no fame.

Thus, although the Bombay communists' working class success provided new opportunities and resources for bridging the gulf between themselves and the peasantry, the success actually reduced their motivation to make the step. This 'psychological reason' was probably connected to the 1920s 'bohemianism' of the early recruits to communist politics. For them a powerful element of Marxism's appeal had been its rationale for their revolt against the irrational and restrictive 'feudal' orthodoxy of their backgrounds. Urban Bombay was unattractive to them for the same reason. At this stage of their personal development at least, to have returned to the much more 'feudal' world of the mufussil would have entailed sacrificing this uncompleted project of personal liberation from the shackles of the past.

Moreover, on the few occasions when members of the party

150. MCCC, P. 2512: op. cit.

did visit peasant agitations they were not encouraged by what they found. In 1927 the WPP deputed a representative to assess a Kolaba district agitation against increased tax assessments. He 'returned disappointed' after discovering that the agitation was firmly in the control of rich peasants and that it was directed exclusively against the government.¹⁵¹ An assessment of the 1928 Bardoli satyagraha led to a similar conclusion. Because it was controlled by the rich peasants, and because their political needs were satisfied by the 'bourgeois' Congress, there was no room at Bardoli, either, for communist intervention.¹⁵²

However in this period one significant peasant agitation developed which had more radical possibilities, namely a protest movement in Satara district, from mid-1927 to mid-1928, against the government's Small Holdings Bill.¹⁵³ This legislation would have forced the sale and consolidation of fragmented, 'uneconomic' land-holdings, thus 'proletarianising' the lower strata of the peasantry and benefitting the rich peasantry. The poor peasantry thus provided the main force of the agitation. It was led by the radical section of the non-Brahman movement. This was the first time that non-Brahman activists had been engaged in an anti-government movement, and so the Satara situation contained potential for an alliance between radical non-Brahmans and radical nationalists. Finally, Satara was the

151. MCCC, P. 2408 (P): Ghatge to C.P. Dutt, 20/7/28 (replying to Dutt to Ghatge, 28/6/28, which requested the Bombay WPP to adopt a more positive policy towards the Bardoli satyagraha.

152. MCCC, P. 2408(P): op. cit.

153. For this agitation see Omvedt, 'The Satyashodak Samaj and Peasant Agitation', pp. 1979-80.

second biggest labour-supplying district for the Bombay mills, and the repatriation of the mill strikers did overlap with at least the final phase of the Satara agitation. But despite all of these features the communists did not interest themselves in the agitation.¹⁵⁴

In part this failure probably occurred because the party, in attempting to establish itself as Bombay's working class leadership, was in competition with the city's non-Brahman movement.¹⁵⁵ By the beginning of 1929 this competition had developed into open conflict. Moreover the non-Brahman radicals who had led the Satara agitation joined with the conservatives in this anti-communist attack. Thus, as late as 1929, the strength of the community bonds within the non-Brahman movement more than counterbalanced the ideological differences and at that stage the difficulties standing in the way of a communist non-Brahman alliance were probably insurmountable.

No doubt residual 'neo-Brahmanical' elitism in the communists' attitudes contributed to the barrier.¹⁵⁶ That such a tendency continued to exist is suggested both by the limited response which the non-Brahman campaign did elicit from the Marathas on the managing committee and by the nature of the communists' reaction to this development. Non-Brahman approaches to the working class managing committee members resulted in Kasle's defection and the temporary vacillation of several of

154. The WPP minute book shows that the Satara agitation was not even officially discussed by the communists.

155. We noted this in Chapter 3. The nature of the conflict is examined in Chapter 5 (3).

156. Omvedt, who, rightly, attaches considerable importance to the fact that this alliance did not materialise, considers that communist elitism was the most important factor contributing to the failure (see her 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', pp. 755-756 and pp. 804-805).

the others.¹⁵⁷ The managing committee survived essentially intact - thereby demonstrating the strength of the alliance between the communists and the working class militants; but Kasle's defection and the temporising of the others suggests that the worker militants resented some aspects of the communists' mode of leadership.¹⁵⁸ The communists' response to the managing committee factionalism is more revealing. Despite the potential seriousness of the discontent the communists did not consider the question of whether or not they were in any way guilty of the charge of elitism: they simply and complacently resolved that 'members should not fight over this communal question'.¹⁵⁹

Thus Brahman communist elitism may have been an important factor standing in the way of an alliance with the non-Brahman

157. NAI H. Poll, 10/14/1929: B.V. Jadhav (the non-Brahman Party leader) to Hotson, 26-4-29; NAI, H. Poll, 17/1929 Bombay FRI Jan.; Newman, *op.cit.*, p. 322; Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', p. 755.
158. There had been earlier conflicts between the communists and Alve and Kasle over the running of the GKU (MCCC, P. 1344: WPP EC meetings 23/9/28 and 13/1/29). At the latter meeting Kasle 'objected to Dange's attitude on the settlement made by Kasle and Alve with the Bradbury mills', and also to his unilateral hiring of non-working class clerks - presumably for the union. During the Meerut Case both Alve and Kasle retrospectively criticised the communists for having elitist attitudes towards the workers (MCCC, Kasle's Defence Statement, p. 1014, and Alve's Defence Statement, p. 984; NAI, H. Poll, 61/1930: Alve's petition for release from the case, 1/2/30). At the time of the non-Brahman troubles there were also rumours that the communists were restricting the workers militants' control over GKU funds: NAI, H. Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FRI Jan.
159. MCCC, P. 1344: WPP EC meeting, 13/1/29.

radicals.¹⁶⁰ But that this was not serious enough to split the managing committee shows that it was not of fundamental importance. The weakness of the basis for revolutionary tendencies within the non-Brahman movement was probably more decisive.¹⁶¹ This weakness was clearly revealed in the early 1930s when the non-Brahman movement merged with the Congress, thus redirecting non-Brahman radicalism and providing the hitherto urban capitalist-based Bombay Congress with its first solid rural base.¹⁶² Thus the structural feature underlying the weakness of revolutionary tendencies within non-Brahmanism was probably the same as that which made communist intervention at Bardoli an unpromising venture - the strong basis for an alliance, via the Congress, between the rich peasantry (who constituted the non-Brahman mainstream's main rural base) and urban capital. The existence of this structural basis for such

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160. That Javalkar, the most militant non-Brahman radical, maintained relations with Mirajkar, the one non-Brahman communist, reinforces this hypothesis: see Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', p. 801.
161. I thus differ with Omvedt (who argues that Javalkar was an emerging revolutionary) in my analysis of this issue. If one does not accept that the weakness of such non-Brahman revolutionism was decisive then it is difficult to explain how Javalkar was co-opted into playing a leading role in the conservatives' attack on the communists, despite the latter's obvious popularity with the vast majority of the Maratha working class.
162. Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Nationalists', pp. 211-14. Significantly, the leading figures in the Satyashodak-Congress alliance were a leading non-Brahman radical, K. Jedhe, and a radical Congress Brahman, N.V. Gadgil. The Congress left's form of radicalism appears to have been sufficient for Jedhe, and the fact that Gadgil was a Brahman was not a barrier to the merger. Marathas subsequently came to dominate the Congress organisation in Maharashtra. Javalkar moved towards Marxism from 1930 - a trend which was terminated by his early death in 1932 - but he did so in virtual isolation from the other non-Brahman radicals and with a limited mass base: see Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', pp. 800-05.

an alliance would also help explain why only one intellectual from a peasant background - Mirajkar - joined the Bombay communist movement during the Party's formative period.

Thus the communists' neglect of the peasant question arose not only from the shortcomings of their theoretical inheritance, their lack of resources and their 'petty bourgeois psychology', but also from the forbidding structural barriers working against communist penetration of the countryside. The communists - and the government - recognised the barrier posed by the dominant peasantry and its natural tendency to ally with the 'bourgeois' Congress.¹⁶³ The communists' awareness of the problem contributed to their lack of enthusiasm for rural work. But as Dange later wrote, it was 'suicidation' for the Party to concentrate only on the working class¹⁶⁴ and from early 1929 the communists began to devote more attention to the issue. In January a new party member from Bassein, in Thana district, submitted a report on a peasant agitation in that area. His report stimulated the first extended party discussion of the agrarian question¹⁶⁵ and the executive resolved that it 'was desirable that we should establish our influence amongst the Peasantry'. But the discussion centred on the limited point of 'whether the Party was in a position to take up the lead of such movements. There

163. For the government's awareness, see Chapter 5, fn.103. For a detailed study of the several dimensions of the problems for revolutionary agitation arising from the dominance of the substantial peasantry, see S.C. Henningham, 'Protest and Control in North Bihar, India, 1917-42. A Study of Conflict and Continuity in a Colonial Agrarian Society', (PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 1978), passim. As Dr Henningham points out, a significant aspect of the problem for 'outsider' revolutionaries was self-protection from physical attacks by the locally dominant.

164. MCCC, P. 2512: op.cit.

165. MCCC, P. 1344: WPP EC meeting, 30-1-29.

was no use of (sic) assisting sporadically'.¹⁶⁶ The executive decided to contact a leader of the Bassein agitation and then to reconsider the issue. But the Meerut arrests precluded any further investigation of the question and the January discussion was as close as the WPP came to attempting to build a peasant base.

A Leadership in Transition: on the Eve of the Meerut Case

Phillip Spratt described the communists' life in the pre-Meerut Case period as having been 'a whirl of activity' involving 'unaccustomed responsibilities'.¹⁶⁷ They 'had been engaged, in some cases to the exclusion of other occupations, in an attempt to realise a political ideal, and to some extent to shape their lives in a way appropriate to it'.¹⁶⁸ This activity was most frenetic in Bombay and it climaxed in the few months before the Meerut arrests. It was a confusing period of rapid transition in both the party's environment and its internal life. During these few months the communists attempted to take stock of what had been accomplished and to identify and rectify their increasingly apparent weaknesses as a communist leadership so that they could better cope with the emerging challenges of the new phase.

166. loc. cit.

167. P. Spratt, 'Some Notes on Jail Psychology', Modern Review, Vol. LXI(6), 1937, p. 653.

168. ibid., p. 652

The examination of the Bombay leadership in this period of high tension reveals both its continuing weaknesses and its emerging strengths. The communist leadership began coming to terms with its 'unaccustomed responsibilities' as the revolutionary leadership of a dynamic mass base by taking its first serious steps towards recreating itself as a communist party based on the Leninist model. The nature of its response to the major change in Comintern policy initiated by the 1928 Sixth Comintern Congress was a measure of the level of independence attained, as a consequence of its mass base, by the reconstructed leadership. The communists, caught up as they were in the momentum of their new situation, were impelled to judge critically the new instructions of their international guides. At the same time they had, in the GPU, a new material basis for this relative autonomy: for the first time they had an indigenous source of funding with which to finance major political activity.

The challenge of the Pathan-millhand clashes in February revealed both the WPP's inadequacies as a communist political leadership and the communists' self-critical reorientation. The riots developed from a conflict which arose during a strike in December-January at the Shell and Burmah Oil installations at Sewri.¹⁶⁹

169. The following account of the development of the riots is based on:
 Bombay Riots Enquiry Committee, Report of the Bombay Riots Enquiry Committee, (Bombay, 1929), (hereafter BREC, Report), pp. 1-7;
 Bombay Commissioner of Police, The Police Report on the Bombay Riots of February 1929, (Bombay, 1929) (hereafter BCP, Report).

The companies recruited Pathan blacklegs - a common practice among employers - and this led to violent conflict between the blacklegs and the strikers. Then, from January, numbers of millhands began to join the oil installation workers in their attacks on the Pathans. Widespread hostility towards the Pathans already existed among the millhands - Muslim as well as Hindu - because of the Pathans' traditional roles as blacklegs, mill watchmen and notoriously rapacious money-lenders.¹⁷⁰ The Pathans had been active in each of these roles during the 1928 general strike and anti-Pathan feeling reached a high level during its course. Consequently the millhands' solidarity with the oil workers was natural. But in early February the millhands' participation in the Sewri situation brought the conflict into the mill area itself. At the beginning of February it suddenly escalated with frightening speed when a rumour that the Pathans were kidnapping the millhands' children gained wide currency. The rumour was founded on a long-standing popular anti-Pathan prejudice and was fanned by the mounting hostility against them for their several roles in the industrial area. The resulting panic closed several mills and, on February 4 and 5, violent and sometimes fatal, clashes erupted between Pathans and millhands. Although the initial attacks on the Pathans were

170. The BREC noted (Report, p. 31) commented that the Pathan moneylender was 'particularly usurious', demanding interest of 150 percent and more and relying on 'a big stick' rather than the courts to recover his dues.

directed specifically against those who were moneylenders, strike-breakers and watchmen , the clashes threatened to escalate, in the growing panic and excitement, into indiscriminate communal rioting. This was a very serious threat to the class basis of the GPU.

These developments shook the communists deeply. Following closely after the non-Brahman challenge, these two challenges registered firmly in the communists' minds that the period of the relatively easy successes of 1928 had passed and that the challenges of the future required a fundamental re-thinking and re-organisation. The tentative reconsideration of the peasant question was just one outcome of this undermining of the old complacency.

The communists were disturbed by their failure to understand the consciousness of the millhands and, therefore, to anticipate the escalation of the potentially destructive events of early February. In retrospect they could see that, since early January, there had been clear warning signs of the eventual turn of events.¹⁷¹ However the millhands' acceptance of the kidnapping rumour, and the vehemence of their 'feudal reaction' to it, took the communists completely by surprise.¹⁷² They had seriously underestimated the extent to which such irrational 'false consciousness' continued to

171. This paragraph is based on: MCCC, P. 1344: WPP EC meeting, 17/2/29 (an intensive post-mortem of the riots and the WPP's response to it); MCCC, P. 1170: notes of the same meeting.

172. The term is used in ibid.

hold sway, and had overestimated the millhands' transition to 'proletarian consciousness'. Thus the communists' failure to understand this dimension of the millhands' mental world was a measure of the incompleteness of their own 'proletarianisation'. The communists were also unhappy with the indecisiveness of their initial response to the crisis and the weaknesses which the crisis had revealed in their political organisation. Initially party members shared in the general panic and the leadership was unable to act decisively. Even when, on the third day, it decided on a definite policy, the WPP did not operate as a disciplined communist organisation. Rather, the communists later reflected self-critically, it functioned merely as a group of individuals acting like 'feudal chieftans'.¹⁷³ Even after a plan of action was decided upon individual party members 'were hesitating to carry out the Policy'. Moreover, 'throughout the riot [some had] deliberately failed to carry out the decisions' and others had acted contrary to the decided policy.¹⁷⁴ Finally, the crisis showed that the organisational links between the party and the mill committees were inadequate.

The WPP and the GPU managed to survive this crisis relatively unscathed. The party did manage, finally, to formulate a policy. Though the policy was imperfectly executed, 'the response of the workers to the Party's call to keep

173. ibid.

174. MCCC, P. 1344: WPP EC meeting, 17/2/29

peace', Ghatge commented was 'very commendable'.¹⁷⁵ But the communists took to heart the lessons of the incident: it was urgent that they eradicate 'feudal' modes of consciousness and organisation from their leadership and that they come to terms with the revealed 'feudalism' among the workers. The February riots prompted not only the self-critical post-mortem after the crisis had passed, but also a series of discussions to plan a permanent solution to the problems that had been revealed. In particular they decided that, having 'created the preconditions' for a Leninist communist party¹⁷⁶ the urgent task of the moment must be to transform themselves from a left-wing trade union and nationalist leadership into a functioning Communist Party of India.

The sense of urgency did not arise from the Bombay situation alone. At the end of December 1928 the communists gained a new comrade, Dr. G.A. Adhikari, who returned to India after several years membership of the world's second biggest communist party - the German Party.¹⁷⁷ Adhikari soon became a crucial figure in the CPI. He had been a contemporary of Dange's at Wilson College. Like the others he had been deeply affected by the ideological impact of the First World War and the ensuing turmoil, but his heightened

175. MCCC, P. 480: Ghatge to Ahmad, 17/2/29. For an account of how the WPP/GKU leadership managed to pacify the situation, see Newman, op. cit., pp. 323-27.

176. MCG:2.

177. This paragraph is based on: 'Biographical Sketch', in Rao and Sen, Our Doc, pp. 1-6; interview with G.A. Adhikari 7/6/74.

patriotic feelings led him to devote himself to science rather than politics. He made this choice not only because of his love of science and his conviction that India needed its own scientists if it was to advance, but also because he found the existing political choices unattractive. Like several of the other communists he rejected the extremists for their reliance on irrational religious ideologies and the moderates because of their moderation. He won a Doctoral scholarship to Berlin University in the early 1920s and worked in the field of physical chemistry. During his stay in Berlin his work attracted the attention of Albert Einstein. But while in Berlin he also discovered Marxism, which satisfied his former objections to political involvement, and the Communist Party, which embodied his new philosophy.¹⁷⁸ He also began working closely with Virendranath Chattopadhyaya's Berlin group of revolutionary expatriates and with M.N. Roy in addition to joining the German Party. By 1928 he had decided to make politics rather than science his profession, and he arrived in Bombay with this intention.

One back in India Adhikari judged the Indian communists' achievements harshly against the German model. Writing to M.N. Roy in March Adhikari commented that:

178. Dutt's Modern India made a particularly big impression on him.

Conditions in the ... [Party] are anarchic. It is at present nothing more than left-wing Trade Unionism. ... the objective situation is rapidly developing. But the vanguard is a rearguard. Party discipline! — ? But where is the Party?¹⁷⁹

In addition to his German experience Adhikari also brought with him excerpts from the decisions on India taken by the Sixth Comintern Congress several months earlier.¹⁸⁰ Shaukat Usmani, who had left India to attend the Sixth Congress and who had participated in its debate on the colonial question, also returned to India in late December.¹⁸¹ This was the first time that the Sixth Congress's decisions had reached the Indian communists.¹⁸² As we will see in Chapter 6, this Congress instituted a basic reorientation in theory and policy for India. It also gave some specific directives. One of these was that the Indian communists must give much more attention to organisation and, specifically, to the formation of a strong Communist Party of India.

The Communist Party members of the WPPs of Bombay, Bengal and the Punjab, convened a series of Party meetings in Calcutta in late December — at the time of the AIWPP conference

179. MCCC, P.1174 : Adhikari to M.N. Roy, 15/3/29.

180. Many copies of this abridged version were found during the Meerut Case arrests. Several of these were produced as exhibits in the Case. It gives only a truncated picture of the overall theoretical framework of the Sixth Congress thesis. But it was sufficient to show that the thesis was based on very different assumptions to those of the 'new Imperialist policy', and it contained all of the policy directions pertaining to India.

181. NAI, H.Poll, 10/V/1929: DIB Weekly Report, 17/1/29.

182. MCCC, Judgement, p. 444.

and soon after the arrivals of Adhikari and Usmani.¹⁸³ The Bombay delegation constituted half of those present. The Calcutta meetings focussed on 'the question of making the Party active, [and of] doing propaganda in the name of the C.P.I.'¹⁸⁴ The communists decided to resurrect and reorganise the moribund CPI and to expand its membership. Several members were expelled for inactivity or questionable conduct and others, including Adhikari, were admitted as members. A new Central Executive Committee was elected, with Ghatge as the general secretary. The executive consisted of five Bombay members, three from Bengal and two from the Punjab.¹⁸⁵ Bombay was selected as the Party headquarters and Calcutta was to take charge of the Party's new central organ. The five Bombay executive members would act as the Central Executive Committee between meetings of the full national body. The Calcutta meetings thus formally recognised Bombay's predominance.

This was the last meeting of the full Central Executive Committee before the Meerut Case arrests. The Calcutta meeting had asserted the importance of a national Party and had created the formal apparatus for it, and during early 1929

183. IB, Communism, (1935) pp. 133-34; MCCC, Ps. 1300, 1303, 1309 & 1295: minutes of CPI meetings, 27, 28 & 29/12/28.

184. MCCC, P. 1295: op. cit.

185. The CEC was as follows: Bombay - Ghatge, Nimbkar, Joglekar, Mirajkar & Dange; Bengal - Ahmad, Halim & Huda; Punjab - Abdul Majid & Sohan Singh Josh. It is significant that all three of the Bengali members were Muslims, reflecting the break with the ex-Anushilan group.

Muzaffar Ahmad attempted to maintain the momentum. But the Bombay group displayed little interest in the national organisation, possibly because, as Spratt wrote, the communists' first attempt at a full scale inter-provincial conference — the AIWPP conference — had been 'a farce'.¹⁸⁶ The Bengal WPP's factional struggle during the conference could hardly have inspired Bombay's confidence in the immediate prospects of the national organisation. Instead — and to Ahmad's annoyance¹⁸⁷ — Bombay concentrated 'for the present'¹⁸⁸ on the development of its own WPP and CP organisations. It resolved to overcome its former 'indifference' to the question of recruitment¹⁸⁹ by bringing the most class conscious workers and more intellectuals into both the WPP and the Party.¹⁹⁰ Partly to help counter the disruptive effects of repression, Adhikari was detailed to lead a program of ideological and technical training of members.¹⁹¹ Finally, during several meetings in mid-March, the Bombay group returned to the question of establishing a Party organisation.¹⁹²

186. MCCC, P.5271(1): op.cit.

187. E.g. MCCC, P.1302: Ahmad to Ghate, 8/3/29, complaining of Bombay's 'dead-like silence' in the face of his frequent requests for action at the national level. This letter is one of several written by Ahmad in early 1929 in a similar vein.

188. MCCC, P.1172 : minutes of a CP meeting, Bombay, 19/3/29.

189. MCCC, P.670 : minutes of a provisional AIWPP executive meeting, Bombay, September 1928. This comment was made during a general assessment of the state of the different provincial branches. The Bombay communists later admitted, from the Meerut Jail, that they had restricted membership to 'a small clique' : MCG:2.

190. MCCC, P.1344 : WPP EC meeting, 30/1/29. It was probably not coincidental that the decision to bring more working class members into the Party was taken after the mill committee system had begun to demonstrate the workers' capacity for organisation and leadership.

191. MCCC, P.1344 : WPP EC meetings, 13 & 30/1/29.

192. MCCC, Ps.1171, 1172, 1173, 1296 & 1297 : minutes of CPI meetings, Bombay, 17 & 19/3/28.

Those present at the meetings 'agreed on the intensive organisation of the CP'¹⁹³ which was henceforth to be 'the basis of all Communist Work'.¹⁹⁴ They resolved to organise the Party into five departments — trade unions, peasant organisation, 'agit-prop', political work and Party organisation.

A meeting on March 19 appointed a sub-committee of four — Ghate, Adhikari, Usmani and a recent arrival from a Soviet training school, Amir Haider Khan¹⁹⁵ — to draw up a detailed program for the creation of this structure.¹⁹⁶ Significantly, however, neither the December nor the March Party meetings gave any attention to the specific question of underground organisation. The Calcutta meetings, in fact, had continued to float the idea of the feasibility of a legal communist party. Haider Khan was subsequently to prove himself capable of effective underground work, but he was not able to demonstrate his talents until after the Meerut Case arrests, which took place on the day after the March 19 meeting. Because of this particular lacuna, and because the decisions on recruiting a wider membership and training alternative leaders were taken too late, the arrests left little of the original leadership behind.¹⁹⁷ Consequently the communists paid a high price for their failures in these necessary dimensions of a 'definitely independent' revolutionary leadership.

193. MCCC, P. 1296 : op.cit.

194. MCCC, P.1171 : op.cit.

195. IB, Communism, (1935), pp.177-78.

196. MCCC, P.1171 : op.cit.

197. See Chapter 7, below.

Nevertheless the significance of the transition should not be underestimated. Its significance can be seen by comparing the communists' respective responses to the Roy-Dutt schema in early 1927 and to the Sixth Congress line in late 1928 and early 1929. They accepted the former almost without questioning. Their initial reaction to the latter, however, was conditional — that it 'should be taken up as a basis ... to be changed according to the conditions in India'.¹⁹⁸

Against the background of the Bombay events of 1928 the communists deemed that the Sixth Congress line was not wholly appropriate to 'the conditions in India'. The Bombay communists did gradually come to regard the Sixth Congress's theoretical framework and the general thrust of its policy formulations to be more adequate than those of the 'new Imperialist policy' thesis. However most of them disagreed strongly with one particular policy directive — that they should abolish the WPP.¹⁹⁹ They maintained both elements of this response after they were removed to the Meerut jail: they developed a creative and quite perceptive theory of Indian politics from their reading of the Sixth Congress document; and despite the ECCI's constant assertions to the contrary, they continued to maintain that it was politically unwise to abolish the WPP.²⁰⁰ Thus when the communists finally decided in December 1928 to seek affiliation with the Comintern and to improve their direct communications

198. MCCC, P.1303 : op.cit.

199. MCCC, P.1296 : op.cit.

200. MCG;2. The Meerut group's theoretical and political development is studied in Chapter 8.

with it, they also decided that policy would be formed 'by the Party with the agreement of the Comintern',²⁰¹ not the other way around.

It was the CPI's great misfortune that these leadership developments arising from its 1928 achievements began so late, and that the political conditions within which they occurred were atypical. When the Raj finally clamped down the recent transitions had not been consolidated. Although the early 1929 tendencies developed further inside the Meerut jail, the March 20 arrests broke the continuity of the CPI's evolution almost completely. This occurred partly because the communists neglected the lesson of the Cawnpore Case — they continued to entertain the illusion that, because of the legalism of the Raj's general approach to repression, an essentially open Party was feasible in the current conditions. That the communist leadership continued to entertain this illusion demonstrated not only the extent to which it misunderstood the logic of the Raj's response to political opposition, but also the extent to which it remained, in its thinking, a left Congress faction.

201. MCCC, P.416(7) : CPI Constitution, 1929. (Drawn up after the Calcutta CPI Meetings in December).

CHAPTER 5

ENVIRONMENTAL SHIFTS, I:THE CONTRACTION OF URBAN 'REVOLUTIONARY SPACE', MARCH 1929-1933.

'Come along warriors, come to the battle,
 a bloody struggle is taking place.
 Look, look how the enemies have led a counter-attack
 and are assailing us on all sides!

- from the 'Girni Workers' Poem', Bombay,
 February, 1929.

By early 1929 the Bombay communists, in contrast to their comrades in Bengal, had built a mass base and, as a result, had reinforced their position within the BPCC and the AITUC and their footing in nationalist politics at the all-India level. They could have made a fair claim to being, at that point, the leaders of a mass movement - if not of a Party - stronger than that of any other communist leadership in Asia;¹ and they seemed well placed to consolidate and further expand their influence within the city of Bombay and beyond. But these positions within Indian politics and Asian communism proved

1. Professor D.A. Low made this point during his paper on 'The Asian Background to Decolonisation in Africa', in the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, on Nov. 9, 1977. The CPI occupied this position because the Vietnamese Party was still only embryonic and the Chinese and Indonesian Parties had not recovered from the repressions they and their movement had suffered in 1927. The Indonesian Party was, in fact, essentially eliminated. For the state of the Chinese Party at this point see: Guillermaz, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-73, ps. 201 & 225; and S. Schram, Mao Tse-Tung, (London, 1967), pp.138-43.

to be very temporary. During the following 18 months their advances were to be almost completely crushed or undermined by quite radical transformations - particularly rapid during 1929 - in each of the contexts within which the Indian communist movement functioned. Some of these changes were reactions against the successes of the previous year and had a direct impact upon the nascent CPI's continuity and fortunes. Others were broader socio-economic, political and ideological shifts which, though unrelated to the communists' activity and without an immediate impact upon it, were to provide a set of objective limits to revolutionary politics in India very different to that of the preceding phase. The most significant feature of these changes was a marked contraction in the 'revolutionary space' available to the communists in Bombay city. Following this contraction, Indian communism then began seriously to feel the impact of the major changes that took place in the Comintern during 1928-29.

In this chapter and the next we examine these environmental shifts. This chapter will look first at the transformation of the Bombay situation and its immediate impact upon the communists' mass base and position within nationalist politics. It will then delineate the main features of the new conjuncture the communists faced in the 1930-33 period. In the following chapter we study the changes within the Comintern.

The reaction against the rise of the WPP and the GPU in Bombay was multi-dimensional. For example, open attacks were launched by the state and Bombay's industrial and merchant capitalists and communal organisations, while more subtle oppositions were mounted by the reformist trade unionists and the Congress

mainstream. The most crucial of these reactions was the state's repression, which began in March 1929. This had the most immediate and effective impact and, by leaving the communists' political apparatus and mass organisations much more vulnerable to the eroding effects of the other dimensions of the reaction, contributed decisively towards the resolution of these struggles, too. The Raj, in turn, in planning its offensive, also took into account the communists' and the GKU's indigenous oppositions. Almost all elements of the opposition were articulated at the national as well as the local level, but in significantly different forms at each level. These differences, also, were to contribute to both the modes and the timing of the reaction.

In studying these transformations we are also able to identify more clearly the deeper indigenous and colonial structures shaping the Indian communist movement throughout the period of the Party's formation and, ultimately, determining the outcome for the CPI of the bolshevisation of the Communist International. In the crises of this period these structures and their inter-relationships, formerly largely concealed, now stood much more fully revealed. The revelation provides an opportunity to explore these deeper features more fully and to determine their wider implications for Indian communism.

1. THE LOGIC OF THE RAJ'S ANTI-COMMUNIST STRATEGY

In March 1929, more than four years after its last serious attempt to crush Indian 'Communism', the Government of India finally and dramatically ended its apparent moratorium on

the repression of the movement. In the early hours of the morning of March 20, in an impressively coordinated secret operation including the stationing of two companies and three platoons of troops in Bombay city, 31 men were arrested in four provinces to be tried in the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case.² They were charged with having conspired with each other and with the Communist International and its subsidiary organisations, between 1925 and 1929, to 'deprive the King-Emperor of his sovereignty of British India'.³ The method was not new - it was intended as 'a continuation of the successful Cawnpore Conspiracy Case'.⁴ But it was by far the most ambitious of the Raj's sequence of conspiracy cases, eclipsing its predecessors with

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2. The arrests, along with extensive searches and confiscations of literature and correspondence, took place at 10 centres in Bombay, Bengal, UP and the Punjab. The Bombay government stationed the troops to meet the possibility of 'serious trouble' from the millhands when they heard of the arrests of their leaders. (NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929: G of Bom. to G of I, 20/3/29.) The act was clear evidence of the government's awareness of the popularity of the WPP/GKU leaders. The secrecy of the operation testified convincingly to the internal security of the Raj's apparatus - on questions of communist repression at least. As the DIB later commented, despite the IB's having prepared the case for five months, despite the involvement of provincial officers in the distribution of the 200 arrest and search warrants, and despite the participation of significant numbers of Indians at all stages, 'the secret of the prosecution was kept': 'Nothing got out. No one absconded, books and papers were found on every office table and correspondence was passing freely in the post. In these days, when so little is secret, this was something of a feat'. (NAI, H.Poll, 109/1934: Petrie to Hallett, 7/10/33). Only one communist (Lalji Pendse) received sufficient warning - through a Congressman friend (N.V. Gadgil) with a relation in the Bombay CID - to destroy incriminating evidence: from Lalji Pendse's unpublished memoirs, translated for the author by his son. Dr S.Pendse.
 3. MCCC: Committal Order.
 4. NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929: V to S of S, 19/1/29.

its 'gigantic' scale and 'unprecedented' duration:⁵ it drew upon 2,500 prosecution exhibits and 320 prosecution witnesses, including several from Britain, cost the Government of India alone more than Rs. 18,00,000,⁶ and took nearly four years to prove an apparently simple charge. The Meerut Conspiracy Case was, despite its precedents, unique in the legal and political history of colonial India.

The Meerut Case immediately raises four questions: why did the Raj take the communist movement so seriously as to launch such a major act of repression?; why, given its earlier readiness to move quickly against much less serious manifestations of 'Communism', did it wait until March 1929 to repress the activities of the preceding years?; what logic led it to choose this ponderous mode of repression?; and what were the immediate consequences and longer-term implications of both the mode and the logic for an urban, working class-based communist movement in colonial India? In answering them we also learn something about both the Raj's wider political strategy and the structure of opposition within Indian society faced by a communist movement. The modalities of repression chosen by the government to meet the communist challenge were very carefully deliberated and integrated with its discriminating, overall strategy for maintaining its political dominance; and both strategic levels were deeply influenced by the powerful socio-economic groups and political

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5. The (pejorative) epithets are the Allahabad High Court's: MCCC: Appeals Judgement, p.803.
 6. IO, Statement Exhibiting the Moral and Material Progress and Condition of India, 1932-33, No.67, (London, 1933), p.48. This assessment does not include the cost of the Appeals.

movements that were, immediately or indirectly, opposed to communist politics and class-based working class radicalism.

The Background of the Meerut Case

As we saw earlier, the first phase of repression, ending in the Cawnpore Case in 1924, was determined, essentially, by wider political factors than specific 'Communist' activities in India. London's exaggerated anxieties in the wake of the Russian Revolution and in the context of the post-War agitations in India, and its 'Imperial' interest in creating a 'Communist threat' in India, had been the most important factors. The Raj's political strategy of using the same 'threat' to impress upon 'moderate opinion' the dangers of mass-based political action, and to warn the nationalist movement of the political costs of 'Communitistic' deviations, had also contributed significantly to the (uncharacteristically) heavy repression of M.N. Roy's first correspondents in India. In the political quiescence of the mid-1920s these metropolitan and domestic considerations lost their urgency. No further public demonstrations of official anti-communism were believed to be necessary, despite the continuation of the 'international Bolshevick conspiracy' in India and the inauguration of the Communist Party of India at the 1925 Kanpur conference.

By mid-1927, however, the vigilant DIB, David Petrie, could see future hazards presaged in the slight political shifts of that year. He set himself to convincing sceptical colleagues of the dangers posed by the communist presence, no matter how apparently insignificant. 'It would be folly to despise the day of small things', Petrie, in the Biblical tones favoured by New Delhi's Directors of Intelligence in their pronouncements on communism, warned the Raj. For, he continued in the pathological

imagery found equally appropriate to the subject, 'the germ is bound to multiply, even as that of an infectious disease, and to taint the entire body politic'.⁷ The Home Department's publication in September 1927 of a second edition of Communism in India, under Petrie's direction, heralded a second phase of repression. This time the Indian administrations rather than the India Office set the pace.

Again, this concern in 1927 was prompted more by general changes in nationalist politics than by specific communist activities. In particular, Petrie was worried by what he saw as the growing nationalist recognition of 'the immense power of mass action as a political weapon' - by the increasingly effective percolation into the National Congress, mainly from communist sources, of the idea of 'the need of organising the labouring masses in order to associate them with the general movement'.⁸ The continued propagation of 'the idea that by their own action the masses themselves' could effect their own liberation was particularly dangerous, and it was 'indisputable' that 'the mass action idea has come to stay' in nationalist politics.⁹ But Petrie was also worried by the particular threat posed by the communists themselves, despite 'Roy's singularly barren record' of attempts to establish an autonomous movement in India.¹⁰ In particular, he foresaw with alarm the possibility of increasing communist success in the organisation of industrial labour. This

7. IB, Communism, (1927), p.292.

8. ibid., p.287.

9. ibid., p.290, (my emphasis).

10. ibid., p.287.

potential, combined with the possibility of another mass movement equivalent to NCO, was ominous: 'it needs few words to point out the mischief that Communism might do were it to obtain a proper grip over ... Labour', particularly during a national crisis when 'the calling of a general or sectional strike among railway-workers, dockers, etc., might completely paralyse Government's ability to procure supplies and to keep open its lines of communication'.¹¹ Thus was resuscitated what had been the government's 'greatest fear' during 1920-22:

For all of these reasons, the DIB concluded, any manifestation of communist politics should be immediately and ruthlessly repressed:

It would be as little justifiable for the Government to relax its vigilance in time of peace as it would be for our health authorities to discard precautions when the public health is at its best. Wherever Communism manifests itself it should be met and stamped out like the plague ... it must be looked straight in the face, and it must be fought with the most unrelenting opposition. 12

In 1927 Petrie was frustrated by 'open scoffers',¹³ but during the following 18 months the Government of India was increasingly to heed his warnings and to accept the main thrust of his frankly stated diagnosis and extremist recommendations. Its immediate concern was to deport the British communists, a measure regarded as absolutely essential by Petrie, and then to follow his advice to close 'any loophole whatsoever by which

11. ibid., p.291.

12. ibid., p.292 (my emphasis).

13. ibid., p.288.

the agents and doctrines of Communism might find admission to this country'.¹⁴ It was believed that these measures to isolate the Indian movement would be sufficient to render it impotent.

But in seeking to deport Spratt and Bradley the government faced a fundamental problem which had first been raised in the pre-1924 phase and which was to occupy it increasingly during the following years - the problem, for a government which attached great political value to observing due legal process and minimising arbitrary executive action, of obtaining a constitutional basis for summary action against communist activity per se. As trade union activity had already been legalised the question was how to 'connect up activities which in themselves might be capable of innocent interpretation with the ultimate objects of Communism'.¹⁵ In this case Allison, having committed a passport offence, could be dealt with simply. But Spratt and Bradley, being British citizens who had entered India legally, could only be deported if they breached the law. The sedition case against Spratt in Bombay was the first attempt to secure a conviction. Spratt's acquittal embarrassed the government and demonstrated the unlikelihood of securing a conviction on a political charge through the jury trials required at Bombay and Calcutta. Intelligence 'very carefully watched' Spratt and Bradley after the sedition case, but it soon became apparent that both men were continuing to take care not to

14. ibid., p.292.

15. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: G of I to all LGs, 18/8/28. The G of Bombay (ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 10/9/28) noted the same problem: 'the ordinary law does not contemplate interference with the ostensibly innocent and 'legal' activities of Communism, which form an integral part of Communist activities'.

transgress the criminal code in their political activity.¹⁶

New Delhi then began to consider new methods. It was no longer prepared either to wait for the communists to commit an offence or to risk another jury trial.

In May 1928, soon after the beginning of the Bombay general strike, New Delhi and London decided simultaneously that the problem should be overcome by obtaining through the Legislative Assembly Executive power to deport British communists.¹⁷ This additional power, it was still believed at the time, would be sufficient to undermine the Indian movement, 'by itself very weak', and thus to avert 'the great potentialities of danger' in the future.¹⁸ Accordingly the 'Public Safety (Removal from India) Bill', based on a draft supplied by the India Office, was prepared in the following months. It also incorporated the power to confiscate foreign remittances from communist sources. In addition, the Home Department reviewed its procedures for detecting incoming communist literature, and the imperial intelligence system its surveillance for the departure of communist agents for India.

The decision to seek to gain the desired deportation powers through the Assembly is revealing. In 1928 the government faced a rather delicate balance in the Assembly. This was because the Swarajists, the moderate, Bombay industrialist-backed Nationalist Party, and some Independents, had earlier formed an

16. IOL, L/PO/255: V to S of S, 9/5/28.

17. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: V to S of S, 24/5/28, replying to S of S to V, 3/5/28.

18. loc. cit.

informal alliance in opposition to the government.¹⁹ The opposition was further reinforced, by other moderates, after the announcement that the Statutory Commission on future constitutional reforms would not include any Indians. This opposition meant that the passage of the Public Safety Bill was not completely assured. Nevertheless the government decided not to use the simpler and safer method of Executive Ordinance because of the attendant dangers of 'giving the Communists a martyr's halo' and of provoking wider moderate opposition to the government.²⁰ So, in consonance with what had become, since 1921, a basic tenet of the Raj's political strategy, New Delhi was, as Irwin wrote to London in May, 'careful to carry public opinion with us' while securing its new powers:²¹

Moderate opinion has been alarmed by recent manifestations of Communism. If we do anything we want to have that opinion with us, and we might possibly get support for carefully drafted legislation.

A great deal of attention was subsequently devoted to maximising

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19. The Nationalist Party was founded in 1926 by a coalition of Liberals and other responsive co-operators, and it included several prominent industrialists and their representatives. After the 1926 Assembly elections the Nationalists, Swarajists and several Independents formed a loose opposition. In 1927, at the highpoint of the alliance, it commanded 69 of the 144 votes in the Assembly. (A.D. Gordon, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-70). The reasons for the Swarajist-Nationalist oppositional alliance will be studied below.
20. IOL, L/PO/255: V to S of S, 9/5/28. For Irwin's view of the importance in 1928 of detaching the moderates from the Congress opposition to government, see D.A. Low, 'Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and the First Round-Table Conference', in Low (Ed.), *Soundings*, p.302.
21. IOL, L/PO/255: V to S of S, 9/5/28.

the moderates' support. New Delhi was anxious to use the Assembly debate to emphasise 'the distinction between political or subversive purposes and legitimate industrial disputes'.²² Between May and August the draft bill went through successive alterations²³ to make it quite clear to the Assembly that it was intended only for 'the people we wish to strike ...the Communists', and not 'those who merely hold extreme political opinions'.²⁴ The bill was to be projected not as 'a measure for the protection of Government, but ... for public security and to stamp out Communism and Revolutionary teaching in this country'.²⁵

The Government also supplemented its careful redrafting with an intensive anti-communist propaganda campaign, both before and after the bill had been introduced into the Assembly. As in the first phase of its anti-communist repression, the government continued to attach a great deal of importance to propaganda. Indeed, an important dimension of its anti-communist strategy throughout was to use its repressive actions as occasions for concerted propaganda exercises demonstrating the grave social, political and moral dangers of 'Communism' - a term which had earlier been used more as a synonym for organised, militant mass action than as a referent for specific, internationally-affiliated communist activity. Such a demonstration, it had been hoped since the days of Non-Cooperation, would serve

22. loc. cit.

23. The correspondence relating to the Public Safety Bill is contained in NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928.

24. ibid., note by Haig, 12/6/28.

25. ibid., note by Isemonger (Acting DIB), 2/7/28.

to warn the 'property-owning classes' of the hazards of mass nationalist activity, rally the moderates, and isolate the militant nationalists. To this extent the existence of Comintern-connected Indian communist groups was, in fact, politically useful to the Raj.

The government's views of the great importance of propaganda in 1928, when the need to discredit both communist and 'Communistic' activities was more pressing than in the pre-1924 phase, is revealed in the 'Assembly Letter' incident. The incident was reminiscent of the government's earlier 'leaking' to the press of M.N. Roy's program to the Gaya National Congress session and the more recent 'Zinoviev Letter' in Britain.²⁶ It also provides an informative case study in the government's use of the press.

To 'help to prepare the way for ...[the] anti-communist legislation',²⁷ the India Office and New Delhi's Home Department decided simultaneously to have the press publish a Comintern document which would compromise the Indian communists and convince Indian politicians and the public of the reality and immediacy of the 'Communist threat'.²⁸ A long letter of 'instructions' from

26. The 'Zinoviev Letter' - a similar letter of instructions, the authenticity of which has been hotly contested, from the Comintern to the CPGB - was published by conservative interests in Britain to discredit the CPGB and the Labour Party before the 1924 national election. See: L. Chester et al., The Zinoviev Letter, (London, 1967); S. Crewe, 'The Zinoviev Letter: a Reappraisal', in Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 10(3), Jul. 1975, pp.407-432.

27. IOL, L/PO/255: S of S to V, 9/8/28.

28. loc. cit.; ibid.: V to S of S, 11/8/28. It was decided that 'the advantages of publication seem [to] outweigh [the] risk of exposing our knowledge': ibid.: S of S to V, 14/8/28.

M.N. Roy to the CPI in December 1927, markedly 'conspiratorial' in style and including many passages hostile to 'bourgeois' nationalism, was chosen.²⁹ The operation was carefully prepared and synchronised.³⁰ It was decided that the Home Department should unofficially hand a slightly edited version of the letter to Associated Press in India, 'as I should have given it to the "Times" here', the Secretary of State suggested, then 'instruct' Reuter's to telegraph the same extracts for publication in Britain.³¹ To ensure maximum publicity the publication of Roy's letter was delayed until August 17, one week before the gazetting of the deportation bill, because of the Indian press's preoccupation with the All-Parties Report before that date.³²

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29. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: 'J' (M.N. Roy) to the CCs of the CPI & WPP, 30/12/27. There is a certain irony in the fact that the HD should select a letter from a man whose effectiveness as a 'conspirator' it had derided, and whose influence in the CI and upon the CPI was on the decline, to 'prove' the existence of an internationally organised threat to India. Once again the Raj had found Roy's rather amateurish efforts very useful to its purposes. The publication of the letter aroused some controversy - particularly Roy's (correct) description of J. Nehru as the LAI's main contact in India. Both Roy and the Indian communists publicly denied the letter's authenticity (MCCC, P.s 549(19) & (20), 1887 & 1888). However the IB already had a copy of the letter, and was convinced of its authenticity, by early-June (in NAI, H.Poll, 190/1928), well before it was decided to use it. In any case the most significant point in this context is not the question of the letter's authenticity, but the 'conspiratorial' use that was made of it - transforming a letter from Roy into the 'Assembly Letter'.
30. In particular, Irwin was concerned that the method and timing of the publication should not arouse in India the suspicion that it was London's initiative and the consequent inference that the bill was 'being pressed upon us from home': IOL, L/PO/255: V to S of S, 11/8/28.
31. ibid.: S of S to V, 14/8/28, & V to S of S, 11/8/28. A copy of the edited version is in ibid.
32. ibid.: V to S of S, 16/8/28.

But the publication of the Roy letter, and the liberal use made of it as part of the government's propaganda campaign in the Assembly, ³³ did not secure the intended result. Despite the propaganda, ³⁴ careful preparations and cautious optimism, the bill met with an unexpectedly vigorous opposition from the loose Swarajist-Nationalist coalition the government had hoped to divide. ³⁵ Eventually, on September 24, the vote was taken. The result was a fitting climax to the affair. Several government members happened to be away from New Delhi at the time and the Assembly President, Vitalbhai Patel, ruled that an official member who arrived late for the division could not participate. When the resulting vote produced a tie of 61 votes to each side Patel gave his casting vote to the opposition. The Public Safety Bill had been defeated. The British communists, by the most fortuitous of circumstances - a contingency arising from the Raj's pronounced political concern to secure 'popular' legitimisation of its rule - had been granted an apparent reprieve.

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33. It was this that gave rise to the popular term the 'Assembly Letter'. A copy of the complete Assembly debate on the bill is filed in NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928.
34. Quoting extensively from Comintern documents Crerar, the Home Member, sought to convince the Members that the communists were anti-nationalist and were working for the total destruction of Indian society and the negation of its traditional culture. He stressed their atheism. He cast the government in the role of the protector of the interests of the constituencies represented in the Assembly against a threat which he claimed was imminent. But, unable to reveal Intelligence documents, he urged the Assembly to accept his claims on trust.
35. The terms of the opposition mounted by the Swarajist-Nationalist coalition and some Independents (e.g. N.M. Joshi) were, essentially, anti-government, not pro-communist. The main arguments against the bill were that the 'Communist threat' was neither substantiated nor serious, that the bill would give (and was intended to give) the government wide

But even before the bill had finally reached the Assembly the government had begun considering an alternative, more comprehensive move against Indian communism. In May, when the idea of the deportation bill was first conceived, the authorities had believed not only that the Indian movement could not sustain itself without foreign assistance, but also that the Bombay and Calcutta strikes then in progress did not pose a serious threat. These, Irwin predicted, would soon collapse and the militants would consequently lose ground to the moderates, having been 'discredited by an expensive failure'.³⁶ In late July this view was still held within the Home Department.³⁷ But by mid-August its complacency had been seriously eroded. 'Until recently', the Viceroy informed his provincial governments on August 18,

... the Government of India were disposed to think that, if the Indian movement could be ... isolated, it would not be likely to make much progress. But the experience of the last few months has suggested that the movement has obtained in India a stronger hold than seemed likely ...³⁸

This reassessment raised, for the first time, the question of a more comprehensive action directed against the Indian movement as a whole, not just its foreign assistants.

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(35. cont'd...)

discretionary powers which could be used against non-communists as well as communists, and that it could be used to discriminate between Indian and British communists. Of the Nationalists only one (F.I. Rahimtullah) supported the bill. Both Birla and Thakurdas (the latter being the Indian Merchants' Chamber's representative), were prominent in the debate against the bill.

36. IOL, L/PO/255: V to S of S, 9/5/28.

37. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: HM (Crerar) to V, 29/7/28.

38. ibid.: G of I to all LGs, 18/8/28.

The Bombay government was the agency primarily responsible for New Delhi's reconsiderations. The exchange which took place between the two governments in the second half of 1928 was to raise most of the issues behind, and to establish the essential guidelines for, the Raj's repression of communism in the following decade.

Between late July and mid-August Bombay sent a sequence of alarmist telegrams and letters to New Delhi warning of an impending provincial emergency, of the gravest dimensions and with all-India implications, if the communist leaders were not immediately arrested. The emergency arose, Bombay argued, from a conjunction of the Bardoli satyagraha and the communists' growing influence in the railway unions subsequent to their successes in the textile strike.³⁹ It argued that there was a strong possibility of a railway strike which could paralyse the government's capacity to move troops, police and supplies to Bardoli. Bombay was also worried about the communists' growing tendency to 'ally themselves with political attacks on Government',⁴⁰ and later expressed its concern about their developing a rural base through repatriated strikers in the villages.⁴¹ It was unable to move against the communists under the ordinary law as they took 'good care to keep within the law as it stands';⁴² it was reluctant to use the emergency powers available under Bombay Regulation XXV of 1827 because of the risk that emergency action 'against railway

39. ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 27/7/28, 29/7/28 & 5/8/28.

40. ibid.: G of Bom. to V, 9/8/28.

41. ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 10/9/28.

42. ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 27/7/28.

communists who are [also] mill strike leaders will appear and be represented as interference by Government in [a] legitimate trades ... dispute induced by capitalist mill owners';⁴³ and Bombay argued that Government of India action was preferable in any case because the railways, and the implications of the wider communist threat, were inter-provincial.⁴⁴ Bombay's recommendations were extreme:⁴⁵ the Government of India should immediately proscribe under the Criminal Law Amendment Act 'any association to further communistic principles' and arrest all members of such organisations; and the Bombay government should be allowed to take extensive powers to deport communists from the cities and intern them in rural areas, and to prevent picketing in industrial disputes.

But surprisingly, given its original stress on the role of the communists in the railways, Bombay continued to insist that the crisis remained just as extreme after New Delhi had established that the WPP had neither the capacity nor the inclination to call a railway strike to coincide with Bardoli,⁴⁶ and even after the Bardoli dispute had been settled.⁴⁷ The real problems, it began to appear, were the consolidation of the textile strike during July and the growing distress of the millowners.⁴⁸

43. ibid.: 5/8/28.

44. loc. cit.

45. ibid.: 27/7/28.

46. ibid.: Agent, GIPR to Sec., Railway Board, 1/8/28, & minutes of a meeting between Isemonger and members of HD, G of Bom. 18/8/28 (hereafter cited as: Meeting in HD, G of Bom., 18/8/28).

47. ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 8/8/28.

48. It was probably not coincidental that Bombay's first calls for help came soon after the strike had been greatly strengthened by the jobbers' decision to participate in it fully.

The Bombay government's extreme anxiety had a context. The organisation developed during the general strike had confirmed the worst of the fears it had long entertained, since Tilak's efforts, of the mill workers finding an effective political leadership. But of equal importance was the fact that the problem of the relationship between Bombay's industrial capital and the British colonial state had, by 1928, become acute. As we saw in Chapter 2, the co-existence since 1923 of the textile industry's economic decline, which had been aggravated by New Delhi's London-imposed economic policy, and the nationalist retreat into constitutional politics, had respectively motivated the Bombay industrialists towards and allowed them to adopt an increasingly oppositional stance towards the Government of India. The extent of its disenchantment was demonstrated by the Nationalist Party's stand against the Public Safety Bill in the Assembly, which had become an important national forum for industrialist propaganda against the government. The Nationalists maintained their alliance with the Swarajists on this issue despite the fact that the bill was directed against two of the industrialists' key antagonists at a time of industrial crisis. As a joint deputation of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce and the Indian Merchants' Chamber later made 'quite clear' to the Bombay government - while they would welcome and publicly support government initiatives against the communists qua trade unionists, they 'would not be prepared to countenance any effective action against the political side of Communist agitation'.⁴⁹ The Nationalist Party's vote

49. NAI, H.Poll, 1/1928: Bom. FR2 Dec.. The Public Safety Bill came under the second category, despite its potential

against the government on the Public Safety Bill was this part of Bombay capital's wider, rather ambiguous tactics of limited opposition to the Government of India because of its current economic policy towards the domestic textile industry.⁵⁰

In their conflict with New Delhi the millowners had found a firm ally in the Bombay government. The government had a direct stake, in terms of revenue, in the health of the industry, and it was politically dependent on the collaboration of the industrialists. Bombay was therefore particularly concerned to promote the industry's profitability, to reduce the millowners' growing alienation from government, and to counter its rapprochement with the National Congress. This anxiety had been evidenced

(49. cont'd..)

contribution to the first. The millowners were also reluctant to initiate a counter-propaganda campaign against the communists, despite the government's encouragement. (NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Com. of Pol., Bom. to G of Bom. 7/8/28.) However they were not as reticent about identifying themselves with government industrial initiatives that did not impinge directly upon issues of nationalist politics. When, as a response to the Bombay mill situation, the G of I introduced the Trades Disputes Bill - designed to counter 'political' trade unionism - most millowners supported it, some even forming a special pressure group (appropriately titled the 'Bombay Capitalists' Association') for the purpose. Thakurdas, still seeking to maintain the Nationalist-Swarajist alliance, was one of the few industrialist opponents of the bill: Gordon, op.cit., p.295.

50. This statement is not meant to deny the contribution of nationalist ideology to the Nationalists' stand on the bill, particularly in the year of the arrival of the Simon Commission. (For the ideological impact on the lending moderate, Sapru, of the exclusion of Indians from the personnel of the Commission, see Low, 'Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru', p.300.) The Nationalist Party was not simply the IMC in another guise. Nevertheless the Nationalists' nationalism could not range too far beyond the orbit determined by the immediate political-economic interests of Indian industrial capital.

over the issue of economic policy from the mid-1920s. In A.D. Gordon's words:

... in all the campaigns fought by the industrialists [with New Delhi] over the economic questions, help was forthcoming from the Bombay Government - even to the point of by-passing normal methods of procedure ... the ... Government was concerned both to maintain its political allies - the⁵¹ industrialists - and to ensure prosperity.

This support was sufficiently vociferous to make the Bombay Government 'something of a bete noire' to the centre.⁵² At the level of provincial politics at least, the WPP's accusation that Indian industrial capital and foreign government were 'allies' was correct.

A similar triangular pattern of support and conflict developed in 1928-29 over the issue of industrial politics. Although the Bombay industrialists opposed the Public Safety Bill at the national level they applied strong pressure at the provincial level for state intervention against the strike. The Bombay government, because of its dependence on the millowners, was very responsive to this pressure. As the Department of Industries and Labour commented, it was 'not surprising that [Bombay] ... should be anxious to see a victory for the millowners', despite the genuine grievances of the millhands and the popularity of the strike leadership.⁵³ Bombay officially adopted the millowners' position that the strike was due primarily to communist agitation, not to genuine grievances, that the workers

51. ibid., pp.283-4.

52. ibid., p.284.

53. NAI, H. Poll, 18/XVI/1928: note by Clow, 4/9/28.

had more natural leaders in the BTLU, and that the government had a responsibility immediately to repress the communists - and to repress them as trade union leaders rather than as opponents of the government.⁵⁴ Its partisan support for the millowners became most explicit in August and September as it faced the grim prospect of the collapse of the BMOA's solidarity, the capitulation of the millowners, and a decisive victory for, and subsequent strengthening of, the millhands.⁵⁵ Sir Leslie Wilson, the Governor of Bombay, saw all of the millowners personally at that point to warn them of the grave political implications of granting the strikers' demands.⁵⁶ Bombay cautioned the central government that 'Any conclusion of the mill strike on terms which could be represented as a victory for the millhands would be a most signal victory for the Communists and place them in the position of Labour's leaders throughout India'.⁵⁷ To avoid the imminent possibility of this dual victory, and the consequent eclipse of the moderate trade unionists, Bombay once again urged the immediate arrest of the communists by the Government of India.⁵⁸ It maintained this pressure into 1929.⁵⁹

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54. ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 5/8/28 & 17/9/28.

55. ibid.: Meeting in HD, G of Bom., 18/8/28.

56. ibid.: Note by Haig, 24/9/28.

57. ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 24/8/28.

58. loc. cit.; ibid.: Meeting in HD, G of Bom., 18/8/28.

59. See the correspondence in ibid.

The Bombay Government's succession of alarms did much to change the Government of India's assessment of the seriousness of the threat posed by the communists: by mid-August, following the Bardoli settlement, New Delhi was convinced that the communists led 'the most important revolutionary movement in sight'.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, despite this re-evaluation, it was at that point disinclined to make any special concessions to the millowners and took a rather different view of the wider significance of the situation to that of the Bombay administration. In fact Bombay's exaggeration of the immediate threat, its partisan adoption of the millowners' viewpoint, and its repeated requests for New Delhi to initiate actions that the latter believed to be Bombay's responsibility, provoked considerable concern and irritation.⁶¹

'Bombay official and commercial opinion', wrote Haig, the Secretary of the Home Department, 'pays too little attention to the question [of] whether the workers really have grievances'.⁶² Commenting on the request for the central government to intervene to avoid the danger of the Bombay government's appearing partisan, he noted caustically that Bombay was 'alive to this as far as they themselves are concerned, but seem to be oblivious of it if

60. ibid.: joint HD memo by Haig & Crerar for the Sub-Ctee. of the Exec. Council, G of I, 4/1/29 (hereafter cited as: Haig/Crerar, 4/1/29).

61. Cf. also D.A. Low, 'The First Non-Co-operation Movement', on the patterns of conflict over political tactics between Bombay (and other provincial governments) and New Delhi during that movement. On this issue, too, New Delhi had resisted calls for immediate repressive action.

62. ibid.: note by Haig, 23/8/28. This was also the view of the Industries and Labour Dept : ibid.: note by Clow, 4/9/28.

the action is to be taken by the Government of India'.⁶³ The differences between Bombay and New Delhi became sufficiently sharp for New Delhi to issue a formal rebuke: 'the position of Government would be very unsound', the Home Department wrote in September, 'if the desire to suppress the Communists should develop into a desire to defeat the present mill strike'.⁶⁴ The Bombay Government should use its influence 'rather in the direction of securing some reasonable accommodation of the dispute than of defeating the strikers with the object of discrediting their Communist leaders'. 'The traditional role of Government in an industrial dispute', Bombay was reminded, 'is that of an impartial arbiter'.⁶⁵ New Delhi stressed the necessity of this role on two grounds: it was of great value to both groups of disputants; and it was very important for the government's own position - for if government could credibly be represented as hostile to labour 'the path of the Communists in combining the exploitation of labour grievances with attacks on Government is made smooth'.

In the Government of India's careful deliberations over the most prudent mode of repression of communism and militant trade unionism the second consideration subsequently proved to be of much more significance than concern for the rights of labour vis a vis capital. As with the Public Safety Bill, New Delhi very carefully weighed against the immediate gains

63. ibid.: note by Haig, 11/8/28.

64. ibid.: G of I to G of Bom., 5/9/28.

65. loc.cit., (my emphasis).

the wider political costs of the sort of precipitate action proposed by Bombay. This assessment depended upon its evaluation of the significance of the Bombay situation in the context of the overall political situation in India - an evaluation which was to change significantly in the following months.

In mid-August the Government of India was about to introduce its deportation bill into the Assembly, and was planning the introduction of trade union legislation (the Trade Disputes Bill) providing greater powers to control labour militance and 'political' trade unionism. Apart from its general concern not to alienate the moderates, provoke the Congress, or counter the hopefully salutary effect on political opinion of its anti-communist propaganda, the government was particularly concerned at that point not to prejudice the passage of these two pieces of legislation.⁶⁶ By taking emergency action or enacting new legislation by ordinance all of these political costs would be incurred. In any case, in August-September New Delhi did not share Bombay's anxieties about the communists' becoming permanently entrenched following a successful general strike. Immediate emergency action was not required, for the communists' consolidation of their position could 'subsequently be reversed by a successful prosecution ...the triumph of the communists would be brief'.⁶⁷ The government could afford to allow them more rope while deciding on the method of repression least likely to increase its difficulties in other directions. These were the considerations underlying the Government of India's 'impartiality',

66. ibid.: V to Gov. of Bom., 13/8/28.

67. ibid.: G of I to G of Bom., 5/9/28.

and the 1928 general strike's freedom from repression. New Delhi was more concerned with Bombay's failure to 'take a very comprehensive view of the situation'⁶⁸ than with its hostility towards labour. The differences between the two levels of the administration were much less substantive than those behind the conflict over the textile industry's economic demands. The millowners' interests in industrial politics - and therefore the question of defeating effective trade unionism - did not loom nearly as large in New Delhi in August-September 1928 as they did in Bombay. But the Government of India was just as determined to crush the communist labour leaders, despite its tactical differences with Bombay, and it would subsequently prove to be more amenable on the wider trade union question as well.

This was the carefully considered background to New Delhi's decision that a case based on a charge of conspiracy against the state was the optimum tactic in the existing situation. It made this decision despite the fact that the communists' activity so far had been markedly open and un-conspiratorial and had not been primarily directed against the state, and despite the fact that the necessarily lengthy preparations for the case would considerably delay its anti-communist repression. The perceived advantages of this mode of repression, relative to those proposed from Bombay and other provincial governments, were spelt out subsequently:⁶⁹ it was the sole means available under

68. ibid.: note by Haig, 22/3/29

69. ibid.: Haig/Crerar, 4/1/29. (This memo was an extended consideration of all possible courses of action available to the central and provincial governments, and its recommendations were adopted as G of I policy.) See also NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1928: V to S of S, 19/1/29.

the existing law for moving against the communists and their associates; it would immediately 'break up the existing organisations and remove the more dangerous leaders'; the subsequent convictions would 'expose by means of a judicial pronouncement, which could not be questioned, the real aims and methods of the Communists'; this legal finding could subsequently be used to justify the proscription of communist organisations in a way that minimised the political risks of direct proscription; for all of these reasons it would serve in any case to 'deal the whole Communist movement a much more serious blow', more permanent in its effects, than would any alternative emergency measures or special additions to the law; 'and at the same time the Government would avoid the odium and the political danger of adopting these special expedients'.

The idea of another conspiracy case under Section 121-A of the Indian Penal Code had been championed for some time by the Acting DIB, Isemonger.⁷⁰ The Bombay situation provided him with the opportunity to gain wider acceptance for the idea. It was first mooted very tentatively with Bombay on August 2, and again, along with other alternatives, with all provincial governments on August 18.⁷¹ Bombay, still smarting from the experience of the Spratt sedition case and apprehensive of the results of another jury trial for a political offence, reacted negatively.⁷² It escaped the consideration of the other governments.⁷³ But

70. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: note by Haig, 23/8/28. For Isemonger's arguments see NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: Isemonger to Haig, 20/9/28.

71. In NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928.

72. ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 5/8/28.

73. Their replies, written between Sept. & Dec., are in ibid.

New Delhi, despite Bombay's reaction, began to explore the option in greater detail. Isemonger was sent to Bombay and Calcutta in mid-August to assess the situations there and to confer with the respective governments. In Bombay he was only able to secure the administration's support for a conspiracy case that was held promptly, to break the current strike, and outside that province so as to avoid a jury trial in Bombay.⁷⁴ In Calcutta he gained the Government of Bengal's acquiescence, but not its enthusiastic support.⁷⁵ But by the time Isemonger had returned to New Delhi the Home Department had already decided, on the basis of his interim report from Bombay, that 'Nothing would suit us better than a successful conspiracy case'.⁷⁶ By September 8, during the course of the Public Safety Bill debate in the Assembly, the Government of India was sufficiently confident of this course to notify the India Office that its possibilities were being seriously investigated.⁷⁷ A team of legal specialists was appointed to assess the likelihood of its success.

(73. cont'd)

Though most of the other govts'. did not regard action against communists as being urgently required, all recommended repressive action against them via additional powers.

74. ibid.: meeting in HD, G of Bom., 18/8/28; G of Bom. to G of I, 24/8/28; Isemonger to Haig, 20/8/28.

75. ibid.: note by Isemonger, 29/8/28. In fact at no point during the deliberations leading up to the Meerut Case did Bengal appear anxious for drastic action against the communists: e.g. it did not reply until Dec. 19 to the G of I's Aug. 18 letter canvassing the provincial governments' views on methods of repression, and in its reply argued that there was no serious communist problem.

76. ibid.: note by Haig, 23/8/28.

77. ibid.: G of I to S of S, 8/9/28.

Thus the Government of India had already decided that it would prefer a conspiracy case, provided that it could be absolutely assured of success, before the bill had been defeated. This decision conditioned its response to the defeat. It briefly considered enacting the legislation by ordinance⁷⁸ but then decided to wait to reintroduce the bill in early 1929. There were two reasons for this decision.⁷⁹ The first was the political cost of executive action, particularly when 'it would be difficult to make out that a real emergency existed, ...[justifying] legislation at all costs'. Secondly, and more importantly, because Spratt and Bradley were central figures in the 'conspiracy' they were now needed to strengthen the proposed conspiracy case. For this reason they would not be deported even if the necessary powers were passed and, Irwin wrote to his provincial governors,

I attach such importance to the maintenance in some form of reserve powers, even after the next revision of the Constitution, that I am very loath to bring them into discredit by employing them without being certain that the legislation ... is going to be immediately required. 80

It was for these reasons that the defeat of the bill allowed Spratt and Bradley a temporary reprieve. The defeat was, in fact, despite the immediate political embarrassment, convenient to New Delhi's new plans for crushing the Indian movement as a whole.

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78. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: V to S of S, 25/9/28.

79. ibid.: V to all Provincial Govs., 25/9/28.

80. loc. cit.

The India Office, however, did not share New Delhi's enthusiasm for the conspiracy case tactic. It was worried by the possibility of legal and political difficulties in India. Sir Malcolm Seton (prophetically) warned his Minister:

It looks as if His Excellency has come to think of an elaborate conspiracy trial as an alternative to legislation. ... experience has shown that such trials for conspiracy (except ... [on a charge of having committed] a particular outrage ...) present many difficulties. 81

But of more immediate concern to the India Office was the probability of politically embarrassing repercussions in Britain, on the eve of a sensitive national election. It was worried in particular about the trade union and civil liberties agitation and the difficult questions in Parliament which would be prompted by the trial of Indian trade unionists and, especially, British citizens, on a charge of conspiracy against the state.⁸²

However this difference of opinion was, as was that between New Delhi and Bombay, tactical rather than strategic. Even if Spratt was deported, the Secretary of State wrote to Irwin,

81. IOL, L/PO/255: Seton to S of S, 17/9/28; see also NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: S of S to V, 18/9/28; & IOL, L/PJ/6/1967 File 3788/1928: IO notes on V to S of S, 13/11/28.

82. NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929: S of S to V, 21/2/29 & 7/3/29, & note by Petrie (DIB), 1/4/29. For background on the relationships between the Conservative Government, the trade unions and the Labour Party at this time see P.Renshaw, 'Anti-Labour Politics in Britain, 1918-27' in Journal of Contemporary History, Vol.12(4), Oct. 1977, pp.693-705. With the British trade unions in general, and the militants in particular, having been defeated in the 1926 General Strike and its aftermath, the conciliatory Baldwin preferred to avoid further clashes with the unions - partly, perhaps, to minimise opportunities for communists and other militants to gain ground at the expense of the now-entrenched union moderates.

... we should not be content with that achievement, but should proceed to smash the organisations which he has established and which would continue his work after his departure, and further ... we should render it impossible to build up such organisation in the future. ... Government ... [must be] armed with much wider and more drastic powers than it has now or will obtain from the Public Safety Bill.⁸³

For the India Office the least politically damaging path to this goal was the immediate deportation of the British communists followed by the proscription of communist organisations and the prosecution of their members.⁸⁴ Its tactical difference with the Government of India was, as was that between the latter and Bombay, a reflection of the different political contexts of the different levels of the colonial administration.

By December 1928, then, both London and New Delhi were agreed that Indian communism posed a serious and immediate threat and that it was necessary to use whatever methods were necessary to 'smash' the movement and 'render impossible' its further development. For both, this required the removal, through the proscription of communist organisations, of the existing legal constraints on action against communists. The India Office's concurrence with New Delhi's strategy, if not its tactics, formalised the initiation of a sequence leading to the eventual banning of the CPI and its associated organisations.

* * *

The tactical debate between London and New Delhi continued through the early months of 1929, the Secretary of State

83. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: S of S to V, 19/12/28.

84. loc. cit.

maintaining his initial objections to a conspiracy case.⁸⁵ But for New Delhi this pressure was more than counter-balanced by recent political developments in India: the apparent radicalisation of the Indian National Congress and its threat of another mass agitation; the consolidation of the communists' working class movement; and mounting pressure from industrial and commercial capital and other interests for action against the communists and militant trade unionism. For New Delhi these developments made the course of action suggested by the India Office even more unacceptable.

Ideological developments within nationalist politics during 1928 appeared to the Government of India to be fulfilling Petrie's predictions. New Delhi was particularly concerned about the formation within Congress of a youthful, radical nucleus - reinforced by the communists in the AICC - interested in the organisation of labour and youth in preparation for another mass movement for 'Complete Independence'. Jawaharlal Nehru's activity became the main object of this general anxiety.

The government had been worried about Nehru from the time of his return to India at the end of 1927, 'fresh from his internationalist and communist connections' in Europe.⁸⁶ His

85. The correspondence is in NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929.

86. IOL, L/PJ/6/1955 File 365/1928: Haig to Hirtzel, (Under S of S), 19/1/28. In Haig's view there was 'no doubt that... Nehru is anxious to link up the Congress with the avowed enemies of the British Empire abroad'. For a more extended account of Nehru's activities in this period, and of the Raj's resulting concern, see S. Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru, A Biography, Vol.1 (London, 1975), pp.100-26, & espec. pp.122-26. Gopal, however, over-emphasises the possibility that the government considered including Nehru in the conspiracy case. His name was not suggested in either the original lists drawn up before the arrests, or at the HD

activities during 1928 fuelled these anxieties - his championing of the cause of the Comintern-affiliated League Against Imperialism,⁸⁷ his 'Complete Independence' resolution at the 1927 Madras session of the INC, his role in the formation of the Independence for India League, and his encouragement of radical youth associations. New Delhi's anxieties were confirmed by the proceedings of the Calcutta session of the INC, Nehru's election as president of the AITUC at the end of 1928,⁸⁸ and Subhas Bose's first experiments with trade union politics.⁸⁹ The Home Department observed 'the very marked movement among the extremist nationalists', most notably Nehru and Bose, 'to try and make use of the masses' in a renewed challenge to the Raj.⁹⁰ Further,

(86. cont'd)

meeting on 6/6/29 which considered the inclusion of a further six men in the case (NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929). Indeed, to have included Nehru would have defeated, as we shall see, one of the primary purposes of the case.

87. For HD concern about Nehru's connection with the LAI see the intercepted correspondence between the LAI (particularly V. Chattopadhyaya) and Nehru in NAI, H.Poll, 120/1928 (and the accompanying HD notes dated 23 & 24/7/28) and in NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928, KWXI; and the IB memo (28/11/28) in NAI, H.Poll, 10/XI/1929.
88. The HD was particularly worried about Nehru's election as AITUC president because this brought him into closer contact with the communists, who had made a strong showing at Jharia. (NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928, KWXI: report on the Jharia AITUC session). See also Nehru's account in his Autobiography, pp.186-7.
89. Bose became involved, in Sept. 1928, in the closing stages of a protracted strike at the Jamshedpur iron and steel works, and subsequently became president of one of the two unions there. His policy at Jamshedpur was, Spratt found, 'peace with the Company and support the Congress'. (MCCC, P.2419P: Spratt to R. Page Arnot, 23/10/28). See also Karnik, op. cit., pp.230-31.
90. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: note by Haig, 4/1/29.

it mistakenly believed that the Calcutta session showed that these younger radicals now held the initiative within the Congress.⁹¹ By January 1929, under the threat of another mass agitation against the government, this trend was regarded as 'a greater danger than Communism'.⁹² The government's alarm was further magnified by what it saw as 'a tendency for the political and Communist revolutionaries to join hands', combining their respective attempts to mobilise the working class, with Nehru standing 'about at the meeting point'.⁹³

These worrying developments, and particularly the prospect of a radical-led civil disobedience movement, placed the communists' working class movement in a new and more dangerous context. The Home Department doubted that the number of 'convinced theoretical Communists' was 'likely to increase largely',⁹⁴ but the government had to act soon to remove the possibility of working class agitation being coordinated with a general movement against the Raj. The breaking of the radical

91. NAI; H.Poll, 179/1929: G of I to all LGs, 21/2/29. Cf. S. Gopal (op. cit., pp.127-8) on Jawaharlal's subsequent election as Congress president: 'From the viewpoint of the older leaders, there was a great advantage in having in the chair the malleable founder of the independence movement; his opinions underwrote the genuineness of their intention to start civil disobedience, even while they could be confident that he would be amenable, if need be, to Gandhi's persuasion'; and (ibid., p.137) on Gandhi's realisation that Jawaharlal was 'the best shield of the Congress against left-wing groups and organisations'.

92. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: minutes of meeting of Sub-Ctee of Exec. Council, G of I, 8/1/29. (hereafter cited as SCEC, 8/1/29).

93. NAI, H.Poll, 179/1929: G of I to all LGs, 21/2/29.

94. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Haig/Creerar, 4/1/29.

working class movement was even more imperative than before.⁹⁵

But the recent shifts within nationalist politics also imposed upon the government a particularly cautious and discriminating anti-communist policy. It was 'important to recognise the similarities and the differences' between the 'Communist' and 'extreme nationalist' movements. The Government of India, the Executive Council decided, should

... do nothing which will produce an artificial union between the two movements, which, if left to themselves, may tend to diverge. ... we should be very cautious in taking action against Communism which may rouse for the Communists any general sympathy among the nationalists or provide the nationalists with what they are searching for at the moment, namely a good rallying cry for an intensive anti-Government agitation.⁹⁶

The new currents within nationalist politics thus accentuated the political risks accompanying the method of repression recommended by the India Office; for this required action by Executive Ordinance or emergency legislation and discriminated between Indian and English communists. New Delhi believed that, as the objections to the Public Safety Bill had indicated, any of these measures would exacerbate nationalist agitation against government - thus strengthening the position of the Congress radicals - place the moderates in a more difficult position, and

95. loc. cit. Irwin was later, during Civil Disobedience, to reflect with relief on 'having these Communist patriots out of the way at a difficult time': IOL, Halifax Papers, Vol.6: Irwin to Benn (S of S), 19/12/30.

96. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Haig/Crerar, 4/1/29. Chapter 5, and a following section in this chapter, show that the tendency, in late-1928 and during 1929, for the communists and the non-communist radicals to 'diverge', was stronger than the Home Department believed.

encourage a dangerous common front between the non-communists and the communists.⁹⁷ These possibilities were to be avoided at all costs, and particularly while there was still a chance of heading off the threatened Congress mass campaign; and, if it proved necessary, the Congress radicals could be dealt with subsequently, and separately, as a sequel to the proposed conspiracy case.⁹⁸

As well as the political sentiments of the Congress activists, the Home Department tacticians also took into account the nature of the movement's social support. The essential difference between the communist and non-communist Independence movements, they observed, lay in the very different class characters of their social bases and their programs: communism contained 'grave dangers' for, among others, 'the very classes who support the extreme nationalist movement'.⁹⁹ The government should therefore 'do nothing which is likely to weaken the natural alarm that the property owning classes must feel at the development of Communism'; and nothing was 'so likely to obscure ... [their] ordinary judgement ... as arbitrary action

97. ibid.: G of I to G of Bom., 8/2/29.

98. ibid.: Haig/Crerar, 4/1/29. The HD, in arguing against introducing additional powers against the communists at that stage, stated that 'if it is necessary to strengthen our powers ... we may have to consider strengthening them as much against the political as against the Communist revolutionaries'. As an immediate measure against the Congress radicals the Executive Council decided to examine recent speeches by Nehru and Bose with a view to possible prosecutions : ibid.: SCEC, 8/1/29, & EC, 11/1/29. For subsequent G of I statements on the relationship between its repression of communists and non-communist radicals, see G of I to all LGs, 21/2/29 & 24/6/29, (in NAI, H.Poll, 179/1929) and 30/1/30, (in NAI, H.Poll, 98/1930).

99. ibid.: Haig/Crerar, 4/1/29.

against the Communists'.¹⁰⁰ Further, New Delhi decided, it should complement its tactics of caution by positively accentuating the class differences between the two movements. This had become particularly necessary because the Congress and moderate opposition to the Public Safety Bill had created 'an artificial and false atmosphere' that had to be 'set ... right as soon as possible'.¹⁰¹ It was therefore important to intensify its 'steady campaign of propaganda against the ideas and programme of the Communists'.¹⁰² This campaign was intended, in particular, for the non-communist nationalist activists and for those sectors of the 'property owning classes', both urban and rural,¹⁰³ who might

100. loc. cit. For evidence of this alarm in the city of Bombay see fns. 122, 128 & 132 below. The Bombay government became increasingly sure that its anti-communist initiatives would receive middle class support.
101. NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929: Haig to J. Langford James (MCCC Prosecutor), 29/4/29.
102. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Haig/Creerar, 4/1/29.
103. The Bombay government, in particular, stressed the need for rural propaganda. This was because of its fears about the possible destabilising effects of large numbers of politicised Maratha mill workers returning to their poor-peasant/agricultural labourer backgrounds in the already unstable Maharashtrian countryside. Rural anti-communist propaganda was to be directed, above all, at the 'substantial peasant proprietor' class, to convince it in advance that 'Communist success means their expropriation' (ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 10/9/28). This concern had had an earlier parallel, in 1927-28, in Bombay's attempts to pass a 'Small Holdings Bill' designed to promote the development of the 'kulak' class (Omvedt, 'Revolution and the Rural Proletariat', p.264.) The Punjab government, also, lay great stress on the prophylactic value of propaganda. And, as with Bombay, the Punjab administration regarded the growing, 'politically powerful' class of 'yeoman farmers', intermediate between the few large landlords and the 'multitude of small peasant owners', as the province's main bulwark against possible communist inroads into the countryside. This class, in particular, was capable of containing communist attempts to gain a footing among the small peasants and to 'seduce' agricultural labour (ibid.: G of Punjab to G of I, 25/10/28; Imran Ali's current work

find the communists' immediate program attractive or their presence unexceptionable.

A conspiracy case was the tactic most appropriate to these requirements too. Not only was it the method least likely to counter the 'natural' alarm of the conservative classes or the government's campaign to exaggerate that alarm; it would also provide, New Delhi came to believe, an ideal additional platform, much more effective than the Public Safety Bill debate, for its propaganda. The very act of launching a large case, and the prosecution's evidence-supported arguments during its course, would lend credence to the government's contention that the 'international conspiracy' posed a serious and immediate threat to the established indigenous social order.¹⁰⁴ The case could

(103. cont'd)

on the Punjab canal colonies investigates the political relationship between government and the 'yeoman farmer' in that context). Bengal felt complacent: 'The Permanent Settlement provides a buffer between the cultivator and the Government, and this may account for the weakness of the attempts to stir up agrarian discontent' (*ibid.*: G of Ben. to G of I, 19/12/28.) The Bombay and Punjab analyses and prognoses are particularly interesting in the light of Professor D.A. Low's emphasis on the pivotal role of the 'dominant peasants', in Indian politics from the 1920s. (See, particularly, his 'Introduction: the Climactic Years'.) The Raj's predominant anxiety arose from its connections with the dominant peasants, and 'at the core of the conflict between the [Congress and the Raj]... in the 1920s and 1930s, there raged a battle for their political allegiance' (*ibid.*, p.2.) The Bombay and Punjab responses (and see also the section below on the prosecution's propaganda in the Meerut Case) show that the dominant peasants were also seen as the primary buffer in the countryside against communist success there, if not (NAT, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Haig/Creerar, 4/1/29) against the Congress.

104. The necessity of a large and 'serious' case for propaganda purposes is a constant theme in the government deliberations on the Meerut Case, both before and after it had been instituted. This function contributed very significantly to both the structure and the conduct of the case.

also be used to show in more detail why communism was 'not the kind of movement that should receive the sympathy of the Nationalists'.¹⁰⁵ A conspiracy case was seen as an ideal method for creating a 'Communist threat' in order to crush, at least political cost, the threat that did exist.

The wisdom of taking this approach was further confirmed, and the urgency attached to the need to move against the communists increased, by the profound change in the class and communal political balance in Bombay at the end of 1928. In December, following the formation of the mill committees, the longstanding alarm felt by Bombay's 'official and commercial opinion' escalated and this time the central government was more responsive to its pressure. New Delhi was also worried by events in Bengal suggesting that the Bengal communists, too, were rapidly gaining mass working class influence,¹⁰⁶ and it was receptive to representations from capital in that province.¹⁰⁷

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105. NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929: Haig to Langford James, 29/4/29.
106. In particular, New Delhi regarded the working class demonstration at the INC pandal as 'a striking demonstration of the degree to which the Communists were succeeding in getting hold of industrial labour': NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: SCEC, 8/1/29; see also Chap. 4, fn. 275.
107. From Calcutta, Anglo business organisations such as the European Association brought increasing pressure to bear on the state apparatus to take effective action against the communists and labour militancy (e.g. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/28: Rainy to Haig, 12/1/29; NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: note by Haig, 24/12/28.) Interestingly, these groups were unhappy with the Bengal government's response to their pressure, and tended either to deal (with effective results) with the local district authorities or to approach New Delhi (Rainy to Haig, 12/1/29, as above.) They were also able to bring effective pressure to bear on the Indian administrations through the India Office - an avenue not as accessible to Indian capital: IOL, L/PO/43: S of S to Irwin (18/12/28) and Jackson (19/12/28).

After the settlement of the Bombay strike the millowners, compelled by their precarious economic condition to maximise short term production and constrained in their dealings with labour by the existence of the Strike Enquiry Committee, had followed a policy of appeasement of the GKU - at the expense of the BTLU.¹⁰⁸ But this tactical compromise did not signify an acceptance of the new situation. It was matched by increasing pressure upon the Bombay Government to take the action which, in the immediate future at least, was not open to the millowners - to crush the GKU. In their approaches to the government the millowners had the increasing support of Bombay's wider industrial and merchant business interests. In late-August these groups were privately 'questioning why Government is taking no action against the English Communists';¹⁰⁹ by December the Indian Merchants' Chamber and the Bombay Chamber of Commerce were officially and directly pressing upon the Government of Bombay the urgent need for 'drastic' action against all of the GKU leaders.¹¹⁰ The government, in turn, took up their case with New Delhi with increasing vigour.

The Government of India demonstrated its increasing responsiveness by deputing Sir George Rainy, the Secretary of the

108. See Chapt. 4, section 2.

109. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Isemonger to Haig, 20/8/28 (after visiting Bombay); *ibid.*: Agent, GIPR to Sec. Railway Board, 1/3/28 - a report of a private meeting with the Chamber of Commerce and the Indian Merchants' Chamber.

110. NAI, H.Poll, 1/1928: Bombay FR2 Dec; see also NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Irwin to Sykes, 18/1/28.

Department of Commerce, to visit Bombay and Calcutta at the beginning of January 1929. Rainy spent two days in Bombay interviewing many of 'those who were likely to give useful information'.¹¹¹ This category included prominent government, police, industrial and commercial figures, but not, significantly, labour representatives, either militant or moderate. The millowners gave Rainy an alarming account of the current situation in the mills: 'The men were thoroughly out of hand and ready to do whatever their leaders told them. Respect for the employer and for the constituted authority had entirely disappeared'.¹¹² He heard elsewhere that the communists planned another general strike in the textile mills, to be extended to a general strike in all industries and on the railways, when the Strike Enquiry Committee handed down its report.¹¹³ Bombay capital was unambiguous in its stated expectations of the state:

... the business community, whether European or Indian, is united in the demand that Government should now take steps to bring about a better state of affairs, to maintain law and order and to restore confidence. It is ... strongly felt that the Bombay Government has not been firm enough.

111. ibid.: Rainy to Haig, 12/1/29. The following quotations are taken from this report.

112. loc. cit. For the BMOA's view of the mill committees see also RCLI, Vol. I(2), p.307.

113. While the communists did intend a second textile strike if the Enquiry Committee's report was unfavourable - which, in the event, it was not - they were not planning to co-ordinate a (premature) railway strike with it.

Rainy's response, and his advice to the Executive Council of the Government of India - advice subsequently accepted by that body¹¹⁴ - indicates a very significant change in the perspective adopted by New Delhi towards the Bombay situation. Rainy accepted that the new mode of labour organisation institutionalised in the communist-led, mill committee-based GKU, had indeed become a serious threat to 'law-and-order' in the city.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless he thought that 'the business world puts forward an exaggerated view of the seriousness of the situation'.¹¹⁶ But however exaggerated, he continued,

... the fact of its unanimity, about which there can be no doubt, is in itself an important factor which Government has to take into account. ... It is easy enough to show that the Millowners are illogical and the merchants unreasonable. That does not solve the problem.¹¹⁷

Therefore, while the Government of India 'ought not to be rushed by the Millowners, or by anyone else',

114. *ibid.*: SCEC, 8/1/29, and EC, 11/1/29. Rainy's memo was originally written for the SCEC meeting on 8/1/29.
115. Rainy emphasised the 'seriousness of the situation', for labour was 'better organised and in a stronger position to assert its claims than it has ever been' (my emphasis). The strike leaders were 'thoroughly unscrupulous men aiming at an ulterior object and not at the welfare of labour'. The dichotomisation between political 'ulterior objects' and labour's 'welfare' was a familiar ideological technique for justifying a partisan role for the government. It avoided the question of the impotence of the 'legitimate' trade unionists vis-a-vis the millowners, and the consequent 'necessity' of 'political' trade unionism. (See Chapter 4(2)).
116. Cf. Irwin's comments, following these discussions, that the Bombay business interests 'tend to take an exaggerated view of the situation, when their own pockets are threatened, and to form unreasonable expectations and make unreasonable demands from Government'.: NAI. H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: Irwin to Sykes, 18/1/29.
117. My emphasis.

... we cannot afford to take any line of action which would give the impression that we were weak in our attitude or that we were uncertain in our own minds. The effect of any failure of this sort would be immediate, for it would at once encourage the labour agitators and would confuse and infuriate the business and other communities on whom Government must always rely for the maintenance of law and order in question.¹¹⁸

It was now time for the state to intervene to break popular, militant unionism as a whole, as well as the communist influence.

With its acceptance of Rainy's advice New Delhi, while still not prepared to be 'rushed into hasty action', had deferred very substantially - at least for the duration of the crisis - to Bombay's 'official and commercial opinion'. This was in marked contrast to its earlier disparagement of the same opinion; it was now much less concerned to maintain the appearance of an 'impartial arbiter'. It made this shift partly because it now took more seriously the immediate and longer-term threats posed by the communist-GKU movement. But of more importance was the fact that, facing the prospect of an imminent political crisis, the government could ill afford to alienate the classes and communities on whose collaboration it depended in this politically important city when the Raj was under challenge. Consequently, from January 1929 the Government of India's strategy towards industrial politics

118. My emphasis. For Bombay's subsequent emphasis, during Civil Disobedience, on the importance of securing non-Brahman, Muslim and Untouchable community support for government, see NAI, H.Poll, 269/1930: Sykes to Irwin, 21/5/30. This report underlines Bombay's difficulties in maintaining Muslim collaboration. For the difficulties of the loyalists within the flux of non-Brahman politics at this time see, Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Nationalists', pp.209-13.

coincided very closely with the interests of Bombay capital - and thus with those of the Bombay government. Further, it was now concerned actively to foster the support of the 'other communities'. On the issue of industrial relations at least, the colonial state had gone far towards incorporating - and thus strengthening - the communists' class and communal enemies. For similar political reasons, in the context of the Civil Disobedience movement, New Delhi was soon to complement this concession by vigorously taking up the industry's economic demands with London.¹¹⁹

However New Delhi's decision to revise its relationship with the Bombay interests did not lead it to question its immediate tactics for repressing the communists. Rather, it reinforced the choice of a conspiracy case despite the fact that this fell within the category - which the Indian business organisations had warned in December that they could not publicly support - of attacks upon the 'political side' of communism.¹²⁰ This was because, as we have seen, New Delhi believed that this tactic would prove to be the most effective form of repression in both the immediate and long terms; it would therefore soon maximise the currently drifting support of Bombay's powerful vested interests. But the scale of the case was increased,¹²¹

119. Gordon, *op. cit.*, pp.341-42 & 345-46. Because of the moderates' strategic importance to the government during Civil Disobedience (see, eg., Low, 'Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru', pp.308-10) New Delhi became very worried about the possibility of the industrialists' breaking, over the issue of government economic policy, with the moderates' conciliatory position.

120. The Nationalist Party's continued opposition to the re-introduced Public Safety Bill in Feb.-Apr. 1929 underlined this point.

121. Between January and March the number to be included in the case was increased from 20 to 31.

and the Executive Council also gave its attention to the question of future, supplementary action against communist-led strikes occurring after the Meerut arrests.¹²² When the 1929 textile general strike began in April the question of securing the support of the business interests again became an immediate one.

When Bombay requested additional powers to deal with the strike¹²³ New Delhi's initial response was very similar to its reaction to Bombay's requests in August-September 1928. The Home Department was sceptical of Bombay's claims and sent Haig to investigate. He found that the situation was 'most complicated'. He reported that the continued organisational and ideological strength of the strike was politically destabilising and that the government's difficulty in placating 'public' opinion, and the deteriorating morale of the police - many of whom were sympathetic with the strikers - were disturbing.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, he decided that the millowners had acted arbitrarily and provocatively, that the millhands had genuine grievances, that the strike and its leadership were genuinely popular and that the millowners were simply looking to the government to re-establish the control they had lost. The powers requested by Bombay would have only symbolic value or would mean going 'too far in the direction of taking sides with capital against

122. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: SCEC, 8/1/29.

123. ibid.: G of Bom. to G of I, 30/4/29.

124. NAI, H.Poll, 303/1929: notes by Haig of conversations with Bombay government and police officials on 4, 6 & 7/6/29, and summary note, 11/6/29. The question of police morale was a particularly sensitive one for the Raj during Civil Disobedience - much more so than during the Non-Cooperation movement: see Low, 'Introduction', p.9.

labour'.¹²⁵ But when, a fortnight later, 'the millowners and middle class public' brought pressure to bear on the Bombay government in 'a more direct fashion' than previously,¹²⁶ the Home Department very quickly relented and, in allowing the passage of legislation against 'criminal intimidation', granted Bombay much of what it had requested.¹²⁷ It did so - even though it doubted that the strike situation had changed

125. Notes by Haig cited in fn.124; NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: note by Haig, 7/6/29. Haig commented that serious trouble would continue in the industry until there was 'a radical change of relations between capital and labour'.
126. NAI, H.Poll, 303/1929: G of I to V, 27/6/29. On July 21, 17 of the province's industrial, commercial, financial and utility organisations had met with the Governor and pressed unanimously for additional legislation against the strikers. The Servants of India Society, in which the BTLU leaders played a leading role, was also invited and gave its support to the resolution. Bombay's small shareholders were also 'making their influence felt'. The 17 organisations present at the meeting were: the Bombay Chamber of Commerce, the Indian Merchants' Chamber, the Bombay Corporation, the BB & CIR Board, the GIPR Board, the East Indian Cotton Association, the Native Piecegoods Merchants' Association, the Imperial Bank of India, the Native Share and Stockbrokers' Association, the Bombay Shareholders' Association, the Associated Joint Stock Banks, the Provincial Cooperative Institute, the European Association, the Bombay Port Trust, the Marwari Chamber of Commerce, the Indian Industries Association and the Bombay Presidency Trades Association.
127. The legislation would make 'criminal intimidation' a cognisable offence. It would thus provide the police with greatly increased powers of discretion against the strikers. However New Delhi again resisted Bombay's request for it to intervene, and to do so through Executive action, because it thought Bombay's case 'singularly weak'.

significantly¹²⁸ - because it recognised the increased gravity of Bombay's political problems with the city's capital and its middle class: 'it would have a very unfortunate effect on the Bombay Government' if it was refused permission to 'introduce legislation in accordance with what a large body of public opinion considers to be necessary'.¹²⁹ Thus the Government of India, following its reevaluation in January of the significance of the Bombay situation, was prepared to respond to pressure from that province much more readily in 1929 than it had in 1928.

* * *

Once the essential decisions had been taken in early January the planning of the conspiracy case gathered momentum between then and March. At the same time New Delhi continued its attempts to erode London's resistance to the idea:¹³⁰ 'The trial would take many months and be costly', Irwin admitted to London: 'but', he added, emphasising the particular virtues of a conspiracy case, 'in comparison with the advantages of success the time and money would be of little account'.¹³¹ It was anticipated that the trial would be completed within a year.¹³²

With the flimsy justification that a WPP meeting had been held there, the obscure town of Meerut was chosen as the

128. NAI, H.Poll, 303/1929: HD, G of I to V, 27/6/29.

129. ibid.: V to S of S, 11/7/29.

130. See the telegrams between the Viceroy and the Secretary of State from 19/1/29 to 10/3/29 in NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929.

131. ibid.: V to S of S, 19/1/29.

132. ibid.: notes by Haig, 20 and 23/2/29.

site in order to avoid the hazards of a jury trial, and the serious industrial and political trouble that would have attended it, in Bombay or Calcutta.¹³³ Sanction for the arrests was granted on March 14 - two days after London had finally acquiesced. Of the 31 men finally selected only 17 could conceivably have been considered to be conscious, active communists. The remaining 14 were chosen - on the grounds that they had been in association with the communists - either to crush militant trade unionism completely or to add to the credence of the government's claim that a serious inter-provincial conspiracy had existed.¹³⁴

Following the arrests, searches and confiscations on March 20, the 31 'conspirators', suitably handcuffed, were taken by train to the Meerut jail. There they waited, first in solitary confinement and then in a communal barrack, for the three months that it took for the prosecution to sift through the vast quantity of captured material and begin what was to become one of the most extended trials in world legal history. It eventually began on June 13, in the specially converted bungalow of the former commander of the allied intervention at Archangel against the Russian Revolution, General Ironside - an irony not lost on these Indian 'Bolsheviks'.¹³⁵

133. ibid.: note by Haig, 20/2/29, & V to S of S, 27/2/29.

134. There were later to be regrets about this lack of discrimination. Not only did it add greatly to the trial's problems, but, in the DIB's words, 'in regard to a number of the minor accused it was always easy to consider that the solemnity and, as it were, dignity of this charge were bordering on the grotesque': NAI, H.Poll, 7/11/1934: note by Williamson, 28/10/33.

135. Interviews with M.G. Desai, Bombay, 6/8/74, & D. Goswami, Calcutta, 18/8/74.

The terms of the charge made it a very simple one to prove - against the communists at least. It was not necessary to prove the committal of overt illegal acts - 'the mere agreement to put in practice the creed of the Communist International and to carry out its programme, ipso facto constitutes an offence ... whether ... the programme has actually been carried out or not'.¹³⁶ Accordingly the Meerut Case might possibly have been completed within the anticipated time if it had been brought against only the communists and if it had been devoted only to the securing of convictions. But the case's propagandist function, which had largely determined its scale, also compounded the complexities inherent in such a big trial. Moreover, the prosecutor, J. Langford James, carried out the propagandist function with excessive enthusiasm, leading the government into deeper water. Langford James, a 'constellation of the first magnitude in the Calcutta legal firmament', was chosen as 'absolutely the best procurable' lawyer for the job.¹³⁷ One of his qualifications - to which even the accused were to testify - was his zeal and wit as an anti-communist propagandist.¹³⁸ Determined to create as ideologically

136. Labour Monthly, Vol.12(1), Jan. 1930, p.27. (The prosecutor's speech is reproduced in Vol.12(1-4) of this journal.)

137. NAI, H.Poll, 109/1934: Petrie to Hallett, 7/10/33; NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1928: note by Haig, 24/12/28.

138. Eg. Hutchinson, op. cit., pp.87-90; Spratt, Blowing Up India, pp.51-2. Hutchinson described Langford James in the following manner: 'Clever, quick-witted, an able lawyer, he possessed a sardonic humour, a generous disposition and an inexhaustible fund of invective. ... He ... thoroughly enjoyed attacking the monster of communism, revelling in the chance to introduce political oratory into a legal case. ... he was in turn amusing, indignant, sarcastic, facetious and malicious'.

effective an event as possible, he did his 'best, when occasion offers, to inform the public that this is a Moscow case and nothing to do with Nationalism', and selected a far larger number of exhibits than were needed for a legally watertight case.¹³⁹ Most of his four-day opening speech was devoted to a blatantly propagandistic attack on the politics of the 'anti-nationalist', 'anti-God', violent 'doctrinaire desperados' in the dock rather than to the question of their guilt or innocence.¹⁴⁰

139. NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929: Langford James to Haig, 2/5/29. Haig had already become very worried about the prosecution's tendency to 'paint the lily': ibid.: Haig to Langford James, 29/4/29.

140. See fn.136. The following selection provides an example of the content and style of his speech:

... to be a Bolshevik of unimpeachable character you require certain definite qualifications to which the ordinary man does not aspire. You do not love your country, you are anti-country, you are anti-God, and you are anti-family ... anti-everything which the ordinary man considers decent. You have ruthlessly to hate those who differ from your views, and when the proper time comes you have as ruthlessly to kill them. And last, but by no means least, ... it is quite essential that you should have no sense of humour .

Langford James, with his eye to his Indian audience, also stressed the Bolsheviks' hostility to the kulaks and Russia's indigenous bourgeoisie, and several times claimed that there was a very close parallel to be drawn between India and pre-Revolutionary Russia. (See, eg., ibid., Vol.12(2), pp.103-5.) Nor was the prospective audience restricted to Indian nationalists. The propaganda was later considered to have had a beneficial effect on the provincial governments which, apart from Bombay, had previously taken a 'somewhat casual view' towards the communist threat. This was especially the case for Bengal (NAI, H.Poll, 7/II/1934: note by Williamson, 28/10/33). To ensure the maximum effect, the Department of Public Information published the speech and supervised and subsidised its distribution to the press agencies: IOL, L/PJ/1978, file 1201/1929: Manchester Guardian article, 9/12/29, & J. Nehru to W. Citrine, 23/6/29.

Langford James' address was a tour de force; and he maintained the performance during the case that, with the aid of his thousands of exhibits, he then proceeded to bring against his 'doctrinaire desperados'. But it opened a Pandora's box for the government. Propaganda invited and legitimised counter-propaganda; and the constant references to Marxist literature led to a demand for unlimited access to the same literature to prepare an adequate defence against the charge as defined and the prosecution's approach to it. The government felt constrained to accede to these tactics and demands, and to the demand for free access to communist defence committees, in order to minimise the force of the charge that the trial was a mockery of justice. The considerable agitation in Britain against the Meerut Case ensured the granting of these concessions.¹⁴¹

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141. See the large quantity of protest correspondence, and the correspondence between the Secretary of State and the Viceroy, in ibid.. The pressure on New Delhi was increased when the Labour government came to power - the Meerut Case was 'not popular with supporters of Government here', Benn telegraphed to Irwin in August, 'and the longer it lasts the harder will my position become' (ibid.: Benn to Irwin, 13/8/29). However the Labour government, already in a shaky position, could not afford the political controversy of a show-down with New Delhi. Once it realised that New Delhi was committed to the case it soon acquiesced and, as with the Conservative government, the Government of India continued to set the terms. Secretary of State Benn was, by the end of 1929, working with Walter Citrine, the powerful, anti-communist general secretary of the TUC, to neutralise the grass-roots trade union campaign against the Labour government's involvement in the Meerut Case (ibid.: 10 memo, 2/2/30, & Citrine to Benn, 17/2/30). In fact Irwin had 'nothing but thanks to the Labour Party for the way in which they have supported us' during the case and Civil Disobedience. 'They really have played up very well, and have been ready to support us in whatever we thought necessary' (IOL, Halifax Papers, Vol.27: Irwin to his father, 11/8/30). (For an interpretation of Labour policy somewhat contrary to mine, see P.S. Gupta, Imperialism and the British Labour Movement, 1914-1964, (London, 1975), pp.203-8.)

Thus the propagandist nature of the case allowed the communists important opportunities to conduct a widely publicised propaganda campaign from the dock, to develop their theoretical skills and organisational plans, and to retain national and international political contracts.¹⁴² It also established a dynamic which drove the trial relentlessly onwards, far beyond the political situation it had been carefully tailored to meet and almost out of the government's control. This greatly compounded its embarrassment.

The trial became a deadening 'trial of endurance ... while the whole of outside India was in a blaze'.¹⁴³ Even the initially aggressive Sessions Court judge, R.L. Yorke, after 'months of tapping the evidence down on his portable typewriter, ... lost his aggressive manner and seemed resigned to spend the rest of his life presiding over this interminable trial'.¹⁴⁴ The proceedings, Spratt recalls, 'became such a bore that not one of the accused ... tried to follow them. We read, talked or slept in the dock'.¹⁴⁵ Thus, when their lively prosecutor died

142. The launching of the case, and the long Public Safety Bill debate which preceded and followed the arrests, ensured a great deal of reasonably sympathetic press coverage for Indian communism. The defence statements were, in the words of the IB, 'little more than communist theses supplemented by political harangues' (IB, Communism, (1933), p.179). They allowed the nationalist press, for the first time, to report Marxist doctrine without the risk of prosecution. Abridged versions of the statements were published in booklet form in both Britain and India. Inside the jail the communists had, for the first time, the extensive literature and the leisure to develop their Marxist theory. They came to regard the jail as the 'Meerut Communist University' (interviews with several of the ex-prisoners). Moreover they were able to conduct, under the cover of their defence committee, 'what amounted to a party office' in conjunction with their outside comrades: Spratt, Blowing up India, p.53.

in 1930 and was replaced by a dull lawyer called Kemp, even the victims of Langford James' invective felt a genuine sense of loss.¹⁴⁶ The trial was to claim two more lives before its completion - K.L. Ghosh, the Bengali moderate trade unionist, and D.R. Thengdi, the ageing one-time Bombay WPP president. The proceedings finally came to an end in August 1932, three and a half years after the arrests. The court was adjourned while Yorke prepared his judgement. This took another five months and was finally presented as a massive, 700 foolscap page document.¹⁴⁷

The sentences were passed in January 1933. All but four of the accused were convicted. The sentences were, as the Government of India later acknowledged, 'exceptionally drastic'.¹⁴⁸ They ranged from transportation for life to three

143. Hutchinson, op. cit., p.117.

144. ibid., p.116. That there was no professional stenographer added greatly to the length of the trial.

145. Spratt, Blowing Up India, p.52; see also H.N. Brailsford, Subject India, (London, 1943), pp.211-13, for a critical, eye-witness account of the conduct of the trial.

146. Eg. loc. cit.; Hutchinson, op. cit., p.116, who commented that 'His death was regretted on both sides. ... the trial would have been a much brighter affair had Mr. James lived. ... We had lost a great entertainer and had gained nothing in return'.

147. Its excessive length also meant that it was useless as a propaganda document. The DIB commented: 'I wish ... [he] had devoted two more weeks ... in preparing a summary of his judgement' to make it accessible to the public: NAI, H.Poll, 7/11/1934: note by Williamson, 28/10/33.

148. NAI, H.Poll, 17/19/1933: G of I to S of S, 2/10/33. London was alarmed. Hoare, the third Secretary of State to oversee the Meerut Case, informed its second Viceroy that the British agitation against the sentences was 'by no means confined to the Daily Herald and the labour press'; there was 'a general feeling, even among Conservatives, that the sentences are too heavy': IOL, Templewood Papers, Vol. 3: Hoare to Willingdon, 28/4/33.

years rigorous imprisonment.¹⁴⁹ It was a last-ditch attempt to inflate the seriousness of the 'conspiracy'.

But the intense public agitation against the sentences 'somewhat influenced' the Allahabad High Court which heard the appeals.¹⁵⁰ Chief Justice Sulaiman's judgement, while confirming the existence of the original 'conspiracy', sharply criticised the conduct and outcome of the trial, acquitted nine, immediately released five and also granted spectacular reductions in the sentences of all the remaining 13.¹⁵¹ With this final outcome New Delhi's embarrassment seemed complete.¹⁵² The price of the conspiracy case alternative now seemed to have been almost unacceptably high.

* * *

Yet, even so, Haig's decision to opt for a conspiracy case appears, in retrospect, as an astute one. In the politically charged atmosphere of late 1928 and early 1929 the choice of an appropriate mode of repression was a very difficult one, and the political costs of miscalculation were potentially high. Despite the advantages that New Delhi's

149. MCCC, Judgement.

150. NAI, H.Poll, 17/19/1933: note by Hallett, 20/9/33.

151. MCCC, Appeals Judgement. The heaviest sentence, Ahmad's transportation for life, was reduced to three years Rigorous Imprisonment and most of the communists were released within the next year.

152. See the correspondence and HD notes in NAI, H.Poll, 17/19/1933. London informed New Delhi that, in its opinion, while the original decision may have been sound, and even though the detention of the communists during CD had been very advantageous, 'the length of the trial and its ultimate result have aroused so much resentment against the Government and the Law as to obscure the major issues which the prosecution was intended to make plain': ibid.: IO to G of I, 17/8/1933.

approach allowed the communists, Haig's rejection of the Bombay and India Office alternatives was essentially vindicated.

As we will see in the following section, the arrests did strike a very serious blow to the Bombay communists' trade union and political organisations at a critical juncture. The mill-owners could feel satisfied with the outcome of the state's intervention, if not with the time it had taken. And the back of the radical working class movement was broken before the onset of Civil Disobedience, and the core of the communist leadership detained for its duration.

While securing these results the Meerut Case did not - as the alternatives urged by both Bombay and London may well have done - force a common-front between the communists and Congress radicals, or a Congress reaction equivalent to the Rowlatt satyagraha against the repressive enactments of 1919.¹⁵³ The Congress protest against the Meerut arrests was fairly vociferous, and several prominent Congressmen interested themselves in the case during 1929. This caused New Delhi some concern. Nevertheless, the nationalist reaction did not go far beyond an ambiguous, and essentially ritualistic,

153. D.A. Low stresses this point in his 'Civil Martial Law', in Low (Ed.), Congress and the Raj, p.166. The Bombay government noted with some satisfaction that the immediate effect of the arrests on the provincial Congress organisation was to dampen the activity of the radicals: NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: G of Bom. to G of I, 30/4/29.

verbal attack on the Raj's repressiveness;¹⁵⁴ and, although the British agitation against the trial and the sentences had a definite impact, New Delhi could draw some comfort from the fact that the protest in India was only half-hearted.¹⁵⁵ In fact the Gandhian leadership could hardly have been dismayed by the removal of the militant labour leaders and the collapse of the organised working class prior to the launching of its mass agitation;¹⁵⁶ nor by the selectiveness of the method chosen by the Raj - the Congress radicals were not given 'a good rallying-cry' for an early start to the movement.

Finally, although the Allahabad High Court's criticisms, and its early release of the prisoners, greatly embarrassed the government, its judgement did preserve the desired - if now tarnished and very delayed - legal finding against communist activity. It was on this basis that the CPI was banned in July 1934.¹⁵⁷ Again, there was no serious Congress protest.¹⁵⁸

154. Resolutions of protest were passed at the different levels of the organisation; leaders such as the two Nehrus and Kitchlew (and the moderate, Sapru), participated in various aspects of the defence; and the AICC set up a defence committee and fund. But apart from escalating its obstructionist tactics against the Public Safety Bill, the Congress protest was essentially restricted to the passing of resolutions, the contents of which were very similar to the earlier arguments against the P.S. Bill.

155. NAI. H.Poll, 17/19/1933: G of I to S of S, 2/10/1933.

156. Sumit Sarkar has argued recently that Gandhi may well have delayed Civil Disobedience until after the working class movement had been broken - see his 'The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism: Civil Disobedience and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact (1930-1931)', in Indian Historical Review, Vol.3(1), Jul. 1976, p.143.

157. IOL, L/PO/43: V to S of S, 30/6/34.

158. Eg., NAI, H.Poll, 18/7/1934: Bombay FR2 Jul.. There was even less reason to protest this time, for the anti-communist repression coincided with the end of a Congress campaign rather than preceding it, as before.

Thus the Meerut Case served all of its several intended functions; there were more effective conspirators in the Home Department than in the early CPI. The problems it created in the process were sufficiently serious for the DIB, echoing a chastened Home Department as a whole, to state emphatically that 'No one would look at a big conspiracy case after the Meerut experience'.¹⁵⁹ But these problems arose not so much from the original conception as from misjudgements in its execution. And, in any case, no further communist conspiracy cases would be necessary.

* * *

This study of the decision-making behind the Meerut Case has revealed the close and complementary character of the relationship, during a period of political crisis, between the colonial state and the Indian 'business and other communities'.

When the normally resilient mechanisms of control of working class politics were ruptured in Bombay city - that sensitive 'nodal point' of Indian politics - and the communists skillfully grasped the opportunity, the Raj felt compelled to intervene. But, compared to the other colonial powers in Asia, the mode of the intervention was remarkably legalistic and the extent limited; and, although heavy in the Indian context, it was substantially less than the total repression desired. As a result the communists and their working class movement were allowed very significant opportunities, both before and after the arrests.

159. NAI, H.Poll, 32/III/1933: note by Williamson, 20/1/33.

Several factors contributed to the Raj's legalism and restraint. An important one was the ideology - deeply influenced by the British tradition of constitutional politics - of the decision-makers. Another was the controlling influence of parliamentary democracy and trade unionism in Britain. Nevertheless, given India's finely balanced role within Britain's global interests, the tension determining the logic of the Raj's repression arose primarily from the powerful and conflicting demands of the differentiated world of Indian politics. The need for India to be financially self-supporting, in order to fulfill its key balancing role in the British imperial system, impelled the Raj to attempt a discriminatingly cooptive, rather than an expensively coercive, policy towards Indian opposition. Thus the immediate imperative behind the Raj's approach to the question of the repression of the communist movement was its need to come to terms with the conservative, 'bourgeois' opposition to current British colonial policy.

The significant degree of political space allowed to the communists by the mode of repression which emerged from these conflicting forces was, therefore, a fairly direct reflection of the strength of the communists' and the radical unions' indigenous opposition. The Raj was seeking through the Meerut Case to do, in a politically acceptable form, no more than was necessary to tip the balance sufficiently in this opposition's favour for it to complete what had been begun. In studying the background of the Meerut Case we have been able to identify the main outlines of this indigenous structure of opposition as well as its relationship to the colonial state.

Following the Meerut arrests the decapitated communist working class movement had then to cope with this now reinforced structure. We next look at this encounter.

2. IN THE WAKE OF THE MEERUT CASE ARRESTS

The new leadership of the GKU inherited an impressive organisation and a large reserve fund. But it also inherited a daunting situation and a union which remained imperfectly consolidated and only very incompletely extended to the non-Maratha sectors of the workforce. The Meerut arrests were to prove just how vulnerable the GKU remained and, in particular, how crucial was the integrative role played by its original leadership; the decapitation of the union proved to be, in the face of an intensification of the oppositions it had successfully met before the arrests, the prelude to its disintegration. The defeat of the GKU was, in turn, the prelude to the defeat of the GIPRU. Concurrently with these processes in the industrial sphere, the communists were also squeezed out from the position of influence the WPP had established in the city's nationalist politics.

The Destruction of the GKU

While the Government of India had been preparing its conspiracy case the millowners had been replenishing their stocks.¹⁶⁰

160. The delineation of the BMOA-GKU relationship, and the changes within the GKU, in this section is based primarily on Newman, op. cit., Chapter IX (B & C).

For this reason, and presumably because they were more assured of the state's industrial policy following its initial intervention, they were more prepared than before to begin their challenge to the GKU. Even before the arrests one mill group - Wadia - had begun a confrontation with the union. Wadia's challenge continued after the arrests. Then, several weeks after the Meerut Case arrests, the Strike Enquiry Committee handed down its report and the remaining constraint on the millowners was removed. Within a month of March 20 a majority of the BMOA, preferring confrontation to continued negotiations with the union over the Enquiry Committee's findings, was supporting Wadia's intransigence. The millowners' goal was now, Haig observed, 'to break the Girni Kamgar Union'.¹⁶¹

The union was faced with a choice between piecemeal defeat and the risks of a general strike. Though initially conciliatory,¹⁶² the new leadership finally chose the second course. 'It is necessary that all must leap into the fight at once and get it finally decided', Kranti declared on April 21, after all possible avenues of compromise with the BMOA had been exhausted.¹⁶³

The leadership passed the first test. The GKU's rank and file responded 'in a perfectly peaceful way and with

161. NAI, H.Poll, 303/1929: note by Haig, 7/6/29.

162. The new GKU leadership even muted the ideology of class struggle. Eg. Kranti declared that capital and labour were equal partners, 'like contractors', and were therefore entitled to mutual respect. The propaganda for an inevitable general strike was also dropped temporarily: Newman, op. cit., p.333.

163. Quoted in ibid., p.331.

remarkable unanimity', the nonplussed Bombay authorities reported.¹⁶⁴ Some 80 percent of the workforce struck immediately, on April 26. By May 1, 64 mills had closed and 109,200 were on strike.¹⁶⁵ Strike meetings regularly numbered between 15 and 20 thousand.¹⁶⁶

But this impressive demonstration of union solidarity and leadership authority masked the vulnerabilities that had been revealed during the conflicts of early 1929. As we noted in Chapter 3, the causes of the most serious of the centrifugal tendencies threatening the integrity of the GKU were the continued existence of definite community distinctions within the workforce, the incomplete integration of the union's base with its central organisation, the weakness of the communists' political organisation, and the almost complete failure to establish a political cadre system within the workforce.

The consequences of the latter two problems were made immediately apparent by the leadership succession which followed the Meerut arrests. Because the original leadership had not established an underground organisation or an extensive program of working and middle class cadre recruitment and training, there were almost no leaders equivalent to their predecessors among the successors. Most of the working class replacements who moved up into the leadership had had previous experience in the managing committee, but very few had been given training

164. NAI, H.Poll, 303/1929: note by Haig, 7/6/29. Strikes were traditionally spread by groups of strikers stoning the working mills and calling on the hands to stop work. This response was, therefore, a remarkable event.

165. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the GKU, 1928-33; Newman, op. cit., p.331.

166. NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Apr.

specifically for the positions they now held, and none were WPP or CPI members.¹⁶⁷ Of the middle class replacements only one - Lalji Pendse - had previously had significant experience in union work. The others were S.V. Deshpande, B.T. Ranadive and Dange's former 'private secretary', V.H. Joshi. Joshi, though marginally involved in the WPP, had not participated significantly in the union's affairs. The other two - who were to become the leading communists in Bombay - had only just joined the WPP before the Meerut arrests. They had come almost directly from middle class intelligentsia and Congress backgrounds. Deshpande was a school teacher by profession, and Ranadive had recently won a Gold Medal for his MA in Economics at the University of Bombay. Deshpande had been associated with the BPC's loose socialist faction since 1924¹⁶⁸ but had not involved himself in the WPP after it was formed, and Ranadive had been an active member of the Congress Youth League well into 1928.¹⁶⁹ The Meerut communist group was later to describe them as

167. Kandalkar, the former jobber and leader of the GKU's volunteer force, replaced Alve as president; Pendse and two weavers took over Bradley's, Nimbkar's and Jhabvala's positions as vice-presidents; another worker activist, Tavde, and Deshpande took Dange's and Joglekar's places as secretary and assistant secretary respectively; V.H. Joshi became treasurer, previously held jointly by Ghatge and Alve; and Ranadive became a centre secretary: Newman, *op. cit.*, p.328-9.

168. BSAI, 1924, Para. 454.

169. MCG: 1 & 2.

... petty bourgeois enthusiasts, whose knowledge of the movement was derived mainly from acquaintance with the period of 1928 - a time of almost unbroken, easy and striking, but somewhat superficial success. ... [they were] ill-fitted to face a situation of great difficulty and determined attack and repression from the other side. 170

In particular, both they and their working class colleagues had been ill-prepared by the preceding leadership for the tasks of overcoming the existing tensions within the GKU and of meeting renewed attacks by the GKU-WPP's enemies. To better understand the terms and dimensions of their predicament we will first look again, in more detail than in Chapter 3, at the opposition to the GKU-WPP which developed from early 1929, and then ^{at} the associated internal problems of the union.

The non-Brahman campaign that was begun in January 1929 was organised by B.V. Jadhav, the conservative, loyalist leader of the political wing of the Presidency's non-Brahman movement, and his influential Maratha merchant colleague, G.R. Shinde.¹⁷¹ It was believed that the campaign was funded partly by the BMOA and the Maratha merchant community.¹⁷² The young non-Brahman radical, Dinkarrao Javalkar, became the movement's leading publicist. The campaign aimed at the capture of the GKU, not at its destruction. The non-Brahmans sought first to discredit the communists in the eyes of the workers by characterising them as elitist, Brahman outsiders, interested only in exploiting the millhands for ulterior political purposes. They hoped then to displace the communists and convert the GKU

170. MCG:2.

171. Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', p.755; NAI H.Poll, 10/XIV/1929: Jadhav to Hotson, 26/4/29.

172. Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', p.755.

into a non-Brahman organisation. The campaign was conducted at several levels: Jadhav personally approached each of the Maratha office-bearers; Shinde drew upon his community linkages among the millhands, particularly in the DeLisle Road area; and Javalkar conducted a public campaign, both through Jadhav's weekly, Kaivari, to which he had recently been appointed editor, and then at public meetings in the mill area. The ideological stance adopted by Kaivari incorporated much of the militance that had become popular among the Maratha millhands during and since the general strike. The attack was launched against the Brahman communists but not against communism per se: 'The Red Flag Union must endure and grow', Kaivari declared, but with non-Brahmans replacing its 'elitist', Brahman, communist leadership; 'if anyone can be a true communist it is a non-Brahman!'.¹⁷³

The Muslim community leaders, likewise, felt threatened by the development of the GKU's class organisation and its potential appeal for their Muslim working class base - particularly after the WPP's Shaukat Usmani began working in Madanpura. But, unlike the non-Brahmans, the Khilafatists sought the destruction of the union: 'I fought them tooth and nail' Shaukat Ali later declared.¹⁷⁴ The issue was particularly sensitive for the Khilafatists at this time, for they had to

173. Quoted in loc. cit... As Omvedt has stressed, the non-Brahmans' use of a radical ideology reflected the popularity of the new ideology of class struggle among the Maratha millhands. It is possible that Jadhav chose the radical Javalkar as his main publicist for this reason.

174. Newman, op. cit., p.326.

secure their mass base not only against the communists, but also against the possibility of a Congress mass campaign in 1930. Thus the violent clashes between the millhands and the Pathan blacklegs and money-lenders which erupted in the mill area in early February were - despite the fact that the Muslim workers shared the anti-Pathan sentiment - timely for the Muslim communalists.¹⁷⁵ The riots were not essentially communally motivated; but they developed communal overtones and they lent themselves to communal exploitation. They provided the Khilafatists with an opportunity for attempting to fan the community consciousness of the Muslim millhands by characterising the GKU and the WPP as Hindu communalist organisations opposed to the specific interests of the Muslim workers.¹⁷⁶

The non-Brhman campaign did not have a noticeable effect on the great majority of the Maratha workers. The communists' accessibility to the union's rank-and-file, and their manifest achievements as trade union leaders, more than

175. For the background and course of the millhand-Pathan riots see Chapter 4. For the Khilafatists wider politics in Bombay city at this time see R. Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj', ps. 95 & 97. (It should be stressed again that the Muslim millhands shared the antagonism towards the Pathans.)

176. Newman, *op. cit.*, ps. 324 & 326; BREC, *Report*, p.16; MCCC, p.480: Ghate to Ahmad, 14/2/29. Hindu Mahasabhite Gujarati merchants also took the opportunity to attempt to fan communalism, though without apparent results in the mill area; there appears to have been no coordination between the Maratha and Gujarati Hindu merchant communities of their common antagonism towards the communists.

neutralised the possibility of a serious millhand reaction against their bureaucratic and residual elitist tendencies.¹⁷⁷ But the campaign did meet with two limited responses. These indicated the potential hazards of renewed non-Brahmanism, particularly if the disaffected jobbers were able to regain sufficient freedom of manoeuvre to coordinate their efforts with those of the Maratha community leaders. The first was the wholesale defection of the GKU's DeLisle Road centre, where the influence of Shinde's network was strongest. This was one indication that community forms of organisation and consciousness had by no means been completely liquidated even among the Maratha workers.¹⁷⁸ The second was the partial response within the managing committee noted in Chapter 4 - the defection of Kasle (whose base was in DeLisle Road) and the temporising of Alve and others. This reflected both the friction between the middle and working class members of the WPP which had become apparent from late 1928, and the continuing - if weakening - hold of the old community loyalties on the working class militants.

The threatened rifts were successfully contained before they became serious. But in the GKU leadership succession after March 20, Kasle's followers were able to gain more influence in the managing committee.¹⁷⁹ Moreover, the

177. Newman, *op. cit.*, p.322. (The evidence does not support Omvedt's contention that 'an emerging split' between a bureaucratised communist leadership and the mill committee base had begun before the Meerut arrests (see her 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', p.755). Despite the defections, the most striking feature of the encounter was the resilience of the leadership-base bond in the face of a concerted attack.)

178. Another feature was the rapidity with which the superstitious 'feudal' belief that the Pathans were kidnapping children gained wide currency among the millhands.

middle class replacements had had virtually no experience in working responsively with mass organisations, such as the mill committees, and had not passed through the (incomplete) process of 'proletarianisation' undergone by their communist predecessors in the previous 18 months. Because of this they were potentially much more vulnerable - at both the mass and the leadership levels - to the non-Brahman charge of elitist manipulation and exploitation of the workers. The danger remained, despite the impressive start to the strike.

The results of the February anti-Pathan riots were more serious, for they clearly revealed, and further aggravated, the GKU's biggest problem - its community limits. Despite the communalists' efforts to exploit the riots the GKU leaders were able, by controlling their largely Maratha rank-and-file, to prevent serious clashes between Muslim and Hindu workers. The worst of the rioting occurred outside the mill area.¹⁸⁰ But the Ali brothers' efforts to promote community consciousness among the Muslim millhands, and to neutralise the WPP's program in Madanpura, were largely successful.¹⁸¹ This was clearly

179. Newman, op. cit., p.343.

180. From February 6, after the GKU leadership's successful pacification of its rank-and-file, the situation calmed down in the mill area. From that point the rioting moved southwards from the mill area. Most of the killings and injuries (totalling 149 and 739 respectively) occurred in Kalbadevi and Pydhonie. (BCP, Police Report on the Bombay Riots, p.41; BREC, Report, p.5).

181. 'I succeeded', Shaukat Ali could say of the outcome of his 'tooth and nail' struggle against the GKU in Madanpura. (Newman, op. cit., p.326). After the riots experience the WPP leaders much more fully recognised the vulnerability of the party and the GKU to the charge of being 'Hindu' organisations. The vulnerability arose largely from the small (less than 10 percent) minority of Muslims on the GKU's managing committee and in the WPP (where there was only one Muslim - Usmani) and the complete absence of

demonstrated when the 1929 general strike was called; the majority of the Muslim workers refused to join a strike called in defence of what remained an essentially Maratha union - particularly when they had less access to credit and alternative sources of income. Similar factors underlay the Untouchables' weak response to the strike call¹⁸². Thus, although the Maratha 'class community' entered the 1929 strike with a far higher level of internal solidarity than it had in the 1928 strike, the inter-communal solidarity of the workforce as a whole was much less.

The February riots also revealed organisational weaknesses in the GKU¹⁸³ and, thus, highlighted the more general problem of integrating the sometimes recalcitrant 'union of the

181. (Cont'd)

Muslims from the GKU's executive. The WPP executive was also critical of the conduct during the strike of several of the leaders and activists, and of the content of some of the leaflets: both the activity and the leaflets had tended to betray a 'Hindu bias': MCCC, p.1344: WPP EC meeting, 17/2/29; MCCC, p.1170: Adhikari's notes of the same meeting.

182. See fn. 62, Chapter 3, for the special reasons for the Muslims' and Untouchables' more limited access to alternative incomes and credit. All communities had low reserves because of the financial burden of the recent general strike. The jobbers' opposition to this strike probably further restricted available credit. Moreover, the Marathas' continued discrimination - in an increasingly competitive job market - against the Untouchables, contributed to the weakness of the latter community's response to the GKU's strike. The Marathi 'Girni Workers' Poem' is evidence not only of ideological transition within that community, but also of the continuing discriminatory community consciousness - against which the poem was directed - among the Marathas.

183. During the riots the leadership-mill committee connections 'did not function properly': MCCC, p.1344: WPP EC meeting, 17/2/29.

militant' workers' with the central leadership. This problem fell into two categories. The first was the essentially transitional problem of coordinating such a large and rapidly formed mass organisation with its still small and over-taxed central leadership. This demanded a high level of mill committee representation on the managing committee and large-scale training of the ordinary millhands in leadership skills. By the time of the Meerut arrests the communists' initial 'elitist' tendencies to under-estimate the crucial importance of this task had been largely (though not completely) eroded by the assertive character of the mill committees and the experience of the February riots. The second category was the definite alienation of a small number of the Maratha mills from the central leadership. The alienation arose from either the leadership's inability to secure their particular demands or its refusal to do so because of the perceived risk of premature and damaging confrontation with the millowners.¹⁸⁴ The resulting attitude of these millhands.

184. Several of the Sassoon mills, for example, demonstrated the former problem. The Sassoon weavers had initiated the 1928 strike with their protests against the first attempts to introduce rationalisation schemes. Because the strike settlement accepted the pre-strike Sassoon rationalisations, the workers in these mills refused to join the GKU. Given the Sassoon weavers' 'vanguard' role in the strike, this was a protest of some significance. The GKU leadership's concern about the 'undisciplined', confrontationist activity of some of the mill committees was vindicated in the case of the Wadia mills, for it was precisely this issue which Wadia used to begin a confrontation with the GKU (see Newman, *op. cit.*, pp.333-6). This is an issue which Omvedt fails to recognise in her critique of the communists' 'bureaucratism' (see Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists', pp.754-7). The problem, at this stage, was primarily situational.

towards the leadership underlined the conditional character of the GKU's overall support - it was dependent, in the longer term at least, on the leadership's continued success as representatives of their immediate interests. Both levels of the problem reemerged in the strike's early stages: some of the alienated mills refused from the outset to join it; and, during its course, the mill committees tended to take from the new, less experienced leadership, more authority for themselves than they had from the old managing committee.

In addition to the millowners' and the communalists' direct attacks, the GKU had also to face less overt forms of opposition from a number of quarters: from the jobbers, the BTLU, Bombay's middle class, and the BPCC. The jobbers, increasingly neutralised by the mill committees, had begun to resist the GKU before the strike. They were therefore waiting for opportunities to subvert it and regain their traditional power over the workforce. By the time of the 1929 strike the BTLU's former preparedness to work with the militants had disappeared. Apart from the longstanding political differences between the two forms of trade unionism, the BTLU's eclipse by the GKU, the fact that the moderates' remaining base - Muslim Madanpura - opposed both the GKU and the strike, ensured the BTLU's antagonism. The middle class's opposition, which was much stronger than in 1928, was largely economic in origin. Shareholders, large and small, had a direct stake in the defeat of the strike and the permanent subordination of the millhands.¹⁸⁵ Further, the middle class's worsening unemployment situation was

185. See fn.126 above.

linked to the textile industry's decline and was, thus, aggravated by this second general strike. Finally, the social disruption, and the perceived potential for large-scale violence attendant upon the rise of the GKU, also contributed to the middle class's growing hostility to the union.¹⁸⁶

The BPCC's opposition to the 1929 strike in particular, and to radical industrial politics in general, was much more pronounced than in 1928; the limited and ambiguous defence of the Meerut prisoners expressed by the Congress at the national level camouflaged the BPCC conservatives' mounting campaign against the communists and the GKU at the local level. The terms of this campaign were stated succinctly in mid-July, during the general strike, by the BPCC's powerful, merchant-aligned, organisation man, Bhulabhai Desai. During an extended BPCC debate on industrial politics Desai argued forcefully that the Congress should

... carry on a vigorous propaganda to win the workers to their side and save them from the influence of the communists. ... they should be brought round to the view that the struggle between the Government and the people was far more important than that between labour and capital. 187

186. NAI, H.Poll, 18/XVI/1928: G of Bom to G of I, 6/2/29 & 14/3/29.

187. NAI, H.Poll, 257/I/1930: record of BPCC meetings on 3 & 4/7/29. Several BPCC meetings were devoted to the issue during May-July: BSAI, 1929, paras. 969, 1094(4) & 1126; NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2, Jun. & FR1 Jul. To the ends outlined by Bhulabhai Desai, the BPCC resolved to launch a campaign to increase its influence over labour at the expense of the GKU militants: the BPCC's Labour Sub-committee, previously the preserve of the left, was to be resuscitated and provided with an allocation of Rs125 per month; attempts were to be made to establish a 'Congress Textile Labour Union'; and a permanent Congress office, and eventually a 'Congress House' costing Rs.50,000, were to be set up in the mill area.

There were a number of factors behind this challenge. It partly reflected the increasing opposition of Bombay's middle class and merchant and industrial capital to the existence of a strong communist-led militant union in the city. The Calcutta Congress session's foreshadowing of another challenge to the Raj provided another, directly political impetus - the need to secure the dominance of the Gandhian Congress over the politics of Bombay city before another mass campaign was begun.¹⁸⁸ This particular concern, which became more pronounced after the Lahore Congress in December 1929, required the isolation of the communists within the BPC, the pacification of the working class and, hopefully, its controlled mobilisation in the Congress's

188. This was indirectly and in part an outcome of the National Congress's increasing - if still essentially nominal - wider commitment to mobilising labour in the Congress cause. For example, the Nehru Report had included a 'Labour Charter', the Calcutta Congress session directed volunteers to take up the cause of 'the city labourers', and early in 1929 the AICC circularised all District Committees to involve themselves in labour organisations. The AICC also created a 'Labour Research Department' under a full-time officer at this time. (*ibid.*: DIB's abstract on 'Congress and Labour since 1929', dated Oct. 1929.) These decisions and activities were taken note of by the BPC in its 1929 campaign (*loc. cit.*; NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2, Jun.), though it was the textile strike which provided the immediate impetus (see, eg., the BPC's F Ward District Committee's anxious report about the difficulty of implementing the AICC directive because of the increasing anti-Congress sentiment among the millhands of its district during the general strike: AICC Papers, P11-1931: Hon. Sec., F Ward DCC to Gen. Secs., AICC and BPC, 25/6/29 (kindly provided by Sandy Gordon)).

cause.¹⁸⁹ Finally, the communists' increasingly self-confident attacks on the revolutionary credentials of the 'bourgeois' Congress leadership - most clearly expressed at the Calcutta AIWPP conference in December 1928 and, in Bombay, during the Municipal elections campaign - provided further motivation for a conservative attack on the Marxists and their mass base.

The textile strike ended soon after the BPCCC had drawn up its plans to counter the communists in the trade union sphere, and so this element of its strategy temporarily lost its urgency.¹⁹⁰ It was not to be actively implemented until 1930, in the context of the launching of Civil Disobedience. However the isolation of the communists within the BPCCC was successfully completed during 1929. This process was facilitated by the contemporaneous erosion of the support the communists had developed among the BPCCC's radical Maharashtrian intelligentsia during the 1920s. During these years this support had enabled the communists to mobilise a significant voting bloc against the conservatism of the 'industrialist' and 'merchant' factions. This began to change from early 1929. After the Calcutta

189. That the BPCCC was as interested in exercising social control over the millhands as in mobilising them for Civil Disobedience became more apparent after the movement had begun. For example the DIB found in August 1930 that the BPCCC was seeking to 'keep the workers quiet ... as they had done successfully at Ahmedabad', so as to minimise the potential for violence. To this extent Petrie and the Bombay authorities were happy with the Congress's labour ambitions. (NAI, H.Poll, 504/1930: Petrie to Emerson, 20/8/30). (See also the section below on the Congress and labour in 1930.)

190. That the BPCCC's campaign was temporarily shelved after the collapse of the strike further suggests the importance of the social control motivation.

National Congress the force of the WPP's claim to being the only available radical nationalist leadership was reduced by the prospect of another Gandhian-led mass campaign; the Congress leadership was somewhat rehabilitated in the eyes of the non-communist radicals.¹⁹¹ The process of isolation was then greatly accelerated by the Meerut arrests; for the Meerut prisoners' successors in the BPCC - Deshpande and Ranadive - did not inherit the personal influence exercised, or the official positions held, by the old WPP faction.¹⁹² Deshpande and Ranadive, who remained within the BPCC during 1929 and sought to increase their influence there, found it impossible to use that organisation or the Youth League as effective platforms from which to rally political and financial support for the strike.¹⁹³

Finally, the 1929 strike had also to face the active state intervention that had been absent during the 1928 strike.

191. See, eg., New Delhi's assessment of the overall Indian situation on the eve of Civil Disobedience, in NAI, H.Poll, 98/1930: G of I to all LGs, 30/1/30; also R. Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj', pp.94-5.
192. This could be seen, for example, in the fact that a number of the non-communist former WPP members and sympathisers, such as J.B. Patel and K.B. Sanzgiri, participated in the conservative-initiated BPCC discussions during the strike on the Congress labour program. The Meerut arrests did not lead to a process of radicalisation around the remaining communist nucleus in the BPCC: see fn.153 above.
193. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the GKU, 1928-33; NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Jul.; BCP, 1036/B/II/1935: note on Bombay communist groups, 1929-33.

The 1929 strike took place during the transitional stage in the development of the Raj's industrial policy: from January 1929 New Delhi was prepared to allow much more open intervention; but, during 1929, residual constraints continued to deter the Raj from a policy of total repression. During the remainder of that year, before Civil Disobedience had definitely been decided upon, the government was still concerned not unnecessarily to 'disturb the rather delicate poise of the political situation' in its interventions against communism and militant trade unionism.¹⁹⁴ For this reason, repression in this phase was not as severe as Bombay desired or as it would later become. Nevertheless, the Bombay government - now with much stronger backing from New Delhi - was more able to act against strikes than before. The passage of the anti-intimidation legislation during the 1929 strike demonstrated this shift.¹⁹⁵ The government also implemented a policy of 'judicious arrest and prosecution' of individual leaders and the police took increasingly open action against the strike. On May Day, for example, the police prevented a GKU 'monster procession' on the grounds that it would be prejudicial to public order.¹⁹⁶ On July 12 a police order was passed which

194. NAI, H.Poll, 304/1929: Irwin to Benn, 13/11/29. Irwin was referring to a decision not to re-invoke the Public Safety Ordinance at that time. Earlier, in June, the HD had decided, for similar reasons, not to add Pendse and Kulkarni to the Meerut Case. It was decided that because 'the delicate situation at Bombay made it undesirable to take action which might provoke trouble', these two should not be included, despite the adequacy of the evidence against them that had come to light: NAI, H.Poll, 10/IV/1929: minutes of HD meeting, 6/6/29.

195. As it eventuated, the legislation could not be passed until early August, after the back of the strike had been broken. For this reason its effect on this strike would have been limited to the moral support for the millowners provided by the government's decision to proceed with the legislation.

prohibited the holding of any meeting in the labour area. The order was to remain in force until the end of the year. Deshpande and Ranadive were arrested on the same day for defying the order and were sentenced to a month's imprisonment. More than 60 GKU volunteers were arrested during July-August for this and other offences.¹⁹⁷ Subsequently, in November, 1929, Ranadive was sentenced to a year's rigorous imprisonment for a militant speech.¹⁹⁸

Thus the overall opposition faced by the 1929 strike was both more extensive and more intensive than that directed against the 1928 strike. This situation also precluded the possibility of the political and communal common-fronts that had sustained the preceding strike; in 1929 the GKU would need all of its recently established internal unity and resources to counter the effects of its isolation. Its vulnerability was increased by the fact that not only did the many different elements of this wide opposition coincide - to a large degree they were also coordinated.¹⁹⁹

196. NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FRI May.

197. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the GKU, 1928-33; NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FRI & 2 Jul. and Aug.

198. BCP, 1036/B/II/1935: note on Bombay communist groups, 1929-33.

199. We have already noted a number of instances of this coordination: eg., the overarching support of the state for the business and communal interests; the merchant and mill-owner financing of the non-Brahman campaign; the moderates' participation in the July 21 meeting of business organisations with the Governor. There were also other instances: eg., the committee of enquiry into the causes of the February communal riots was a politically motivated effort to blame the communists - despite all the evidence of their efforts to pacify the situation - while ignoring the active role of the communalists (Newman, *op. cit.*, pp.324-5, incl. fn.84); after the strike had begun the millowners deliberately fanned communal tension by employing Muslim and Untouchable strike-breakers for this purpose (*ibid.*, p.340); and the industrialists and the merchants were able to overcome their wider differences to coordinate effectively on this issue: see the evidence of the BMOA representative in RCLI, I(2), p.307.

Just as the old leadership may have overcome the Party and union problems it had belatedly recognised had it had more time, the new leadership might have begun to come to grips with these continuing problems had the assault come later. This is suggested by the fact that even in mid-June, nearly two months after the beginning of the strike, the union was still making a good showing, despite the difficulties of the situation; at that point the government remained worried about the GKU's 'excellent organisation', the leadership's 'very strong hold over the millhands', and the continuing popularity of the ideology of class struggle among the strikers.²⁰⁰

But by this point these strengths were beginning to be outweighed by the union's less visible weaknesses: the hairline fissures that had flawed the solidarity of the GKU by the time of the Meerut arrests were fast becoming open fractures, and the community breaches had become unbridgeable. The tension between the striking majority and the non-striking and black-legging minority was, because it largely overlapped with the millhands' community divisions, particularly corrosive. It often erupted into uncontrollable violence.²⁰¹ This was demoralising and it also provided the police with additional opportunities for action against the strike. The relative independence of the mill committees from the central leadership made it increasingly difficult for the inexperienced leadership to conduct a coordinated strike policy. Then, in mid-June, the

200. NAI, H.Poll, 303/1929: note by Haig, 11/6/29; also NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FRI Jun.

201. BREC, Report, p.19. For the union this communal tension was more serious than during the February riots because it was leading to Hindu-Muslim violence within the workforce.

communists became the object of a second non-Brahman campaign in the managing committee, much more serious in scale than the pre-March dispute.²⁰² Finally, when the strike funds were exhausted in late July, having been spent too early and too freely, the end was near. With both the relief funds and their credit facilities exhausted, the strikers were defeated.²⁰³ The millowners' determination and capacity to endure proved to be too great.

The final stage in the process of defeat - the collapse of the GKU itself - followed immediately after. This stage, in contrast to the defeat of the strike, arose almost completely from the inadequacies of the new leadership; a leadership failure completed what the opposition had already achieved.

202. On June 19 the non-Brahman activists in the managing committee put forward a resolution declaring that the GKU 'had nothing in common with the Communist movement of Russia, whose emblem is also a red flag'. It was defeated 23-12. But eight members of the faction subsequently published a leaflet protesting against the wearing of communist badges by the union's pickets, declaring that this was 'a dodge of the Communists to brand the Union as a Communist body ... and to get it destroyed at the hands of the Government and break the strike and stop the labour movement'. This effort was again opposed by the majority. (NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Jun.) But the defeat of the non-Brahmans could provide little comfort for the communists. The attack was more explicit and determined, and gained wider and more open support, than the pre-Meerut arrests attempt. It signalled a growing groundswell of opinion against communist ideological militance, divorced from the increasingly defensive outlook of the ordinary millhands.
203. The mills were able to begin building their musters during June, but the return to work accelerated only in July. By mid-August 111,000 had returned and by mid-September it was all over: NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Jul., FR1 Aug., FR2 Sept..

Even when the strike was plainly collapsing the union's managing committee refused to admit defeat. Instead, it responded with a desperate and escalating ideological militance initiated by the communists.²⁰⁴ This serious tactical error - which was severely criticised by the Meerut group²⁰⁵ - led to the almost complete divorce of the leadership from the workforce and to the liquidation of the mill committee movement. The forced return to work of the strikers, in defiance of the leadership, was in itself a serious blow to the managing committee's authority. But, more seriously, because the leading militants remained on strike the jobbers were able independently to recruit the new workforce and the managements were able more easily to victimise the activists. Consequently the jobbers, as unchallenged recruiting agents, were able to regain much of their former power over the millhands, while the GKU leadership lost almost all of its organised contact with the reconstituted workforce: 'Between July 1928 and July 1929 the G.K.U.'s relations with the jobbers turned full circle'.²⁰⁶ The mill committee system - the organisational basis of the GKU - was destroyed. Following the strike the union had only 2,000 members.²⁰⁷ The demoralisation of the workforce as a whole was also reflected in the even smaller membership of the other

204. It was at this point that the militant incitements to the millhands, to defy their opposition and continue the strike, began (NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR1 Jul.; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the GKU, 1928-33). The GKU leadership did not officially call off the strike until September 19.

205. MCG: 1 & 2.

206. Newman, op. cit., p.342.

207. ibid., p.343.

unions²⁰⁸ and in the weak and erratic participation of the GKU's drastically reduced membership in the union's subsequent affairs.²⁰⁹ The defeat of the 1929 strike was more than a defeat of the GKU - it was a defeat of textile industry unionism as such in Bombay city. It was also a retreat from the ordered relationships that would have been provided by standardisation. The industry was to remain in its traditional, chaotic state. The price of standardisation - a strong union - had proved too high for both the millowners and the government.

The Communists Position in the BPCC

The GKU's defeat also sealed the communists' fate within Bombay's nationalist politics. In the second half of 1929 Deshpande and Ranadive began a campaign to improve their position at the November BPCC elections and to capture the AICC seats held by their communist predecessors. From August they conducted a Congress recruitment drive among the millhands to

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208. Whereas the April 1929 membership of the BTLU had been 5,400, by the end of the year the combined membership of the non-GKU unions was only 400 (*loc. cit.*). (As the BTLU had not been involved in nor, thus, defeated by the strike, the drastic fall in its membership suggests that the Muslim community's support for the union had been largely politically inspired; once the GKU had been defeated the BTLU was no longer as necessary to the Muslim leaders' purposes.)
209. Eg., only 100 members arrived for the GKU's annual general meeting on December 15 and the meeting had to be postponed. Some 1,500 arrived for the postponed meeting a week later, but by the time a leadership conflict had been resolved only 200 remained and the meeting had to be postponed a second time. The leadership conducted a vigorous recruitment campaign before the next meeting, on January 26. Even so, only 700 attended, though this provided a quorum and the elections could be held: NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Dec.; NAI, H.Poll, 18/II/1930: Bombay FR1 & 2 Jan.

this end.²¹⁰ But the workers' demoralisation and indebtedness, and the communists' declining authority, undermined these efforts; and, without the authority and influence provided by a mass base, the communists' had little more than ideology to offer the BPCC radicals. The election results were a decisive blow to the communists' aspirations:²¹¹ they failed to increase their influence; and Jamnadas Mehta, the leader of the BPCC's 'industrialist' faction and one of the communists' arch foes in both the nationalist and trade union arenas,²¹² won the presidency. Then, after Mehta had resigned his position in January 1930 because of his opposition to the Civil Disobedience program, Nariman was elected as his replacement.²¹³ Once the radical Nariman had replaced the moderate Mehta, the potential for a communist-led challenge to the BPCC leadership had been greatly reduced. Nariman had inherited the support previously given to the WPP leaders.

The Defeat of the GIPRU

The GIP Railway strike in February 1930 led to the defeat of the communists' second trade union base. It also led to further confrontation with the Congress conservatives.

Efforts to organise the GIP railway workers and to

210. NAI, H.Poll, 257/1/1930: report dated 2/9/29.

211. NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR1 Nov.

212. Mehta was the moderate president of the BB & CI railway union and, as such, was in fairly constant conflict with the communists.

213. On these changes within the BPCC see R. Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj', pp.94-7.

prepare for a strike continued in the workshops and along the line after the radicals' victory at the union's general meeting at Chalisgaon in May. By the end of the year the level of agitation, combined with the GIP administration's refusal to consider even moderate demands, was sufficient to force the reformist Ginwala secessionists to come to a compromise agreement with the GIPRU militants - a 'small triumph' for the latter.²¹⁴ A strike was generally accepted as an inevitability.

But it was a faction around the Nagpur non-communist militant, R.S. Ruikar, rather than the communist group, which benefitted most from these developments. At the time of the Meerut arrests the internal organisation of the union and the extension of its base were still at a much lower level than in the textile industry. Moreover, the new communist leadership, even though represented on the GIPRU's executive, was unable to establish for itself the authority held by its predecessors. The demands of the textile strike, the month-long arrests of Ranadive and Deshpande during its course, and then Ranadive's imprisonment in November, further disorganised the communist faction's efforts. Finally - and this was the factor which the Meerut group believed to be the most important - the communist group's program of work in the union during 1929 was neither systematic nor energetically pursued.²¹⁵ By the end of the year

214. NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR2 Nov.; also: NAI, H.Poll, 257/I/1930: note by H.J. Hobbs (Staff Officer, Railway Board, Bombay), 25/10/29; List of resolutions passed by the AIRF meeting, Nagpur, 29/9/29, and list of demands formulated at the executive meeting of the GIPRU, 14/7/29 (from the Marx Memorial Library, London).

215. MCG: 1 & 2.

the communists' influence was definitely secondary to that of Ruikar. This was demonstrated clearly in January 1930, when Ruikar began propagandising for a one-day strike on the line. Although the previous communist leadership had been patiently and carefully preparing for an eventual general strike, after union organisation had been sufficiently advanced, the Deshpande leadership supported Ruikar's tactic. The communists were only a minority in the strike committee formed to conduct the struggle.²¹⁶

The railway strike did not face the extensive opposition faced by the textile strike. Because the communists had not managed to develop class forms of organisation and consciousness among the railway workers to the extent that they had among the millhands the GIPRU did not pose the same threat to the established social and political order of the city. Secondly, because the strike was in a state enterprise it could be linked more comfortably with Gandhian nationalist themes. The differences could be seen in the different character of the Congress's response to the two strikes: in sharp contrast to its policy towards the strike in the Indian-owned textile industry, the BPCCC voted its solidarity with the railway strikers.²¹⁷ But though the opposition was not as extensive, state repression was much more intensive. This was partly because of the same determination to defeat serious industrial activity on the

216. *ibid.*; NAI, H.Poll, 18/II/1930: Bombay FRI Jan.; NAI, H.Poll, 95/1930: note by Petrie on the GIP situation, 6/2/30.

217. *BC*, 19/2/30, p.1; see Lakshman, *op. cit.*, pp.57-8 for the resolutions of sympathy passed by the AICC.

strategically sensitive railways that had earlier been evidenced at Lillooah and elsewhere. But, in addition, the strike was the first to follow the Lahore National Congress decision to launch Civil Disobedience. This was a political combination to which the bureaucracy, in both India and London, had already given considerable attention during 1929.²¹⁸ Now the Raj was much less constrained by the need to consider nationalist sensitivities when repressing 'communistic' activity. Accordingly, when the railway strike began, both the GIPR administration and the government reacted with a particularly concerted and ruthless array of strike-breaking measures.²¹⁹ The breaking of the strike was facilitated by the ready availability of replacement labour from the, by now, large and growing reserve of desperate unemployed.

The acute difficulties faced by a strike in this situation were further compounded by the inadequacy of its leadership. The organisation of the strike was a fiasco. The one-day stop-work was timed for February 4, but on its eve the union leadership decided instead to extend it into an indefinite strike. The last-minute change, which was inadequately communicated to the union's centres along the line, combined

218. NAI, H.Poll, 257/I/1930: correspondence between New Delhi, the Bengal government, and Calcutta commercial and industrial organisations, in August-October 1929; and DIB's abstract on Congress and Labour in 1929; IOL, L/PO/257: account of conference, arranged by Benn, between Tegart and Home Office officials (incl. Sir John Anderson) on 25/10/29. (The conference discussed the measures used to break the 1926 General Strike in Britain as a model for a possible general strike during Civil Disobedience.)

219. BC, 8/2/30, p.8, 10/3/30, p.12, 14/3/30, p.12; Punekar, op. cit., p.141. The strike-breaking measures included the use of convict labour.

with the absence of previous preparation for a general strike, resulted in confusion from the beginning.²²⁰ Then, in this confusion, the Ruikar-Deshpande relationship rapidly deteriorated. Within a week they were engaged in an open conflict.²²¹ This was further exacerbated when the BPCC, now under Nariman's leadership, began actively to involve itself in order to bring the strikers under Congress influence and to mobilise them as disciplined volunteers in Civil Disobedience.²²² The Ruikar faction, though initially hostile to the BPCC's intentions, began to ally itself with the Congress after the strike had begun to collapse.²²³ But the Deshpande group violently opposed the BPCC-Ruikar alliance and policy.²²⁴ This soon became the

220. MCG: 1 & 2; Karnik, op. cit., pp.218-19.

221. BC, 8/2/30, p.10; BCP, 1036/B/II/1935: note on communist organisations, 1929-33; BSAI, 1930, para. 389.

222. It is probably significant that the BPCC did not begin actively to participate in the situation until after the strike was in trouble. It appears not to have been interested in strengthening the strike or in coordinating it, as a strike, with Civil Disobedience.

223. BSAI, 1930, paras. 381, 675, 675(1), 675(5). From late March, and during the first half of April, the Ruikar leadership joined with prominent Congress speakers to call on the remaining strikers to 'help the Congress and receive help from it'. The railway workers were requested to become satyagrahis, to eschew violence, to wear khaddar, and to renounce their 'vices'. Small doles were offered as an added inducement for the strikers to enrol as volunteers.

224. The reasons for the vehemence of Deshpande's opposition to the Ruikar-BPCC alliance - as, later, to the Kandalkar-BPCC alliance - will be investigated in Chapter 7.

dominant issue in the strike, and the preoccupation hastened its already inevitable collapse and made more complete the disintegration of the union.²²⁵

At its height some 22,000 workshop and traffic employees were on strike, and it cost a total of 895,000 man-days.²²⁶ But, though this was a significant number of strikers, it was only a small percentage of the GIPR workforce in the Presidency - it was, in fact, only half of the union's 1929 membership. After a formal settlement, negotiated by the Ginwala moderates, took effect on March 15, the administration could proceed unfettered to recruit workers on its own terms. The union was powerless to prevent the large scale retrenchments and victimisations which then took place.²²⁷

While the railway began to return to normal operations, those who had been retrenched and victimised continued a desperate, but impotent, rear-guard 'strike'.²²⁸ The most notable events in this phase were two confused and violently repressed 'satyagrahas', which coincided with the launching of Civil Disobedience in the city, at the Bombay suburban railway stations of Kalyan and Kurla.²²⁹ While Ruikar and the BPCC sought

225. MCG:1 & 2; Karnik, *op. cit.*, pp.219-21. (Given the above account of the strike I cannot agree, however, with Karnik's assertions that the strike was 'well-organised and disciplined'; that the communists were dominant in the union's leadership, and that this was the main cause of the strike's failure.)

226. G of I, *India in 1930-31*, p.244.

227. Eg., an initial retrenchment of 1,350 from April 1 created 'much ill-feeling among the labour population', but there was 'no trouble, owing to the helplessness of the various unions due to their internal dissensions, absence of combination and lack of funds': NAI, H.Poll, 18/IV/1931: Bombay FRI Apr.

228. BSAI, 1930, paras. 381, 444(3), 675(2&3), 700; NAI, H.Poll, 18/IV/1930: Bombay FRI & 2 Mar.

229. *ibid.*; BC, 7/4/30, p.12; R. Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj', pp.99-100.

to superimpose the ideology of Congress nationalism upon these actions, Deshpande declared that the railway workers were acting as the vanguard in the worker-peasant revolution.²³⁰ For the strikers, however, the Kalyan and Kurla 'satyagrahas' appear to have been intended primarily at last-ditch protests against the Railway Board's recently released final terms.²³¹ Some of the retrenched workers enlisted as Congress volunteers. But most showed little interest in either the Congress or the communist programs once it had become clear that neither could help them to realise their main object after ten weeks without pay - to find work 'under any conditions'.²³² At several centres, the authorities reported, the retrenched workers had 'expressed their opinion on agitators in general in no uncertain terms'.²³³ The union subsequently entered a sharp and factional decline.²³⁴

The GKU, Congress and the Millhands in 1930.

The next phase of industrial contention took place in the textile industry, over which, during 1930, 'the black cloud of industrial depression darken[ed] the whole sky'.²³⁵

At the same time that it became involved in the GIPR

230. NAI, H.Poll, 18/III/1929: Bombay FR2 Feb & FR1 Mar.; BSA, 1930, paras. 389 & 572 (which contain summaries of leaflets issued by the Deshpande group).

231. Karnik, *op. cit.*, pp.220-1. The strike was eventually called off on April 16.

232. NAI, H.Poll, 18/IV/1930: Bombay FR2 Apr..

233. *ibid.*

234. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: notes on the GIPRU; MCG: 1 & 2.

235. NAI, H.Poll, 504/1930: Petrie to Emerson, 20/8/30.

strike, the BPCC also revived its labour program in the mill area.²³⁶ As with Ruikar, the Congress sought an alliance with the GKU's president, Kandalkar; and, as in the GIPRU, this attempt, by aggravating union factionalism, further diminished the possibilities for a regroupment of the millhands under a unified militant leadership.

Although Kandalkar, like Ruikar, was initially hostile to the BPCC's labour ambitions,²³⁷ he, too, found the benefits of an alliance increasingly attractive. When the BPCC provided financial assistance to the impoverished and shattered union it was able to reopen permanent head and branch offices.²³⁸ The Congress also gave nominal support to the GKU's program of minimum demands for the working class. By mid-1930 Kandalkar had managed to persuade a majority of the GKU's managing committee to support the Congress, while, contemporaneously, the BPCC stepped up its ideological and volunteer-recruitment program.²³⁹ Through July and August, GKU leaders joined Congress speakers, including prominent figures such as Vallabhbhai Patel, at moderately large meetings in the mill area. Their audiences were drawn from both the working millhands and the currently 30,000 unemployed. The speakers' themes were similar to those

236. See the accounts of the BPCC meetings in Parel, in BC, 18/2/30, p.1, 24/2/30, p.12., 13/3/30, p.12, 21/4/30, p.5, 24/4/30, p.7.

237. See Chapter 7.

238. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the GKU, 1928-33. Kandalkar played the leading role in the union in cementing the new alliance.

239. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VIII/1930: Bombay FRI & 2 Jul.

employed during the GIPR strike, and, again, they provoked a bitter communist reaction.²⁴⁰ Free meals and small doles - financed primarily by the BPCC's merchant supporters - were, as before, offered as inducements to potential volunteers. The BPCC campaign reached its climax in a 'Congress Labour Week' from August 17-23. A 'Congress Labour Camp' was set up in Parel and 'the full Congress machinery' was 'placed at the disposal of the camp'.²⁴¹

But, as on the GIP railway, the BPCC campaign met with little real success. Even the 'Labour Week' did not arouse a great deal of interest among the millhands. Nor did the alliance with the now drastically reduced²⁴² GKU prove to be of much value

240. *ibid.*; NAI, H.Poll, 18/IX/1930; Bombay FR1 Aug.; BSAI, 1930, paras. 1330, 1367(23), 1191, 1199 & 1398; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the Young Workers' League (YWL), 1930-34. The estimate of the number of unemployed is from NAI, H.Poll, 504/1930: Petrie to Emerson, 20/8/30. The average number present at the July meetings reported was 5000.

241. NAI, H.Poll, 18/IX/1930: Bombay FR2 Aug.; BSAI, 1930, para. 1152(27). The program for each day included meetings (averaging six per day), processions, visits to the chawls, and the distribution of large quantities of literature. Each day was devoted to a special theme, beginning with specifically labour issues and ending with Congress nationalist themes. Soon after the Congress week the BPCC also began a campaign among the dockworkers, urging them to participate in the boycott movement: NAI, H.Poll, 18/X/1930: Bombay FR1 Sept.

242. The GKU had only a 'precarious' existence during 1930. Its membership was only 800-1000 in mid-1930: BCP, 1036/B/II/1935: note on communist groups in Bombay, 1929-33; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the GKU, 1928-33.

to the Congress. Only the unemployed responded in any significant numbers - and more for the doles thus earned than through ideological conviction.²⁴³ The millhands' demoralisation and vulnerability ensured their resistance to any form of political appeal. But the Gandhians' long history of neglect of labour, their opposition to the 1928 and 1929 strikes, the millhands' longstanding association of the BPCC with the millowners, and the uncompensated contribution to unemployment made by the Congress boycott of 'non-Swadeshi' mills during Civil Disobedience, confirmed the opposition of those still employed and the unenthusiastic and non-ideological response of the retrenched. Having fallen away from an outsider leadership which based its political program on working class demands, the millhands were not inclined to follow one which subordinated their demands to those enumerated in Gandhi's 'Eleven Points'. Even the Kandalkar faction had decided by the end of 1930 that the BPCC was of no value to its labour program.²⁴⁴ The disillusion arose partly because the BPCC had decided even earlier that their attempt was not worth the effort. Their working class program appears to have been shelved soon after the failure of the 'Congress Labour Week'.

243. See the sources cited in fn.241. The Bombay government reported that the 'Labour Week' program was poorly attended and that 'there was little real enthusiasm and attention on the part of the millhands'. The audiences at the various meetings fluctuated between 60 and 1500. However the BPCC-GKU alliance was able to close down 34 mills temporarily in protest against the arrest of BPCC leaders in August: NAI, H.Poll, 18/IX/1930: Bombay FR2 Aug..

244. Leaflets distributed by the GKU leadership early in 1931 were condemning the Congress leaders for doing nothing to help those workers who had been retrenched as a result of the boycott of 'non-Swadeshi' mills, and called for major Congress assistance for the unemployed: NAI, H.Poll, 18/I/1931: Bombay FR1 Feb.; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the GKU, 1928-33.

Thus the BPCC's intervention into textile and railway unionism in Bombay did not lead to a further politicisation of the working class, nor to a strengthening of their trade union organisation. On the contrary, its 'bourgeois' efforts to add a subordinate working class following to its anti-government forces contributed to the workers' growing scepticism towards outsider political leaderships of whatever political hue, while aggravating the factional divisions within - and thus hastening the decline of - local trade unionism.²⁴⁵

The Working Class During Civil Disobedience

The decline continued. Bombay's working class was unable in the following three years to recover from the defeats of 1929-30. When Lester Hutchinson was released on bail from the Meerut jail and visited Bombay in 1931 he found it

... distressing to notice the change in ... [the millhands'] condition. The great days of their unity and strength had passed with the collapse of the textile strike of 1929. Since then they had become divided among themselves ... and were at the mercy of opposing factions.²⁴⁶

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245. The Congress's labour program in Bengal also aggravated factional hostilities in Bengal: NAI, H.Poll, 257/I/1929: DIB's abstract on Congress and labour in 1929.
246. Hutchinson, op. cit., p.142. The increasing communal tension in Bombay's political life during Civil Disobedience also added to the forces of division. This tension culminated in the terrible communal riot of mid-1932, in which 211 were killed and 2600 injured. During its three weeks course the riot directly affected the mill area only briefly, but the escalation in communal feeling in Bombay must have had serious consequences for the consciousness of the millhands: See R. Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj', pp.104-5; Punekar, op. cit., p.129; G of I, India in 1931-32, pp.56-7. I have taken the figures on the riot from the latter source. For the localities affected during its different stages see IQR, 1932, Vol. 1, pp.23-8, and Vol. 2, p.1.

This was a fair description of the condition of the city's working class as a whole during the 1930-33 period.²⁴⁷ There was little scope for effective radical trade unionism, and even less for the reformists;²⁴⁸ and, already defeated industrially, the city's proletariat was not to be a political force throughout the Civil Disobedience period.

Though in part the consequence of inadequate trade union leadership, the Bombay working class's inability to recover from its earlier defeats was primarily an outcome of the Depression. The textile industry passed into an extreme economic crisis in these years. Some 20 of the approximately 80 mills working in 1929 had closed by 1934,²⁴⁹ while most of the others continued to sustain heavy losses.²⁵⁰ The millowners responded with large-scale retrenchments and intensified rationalisation. Before the 1928 strike the average daily number of hands employed in the Bombay mills was some 150,000. In 1930 this dropped to 137,000 and by 1933 it was only 120,000. Between 1930 and 1933 the average number of workers per loom was reduced from 94 to 61.²⁵¹ Between 1926

247. I have not been able to locate a set of figures on industrial disputation in Bombay city during this period. However the passivity of the city's workforce is confirmed by the Bombay fortnightly reports for 1930-33. No major strikes took place, and most were confined to only one or a few mills. The Government of India's annual report, India in 1930-31 etc., which reported the more significant strikes of the respective years, found nothing worth reporting in Bombay city in 1930-33.

248. Eg., in May 1931 Bombay reported that while the GKU was making limited progress, the BTLU 'continues practically moribund': NAI, H.Poll, 18/V/1931: Bombay FRI May.

249. M.D. Morris, op. cit., pp.171-2.

250. See the figures provided in Gordon, op. cit., p.298. The industry as a whole continued to sustain the heavy losses of the second half of the 1920s, but the effects were much more extreme because reserves had by then been drastically reduced.

251. ibid., p.299. The average employment figures mask the great fluctuations which occurred. The fluctuations added to the insecurity of the workforce.

and 1934, wages were reduced by approximately 17 percent - most of the reduction occurring from 1929, after the workforce's largely successful resistance until mid-1929 had collapsed.²⁵² Because of the large reserve of unemployed the rationalisation and wage-cutting could be imposed without serious resistance. Industrial tension remained high in Bombay throughout the period,²⁵³ and the authorities constantly worried about the potential for violent outbreaks by the unemployed. But, as the Bombay government reported in June 1933, at the height of the industry's crisis, the millowners remained 'in the ascendant' in capital-labour relations;²⁵⁴

Owing to the state of unemployment ... it is easy for the millowners to engage new hands in the place of those who go on strike or who refuse to return to work on the terms offered, and the strikes ... had a short duration for this reason.

The competitiveness of the labour market was increased by the severe effects of the contemporary agricultural depression. This deprived the unemployed of the traditional support of an alternative income in their villages, and so most remained in the city in the hope of finding work.²⁵⁵

Bombay's Depression crisis was an extreme

252. M.D. Morris, op. cit., p.223; Punekar, op.cit., p.99.

253. M.D. Morris, op. cit., p.185.

254. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII /1933: Bombay, FR1 Jun..

255. This was apparent as early as August 1930: NAI, H.Poll, 504/1930: Petrie to Emerson, 20/8/30. The Bombay authorities doubted whether even five percent of the unemployed would return to their villages, even if their fares were paid for them, for they would have only famine relief to exist on following the conclusion of the season's agricultural operations.

case,²⁵⁶ but the same trend occurred in most of India's industries and utilities. According to figures supplied by the International Labour Office, the total factory employment in India fell by approximately 12 percent between 1929 and 1933.²⁵⁷ Employment on the railways - the second biggest source of employment in both Bombay and Calcutta - fell by approximately 12 percent, and wages by some 10 percent, in the same time period.²⁵⁸ That these attacks were met by only sporadic and limited strike activity is suggested by the following table:

TABLE No.8
INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES IN INDIA 1928-1933

Year	Number of Disputes	Workers Involved	Working Days Lost
1928	203	506,851	31,647,404
1929	141	532,016	12,165,691
1930	148	196,301	2,261,731
1931	166	203,008	2,408,123
1932	118	128,099	1,922,437
1933	146	164,938	2,168,961

Source: G of I, Bulletin of Indian Industries and Labour, Nos 43 & 62, in: International Labour Office, Industrial Labour in India (Geneva, 1938), p.138.

256. Bombay's depression crisis was extreme within the wider Indian context. It was also much more severe than in the Ahmedabad and Sholapur textile mills (M.D. Morris, op. cit., p.171, fn.67). This was reflected in the wage changes in the three centres. Whereas Bombay's workers suffered a 17 percent cut during 1926-34, for the Sholapur workers it was 8 percent, and the Ahmedabad wages increased by 5½ percent: Punekar, op. cit., p.99.
257. International Labour Office, Industrial Labour in India, (Geneva, 1938), p.177.
258. ibid., p.261.

With the exception of isolated pockets - most notably Sholapur - proletarian radicalism was not on the agenda in India during the Civil Disobedience period.²⁵⁹

The weakness of radical trade unionism at the outset of the Depression was maintained during the period partly by continuing state repression. As we have seen, the launching of Civil Disobedience removed the Raj's concern about possible Congress reaction to the repression of 'Communitistic' trade unionism. It also greatly reduced the industrialists' and the moderates' earlier limited opposition to the Raj. This was because the political and economic hazards created by the Congress's mass agitation and boycott movement encouraged both groups to move, once again, much closer to the government.²⁶⁰ The remaining grounds for their opposition to the state were removed after London finally gave way, in mid-1932, to a worried New Delhi's insistent demands for an economic policy more satisfactory to Indian capital.²⁶¹ This shift allowed the Raj even more freedom from indigenous constraints to repress oppositional political activity of all kinds - communist or Congress. Finally, once Civil Disobedience had begun, the Indian

259. The Sholapur workers played a leading role in the remarkable insurrection, which took control of the city for a week, in protest at Gandhi's arrest in May 1930. In 1931, 15,000 of the city's 50,000 millhands also conducted the largest strike in the Presidency; this lasted for only three weeks;

India in 1931-32, p.115. The largest Indian strikes in the period were in the Calcutta jute industry, but even these were fairly limited: see Chapter 3(2), fn.325.

260. For the moderates' policy during Civil Disobedience, see Low, 'Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru', pp.306-20; for the realignment of most of the industrialists of Bombay, and the political-economic factors underlying it, see Gordon, op. cit., Chapter VI.

261. Tomlinson, 'India and the British Empire', pp.365-76; Bagchi, Private Investment, pp.420-21 & 439-40. Between 1930 and 1932 New Delhi had already won substantial tariff policy concessions from the home government.

administration was allowed much more freedom from the home government in its day-to-day responses to the Indian situation.²⁶² The emergency powers enacted in 1932, at the outset of the second, 'civil martial law'²⁶³ phase of the period, also provided very effective additional reserve weapons against industrial militance; under the 'Ordinance Regime' the state had recourse, for the first time, to almost unrestricted executive power to repress communist activity and industrial militance.

Thus, despite the greatly decreased effectiveness of their movement during the Civil Disobedience period, communist and non-communist trade union militants were arrested and imprisoned much more frequently than before. Ranadive's November 1929 imprisonment was the precursor of a large number of similar cases in the ensuing years.²⁶⁴ Because of the absence of major strike activity, government repression of radical trade unionism during the height of Civil Disobedience did not go far beyond these actions against leaders. But that the Raj was prepared drastically to repress militant strikes was demonstrated in 1933-34. When, in the second half of 1933, a 'frenzy' of wage cuts in the textile industry provoked extensive unrest in the Bombay mills,²⁶⁵ the Government of Bombay readied itself to use its 1932 emergency powers.²⁶⁶ In April 1934, after the industry's

262. Low, 'Civil Martial Law', passim.

263. Professor Low has coined this apposite phrase to encapsulate the Raj's policy towards the Civil Disobedience movement in its second phase.

264. See IB, Communism, (1935), ps.161 & 203, & pp.287-306, for the more important of these. But despite the large increase in prosecutions and convictions, the authorities had constant difficulty in securing convictions in the courts for speeches advocating social revolutionary, as distinct from seditious, themes. Moreover, the communists, unlike the Gandhians, defended themselves in court and launched appeals - which were often successful. The law continued to act as a real, if limited protection - to the Raj's chagrin.

265. M.D. Morris, op. cit., p.172.

depression had begun to lift and after the return of the Meerut communists, a communist-led general strike finally eventuated. Bombay, with New Delhi's backing, promptly used its new powers to conduct a very comprehensive, intensive and effective repression of an order which could hardly have been contemplated in 1928-29.²⁶⁷ Many of the communist strike leaders were subsequently interned for long periods.

3. THE COMMUNISTS' SITUATION ON THE EVE OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Certain continuities can be discerned between the 1927-29 and 1930-34 phases of Indian politics. For example, the industrial revolt and the communists' ascendancy during 1927-29 were the prelude to the urban middle class and agrarian turmoil and the resurrection of Gandhian mass politics of the years that followed. The onset of the industrial depression that had catalysed the working class militancy preceded the arrival in India of the Great Depression, which fed the urban and agrarian agitations of the Civil Disobedience period. The Raj's repression of the communists' movement was also a preparation for its subsequent repression of the Congress's. Moreover, the industrialists' influence on the Congress leadership during the breaking of the radical working class movement, and their simultaneous exploitation of the Bombay situation

266. NAI, H.Poll, 17/II/1934: G of Bom. to G of I, 21/6/33.

267. *ibid.*: G of Bom to G of I, 30/8/34; IOL, L/PO/43: Brabourne to Hoare, 28/6/34; IB, *Communism*, (1935), pp.196-7. After the strike had taken hold the government declared that it constituted an 'emergency' and arrested 28 strike leaders, banned all strike meetings and processions, and took vigorous police action against the strikers.

to pressure the Raj for their own economic ends, were to be repeated on a larger scale during the Civil Disobedience movement. During Civil Disobedience the industrialists played a dual role:²⁶⁸ they were able, through their influence on the Gandhian leadership, very largely to determine the limits to be allowed the mass movement; at the same time they were able to use the agitation to win further concessions from the British. There were, therefore, strong elements of similarity in the fates of, on the one hand, the communists and their working class movement and, on the other, of the Civil Disobedience radicals and their militant peasant movements. Further, even the Gandhian leadership was in an impossible position once the bourgeoisie as a whole had unambiguously withdrawn its support from the Congress movement.

Bombay had been the communists' one hope for making the transition between the two phases from a position of reasonable strength. But by the time Civil Disobedience had begun the Bombay communists shared - though for very different reasons - the Bengal branch's situation of isolation and impotence. At the deepest level, Bombay's fate was due to the inherent vulnerability of a purely working class base. Bombay's radical working class had to face a powerful range of oppositional forces. But the only unity that the Maratha 'class-community' could assert against the unity of its opposition was its own. It was unable to mobilise from within Bombay the political or financial support that might have enabled the strike to

268. On this see Sarkar, 'The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism', passim; NAI, H.Poll, 136/1931: Notes by Emerson, 7/4/31, on the Karachi Session of the INC, and V to S of S, 11/4/31.

survive long enough to defeat the millowners' seige. Nor was there, in weakly industrialised India, a wider trade union movement of substance for the GKU to fall back upon for support. Finally, because the working class upsurge did not coincide with a major peasant revolt, and because the communists had not established a rural base, there was no possibility of support from that quarter, either.

Thus during Civil Disobedience the communists' 'proletarian option' - the Party's 'natural' basis for participation in nationalist politics - was effectively, albeit not totally, closed. What, then, were the possible ways forward for the communists in the Civil Disobedience period? The choices were both few and clear. The extreme weakness of their position demanded the application of Lenin's sound 'united-front' principle of maximising one's friends and minimising one's enemies while, at the same time, attempting to build an independent base. The communists needed both to strengthen the overall forces of the left, by forming a common-front with the non-Party left elements, and to participate in the Civil Disobedience movement as a coherent radical nucleus. Participation in Civil Disobedience could possibly be used to win over as future cadres some of those radicals who became disenchanted with the Gandhian leadership. The Congress could also act as a vehicle for establishing rural contacts, at a time when the villages were succeeding the factories as the main site of mass upheaval. This did not necessitate the communists' abandoning the working class. But the change in the location of mass radicalism did highlight the necessity of developing a rural perspective. Finally, one of the clearest lessons to

be learnt from the effects of the Meerut arrests was the absolute necessity for a communist movement in India of a strong and effective underground Party organisation; the arrests had terminated the remarkably extended period when the communists could function effectively purely as an open organisation.

But though the choices were clear the possibilities were very limited. In addition to the extremely limited resources with which the new communist leadership entered the Civil Disobedience era, this was so for a number of reasons.

Though from 1930 the political space available for communist politics in the cities was minimal, it was substantial for the Gandhian mode. Moreover, this was not a propitious time for the already isolated Bombay communists to win over the non-communist radical intelligentsia. With another mass movement finally under way, Gandhi's hold over the Congress radicals was neither mechanical nor tenuous. The communists were, therefore, at a great political and ideological disadvantage in the city. They were also at a great psychological disadvantage. It would be difficult indeed for them to allow that the political leadership, and the classes, that had so recently contributed to their defeat, could be 'genuinely' anti-imperialist. The Bengal communists did not have the problem of Gandhian hegemony to contend with - in Calcutta at least. But Subhas Bose's charismatic appeal, his organisational control and his 'socialist' camouflage, were considerable barriers between the communists and the 'revolutionary petty-bourgeoisie'. So, too, was the fascination that terrorism continued to hold, at this stage, for many of the youthful activists.

Nor was the path to the villages an easy one for the few remaining communists to find and negotiate. This was so even in Bombay, where the communists' close contact with the working class had provided the most promising potential access to the peasantry and where the non-Brahman movement's antagonism towards the Congress had seemingly offered additional opportunities. The new leadership's divorce from the millhands, and the collapse in working class morale, combined substantially to close the working class door to the countryside. Moreover, from 1930 the dominant non-Brahman leaders finally entered nationalist politics by allying with the Gandhian Congress.²⁶⁹ A communist-radical non-Brahman alliance may have been very possible in the late 1920s but, if so, the potential was now much reduced. The communists' only remaining method of gaining ready access to the peasantry was by becoming Congress volunteers - and we have already noted the objective and subjective difficulties standing in the way of this course of action. None of these obstacles were impenetrable barriers. But if the new communist leadership did make the attempt it would be starting almost from the beginning, and against considerable opposition.

The building of left-wing unity, too, was inherently difficult. This was so even in Bombay where, unlike Bengal, factionalism had not been a serious problem before the Meerut arrests. The dislocation and bitterness of defeat, compounded by the Congress's entry into working class politics, fostered a factious atmosphere. M.N. Roy's return to India at the end of 1930 introduced a new source of leftist division. This was

269. Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Nationalists', pp.209-13.

because, for reasons which will be examined in the following chapter, Roy fell out of favour with Moscow. The ECCI bitterly denounced Roy and his politics throughout the 1929-33 period and enjoined the CPI to do likewise. Roy, for his part, hoped to rehabilitate himself with, and be re-admitted to, the Comintern. His strategy was to attempt to establish, through his own hopefully greater political successes, the superiority of his leadership and policy over those of the 'official' Party.²⁷⁰ Thus Roy, too, had little interest in a united front between his group and the CPI. Instead of these two left factions minimising their weaknesses by pooling resources, they became agents of a factionalism created largely by the curious logic of Comintern bolshevist politics and transposed on to the Indian situation. As the Royist group based itself in Bombay, this particular problem was to be manifested most seriously there.²⁷¹ The Roy group initially made a limited advance.²⁷² It became the strongest left faction in Bombay, exercised a certain influence on the Congress left wing, and made some contact with the UP peasant movement. Roy was quickly to outpace the Party

270. IB, Communism, (1935), pp.216-17; Haithcox, op. cit. pp. 139-43. Prior to the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935, Roy sent to the ECCI a manifesto outlining his group's position, and a letter dismissing the CPI as a political force and requesting an invitation to the Seventh Congress: in BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935.

271. It began with the arrival in Bombay from Europe in mid-1930 of two of Roy's lieutenants, Sundar Kabadi and Tayab Shaikh. They immediately involved themselves in the disputes proceeding within the GKU and the GIPRU, encouraging the Kandalkar and Ruikar factions to break with the communists and ally with the BPCC: NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Note on the GKU; BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: Note on Bombay communist groups, 1929-33.

272. IB, Communism, (1935), pp.162-68 and 211-15; Haithcox, op. cit., pp.175-201.

group, thus demonstrating that there was more potential for the Left during Civil Disobedience than the communists were able to realise. But his successes were, nevertheless, very modest. Moreover, Roy's group depended very much on his personal authority and vigorous leadership; after he was discovered and arrested by the British in July 1931 the Royist group soon foundered, then began to disintegrate.²⁷³

Finally, the contemporary changes in the politics of the Comintern also complicated the task of developing a policy and ideology appropriate to the current Indian situation. The 'metaphysical materialism' which provided the philosophical underpinnings of the Marxism characteristic of the post-Leninist era was inadequate for the task of unravelling the problems posed by, for instance, Gandhi's unpredicted resurrection, the mass popularity of his 'feudal' ideology, and the relationship between this ideology and the politics of Indian capitalism. The first generation of Bombay communists had, in the context of a mass base, begun to come to grips with the inadequacy of the mechanistic Roy-Dutt perspectives with which they had started. They had managed to construct an ideology of genuine mass appeal and had perceived some of the short-comings of the simplistic policy towards 'bourgeois' nationalism provided by the 'new Imperialist policy' thesis. These advances were to be undermined, along with the communists' political position, after the Meerut

273. IB, Communism, (1935), pp.168-69.

arrests. The Comintern policy changes in the second half of 1928 and during 1929 were not - as has been claimed²⁷⁴ - the cause of the communists' defeats of 1929. But they created a major barrier to the CPI's recovery from the defeats. We will therefore look now at the further bolshevisation of Comintern from 1928.

274. Eg. Karnik, op. cit., p.200.

CHAPTER 6

ENVIRONMENTAL SHIFTS, II:
THE COMINTERN'S 'THIRD PERIOD'

In July-August 1928 the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern was held in Moscow. The Congress was primarily concerned with the Soviet Union and the advanced capitalist countries, but it also gave considerable attention to the colonial question. The Congress's 'Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies and Semi-Colonies', in which India figured prominently, were the most exhaustive treatment of the question the Comintern had attempted or would attempt. The theses, which later played an important role in the CPI's politics, marked a definite break with the strategy of the past. For the CPI, whose policy had been based on the Roy-Dutt analysis, the Sixth Congress theses constituted a shift - though an ambiguous one - to a less 'left-sectarian' position. But despite the apparently definitive character of the Sixth Congress document the ECCI was soon to replace it, without a real attempt at justification, with a crudely 'left-sectarian' and 'ultra-proletarian' line employing, moreover, extremely mechanistic conceptual categories, which the CPI was then expected to follow throughout the Civil Disobedience period.

The change in policy introduced at the Sixth Congress, and the ECCI's subsequent abrupt and pragmatic strategic shift, were almost entirely the consequences of the rapid changes

taking place in the internal politics of the Soviet Union. The same changes led also to intensified ECCI demands upon the 'discipline' of the member parties. To understand the Sixth Congress and what followed in Comintern politics we need first to grasp the main features of this Soviet political context.

The Comintern in Transition

The fact that this was the first meeting of the world body for four years - despite the constitutional requirement that they be held at least biennially - indicated the Sixth Congress's close relationship to Soviet domestic politics.¹ In particular, the years between the Fifth and Sixth Congresses had been dominated by Stalin's struggle against the 'Left Opposition' led by Trotsky. Trotsky was finally defeated towards the end of 1927. Stalin then began immediately to prepare his move against the remaining potential opposition to his faction - the group centred around the moderate Bukharin, who had allied himself with Stalin in the anti-Trotsky campaign; following the fight against the 'left-deviation' came the fight against the 'right-deviation'.

Concurrently with this transition in CPSU factionalism the Party had also to face a major domestic crisis. In the first months of 1928 hoarding by the kulaks led to a severe shortfall in the supply of foodstuffs. This provided a new

1. The following account of the Soviet political context to the Sixth Congress is based on: Deutscher, Stalin, Chapter 8, and pp.397-400; Claudin, op. cit., pp.86-90.

context for the continuing Party debate about the optimum path towards industrialisation and the socialisation of agriculture. The urgency of the debate was increased by the continuing fear of imperialist intervention against an extremely vulnerable Soviet Union. Following his defeat of Trotsky Stalin decided to combine his solution to the domestic crisis with his campaign against the Bukharin faction. Though having identified himself during the anti-Trotsky struggle with Bukharin's gradualist and non-coercive policy of 'socialism at a snail's pace', Stalin now reversed his stand. He began to promote an extreme version of Trotsky's program of radical collectivisation of agriculture and rapid industrialisation and to wage a determined campaign against the 'right-deviationists' who opposed it. At the same time he promoted even more vigorously his heretical doctrine of the possibility of completely building socialism in the Soviet Union in the absence of successful proletarian revolution in the West; the slogan of 'socialism in one country' was about to become enshrined as official doctrine in the Soviet Union and to provide the rallying cry to the Russian people for the agonising process of rapid industrialisation.

These essentially domestic preoccupations spilled over into, and dominated, the Comintern. Simultaneously the remaining authority of that organisation was exploited, as it had been during the anti-Trotsky struggle, to isolate the Bukharin faction within the CPSU and to promote Stalin's program. But during this stage, because Stalin's control over Soviet - and thus Comintern - politics had increased, the relationship between CPSU and Comintern politics became more direct.

To justify a radical reorientation in domestic politics, and to provide an external focus for the heightened tensions in both the Party and the wider Soviet society that would result, Stalin argued that a fundamental shift in the international economy was taking place. After the post-War period of capitalist crisis and then the subsequent period of capitalist 'stabilisation', he claimed, a 'third period' of world economic crisis had begun. Further, Stalin argued, despite his deep scepticism about the revolutionary potential of the West, although European working class militance had been almost completely defeated during the 1920s the emerging economic crisis was leading to a spontaneous revolutionary upsurge. That this 'third period' was 'objectively' revolutionary would be guaranteed, finally, by the presence of the Soviet Union, within whose boundaries socialism was rapidly being constructed. The current conjuncture of capitalist crisis, proletarian challenge and an emerging socialist nation amounted to the terminal, catastrophic phase of world capitalism; 'catastrophism' was reemerging as the foundation of Comintern ideology and policy. But precisely because the existence of the Soviet Union was now the primary contradiction with world capitalism, the world bourgeoisie, assisted by its social democratic 'left wing' would intensify its efforts to destroy this 'land of the socialist dictatorship of the workers'.²

2. From the "Manifesto of the VI World Congress", Inprecor, Vol. 8 (92), 1928, p.1769. This document encapsulates, in polemical form, the 'third period' argument running through all of the official Comintern documents of this period.

For this reason it was more imperative than ever that the Soviet Union embark on a program of rapid industrialisation and that the world's communist parties rally in a disciplined manner to 'form a wall of iron' around this 'bulwark of the movement for freedom' in the world.³

The combined 'third period' and 'socialism in one country' arguments led directly to an intensification of the 'Bolshevisation' program. The sense of crisis could be used to justify a regime of extreme monolithicity. Because the world situation was 'objectively revolutionary', party 'unity' and 'correct' leadership were imperative. Resistance to the new line could therefore be categorised as dangerous 'deviationism' and in an 'objectively revolutionary' situation 'deviationists' and 'disruptionists' would have to be expeditiously purged. Moreover, in the same way that Stalin had argued mechanistically that the economic 'crisis' would spontaneously produce an 'objectively' revolutionary mass response, the reasons for the failure of an actual revolution to materialise from these 'objectively revolutionary' conditions could be reduced to failures in party leadership - both past and present. Secondly, because, in this argument, the Soviet Union was now the 'leading' force and final guarantor of the world revolution - contrary to Trotsky's argument that its continued survival was absolutely dependent on successful revolution in the West - it was natural that the Soviet (and thus Stalinist) leadership should be the best judge of the 'correctness' of a party's leadership. Moreover, it followed that the first duty of the world's communist parties should be the defence of the Soviet Union. 'Ultra-centralism' had received a further justification.

3. loc. cit..

This bolshevisation of theory and policy had an organisational counterpart.⁴ The specificity of each of the national situations continued to be acknowledged formally. But the bureaucratic-centralist way in which the Sixth Congress theses were prepared, and the universal scope of the 'third period' analysis, belied the acknowledgement. The Sixth Congress implicitly legitimised the bureaucratic centralism and reaffirmed the discretionary powers accorded to the ECCI by the Fifth Congress. Because the ECCI was now even more under the control of one faction the reaffirmation legitimised an even more monolithic mode of operation. The Sixth Congress also allowed the ECCI the authority to despatch 'instructors' to intervene in the internal affairs of the national parties. These officials had even greater discretionary powers than those of the 'delegates' created by the Fifth Congress. Finally, the establishment in Moscow of a number of special bureaux, including one for the East, further increased the ECCI's bureaucratic powers.

Stalin first put forward his 'third period' argument at the Fifteenth Congress of the CPSU in December 1927, soon after Trotsky's total defeat. It was opposed by Bukharin, who could find nothing in the evidence put forward by Stalin justifying the hypothesis that capitalist 'stabilisation' had begun to break down; in fact, for the time being at least, the post-War capitalist 'stabilisation' was continuing and, moreover, social democracy was still expanding its mass base. The issue was then shifted to the Comintern, and it was raised at the Ninth Plenum

4. See Claudin, op. cit., pp.113-14, on these organisational changes.

of the ECCI in February 1928. The Plenum affirmed Stalin's hypothesis, which then became the basic premise of the documents prepared for the Sixth Congress of the world body⁵ - and, indeed, the raison d'etre of that congress. The next stage of the move against Bukharin - and the concluding skirmish against the Trotskyist rump - occurred in that arena. Following the Sixth Congress, the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI in June-July 1929 completed the entrenchment of the 'third period' strategy as official Comintern policy and prepared the final moves against the Bukharin faction.

This was the political context of the 1928 world congress of the Communist International. The very lengthy theoretical treatises that were presented and produced, and the extended and often heated discussions around these documents, were more a concealed projection of the above patterns of Soviet domestic politics than an investigation of international realities. The note of hysteria that was sounded throughout the proceedings was a symptom of their essential artificiality. For example the Congress's manifesto, which expressed this hysteria in a concentrated form and heralded the new mode of Comintern polemics, declared that 'the steady and rapid intensification of the class struggle' against 'the imperialist beast with its dull eyes' could be seen 'everywhere' - and not least in India, where 'the growing thunder of the revolutionary volcano' was 'already sending up preliminary smoke signals'.⁶

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5. See: the 'Draft Programme of the Communist International' as adopted by Programme Commission of the ECCI on May 25, 1928, in Inprecor, Vol. 8(30), 1928, pp.549-59; and (ECCI), The Communist International Between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses, (London, CPGB, 1928).
 6. The above and following quotations from the manifesto come from Inprecor, Vol. 8(92), pp.1769-71.

'Under the crack of slave whips', capitalism had managed to survive the post-War crisis.

But capitalism is beginning to suffocate under the weight of its own contradictions. Its historical fate drives it once again with tremendous elemental force into the vortex of tremendous catastrophes, the deadly breath of which will scorch the whole world.

But the diversionary 'Wagnerian' style, and the accompanying extremist and gratuitous terms of abuse which were hurled at the social-democratic enemy and the 'deviationist traitors', were not only symptomatic. As they became institutionalised in the following years they also became a material factor in the decline of the quality of Comintern politics: the Comintern itself was beginning to suffocate, under the weight of its florid and incongruously combined metaphors.

India and the Sixth Congress.

The defeat of the Chinese revolution - the one arena of substantial revolutionary activity in the world in the 1920s - ensured that the colonial question would receive detailed attention at the Sixth Congress.⁷ The prominence of the issue was increased by the facts that the Chinese defeat was closely associated with Stalin's policy for the Chinese Party and that this policy had been opposed, and the defeat predicted, by Trotsky: the Chinese defeat both coincided with, and directly impinged upon, the Stalin-Trotsky conflict. The importance of the Chinese question ensured, in turn, India's prominence in the theses on the colonies and semi-colonies. India had always

7. For the Chinese background to the treatment of the colonial question at the Sixth Congress, see: Boersner, op. cit., Chapter VII and pp.253-59; d'Encausse and Schram, op. cit., pp.53-56.

been linked with China in the Comintern's deliberations on the colonial question. Now Stalin's post-facto justifications of his Chinese policy gave the Indian revolution the additional function of 'carrying forward' the revolution begun in China, and of 'learning the lessons' of the Chinese Party's 'mistakes' in its application of the ECCI's 'correct' policy; the Chinese defeat would not have been in vain. As the ECCI put it in the following year, 'The revival of the Indian revolution give[s] the revolutionary movements of China, Indonesia and Egypt a new life, will sound a rallying call for the whole of mankind in chains'.⁸

But there were additional reasons for India's prominence at the Congress. The 'third period' analysis of world capitalism accorded India a crucial role in world political economy: as the colonial lynch-pin of the dominant imperialist power, India was a crucial 'link' in the 'chain' of world imperialism.⁹ India would necessarily reflect the alleged deep crisis into which the British political economy had entered; and the resulting revolutionary upsurge in the colony would further deepen Britain's metropolitan crisis. The Indian revolution would also play an important role in the defence of the Soviet Union against the British-led imperialist intervention that was claimed to be imminent. The 'third period' analysis

8. 'For the Liberation of India from the Yoke of Imperialism', in Inprecor, Vol. 9(17), 1929, p.340. This theme runs through the Sixth Congress documents on the colonial question and the ECCI's subsequent treatment of the issue.

9. See, eg., Kuusinen's remarks in his report on 'The Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies', in Inprecor, Vol. 8(68), p.1226. The same view continued to be stressed subsequently. See, eg., Lozovsky's report to the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI in mid-1929, in Inprecor, Vol. 9(55), 1929, p.1203.

required a deep revolutionary crisis in India.

Finally, M.N. Roy's theoretical and political past became a significant issue in Comintern politics at this time, thus contributing to the detailed consideration of the Indian question. Roy was already in a difficult position because of his direct involvement, as an ECCI representative, in the China debacle¹⁰ - an event from which Stalin had to dissociate himself. At the Sixth Congress he came under fire because of the incompatibility of his 'new Imperialist policy' thesis with the 'third period' argument - an incompatibility in an area that was of vital importance to Stalin's new line. Roy's argument that British finance capital was structurally compelled to engage in a long term policy of large scale export of capital for investment in Indian industry did not accord with the Stalinist hypothesis that British capitalism had entered a deep, contractionary crisis. Hence the ECCI, in 1928, belatedly discovered the error of Roy's theoretical ways. Much of the discussion on the colonial question before and at the Sixth Congress centred on the Royist 'new Imperialist policy' thesis - or, as it was called at the Congress, the 'decolonisation' theory.¹¹ It is also possible that the dominance of this rather academic issue in the colonial theses was in part a means of preventing the Chinese question from becoming the dominant issue. One further consequence of the importance of the

10. See: Haithcox, op. cit., Chapter 4; Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., pp.90-4; for Roy's involvement in China in 1927.

11. The history of the Sixth Congress's 'decolonisation' controversy is covered in great detail in S.D. Gupta, op. cit., pp. 40-56.

'decolonisation' question at the Congress was that the CPGB, which had based its colonial policy on Roy's analysis, also came under attack. This added to the controversy surrounding the Indian question.¹² The attack on the Roy-Dutt thesis was given an added, though spurious, legitimacy by the involvement of a number of travellers from India, including Shaukat Usmani, in the debates. None were accredited CPI delegates, and Moscow was warned accordingly.¹³ Yet all were allowed to attend the Congress, and Usmani was even elected to the Presidium. Usmani fulfilled his role by bitterly attacking both Roy and the CPGB.¹⁴

It was against this background that Manuilsky reported to the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI in the following year that '50 per cent of the attention of the Comintern must now be paid' to India.¹⁵ Of the colonial and neo-colonial world only China warranted equivalent attention - but by that time the real leadership of the Chinese revolution was based in the remote and inaccessible Ching Kangshan mountains, beyond the direct reach of the ECCI. The CPI was less remote: from late 1929 a succession of ECCI representatives successfully penetrated

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12. Eg. Kuusinen's remarks, in Inprecor, Vol. 8(68), p.1226. For the CPGB's stormy passage through the Sixth Congress see L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development Until 1929, (London, 1966), pp.204-09.
 13. Three North Indian members of the CPI - Usmani, Shafique and Habib - had left India for Moscow in mid-1928 without informing the Party. In response to a request from C.P. Dutt in Moscow (MCCC, P.2189: telegram from 'John' to Spratt, 5/8/28) Spratt replied that the Party had 'no confidence' in them: MCCC, P.2190: telegram from Spratt to Dutt, 10/8/28.
 14. Eg. his speeches as reported in Inprecor, Vol. 8(68), 1928, pp. 1247-48 and Vol. 8(78), pp.1472-74. Usmani has recalled that he was 'pushed' into the Presidium, where he found himself seated third from Stalin (Usmani, I Met Stalin Twice, (Bombay, 1953), p.23). This was a curious (and brief) escalation to fame for an unaccredited delegate.
 15. Inprecor, Vol. 9(40), 1929, p.858.

the Raj's cordon sanitaire and involved themselves directly in intra-Party politics;¹⁶ and, as we have seen, it was in the 'third period' that the 1920s CPI leadership gained its first free access to Soviet and Comintern documents. The already struggling CPI's greatly enhanced, Comintern-endowed, international responsibilities and, as we will now see, the quality of the attention of which it was now to receive such a large proportion, were heavy crosses for it to carry.

The Theses on the Colonies and Semi-Colonies

The colonial theses shared that heterogenous mixture of 'shadow' and 'reality', described by Deutscher, which pervaded all of the Sixth Congress's documents; they bore the marks of the tensions and ambiguities of their transitional political context. The CPGB delegation was (self defensively) to condemn the final version on the following grounds:

... the theses repeatedly fall into eclecticism... The prevailing method of the thesis is: "on the one hand we must recognise, on the other we cannot but admit", without any consistent line. ... [Crucial sections are covered with a] cobweb of reservations and contradictions. ... This eclectic method deprives the theses of all semblance of a militant document....¹⁷

The British delegation's Royist position had the virtue of logical consistency (if not of a close relationship with reality) and the criticism was apposite. The Sixth Congress theses' logical incoherence did greatly weaken the document's force as a guide to political action. It was also to facilitate the ECCI's subsequent abandonment of its main strategic thrust. Paradoxically, however, it was precisely the ambiguity arising from this eclecticism, combined with the theses' comprehensive

scope, which subsequently allowed a section of the CPI leadership to develop from them a reasonably sophisticated theory of Indian politics running counter to the prevailing Tenth Plenum line. The Sixth Congress theses acknowledged, both explicitly and, through their internal inconsistencies, implicitly, the complexities of Indian politics and the inadequacies of the earlier and subsequent simplistic theories. The theses' inconsistencies also encouraged a selective reading of them in the light of observed realities. And that the relatively comprehensive Sixth Congress documents remained the ostensible basis of Comintern policy until the Seventh Congress in 1935 made it more possible to resist the ECCI's inappropriate 1929 innovations. One CPI faction continued to draw upon the 1928 theses even after the Seventh Congress.¹⁸ Because the Sixth Congress analysis was to become an important factor in CPI politics we need to examine their content in some detail.

The colonial theses were based explicitly on the 'third period'/'socialism in one country' dogmas. The conjunction of the entry of capitalism into a catastrophic crisis, and the building of socialism in the USSR, both guaranteed that this was the terminal phase of capitalism and opened 'a quite new

16. This will be covered in Chapter 7. That these agents were able to get past the normally very effective security barriers and remain in India undetected for extended periods may well have been due to the Raj's intelligence system's preoccupation with the Civil Disobedience movement.

17. Inprecor, Vol. 8(91), 1928, p.1744.

18. See Chapter 8, below.

perspective' for the national liberation movements in the colonies.¹⁹ But the document was centred around a direct attack on the Royist 'decolonisation' theory. To this extent the theses' main argument was essentially a restatement - though in considerably more detail - of the main tenets of Lenin's Second Congress theses from which the Sixth Congress theses claimed direct descent. India was taken as the main case study.

Imperialist political economy was directed, not towards the industrialisation of the colonies through the export of metropolitan capital, the document argued, but to the retardation of their industrial development. The export of capital, and the colonial industrialisation of the War and post-War period, had been only temporary, and determined primarily by extra-economic contingencies. The export of capital to India since then had been extremely limited and moreover, it had been invested primarily in non-industrial sectors. The absence of a significant engineering industry in India proved this point. Capital investment had led only indirectly, and very partially, to further industrialisation or to the development of a capitalist mode of agriculture. Imperialism had, in fact, hindered the development of the productive forces of the colony and had strengthened the parasitic, neo-feudal, pre-capitalist modes of exploitation (in land ownership, trade and usury) upon which it was superimposed. The consequent agrarian crisis imposed, in turn, very severe constraints on the development of an internal market for

19. From the introductory section of the theses, in Inprecor, Vol. 8(88), 1928, p.1661. The theses as a whole are in ibid., pp.1659-76.

industry - whether colonial or metropolitan.²⁰

From this analysis, which was essentially in accord with Indian realities, the theses concluded, firstly, that the colonial bourgeoisie was, apart from certain compradorist merchant elements, 'objectively' in radical conflict with the interests of imperialism.²¹ The colonial and metropolitan bourgeoisies were not engaged in a joint strategy of industrialisation. There was little basis for the economic and political 'partnership' alleged by the Roy-Dutt analysis. The colonial bourgeoisie, and particularly its industrialist fraction, was a 'national bourgeoisie'. Secondly, because of the low level of industrialisation, the industrial working class was 'young' and numerically small. Moreover, often seasonal and 'with one foot still in the village', it was incompletely proletarianised and remained largely illiterate and culturally heterogenous.²² Hence the task of developing class organisation and consciousness was a difficult one. Thirdly, and also because of the low level of industrialisation, the agrarian sector remained crucial for a revolutionary strategy. The peasant revolt against the 'feudal-colonial' structure of exploitation would provide the main mass force of the national-revolutionary movement. Thus the peasantry as a whole - though with the possible future exception of the 'thin stratum of kulak peasants' which had arisen as a result of colonial policy²³ - was objectively revolutionary. Because of these defining character-

20. ibid, pp.1662-64.

21. ibid, pp.1664-65.

22. ibid, p.1670; also p.1667.

23. ibid., p.1664.

istics the immediate revolutionary stage was that of the 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution, and its 'axis' was the 'national-emancipatory struggle' combined with the agrarian revolution.²⁴ The preconditions for the proletarian-socialist revolution did not yet exist.

In translating these 'objective' class categories into concrete political behaviour the theses made some reasonably perceptive observations. Moreover, the sociological categories, though still crude, did mark an advance on those previously employed in Comintern analyses of Indian society. But the Sixth Congress analysis also drew - against its own logic - a number of 'Royist' conclusions, without either theoretical or empirical justification. Further, other conclusions were qualified to the point of meaninglessness. The theses also made some extremely mechanistic connections between the economic and political levels.

One of the difficult problems the document grappled with was the role of the 'national bourgeoisie' in colonial politics. The bourgeoisie's support for the national movement was 'vacillating' and 'compromising', reflecting its 'intermediate position' between the revolutionary and the feudal-imperialist 'camps'.²⁵ It could be designated as 'national reformism', to distinguish it from the 'national revolutionary' forces. In some of its formulations on the character of 'national reformism' the Sixth Congress document achieved a reasonable working definition of the political strategy of the Indian bourgeoisie. For example:

24. ibid., p.1665.

25. ibid., pp.1665-66.

The native bourgeoisie ... again and again capitulates to imperialism. Its capitulation, however, is not final as long as the danger of class revolution on the part of the masses has not become immediate... . In order, on the one hand, to avoid this danger, and, on the other hand, to strengthen its position in relation to imperialism, bourgeois nationalism ... strives to obtain the support of the petty bourgeoisie, of the peasantry and in part also of the working class. Since, in relation to the working class it has little prospect of success ... it becomes the more important for it to obtain support from the peasantry.²⁶

The bourgeoisie's ideological influence 'on the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie, peasantry and even a portion of the working class', was also recognised.²⁷ However, by over-estimating the extent of big-landlordism and under-estimating the strength of the 'thin stratum of kulak peasants', it seriously under-estimated the potential for a bourgeois-peasant alliance. Thus, the theses argued, the bourgeoisie's need to mobilise peasant support against imperialism was its 'weakest point'. Because of the intensity and mode of the peasants' exploitation they could only be substantially mobilised around a program of agrarian revolution, not mere reform. But the bourgeoisie, as with the petty bourgeoisie, was 'by its immediate interests so closely bound up with landlordism, with usury capital and with the exploitation of the peasant masses in general' that it opposed not only agrarian revolution, but also decisive agrarian reform.²⁸ Therefore as the agrarian crisis advanced the bourgeoisie would increasingly retreat to the tactics of using 'empty nationalist phrases and gestures to keep the petty bourgeois masses under its influence and to compel imperialism

26. ibid., p.1666

27. loc. cit...

28. loc. cit...

to grant certain concessions.'²⁹

This shortcoming would not have been as serious had the theses not also - and, again, against their logic of the central argument - exaggerated the potential political strength of the working class and the potential for a worker-peasant alliance. 'The real threat to British domination comes [it was asserted] not from the bourgeois camp, but from the growing mass movement of the Indian workers' supported by the agrarian revolution.³⁰ This was 'leading to a radical transformation of the whole political situation in India': 'the hegemony of the proletariat' in the 'bourgeois-democratic revolution' was now possible. Despite the vehemence of the argument against the possibility of substantial industrialisation in India, it was asserted that 'the new capitalist forms of exploitation bring into the arena a genuine revolutionary force - the proletariat, around which the many millions of the peasant masses rally more and more strongly'.³¹

Finally, the theses' careful attempts to categorise the 'ambiguous' politics of 'national-reformism', so as to avoid the Chinese Party's 'mistakes', became far too careful - and even more ambiguous than the tactics of the national bourgeoisie. Both the ambiguity and the under-estimation of the force of 'bourgeois' nationalism are particularly evident in the following passage:

29. loc. cit..

30. loc. cit..

31. ibid., p.1664. The theses drew on the current strikes as evidence for this claim: ibid., ps. 1660 and 1673.

The national bourgeoisie has not the significance of a force in the struggle against imperialism. Nevertheless, this bourgeois-reformist opposition has its real special significance for the development of the revolutionary movement ... in so far as it possesses any mass influence at all.³²

In contrast to the confused tentativeness of such formulations, the theses' conceptualisation of the relationship between class and party was as crudely confident as that of the school it was criticising. The National Congress, it was asserted, was 'the organ of the Indian bourgeoisie'.³³ The Congress leadership thus directly pursued the goals and tactics attributed by the theses to Indian capitalism, despite the 'petty bourgeois' origins of much of the leadership: colonial movements such as 'Gandhism' were 'originally petty bourgeois ideological movements which, however, as a result of their service to the big bourgeoisie became converted into a [sic.] bourgeois nationalist-reformist movement'.³⁴ However the Congress also contained a 'petty bourgeois' 'radical wing' which had not yet submitted to bourgeois hegemony and which stood for 'a more or less consistent national-revolutionary point of view'.³⁵ But even the members of this group were merely acting as 'more or less revolutionary representatives of the anti-imperialist interests of the colonial bourgeoisie', and would renege on their radicalism when the mass revolutionary crisis deepened.³⁶ Only small numbers of the intelligentsia would join the 'genuine' worker-peasant, anti-imperialist,

32. ibid., p.1667.

33. ibid., p.1660.

34. ibid., p.1668.

35. loc. cit...

36. loc. cit...

bourgeois-democratic revolution; for this revolution would also be directed against the intelligentsia's class position. Thus a very misleading economic reductionism complemented the sociological shortcomings of the theses. The failure to recognise the important mediating role of ideology which underlay this reductionism also led to a deterministic optimism about the likely political behaviour of the exploited masses: having been 'betrayed' once - in 1922 - by 'bourgeois national-reformism', they would relatively quickly liberate themselves from 'bourgeois' ideological influence in the coming crisis. The same mode of analysis led to the drawing of extremely mechanistic analogies with Chinese politics.³⁷ The inadequacy of the comparisons with China were compounded by a complete failure to take into account the critical role of the colonial state in India.

The tactical conclusions drawn from the above arguments and assertions reflected the theses' inherent ambiguity. In consonance with the formulation on the oppositional role of the bourgeoisie, the CPI was warned against the sectarian mistake of self-isolation through failing to participate in the currently bourgeois-led nationalist movement. The communists were to exploit to the full the contradiction between imperialism and the national bourgeoisie. However the Party was also warned against the opposite mistake of failing to prepare itself and the masses for the bourgeoisie's fairly imminent capitulation in the face of a rising mass revolt: it was necessary 'mercilessly

37. Eg., the National Congress was portrayed as a direct equivalent of the Kuomintang, and Gandhi of Sun Yat Sen.

to expose before the toiling masses the national-reformist character of the Swarajist ... and other nationalist parties, and in particular of their leaders'. However the exposure was

... not to be achieved by any noisy phrases, however radical they may sound superficially, about the absence of any distinction between the oppositional national-reformists ... and the British imperialists or their feudal counter-revolutionary allies. The national reformist leaders would easily be able to make use of such an exaggeration in order to incite the masses against the Communists.³⁸

Organisationally, the Party was to 'reject the formation of any kind of bloc' with the 'bourgeois national-reformist' parties and to 'demarcate' itself 'in the most clear-cut fashion' from the 'petty bourgeois national-revolutionary' parties. However it was 'permissible' to form temporary agreements and coordinate separate anti-imperialist activities with the former, and to establish temporary unions with the latter, provided that their anti-imperialism remained 'genuine' and that they did not hinder the communists' mass work. The communists should, through ideological struggle, win from the petty bourgeoisie their hegemony over the peasantry, while 'relentlessly' struggling against the 'slightest' sign of bourgeois influence inside the labour movement.³⁹

The Sixth Congress asserted, against the 'new Imperialist policy' advocates, the central importance of the peasantry in the colonial revolution. Accordingly the CPI was directed to place a great deal more emphasis on peasant organisation than hitherto. But the force of this directive was blunted by the assumptions that the proletariat was the

38. loc. cit...

39. loc. cit...

only 'genuinely' revolutionary class and that it was significant enough in India to lead a revolution,⁴⁰ and by the exaggerated fear of the intrusion of 'petty bourgeois' influence, via the peasantry, into proletarian politics. Thus the working class was to remain the sole organisational base of the CPI. On this base the Party could become a 'powerful' force in Indian politics. Further, the Party was urged not to continue to organise the Workers' and Peasants' Parties, for these 'two-class' parties could 'too easily ... be converted into ordinary petty bourgeois parties. The Communist Party can never build its organisation on the basis of a fusion of two classes, and ... it cannot ... organise other parties on this basis, which is characteristic of petty bourgeois groups'.⁴¹ Thus while the CPI was forcefully reminded of the very great importance of developing its influence among the peasantry, it was to do so, not through a political party which included the peasantry, but only through peasant unions. The alliance of the proletariat and the peasantry was to be expressed merely in 'carefully prepared and periodically convened joint conferences and congresses' of representatives of trade and peasant unions and through similar organisational forms.⁴²

All of these tasks, which presupposed a strong Communist Party, were urged upon the CPI despite the Sixth Congress's explicit recognition that, strictly speaking, no Communist Party of India yet existed.⁴³ But instead of relating the Party's weakness to the objective difficulties for revolutionar

40. The proper relationship between the proletariat and the peasantry in the revolution was encapsulated in the following way: 'The peasantry can only achieve its emancipation under the leadership of the proletariat, but the proletariat can only lead the bourgeois-democratic revolution to victory in union with the peasantry': ibid., p.1666.

politics, the theses spoke glibly of 'the excessively marked disproportion between the objective revolutionary situation and the weakness of the subjective factor'.⁴⁴ Because the 'third period' hypothesis required an 'objectively' revolutionary situation, the weakness of the revolutionary movement was reduced to 'the subjective factor'. For the present, the current leadership in India was simply chastised and reminded of the urgency of the task of forming a united national Party which was capable of effectively combining legal and illegal work. They were not yet burdened with the full responsibility for the 'failure' of the Indian revolution - nor, therefore, with the full program of 'Bolshevisation'.

Thus the general class analysis employed in the Sixth Congress colonial theses was logically consistent and provided a much more adequate hypothesis than any previously received by the CPI from abroad. It was very schematic, underestimated the influence of both merchant and industrial capital on nationalist politics and the potential for a political alliance between urban capitalists and the dominant peasantry, and overestimated the level of poor peasant revolt. Nevertheless it did recognise the crucial political significance of the agrarian sector, the inherent antagonism of interests between the British and Indian bourgeoisies, the tactical nature of the latter's compromises with imperialism, and the importance of the role of 'bourgeois-democratic' ideology in determining the existing character of nationalist politics. It also explicitly

41. ibid., p.1671; also p.1673.

42. ibid., p.1671.

43. ibid., p.1673.

44. ibid., p.1670.

recognised the incomplete proletarianisation of the 'semi-peasant' working class and, through its argument on industrialisation, it implicitly recognised the strategic weakness of the working class in Indian politics. To this extent it was a reasonable basis for CPI politics in the coming period. But when the theses attempted a detailed consideration of political strategies and tactics they led to conclusions which either lay quite outside the preceding logic or which were qualified to the point of meaningless. Moreover, the conceptualisation of the relationship between class and politics became extremely mechanical. At a methodological level, the discrepancy between the underlying analysis and the policy conclusions revealed, in part, a confusion between two incompatible modes of analysis: while the central argument employed a structural class analysis, many of the conclusions or qualifications relied on a subjectivist, psychologistic mode of analysis. For example, though the theses initially relate the bourgeoisie's 'vacillations' to its intermediate class position they are subsequently linked to bourgeois states of mind - 'half-heartedness', lack of a 'genuine' 'desire' for independence, wavering 'moods', and so on.⁴⁵ The latter, non-Marxist tendency subsequently became a much more dominant mode of ECCI analysis.

The Tenth Plenum and After

Although the Sixth Congress theses remained the official basis of CPI policy they were, in fact, soon replaced

45. eg., ibid., ps. 1668 and 1670.

by a policy based on the 'left-sectarian' inconsistencies in the 1928 document rather than on the anti-'decolonisation' logic. Moreover, the conceptualisation became even more crude, the tone more hysterical and the attacks on 'bourgeois' and 'petty bourgeois' nationalism more abusive. The CPI's respite from the 'left-sectarianism' on which it had been raised was brief. But this time, in the Civil Disobedience period, the consequences were far more serious.

The policy change was heralded in an April 1929 Comintern manifesto to the Indian revolution,⁴⁶ confirmed at the ECCI's Tenth Plenum, and enshrined in the 'Draft Platform of Action of the Communist Party of India' at the end of 1930.⁴⁷ The Draft Platform became the official basis of CPI policy. The new policy was also reproduced constantly in the pages of the Comintern press during the following four years.

According to this argument the Indian proletariat, led by the millhands of Bombay, had finally risen to its inherent political consciousness and power. Moreover, the peasants had begun to rally behind this challenge. Consequently the Indian bourgeoisie (and thus the National Congress) had finally capitulated to British imperialism - it was now 'imperialism's batman',⁴⁸ - despite the remaining contradiction of interests. The capitulation was evidenced by the rescinding

46. See fn. 8.

47. The Draft Platform first appeared in Inprecor in December 1930 (Inprecor, Vol.10(58), 1930, pp.1218-22). It was first received in India in early 1931: MCG:2.

48. P. Schubert, 'Problems of the Revolutionary Movement in India', in Communist International (hereafter CI), Vol. 6 (11-13), 1929, p.506.

of the Complete Independence goal at the Calcutta Congress. The workers' demonstration at that Congress was the true indication of the future shape of Indian nationalist politics. Even imperialism was 'scared out of its wits' by the proletarian challenge - this was shown by the launching of the Meerut Case, which was directed against the WPPs' 'rapidly rising influence in town and country'.⁴⁹ The Congress's launching of the Civil Disobedience movement was simply a preemptive attempt by the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie to disorganise the inevitable mass revolt by claiming its leadership. The 'petty bourgeois' radical wing of the National Congress had, in turn, capitulated to the bourgeoisie, while at the same time strengthening its links with the 'treacherous' social democrats of Britain. The Congress left was now acting as the 'left-reformist' agency of the reactionary bourgeoisie. The revolutionary credentials of the intelligentsia would be determined by its relationship to the proletarian revolution: 'That section which does not submit to the hegemony of the proletariat will be immediately thrown by the course of events into the camp of the counter-revolution'.⁵⁰ The 'left-reformists' were particularly dangerous because they masked their true, bourgeois counter-revolutionary colours with leftist 'phrases' which, though empty, might 'fool' the masses. In the Draft Platform of Action this particular danger was formulated in the following words:

49. Inprecor, Vol. 9(17), 1929, p.340. (My emphasis.)

50. Schubin, op. cit., p.518.

The greatest threat to the victory of the Indian revolution is the fact that great masses of our people still harbour illusions about the National Congress and have not realised that it represents a class organisation of the capitalists working against the fundamental interests of the toiling masses of our country. ... The National Congress, and particularly its "left" wing, have done and are doing all in their power to restrain the struggle of the masses within the framework of the⁵¹ British imperialist Constitution and legislation.

How a revolutionary situation could exist while this illusion remained strong among the masses was not explained.

Instead, the CPI was tutored in the hyperbolic art of Stalinist abuse: Jawaharlal Nehru was a 'sly son of an even more sly father, now deceased'; the GPU's Kandalkar was a 'counter-revolutionary centipede' who 'has in reserve hundreds of manoeuvres for dissipating the force of the proletariat'; following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact the 'Congress and its "left" wing ... will now, more than ever, creep out of its skin in order to screen its black treachery and help English imperialism to avenge itself on the mass revolutionary movement'.⁵² In accordance with the Tenth Plenum schema the CPI was urged to break of all organisational contact with the Congress, to declare 'ruthless war' on the Congress as a whole, and to organise the proletariat as an independent political force and rally behind it the peasantry and the urban poor.

Concurrently with the escalation of 'left-sectarianism' the ECCI accelerated the program of bolshevisation. To eradicate 'deviationism' and to 'explain' the weakness of the CPI at the outset of the alleged revolutionary conflagration in India,

51. Inprecor, Vol. 10(58), 1930, p.1219.

52. G. Safarov, 'The Treachery of the National Congress and the Revolutionary Upsurge in India', in CI, Vol. 8(9), p.260, pp.263-4 and p.265 respectively. Safarov's imagery is more imaginative than most, but its style is representative of the anti-Congress polemics in CI and Inprecor throughout this period.

it publicly scrutinised the shortcomings of the national and international leaderships of Indian communism in the 1920s. At the Tenth Plenum 'Comrade' Roy became a 'renegade', and he was subsequently expelled.⁵³ The CPGB, which had had the temerity to make a spirited attack on the Sixth Congress colonial theses, was chastised for its 'woefully inadequate' leadership of the CPI and received special mention as a Party in need of bolshevisation.⁵⁴ Roy's role as the European-based Indian expert and rapporteur on Indian affairs was taken over by his longstanding rival, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya. During his decline Roy initially maintained his 'new Imperialist policy' position.⁵⁵ He then changed his policy to one which acknowledged the anti-imperialist role of the Indian bourgeoisie and the Gandhian leadership, projected a more modest revolutionary role for the proletariat, and accorded more political importance to the Congress radicals and to work within the Congress. He returned to India with these new policy perspectives.⁵⁶ The CPGB, however, had little contact with Indian politics during this period. It appears to have been removed by the ECCI from its late 1920s position of principal guide to the CPI, and replaced by the direct representatives of the ECCI mentioned earlier.

The ECCI also reprimanded the 1920s Indian communist leadership. They were heavily criticised for their resistance to the Sixth Congress's 'recommendation' that the WPPs be abolished and for having lagged far behind the 'revolutionary'

53. Inprecor, Vol. 9(40), 1929, p.846; Inprecor, Vol. 9(69) 1929, p.1470.

54. Inprecor, Vol.9(53), 1929, p.1148; Macfarlane, op. cit., pp.231-33.

55. Eg. MCCC, P.1207(6); an article by Roy titled 'On the Indian Question at the VI World Congress'.

56. See Haithcox, op. cit., pp.164-74.

temper of the working class. Moreover, they were contrasted very unfavourable with the new communist leadership: 'They are this year not the same by far what they were last year (sic). What enormous vacillations and errors we witnessed last year among Indian Communists, and how different is their attitude now!'.⁵⁷ The same process of leadership change was taking place throughout the world's communist parties: 'The most active and militant elements ... are now gaining the upper hand. Commensurate with this the less active sections within the Parties are relegated to a secondary position. The Party Executives are reorganised ... along the same lines'.⁵⁸ Even before the Tenth Plenum the old CPI leadership had received a severe censure in an article in the Comintern's theoretical journal. It had remained in 'almost complete mechanical isolation' from international communism⁵⁹ and, largely because of this, had continued to participate in the dangerous illusion of a 'legal' Communist party:

This "Communist Party of India", which existed legally on paper, and in which together with honest revolutionary elements were also petty bourgeois confusionists, and openly suspect elements, by its utter impotence, passivity, and complete severance from the mass struggle could only give the workers the impression that the organisation of a Communist Party of India is quite impossible. The fact that the legal Community Party neither lives nor dies had led to the theory that its destiny is to "occupy an empty place", whilst the struggle of the workers and peasants has to go on independently of the C.P. ... under the leadership of other party organisations. ... Thus India also ... has already revealed the tendency to "re-dye the pseudo-Communist revolutionary emancipation movement in backward countries in the hue of Communism"..... 60

57. *Inprecor*, Vol. 9(40), 1929, p.847.

58. *ibid.*, p.852. It was standard Stalinist practice to jettison old leaderships with old policies, as a means of justifying the policy change.

59. Schubin, *op. cit.*, p.522.

60. *ibid.*, p.524. The ECCI was thus identifying the pre-Meerut Case leadership with Satyabakta, the convenor of the 1925 Kanpur 'communist' Conference.

Thus the old CPI leaders were reduced to no more than 'honest revolutionary elements' naively participating in a 'pseudo-Communist' movement. The categorisation continued in 1930 and 1931.

CHAPTER 7

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DEFEAT: THE DISINTEGRATION OF COMMUNIST
LEADERSHIP DURING CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND THE COMINTERN'S
'THIRD PERIOD'

'The outlook is so hopeless from our point of view that we are almost tempted to give up the idea of saying anything whatsoever.'

- The Meerut group, commenting in January 1933 on the state of the CPI (in MCG:3).

The CPI's history in this period is primarily a history of intra-Party politics. Although its details are often byzantine, the main features of the story are simple. In January 1933, just before receiving their very heavy sentences in the Meerut Sessions Court, the Meerut group wrote in despair that:

During the past four years the Communist movement in India has received a series of set-backs. It has been losing one vantage ground after another. We have lost our influence over the working class masses in Bombay and Calcutta, we have failed to make any mark in the political field, we are faced with confusion and disintegration in our own thinning ranks. ... No coordinated work is done. Recrimination and counter-recrimination is the order of the day. An atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion reigns supreme. ¹

If we add to this the increasingly active and direct involvement of the ECCI in the affairs of an increasingly dependent CPI - an involvement which was simultaneously imposed on and sought by the latter - then the essential outlines of the picture are complete.

1. MCG:3.

As the Raj had intended, the Meerut Case period put not only the first leadership of the CPI on trial, but also the very existence of the Indian communist movement. The decapitation of a movement which was unprepared for repression, and the subsequent elimination of the Bombay branch's mass base and position in nationalist politics, led to a deep leadership crisis in the tenuous 'all-India' Party which remained. In the much less favourable 1930-33 conjuncture the Party was reduced to a constellation of mutually hostile leadership factions based on regional and personal loyalties as well as political differences - a small group of defensive, divided and bemused 'generals without an army'.² This leadership failure prevented it from undertaking the inherently difficult task of regrouping and participating in the other battle which now raged around it. The Comintern became increasingly important as both a directive and a mediating force in intra-Party politics; but its contribution, far from breaking the futile circle of impotence and disunity into which the CPI became locked, completed it. Meanwhile, the great wave of Civil Disobedience formed, then passed it by; any potential which this upheaval might have possessed for communist politics was to remain almost totally untested. Against this background the actual survival of the Party was an achievement of some significance.

This, then, was the nadir of early Indian communism. The deep crisis of leadership demonstrated the full extent of the vulnerability of the communists' achievements in the late 1920s and of the inappropriateness of the ECCI's 'third period' guidelines. But if the significance of the period lay only in this then not a great deal more would need to be added to the account provided in

2. IB, Communism, (1935), p.165.

Chapter 5. In fact the trauma was also of deep significance for the future development of the Party: from the extremes of the CPI's humiliation some equally extreme lessons were drawn and long-term plans laid; out of the bitter 'mutual distrust and suspicion' described by the Meerut group were born deep-rooted schisms and frustrations whose traces can be discerned into the post-colonial period; and those communists whose convictions survived this period of trial were almost all to become life-long committed members and to form the core of the Party's subsequent leadership. Moreover, at a more general level, we can also see the disintegration of the Party in this period, and the manner of its formation in the next, as a particularly informative case study of the relationship between the Party's modes of operation and the general problems for it inherent in the Indian and Comintern contexts; here we see particularly clearly the necessary conditions for the CPI's survival, as a Party, in these contexts. For these reasons it is necessary to outline the contours and the dynamics of the intra-Party politics of this period as well as to register the failure.³

The CPI's mode of organisation at the time of the Meerut

3. Because the character of intra-Party politics was the most significant aspect of the Party's history in this period, and because its political insignificance at a time of political upheaval meant that its activities were barely reported in the press or noticed by Intelligence, we rely primarily on Party documents. The series of lengthy reports prepared by the Meerut group are the most informative sources - for Intelligence (see BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: undated BSB note on MCG:2) as well as the historian. These reports are detailed reconstructions of, and commentaries upon, Party affairs. Together they cover some 80 pages of single-space typed foolscap. They are based on interviews with the 'outside' communists at the Meerut jail, reports sent to the Meerut group and observations made by the several Meerut prisoners who were allowed to visit their home cities for various reasons - from sickness, to being allowed bail during the case. The reports cite the evidence upon which they are based.

arrests was still that of a 'family circle' of like-minded groups. The attempts at reorganisation begun in December 1928 had not successfully created a disciplined, centralised Communist Party. The Indian communists and the ECCI were repeatedly to emphasise the importance of strong, centralised Party organisation during 1929-33, and a formal 'all-India' Party apparatus was, in fact, set up. Nevertheless the 'family circle' metaphor remains apt as a description of communist organisation in this period, too, even if the circle was to fall prey to the hostile and brittle relationships to which the family is prone in times of stress. Between 1929 and 1933 there were three distinct member groups: Bombay, Bengal and the Meerut jail group.⁴ For reasons which will be investigated in this chapter, Bombay was to remain the dominant group throughout this period, even after its political influence had declined to something like the Bengal group's level. For example, the Party Secretariat and Central Committee which were established in 1930 remained in Bombay's hands. Most of the changes in the character of Party organisation and modes of operation were linked to Bombay initiatives and changes within the Bombay group; Bengal's impact was very weak. This chapter will therefore be concerned primarily with Bombay and its relations with other groups. Because the developments within the Meerut jail were not to have a substantial impact on the development of the Party until the following period, these will be investigated

4. The UP groupings were destroyed by the Meerut arrests. Two or three individuals were left in Lahore and Amritsar, but they were unable to re-form themselves into a definite group. A very small group was begun in Madras in 1931, but it made no headway (see below). The Meerut group believed that 'none of these is... worth taking notice of as a factor of importance in dealing with the immediate Party situation': MCG:2.

in Chapter 8.

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The malaise in Party politics described above by the Meerut group began to appear openly in the second half of 1929, and was entrenched by the end of 1930. It was manifested in a number of ways. A central feature was the decline and ossification of the Bombay leadership, and the projection of the effects of this process onto the other groups through the formal 'all-India' apparatus which it came to dominate. The bureaucratic-centralist way in which the Bombay leadership controlled the apparatus from the end of 1929 was complemented by its increasingly complete political isolation and inactivity. However the isolation and inactivity rested awkwardly during 1930 with a strident propagation of the ECCI's 'ultra-revolutionary' sectarian policy in both nationalist and trade union politics, punctuated by sporadic sectarian 'militant' actions which hastened rather than arresting the Party's decline. Behind this formalistic projection of orthodoxy lay a developing symbiosis between the Soviet and (though not uniformly) the different CPI leaderships: the former needed, for its own ideological-political purposes, 'confirmation' of the 'correctness' of the ECCI's Indian policy and, thus, the CPI's 'disciplined' adherence to it; contemporaneously, once the latter had lost the resources, political authority and momentum provided by a mass base, it chose increasingly to depend on the authority and the material and moral resources bestowed by the ECCI.

As we saw in Chapters 5 and 6, this situation was created and sustained primarily by the major structural changes which took place in both Indian and Comintern politics in the late 1920s. But what was the process by which these structural changes were

translated into the Bombay communists' near-complete failure, sketched above, to respond as a revolutionary leadership? What were the specific forms taken by this leadership failure?

The personal qualities and the political skills and commitments of the leaders were factors of obvious importance. They became particularly significant in the conditions of extreme defensiveness, and then defeat, which the new leadership had immediately to face; the psychology of defensiveness and defeat was the second factor of importance. The third was the specific contribution made by the Comintern agents who arrived in India during this critical transitional period. We will now look at each of these issues before going on to chart the further decline of the Bombay branch from 1930.

Personal Factors Assume Political Importance.

In their carefully considered analysis of the causes of the decline of leadership in 1929-30, the Meerut group placed the greatest emphasis on the un-transformed 'petty bourgeois mentality' and the alleged doubtful motivations of their successors. For both reasons, the Meerut group argued, the new leadership chose to work 'not ... as a Party, but as a group on a personal basis', allowing 'personal factors to assume political importance'.⁵

The Meerut analysis greatly underestimated the contribution of the other two factors noted above. And, although the Meerut group recognised the continuities of the new leadership's 'personal group' mode of organisation with its own, it played down the significance of the continuity. Nevertheless, the Meerut

5. MCG:2 & MCG:1 respectively. See also IB, Communism, (1935) p.158.

group did identify a crucial problem. Moreover, quite apart from the question of the adequacy of the analysis, once it had been distributed within the Party it became a factor of considerable importance in its internal politics - it contributed to Bombay's factional hostility towards Meerut and to the ascendancy of personal issues within the Party.⁶

In Chapter 5 we saw the results for the communists' trade union bases of the failure of the original leadership adequately to train an alternative leadership and to create a cadre system within the workforce. Similar results arose within the Party, and for similar reasons.⁷ The Meerut arrests spared few with any experience in the work of either the WPP or the CP. Moreover, there was no established procedure of leadership succession. Of those who had attended one or more of the Bombay CP meetings in March, only five remained: D.B. Kulkarni, Pendse, Amir Haider Khan, Deshpande and Ranadive.⁸ Kulkarni, the railway worker and GIPRU leader, had been a WPP member since March 1928 and had been admitted to the CPI at the Calcutta meeting in December.⁹ With this background he was the most senior Party member. Pendse had been an active WPP leader - if not one of its most prominent - since its foundation. Haider Khan, the Moscow-

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6. Bombay's reactions are summarised in MCG:2. One group, for instance, criticised the first Meerut group report for being 'personal rather than political'.
 7. The IB commented (IB, Communism, (1935), p.180) that 'The inadequacy of the supply of competent alternative leaders was the logical outcome of the neglect of the Party during the palmy days of 1928, and this deficiency became the more pronounced by reason of the periodical imprisonment of such leaders as there were and the consequent dislocation of any arrangements which might have been made for training new cadres'
 8. MCCC, Ps.1296 & 1297: minutes of CP meetings, Bombay, 17 & 19/3/29.
 9. MCCC, P.1303: CPI meetings, Calcutta, 18 & 19/12/28.

trained Punjabi who had returned to India and begun working in the Party from the end of 1928, was the CPI's one proficient underground organiser. Deshpande and Ranadive were the least experienced of the five. Deshpande had not joined the WPP until December 1928, and Ranadive, a cousin of Adhikari's, had joined with him in January 1929.¹⁰ Ranadive's had been a very recent conversion to a communist approach to politics, for as late as December 1928 he had been a 'fervent nationalist' and antagonistic to the communists.¹¹

Two more figures were to play a prominent role - the most prominent role according to the Meerut group¹² - in the Bombay branch's regroupment, even though they had not previously been members of either the CPI or the WPP. Lester Hutchinson and Suhasini Nambiar - who was to become the CPI's first woman leader - had arrived in Bombay from Berlin in September 1928. Hutchinson was an aspiring left-wing journalist in his early twenties. Though from a communist family background in England, he was not a communist - Spratt, for instance, described him as an ardent 'fellow traveller', and he was to become a Labour MP after his return to England.¹³ Nambiar, in her late twenties, was the youngest daughter of the remarkable family of Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya; among her sisters and brothers were the

10. MCCC, P.1344: WPP EC meetings, 7/12/28 & 13/1/29.

11. M.G. Desai, in M.B. Rao and Mohit Sen, *op. cit.*, p.24. The Meerut group commented (MCG:1) that Ranadive had come to the Party almost directly from the Bombay Youth League, 'bringing ... no doubt some of its Puritanical psychology and distrust of Communists as "intriguers" etc.'. See also Lalji Pendse's unpublished memoirs (translated for the author by Dr. S. Pendse).

12. MCG:1. Their prominence rested partly on their prestige in having worked in Berlin's revolutionary circles.

13. Spratt, *op. cit.*, pp.57-8: IB, Communism, p.115.

distinguished poet and nationalist, Sarojini Naidu, the exiled revolutionary and leader of the 'Berlin group' of Indian revolutionaries, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, and the noted playwright, Harindranath.¹⁴ Nambiar had studied at Oxford before going to Berlin with her husband. Under her brother's influence she was attracted towards communism. Hutchinson, during his brief stay in Berlin, also came into close working contact with Chattopadhyaya. While Suhasini's husband remained in Berlin with her brother's group, she and Hutchinson, for reasons that are not clear, departed for Bombay. In Bombay Hutchinson began a Marxist study circle for youth, and both he and Nambiar made contact with some WPP members. However they did not join the party themselves until after the Meerut Case arrests.¹⁵

Immediately after the arrests Nambiar, Hutchinson, Deshpande, Ranadive, Kulkarni, Pendse and Haider formed the nucleus of a new communist group.¹⁶ Purandare, the other WPP member in the GIPRU, was also added, only to be dropped from the party soon after, along with Kulkarni, for reasons that are not apparent.¹⁷ After the Home Department decided in June 1929 to include Hutchinson and Haider Khan in the Meerut Case,¹⁸ the situation was changed again. Hutchinson

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14. For the Chattopadhyaya family background and environment see: H. Chattopadhyaya, Life and Myself, Vol. 1: Dawn Approaching Noon, (Bombay, 1948), passim; P. Sengupta, Sarojini Naidu, A Biography, (Bombay, 1966), pp.8-22. Hutchinson, op. cit., pp.32-3.
15. MCG:1 & 2; MCCC Judgement, pp.466-7. Hutchinson, op. cit., ps. 37 & 39.
16. MCG:2; BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: note in the BSB, 22/4/29; Hutchinson, op. cit., pp.49-54.
17. MCG:2.
18. NAI, H.Poll, 10/19/1929: HD meeting, 6/6/29.

was arrested, while Haider Khan managed to evade arrest by going underground, leaving India for Europe, then returning to Madras in March 1931. He was to work there undetected until 1932.¹⁹ Finally, Pendse was isolated by Deshpande and Ranadive for alleged strike-breaking activities during the textile strike.²⁰

Thus, by July the leadership was in the hands of three middle class intellectuals who were newcomers to the movement.²¹ Until the release of the Meerut communists they were to remain the dominant leaders in both Bombay and the CPI as a whole. Of the three, Deshpande and Nambiar were to make the most decisive contribution to the character of the leadership in 1929-30.²² Ranadive, who was younger than the other two and with even less experience, played a comparatively subsidiary role during 1929,

19. IB, Communism, (1935), p.177; interview with B.T. Ranadive; NAI, H.Poll, 44/92/1934: G of Madras to G of I, 3/9/34. In Madras, Haider Khan was able to set up a small group as well as arranging communication lines to the Comintern and the framework of a courier service, through railwaymen, to Bombay. But the Madras group and the communications links were broken by Haider Khan's arrest. The Intelligence Branch regarded him as 'a most dangerous individual'. See also: TNA, GO 918-9, Public, June 20, 1932; TNA, GO 946, Public, Sept. 10, 1934, for reports on Haider Khan's activities.
20. Lalji Pendse's unpublished memoirs; Newman, *op. cit.*, p.342. Pendse says that the fact that he was not included in the Meerut Case was also used against him to suggest that he was a spy. The actual reason for his exclusion from the March 20 arrests was the lack of sufficient documentary proof against him, and he was not included in the June arrests because, despite the proof that had come to light in the Meerut Case evidence, New Delhi thought that it should not risk aggravating the GIPR situation by arresting him at that point: NAI, H.Poll, 10/19/1929: HD meeting, 6/6/29.
21. BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: note on Bombay communist organisations, 1929-33. Neither Deshpande nor Ranadive had attracted the attention of the CID during 1928 or early 1929 (NAI, H.Poll, 303/1929: notes of conversation between Haig & the Bombay Commissioner of Police, 4/6/29). The IB commented that after the Meerut arrests 'the vacuum in the leadership ... was filled by very inferior material': IB, Communism, (1935), p.158.
22. IB, Communism, (1935), p.160; MCG: 1 & 2.

and he was in prison for most of 1930. It was not until after his release in November of that year that his capacity for assertiveness was to become fully apparent. Deshpande was the main public figure during 1929-30, while Nambiar took over the 'tech' (organisational) and financial departments.

Deshpande's was a particularly domineering and sectarian leadership style.²³ But of the three leaders the Meerut group credited Nambiar with the dominant role: to them it was 'at once obvious' that she was 'the leading personality of the group'.²⁴ An intense Party controversy developed around the issues of her intentions and her influence on the other two.

Suhasini Nambiar was, by all accounts, and in common with the other members of her family, a remarkable and powerful personality. She was capable of arousing the strongest of attractions and antipathies, both inside and outside the Party.²⁵ Her family background was at once unorthodox, liberal, intellectual, artistic and political. It included a strong women's-
emancipationist element and a scorn for the prejudices and mores of high caste, middle class India.²⁶ Her friend Lester Hutchinson found her 'a lady of great culture and charm' who discovered 'scope for her talents as an actress and in the political

23. Eg., the Meerut group noted in 1932, when it was supporting Deshpande against Ranadive, that Deshpande's 'personal defects' were 'not few' and were 'of a grave character'. These included 'a tendency to narrowness and dogmatism', and 'rough behaviour, tactlessness and a desire to dominate': MCG:2.

24. MCG:1. This is also a dominant theme in MCG:2.

25. Eg., two former Congress leftists closely acquainted with Party activity at the time gave the author widely contrasting assessments of her character and political abilities: interviews with M.R. Masani (19/10/74) and S. Batliwala (16/10/74). The Party divisions over the issue will become apparent below.

movement';²⁷ Agnes Smedley, the American revolutionary and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya's common-law wife, described her as 'a musician and singer, a women of striking beauty and noble bearing', who was to become a fully committed communist; but, she added, 'it was years before she would bow her handsome aristocratic head and meet on a plane of equality with men of lesser station'.²⁸

It is clear from Party reports of the period that few were unaffected by her dramatic entrance into their world. The Meerut group believed that Deshpande and Ranadive became 'so infatuated and dominated by her that they will do exactly as she wants', while they themselves came to regard her with deep suspicion.²⁹

The Meerut group believed that she was working on behalf of a Berlin-based faction, centred around her brother, which was seeking to take over M.N. Roy's Comintern position as its main spokesman on, and contact with, Indian politics. This faction's plan, the Meerut group argued, was to discredit

26. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya was a Brahma Samajist and a close associate of Keshub Chunder Sen, a D.Sc. from Edinburgh University and a liberal educator of some note - setting up the Nizam's College in Hyderabad. He appears to have taken his Brahma ideals seriously and was an iconoclast in matters of caste orthodoxy and superstition. His wife was artistically talented and shared with him his views against the subjugation of women. Aghorenath was also a strong supporter of early nationalism. Finally, he developed a reputation as an eccentric - particularly for his experiments in alchemy. (For sources see fn. 14 above).

27. Hutchinson, *op. cit.*, p.33.

28. Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China*, (London, 1944), pp. 18-19. (Smedley attained distinction in the 1930s as a journalist and revolutionary activist in China.)

29. MCG:1.

Roy and his Indian contacts in order to bolster its claim that Indian communism required new international and national leaderships. Thus, the Meerut group reasoned, Nambiar and Hutchinson had probably been sent by Chattopadhyaya to attempt to enter the Party and, eventually, to reorganise it under a leadership loyal to her brother's faction and clearly differentiated from the old leadership. The Meerut arrests had provided an ideal opportunity, they hypothesised, and her influence on Deshpande and Ranadive had made it possible to consolidate her position. 'We believe', the Meerut group concluded, 'that this hypothesis, better than any other, will explain the strange behaviour of the group'.³⁰

The Meerut communists marshalled considerable circumstantial evidence, including certain incidents during the WPP split in Bengal in 1928-29, in support of their hypothesis.³¹

30. ibid.

31. MCG:1. Both Bhupendranath Dutt (Swami Vivekananda's brother) and Jawaharlal Nehru had returned from Berlin in 1928 with rumours, originating there, that the existing Party leadership contained spies, that it had misappropriated much of the supposedly large sums of money it had received from the Comintern, and that it sided with the British against the Congress. (See also MCCC, P.2148: P.C. Joshi to Ahmad, 25/2/29, reporting a conversation with Nehru; and MCCC, P.1097: Ahmad to Joshi, 19/3/29, replying to this information and reporting the effects of these rumours on anti-Party factionalism during the Bengal WPP split.) Another man who had returned to India from Europe in September 1928 had begun similar propaganda, but had admitted on questioning that his activity had been inspired by a Berlin faction. Inside the Meerut jail Hutchinson hinted occasionally that he and Nambiar had arrived in India 'with some task of a political nature on hand', but did not explain further, and the reasons for his arrival continued to remain a mystery to the Meerut prisoners. The Meerut group could also draw on Adhikari's intimate knowledge of expatriate revolutionary politics in Berlin in forming its hypothesis.

This lends it a certain plausibility. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter 5, 1928 was an opportune time for factional mobilisation against Roy's position in the Comintern. Chattopadhyaya did in fact win the influential position of joint-secretary to the LAI in 1928, and in 1929 he became Inprecor's main rapporteur on India. Finally, we have Smedley's account as evidence of the very strong emotional bond between Nambiar and her brother and of his strong influence on her.³² Nor is it surprising that a dynamic, unconventional and attractive woman should exercise upon the other two a strong influence, and one that was not entirely political; nor, given the extreme weakness and isolation of the Party, that such a contingency should have substantial political effects within it. Moreover, much of the 'strange behaviour' of which the Meerut group complained was congruent with, if not necessarily fully explained by, their argument. The most obvious of these features - which will be explored below - was the Bombay 'triumvirate's' bureaucratic exclusion of the Meerut group, and those of the preceding activists who remained in Bombay and the other provincial centres, from the decision-making process. Thus the hypothesis does, at least, connect and highlight a pattern of symptoms of a deep crisis of leadership.

Nevertheless, the contention that the fundamental cause of the problem was that an ambitious woman had 'corrupted'

32. Smedley, op. cit., pp.18-19. Smedley was present when they met each other, for the first time, in Berlin. As a child Suhasini had been 'sung to sleep with lullabies about her exiled brother'.

two 'previously promising young men, caused them to fight among themselves, and reduced them to inactivity' suggests a one-dimensional - and very male - reductionism.³³ The suggestion is reinforced by the fact that Nambiar remained a life-long Party member, long after the Berlin group had disappeared - even if, as Smedley noted, her 'aristocratic' ways took a long time dying. This establishes that she was motivated by far more than narrow factional ambitions on behalf of her brother. The Meerut group's hypothesis, in its reductionism, fails to take sufficient account of the other two factors.

The Psychology of Defeat.

The humiliating trauma of total defeat in the 1929 textile strike prepared the ground for much of what was to follow within the Party.

On taking office the new leadership was initially cautious and moderate in its political approach. The calling of the 1929 strike was a reluctant and defensive move - not, as has been argued elsewhere, an early implementation of Comintern ultra-leftism.³⁴ Even as late as June the new

33. MCG:1. There was a close parallel between this explanation and the one Roy used to account for Chattopadhyaya's hostility to himself: 'It seems that ... [Agnes Smedley] managed to poison Chatto's mind against me. ... she was the evil genius of the Indian revolutionary group' in Berlin (M.N. Roy, Memoirs, p.488). For Smedley's (fictionalised) account of her involvement in Indian revolutionary circles in America and Berlin, see her autobiographical novel Daughter of Earth, (New York, 1974) (reprinted), passim.

34. Eg. Karnik, op. cit., p.200. The old GPU leadership approved of the calling of the strike: 'It has been contended that it was rash to enter upon the strike so soon and without adequate preparation. There may be some justification in this criticism, but probably not much. The strike was foreseen as a necessity in our time and it had been prepared for The employers backed by the Government were determined on a fight and it would have been impossible to avoid it at some time or other, without making drastic concessions':MCG:2.

communist leadership 'could not ... be described as preaching specifically Communist doctrines'.³⁵ The ideological militancy and sectarianism that were to characterise the next four years did not appear until after the back of the strike had been broken in July.³⁶ Instead of recognising the terrible reality of defeat, cutting their losses and beginning the painful process of gradually rebuilding the union, Deshpande and Ranadive responded to the crisis with militant speech-making and leadership actions in a hopeless attempt to maintain the strikers' morale long enough to defeat the millowners.³⁷ At the same time they branded as 'strike-breakers' those within the union - such as Pendse and the non-Brahman militants - who opposed the prolongation of a by then hopeless strike and the escalation of the tactics of militance. The government reported that 'personal quarrels among the leaders' became increasingly frequent from this point.³⁸

This response was, in fact, a retreat into militance and sectarianism, away from an acceptance of a bleak reality and

35. NAI, H.Poll, 303/1929: note by Haig of conversation with the Bombay Commissioner of Police, 4/6/29.

36. NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR1 Jul.

37. BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: note on Bombay communist groups, 1929-33 (hereafter, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit.). The Meerut group interpreted this as a 'typically petty bourgeois' response. But although Deshpande and Ranadive took the lead, they had the support of the majority of the managing committee; the worker activists were keen to maintain the strike as they anticipated victimisation if it failed: Newman, op. cit., p.343.

38. NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR1 Oct.; see also NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bombay FR1 & FR2 Dec., and 18/II/1930: Bombay FR1 and FR2 Jan.

of their partial responsibility for it. It was supplemented by other escapist manifestations. For example, just as the Meerut group, while acknowledging it, played down their own responsibility for the situation, the new leadership began to lay great emphasis on the old leadership's organisational and political failures. This tendency, and the tendency to erect a protective bureaucratic barrier around themselves, were further encouraged by both the Meerut communists' criticisms of the Bombay leadership's strike tactics, and their attempts to intervene in the strike. According to Dange, the other former Bombay leaders attempted, in an authoritarian manner, to 'direct the outside movement by fiats'.³⁹ Dange also attempted unilaterally to intervene in the strike through V.H. Joshi and Mrs. Dange -and, it was later alleged, through some of the mill managements. Dange's activity, the other Meerut communists agreed, was 'annoying (and later dangerous) ... and must have given ... [the Bombay leadership] a very bad impression about us'.⁴⁰

Thus the psychology of defensiveness and defeat compounded the objective difficulties, posed by the communists' almost universal opposition, standing in the way of the 'united-

39. MCCC, P.2512: 'The Situation in India' (ca. Jan. 1930).

40. MCG:2. The suspicion that Dange had dealt unilaterally with some of the mills was fostered by the close relationship he had developed with Sir Victor Sassoon. (The BTLU leader Bakhale, for example, described Sassoon as 'one of the greatest admirers of Mr. Dange': RCLI, I(2), p.261.) The issue resurfaced in 1937 when the Royists charged Dange with having received money from Sassoon during the 1929 strike (BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: reports dated 15/1/37 & 5/2/37). Dange's orthodoxy was also (implicitly) called into question by his wife's and V.H. Joshi's joining the Roy group in 1931 (eg. V. Basak, Some Urgent Problems of the Labour Movement in India, (London, n.d. (ca. early 1933), p.6). (This booklet was an ECCI attack on the activities of the Roy group in India.)

front' policy demanded by their now weak position. It encouraged the opposite, 'left-sectarian' response of asserting that the proletariat remained undefeated, but that its revolutionary potential was being 'betrayed' by those - both within and beyond the Party - who opposed the 'correct' policy laid down by the leadership. This provided an ideological justification for the disparagement of the 'reformist', incremental organisational work of rebuilding that was now necessary, and for a regime of extreme centralism and 'discipline' in the Party. These were the characteristics which, after they had become entrenched during 1930, the Meerut group was to describe in the following terms:

... the illusion that all difficulties would melt away before a few agitational speeches, a tendency to neglect the hard and unpleasant work of organisation, ... the idea that it is the whole duty of a Communist to be "militant" and that care and thought and caution are never necessary, ... [the adoption of an organisational mode] in the Party ... of extreme centralisation, but ... [with] none of the advantages of centralisation ... not only oppressive and bureaucratic, but in addition extremely inefficient.⁴¹

In the psychological underpinnings of this response to defeat by non-'proletarianised' intellectuals we can perhaps detect a mixture of pride and panic.

The Comintern's Contribution

This was the situation when, at the end of 1929, the first of the succession of 'third period' Comintern agents who were to visit India in the next few years arrived in Bombay. He

41. MCG:1.

was believed by Intelligence to be Earl Browder, the American Communist Party leader, and he was to stay undetected in Bombay for some six months before leaving India.⁴² In July 1930 he was replaced by two more Americans, Kweit and Somers, who were able to remain until their deportation in December. All three were sent to supervise the CPI's adoption of the new ECCI policy, to assist in the reorganisation of the Party, and to finance its activities.⁴³ With little previous knowledge of the Indian situation, they were not in a position to assess against Indian realities the adequacy of the policy guidelines they brought with them. Moreover, because they had to function covertly, they were severely constrained from augmenting their knowledge, and from developing contacts, independently of the Bombay leadership.⁴⁴

Browder arrived at a critical juncture for the CPI. Firstly, by then the leadership had been narrowed down to Deshpande, Nambiar and Ranadive. Further, Ranadive had just received his one year sentence. As he was later to demonstrate a marked capacity for independent responses to the influence of Comintern representatives, he may have acted to counter some of Browder's initiatives had he been free. Secondly, the Bombay leadership had just sustained its trade union and BPCC defeats.

42. IB. Communism, (1935), pp.175-9.

43. Large sums of money were brought to India by these agents and those who were to follow them. One brought Rs.12,000: loc. cit.

44. MCG:1 & 2. The Meerut group was not impressed with their qualifications as guides for the Indian revolution, while the IB (Communism, (1935), p.179) commented on their 'inferior stamp'.

Finally, it remained theoretically innocent. Deshpande had joined the movement only a few months before the Meerut arrests and had attended only the few inconclusive political discussions on the Sixth Congress theses on the eve of the arrests; and, in any case, the CPI's theoretical basis throughout the 1920s, and thus its legacy to the new leadership, had been the Royist form of 'left-sectarianism'. Nambiar's conversion in Berlin had also been recent and incomplete. Under constant attack since the arrests, they could hardly have found the time to develop a detailed and critical grasp of Marxism-Leninism, or even, perhaps, of the abstractions - and ambiguities - of the Sixth Congress theses. Accordingly, the potential basis for an independent theoretical response to the Tenth Plenum assertions was very weak. Thus the new ECCI directives first arrived in India when the CPI was at its most vulnerable - psychologically, politically and theoretically.⁴⁵

In fact the Tenth Plenum line reinforced the similar tendencies that had already begun to appear in Bombay. There was no conflict. On the contrary, there must have been a certain comfort to be gained by the new leadership from the ECCI's revelations that, contrary to appearances: India was on the verge of a proletarian-led revolution; that Indian capitalism was 'counter-revolutionary' and that the National Congress, including its left wing, was its political agency; that for

45. Browder appears to have been the new leaders' first definite contact with the ECCI. As late as February 1930 the DIB was unaware of their having 'become involved in the international Communist conspiracy': NAI, H.Poll, 95/1930: note by Petrie, 6/2/30.

this reason the worker-peasant movement would break the now-fragile shackles imposed on their revolutionary impulses by the bourgeois Congress, and that these revolutionary forces would gravitate naturally towards the only 'genuinely' revolutionary Party - the CPI; that the 'unmasking' of the 'national reformists', and particularly of the 'left-reformists', in both nationalist and industrial politics, was a prime duty for the communists; that the only constraint on the revolution was the temporary problem of revolutionary leadership; and that this problem arose almost entirely from the organisational shortcomings and dangerous political deviations of the preceding Party leadership. The battered Bombay leadership could endorse this scenario enthusiastically; in fact it is possible that a 'united-front' policy would have been resisted. Browder's message provided a convenient, authoritative rationalisation of its current predicament, and a more coherent statement of many of the arguments it had already begun to advance. The Tenth Plenum line's optimistic determinism also provided an illusory hope in an otherwise apparently hopeless situation. In doing so it further encouraged the neglect of the patient and gradual organisational work that would be a pre-condition for the CPI's return to political significance.⁴⁶ It was, in fact, a very therapeutic program for this battered and disorientated leadership, if not one for its political rehabilitation.

46. Eg., Deshpande constantly inveighed against participation in strikes for limited ends. All strikes were to be transformed into general strikes in this 'objectively revolutionary situation'.

The Meerut communists failed completely to see the mutually reinforcing character of the nexus between the ECCI and the Bombay leadership. Unaware of the structural imperatives behind contemporary Comintern politics - or, at least, preferring to disbelieve their existence⁴⁷ - they continued to assume that the Comintern was a genuine 'World Party', and that the Soviet leadership was acting in good faith in the interests of the world - and the Indian - revolutions. They could not believe that the Comintern or its agents could actively contribute towards what they saw to be inappropriate policies and aberrant political behaviour. These 'mistakes', they believed, were due solely to bad advice - to the fact that the Bombay group was successfully 'deceiving' the Comintern representatives and, thus, the ECCI.⁴⁸ Only in this way could they explain, for example, the pungency of the sequence of criticisms of their earlier leadership which appeared in the Comintern press. They could not see that these ritual scapegoating denunciations were now standard fare during Stalin's pragmatic policy switches. In criticising the Bombay leadership the Meerut group was also, implicitly, criticising much of the Comintern's role. But by condemning the Bombay leaders as the sole source of the problem they overemphasised - through the 'Nambiar conspiracy' hypothesis - the personal dimension, and

47. Eg., M.G. Desai, one of the Meerut prisoners, had been in Britain in the late 1920s and was aware of the background to Stalin's campaign against Trotsky. However his criticisms of Stalin's strategy and tactics were dismissed as misplaced 'Victorian liberalism': Interview with M.G. Desai. See also Spratt, Blowing up India, pp.53-5.

48. MCG:2.

heightened intra-Party tensions accordingly.⁴⁹

The Development of the New Pattern, 1929-30

The new pattern of Party politics in Bombay outlined earlier developed against this complex and mutually reinforcing background: leadership inadequacies, defeat and 'third period' bolshevisation. Substantially the result of political defeat and isolation during 1929, the institutionalisation of this pattern completed the process of isolation from the Indian environment. The most dominant features of the pattern were bureaucratic centralism, 'left-sectarianism', inactivity and increasing political isolation.

The Bombay leadership's successful dominance of the Party apparatus, and its bureaucratic exclusion of the other regional groups - and of the small rank-and-file which began to join the Bombay branch - were central features of the emerging pattern.

The exclusion of the Meerut group was a relatively simple exercise. Apart from the facts that it was isolated in jail and that the ECCI had cast doubt on its revolutionary credentials, Communist Party members automatically lost their membership rights on imprisonment and had to be formally readmitted to the Party on release. This routine security measure was used effectively by the Deshpande leadership during 1930 to neutralise the capacity of the Meerut communists to intervene.⁵⁰

49. See, eg., Spratt, Blowing up India, p.53.

50. MCG:1 & 2.

Bombay's dominance over the other surviving provincial groups was made possible by a number of factors. Initially it was based on the legacy of the past. The new Bombay leadership inherited its predecessor's mass base and its correspondingly predominant weight in the embryonic 'all-India' Party apparatus that had been formally established just prior to the Meerut arrests. The predominance survived the loss of the mass base. In part, this was made possible by its initial position of relative strength in the organisation. But it was also made possible by a number of contingencies. Firstly, the same AITUC regulations that had prevented the communists at the 1928 Jharia AITUC from using their GPU base to increase their voting strength, now operated in the new Bombay leadership's favour, even though the GPU had been destroyed.⁵¹ The Bombay group's voting strength at the Nagpur AITUC in December 1929 was sufficient, for example, for Deshpande to be elected as its secretary and for the reformists to secede from the organisation.⁵² This position provided the Bombay leadership with substantial resources and authority relative to Bengal, despite the fact that the basis for Bombay's position in the AITUC was only formal. Secondly, the ECCI's proletarian revolutionism worked in Bombay's favour; for Moscow, citing the 1929 mill strike, the GIPR strike and the May Sholapur uprising, claimed that the Bombay workers were continuing to act

51. This was the stipulation that voting strength at the Congress be based on the average membership figures for the preceding 12 months.

52. MCG:2; IOL, L/PO/73: Shiva Rao to Graham Pole, 21/12/29. Of the 930 delegate votes at the Congress, 599 went to the communist-nationalist alliance. Of these the GPU had 200 votes and the GIPRU had 150.

as the 'vanguard' of the alleged proletarian upsurge in India.⁵³ This view provided a 'theoretical' justification for the relatively greater importance of the Bombay branch of the Party. Thirdly, the Bombay group received further ECCI reinforcement in the arrival of the sequence of Comintern agents. The ships that brought them from Europe arrived at Bombay rather than Calcutta; and, because their movements were restricted by security considerations after arrival, very few made contact with the Bengal group.⁵⁴ They remained dependent on the Bombay leadership for information on Party affairs. It was during Browder's stay that the Party's Secretariat and Central Committee were formed and manned solely by Bombay people. Thus the Bombay leadership had almost unchallenged access to the authority and funds provided by these agents. In a weak and isolated Party these were powerful weapons of dominance over other centres. They could also be used, if necessary, to reinforce leadership dominance over the small (30 by 1932)⁵⁵ Bombay membership which the Party began to attract during 1930.⁵⁶

The Meerut group described the Bombay leadership's attitude towards them as having been one of 'neglect and indifference, or else distrust':

53. See Chapter 6 above.

54. There is evidence of only one such visit to Calcutta, and that was very brief: Ranen Sen, op. cit., p.4: interview with Abdur Rezzak Khan.

55. BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit..

56. Bombay's monopolisation of the contacts with the ECCI representatives was also used in an attempt to keep the Meerut group isolated from Moscow.

In addition to systematically ignoring our advice they have refused us information which we have asked for from time to time, and this in some cases has had serious effects [on their activity]. ... some Party comrades, even when they have wanted to, have been prevented, under the cloak of disciplinary measures, from even writing to us or meeting us.⁵⁷

But in addition to excluding the Meerut group, Bombay had also made a systematic attempt to 'disparage our work and ourselves' and had propagated the claim that 'the CPI did not exist until they came upon the scene, i.e. after our arrests'.⁵⁸ The Meerut group believed that this policy had existed from the beginning and that it had originated with Nambiar.

However, while it is possible that Nambiar did play a particularly active role, it is apparent that other factors were important - for the deterioration in the Bombay-Meerut relationship was not a uniform process. This can be seen, for example, in the history of the defence committee set up by the Bombay leadership soon after the Meerut arrests. Initially the committee worked 'enthusiastically', and through it the new leadership kept in fairly close contact with Meerut.⁵⁹ The committee collected and forwarded considerable sums of money to Meerut and also conducted satisfactory propaganda work. However, by the end of the year, following the collapse of the GKU, the committee was moribund. During 1930, under Deshpande's direction, it consistently failed to forward or publish accounts of the sums it received, and its

57. MCG:1. However Bombay maintained close contact with Hutchinson and regularly sought his advice.

58. ibid.

59. ibid.

propaganda work ceased. Proposals from Meerut for an alternative defence committee system were consistently ignored, and finally rejected.⁶⁰

Thus the defeat of the 1929 strike and the collapse of the GPU appear to have marked a turning point in the relationship. This was for the psychological reasons noted above, because of resentment at the Meerut communists' 'interference' in the strike - and, it seems, because Bombay by then needed alternative sources of income. There is evidence, moreover, that Browder's arrival marked a further turning point. On January 26 the Bombay Party began publication of a new organ, edited by Deshpande, called Workers' Weekly. It was to continue until April. It was established at Browder's instigation, and he financed and supervised its publication and wrote much of its material.⁶¹ In March a special edition commemorating the anniversary of the Meerut arrests was published. But instead of commemorating the old leaders, it patronised them as 'militant trade unionists, but not genuine communists'.⁶² This was the first public denigration of the Meerut group.⁶³ Naturally, they were incensed by it; but they saw behind it only Bombay's factional ambitions. However the characterisation was perfectly in accord with the ECCI's; and the facts that it was the first

60. ibid. & MCG:2.

61. MCG:2.

62. Quoted in ibid.. See also L.P. Sinha, op. cit., p.243.

63. However it was not the last. The ECCI's attacks on the 'petty bourgeois' WPPs and on those who had resisted disbanding them, and the derogatory association of the old leadership with Satyabhakta's 1925 conception of a legal CP, were repeated during 1930: leaflets in BSB, 1036/B/V/1935.

public criticism voiced in India, and that Browder was so closely associated with Workers' Weekly, also strongly suggest that it was his initiative.

But, whatever the reasons for the development of Bombay's attitude towards Meerut, its consequences were both clear and serious: it compounded the radical discontinuity in Party leadership and experience caused by the Meerut arrests and confiscations; and it greatly aggravated the CPI's existing and future factional hostilities.

The deterioration of Bombay's relations with Bengal followed a similar itinerary.

The Meerut arrests almost eradicated the Bengal branch. The only Communist Party members left were Abdul Halim and Abdur Rezzak Khan, though gradually a few of those, such as Abani Chowdhuri, who had been close to the WPP, began to join the group. Apart from its unsuccessful attempt to establish an independent influence in the 1929 jute strike, the communist group's activities in 1929 were restricted to involvement in strikes in Calcutta's match and ice factories, defence committee work for the Meerut Case, and the publication of a few leaflets.⁶⁴

Contact with Bombay could not be established until the Nagpur session of the AITUC at the end of November of that year. At Nagpur, however, Deshpande soon quarrelled with the Bengal contingent, led by Abdul Halim, during discussions on the re-organisation of the CPI. Deshpande set several pre-conditions for Bengal-Bombay participation in this project: the Meerut group

64. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Notes on the Bengal WPP after the Meerut arrests and on the Calcutta Committee; MCG:1 & 2; Ranen Sen, op. cit., pp.1-4; interview with Abdur Rezzak Khan; NAI, H.Poll, 17/1929: Bengal FR1 May & FR2 Jun..

were not to be informed of the plans because, being in jail, they were no longer Party members; the Punjabi comrades were to be excluded; and the Bengal group was to be subordinate to the Bombay branch. When Halim rejected these conditions Deshpande chose another man he met at Nagpur - the former Karachi socialist, Jamaluddin Bukhari, who had moved to Calcutta in mid-1929 - to head the Bengal branch.⁶⁵ The choice was a curious one, for Bukhari had neither the experience nor the contacts of Halim and was not even familiar with the Bengali language. Under Bukhari a small Bengal branch of the CPI was established and (meagrely) financed by Bombay. After Bukhari was interned in 1930,⁶⁶ another Deshpande nominee, M.A. Zaman, filled his place.⁶⁷ Halim's group was denied funds by the Bombay branch and, without independent contact with the ECCI, it was unable to alter the situation.

The Bombay-Punjab relationship followed similar lines. At the Lahore Congress Nambiar made contact with the Moscow-trained Fazl Elahi, who was regarded by the Meerut group as 'by far the most competent and best instructed comrade in the country at the time.'⁶⁸ However the meeting ended in conflict.

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65. Report by Halim cited in MCG:1; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the Calcutta Committee. Deshpande subsequently admitted this to the Meerut group (MCG:2). In February and March Bukhari had come to the notice of the CID in Karachi and Hyderabad for his propagation of radical views (BSAI, 1929, paras. 332 and 520).
66. Bukhari then returned to Bombay in February 1931 and joined the Bombay group.
67. Zaman had been peripherally involved in the BJWA during the 1929 jute strike (RCLI, Vol. V(1), p.147) but in little else. He was suspected by many as a 'doubtful element', and possibly a spy: MCG:2; interview with B.T. Ranadive.
68. MCG:1. Elahi was a Moscow-trained Punjabi communist who had returned to India in 1926, only to be interned soon after. He was released in 1929.

Subsequently, throughout the period of the Meerut Case, no links were established with the miniscule Punjab group and it continued to work in isolation and without access to Bombay's funds.⁶⁹

As with the Meerut group, the Bengal and Punjab groups bitterly resented Bombay's policy.⁷⁰ By the end of 1930 there was a clear split in Indian communism. On one side was Bombay, reinforced by its Comintern contacts, and the artificial 'official' Bengal group it had established; against these the Meerut group, the Calcutta communists and the few Punjabi comrades formed a loose, impotent alliance. However, under the Meerut group's restraining influence, the Bengal and Punjab groups did not launch a public counter-attack against Bombay during 1930-31.⁷¹

In Bombay the institutionalisation of the bureaucratic-centralist mode did not meet active resentment in 1930. During 1930 both working and middle class members were recruited, and in roughly equal numbers. The former were mostly unemployed former GKU and GIPRU activists and the latter were mostly nationalist intellectuals who had decided that the Gandhian mode of politics was unacceptable.⁷² The new recruits from both classes appear to have accepted an almost unquestioning relationship of subordination to the leadership. The Meerut communists commented that 'by means of the slogan of discipline

69. MCG:2 & 3. For Punjabi revolutionary movements during this period see: Harcourt, *op. cit.*, Chapter 6, passim; and IB, Communism, (1935), pp.266-79.

70. MCG:2; interviews with Abdur Rezzak Khan & Somnath Lahiri.

71. MCG:2.

72. Interview with S.G. Sardesai, (one of the new recruits).

etc., the Secretariat seems to have tried from the beginning to create the impression in the Party that ... to criticise them was a sin'.⁷³ The rank and file membership's acceptance of this 'showed docility, weakness and a lack of comprehension of the situation as a whole'.⁷⁴ The conditions of repression and political isolation facilitated the acceptance of this 'disciplined' relationship. A Bombay Party member in this period has commented that

It required very deep conviction and courage to go against the Gandhian Congress then and to face the resulting isolation and hardship - virtual starvation often - and this built a strong sense of fraternity and discipline. ... I fully accepted the requirements of Party discipline. 75

Even after the Central Committee was formed it met infrequently and exercised little control over the Secretariat.⁷⁶

The Bombay leadership had first adopted a militant 'left-sectarian' tactical approach in the latter stages of the 1929 textile strike. But it was not until the very end of the year that it became a definitely formulated strategy in nationalist and industrial politics. Even as late as November

73. MCG:2.

74. ibid.

75. Interview with S.G. Sardesai.

76. MCG:1 & 2. Those of the Meerut group who visited Bombay during their trial also found marked inequalities in the allocation of the Party's limited funds. The leaders' allowances were far greater, and were often devoted to personal expenditure rather than political work. The working class members were most discriminated against. Two of the leaders also took up residence in the Fort area, making it difficult and expensive for the working class members and trade unionists to see them. These features were found to be demoralising the Party and were providing ammunition for propaganda by the Party's rivals: MCG:1 & 2.

1929 the communists actively sought an alliance with the Congressites in the AITUC.⁷⁷ The eventual full-scale adoption of a 'left-sectarian' strategy followed close on the communists' defeat in the BPCC, and it coincided with Browder's arrival, the increasing difficulties for the communists within the unions, and the stepping-up of the BPCC's working class campaign.

The communists produced their first systematic public characterisation of the National Congress as an organisation of the 'counter-revolutionary' bourgeoisie, in a manifesto to the Lahore session of the Congress in December.⁷⁸ The manifesto's extremism was firmly registered by the slogan appearing on the front cover:

Would you be protected by Imperialist Machine-guns
along with Gandhi and Nehru under Dominion Status?

or

Would you face the fire of Machine-guns along with
the workers in the fight for Complete Independence?

Following this opening rhetorical question came an analysis in accordance with the ECCI's Tenth Plenum policy on India, and in similar language. The condemnation was reiterated constantly after the Lahore session, then after the launching of Civil Disobedience, despite the enthusiasm these events aroused among radical nationalists.⁷⁹ The Lahore resolution was

77. A tactic which was criticised by the Meerut group as being unnecessary: MCG:2.

78. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: 'Manifesto of the Workers' and Peasants' Party to the Indian National Congress, 1929'.

79. Eg., the 10 leaflets issued between June and October 1930, contained in BSB, 1036/B/V/1935. See also L.P. Sinha's summary of the contents of the different issues of Workers' Weekly, in op. cit., pp.242-44.

'merely' an attempt by 'the traitors of Indian Independence' to 'throw dust in the eyes' of the worker and peasant masses to disorganise their independent struggle; 'The real struggle for Complete Independence will never be fought out under the banner of the Congress. It will be fought out only under the Red Flag'.⁸⁰ This message was hardly calculated seriously to win over even the most 'honest' of the 'petty bourgeois revolutionary elements' among the Congress rank-and-file. Nor did the Stalinised language in which the message was couched increase the possibility. On this both the Meerut group and the Intelligence Branch were agreed: the former categorised the communists' style as 'ponderously theoretical' and the latter as 'Deshpande's vaporous thunderings', and both contrasted it with the accessibility of the Royist group's literature.⁸¹ The contrast with the propaganda skills developed by the former leadership during and after the 1928 strike was even greater. This contrast is another indicator that the difficulties of attaining or retaining a mass base seriously retarded the CPI's development of an 'Indian' Marxism.

The Bombay-Browder ideological counterposing of the Red and the Congress flags was translated into action during the year.

80. Kranti (edited by Deshpande), quoted in NAI, H.Poll, 18/II/1930: Bombay FR1 Jan.. Deshpande described his policy as being one of fighting 'stubbornly for rallying the revolutionary masses under working class leadership, with independent slogans and for independent action': quoted in MCG:2.

81. MCG:1; IB, Communism, (1935), p.168. The Meerut group later commented appropriately that the Bombay communist leaders became increasingly 'drugged with Communist phraseology' during this period; they were not in a fit ideological condition for 'going to the masses'.

In fact this was effected quite literally in an event at the beginning of the year - an event which was to become typical of the Bombay branch's mode of political action. For the Congress's 'Independence Day' celebrations on January 26, the GPU leaders organised a counter demonstration. The 30,000-strong rally at Chaupati Sands was 'brought to an abrupt end' by an 'invasion' of the platform by 1,000 millhands, carrying red flags and led by Deshpande, Nambiar and the GPU's president, Kandalkar.⁸² During the 'pandemonium' which followed, a red flag was hoisted alongside the Congress flag. The public reaction against this 'insult to the National Flag' was vehement.⁸³ It was so strong that the GPU leaders subsequently felt it necessary to state that the action had not been meant as a devaluation of the Congress flag, but simply as a symbolic statement of the need for the nationalist movement also to represent the working class.⁸⁴

The Independence Day demonstration was a politically disastrous event. It did draw upon and express the 'anti-bourgeois' ideology and sentiments of the millhands - or at least of those who remained politically engaged - and it affirmed the

82. NAI, H.Poll, 18/II/1930: Bombay FRI Jan.; BC, 27/1/30, p.11. It may not have been a coincidence that the Independence Day celebration was the Nariman BPC's 'debut in politics'; (Kumar, 'From Swaraj to Purna Swaraj', p.98). As this was the leadership which had completely displaced the communists as the focus for BPC radicalism, it must have been a galling day for the Deshpande group - and the more so as it had just emerged from the GPU's disappointing AGM.

83. See, eg., the series of articles and letters to the editor in BC between January 27 and February 13. Jawaharlal joined his voice to the condemnation of this attempt to 'dishonour' the flag: IQR, 1930, Vol. 1, p.23. It was widely reported that the communists had torn down the Congress flag and replaced it with the red flag.

84. See the press statement in BC, 3/2/30, p.8.

new leadership's revolutionary credentials in Moscow.⁸⁵ But it also provided the Congress with a very convenient albatross to hand around the CPI's neck, both during the BPC's current campaign against the communists and for a long time afterwards. It would be used to categorise the communists as 'anti-nationalists' and, at the same time, to reaffirm, for the benefit of the radicals and against the communists' claims, its own nationalist credentials.⁸⁶

But not only did it place a further barrier between the communists and the radical intelligentsia over whom the old WPP leadership had once exercised considerable influence; it also hastened the communists' divorce from the working class and trade unionism. At the beginning of 1930 the communists remained united with Kandalkar and Ruikar, both within the respective unions and against the BPC's labour program.⁸⁷ The splits with Ruikar and Kandalkar developed soon after the Independence Day demonstration and the public backlash it produced. This event, and the approach to nationalist politics that it symbolised, appear to have helped convince the non-communist union leaders that their communist colleagues had become a definite liability;⁸⁸ the positive attraction of the material benefits provided by a Congress alliance was complemented by the increasingly perceived political liabilities of an alliance with the communists during

85. See the section below on Comintern reportage.

86. See fn. 92. For an example of subsequent use of the demonstration to establish communist 'anti-nationalism' see Masani, *op. cit.*, p.42.

87. See Chapter 6(2) above, and note Kandalkar's participation in the Independence Day demonstration.

88. Kandalkar's break with Deshpande came immediately after they had both served short terms of imprisonment in early 1930 for their part in a fracas at a labour meeting (NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Note on the GPU, 1929-33). This experience appears to have helped Kandalkar to decide that the costs of the 'left-sectarian' strategy were too high.

a period of Congress-led mass agitation. And, because of the Bombay communist leadership's now unremitting hostility towards the Congress, once Ruikar and Kandalkar had made their tactical shifts they and the communists were in opposite, enemy camps. This was the context of the bitterness of the conflict between Ruikar and Deshpande during the railway strike. Having been isolated in the GIPRU, Deshpande then engaged in an equally bitter and personal attack on Kandalkar.⁸⁹ The issue came to a head at the GKU's annual general meeting on October 2. The meeting, which was attended by some 4,000 millhands, broke up in uproar and eventual police intervention. On October 12 the adjourned general meeting voted to expel Deshpande from the union.⁹⁰

That both Ruikar and Kandalkar were able to carry with them the great majority of the unions' leaders and remaining mass following demonstrated the extent of the divorce which had developed between the communists and the working class since the Meerut arrests. After the Meerut arrests the majority of the workers on the GKU's managing committee had initially continued to defend the communists against the non-Brahman attacks, as they had done before. But when the communists split with the former jobber Kandalkar, the working class members went with him. The communists' attitude towards the Congress appears not to have been the central issue at stake at this level. When Ghatge spoke to the old GKU and GIPRU worker activists during his visit

89. NAI, H.Poll, 18/VIII/1930: Bombay FR2 Jul.; BSAI, 1930, paras. 1276(1), 1367(23); NAI, H.Poll, 18/IX/1930: Bombay FR2 Aug.; MCG:2.

90. NAI, H.Poll, 18/X/1930: Bombay FR2 Sept., & 18/XI/1930: Bombay FR1 Oct..

from Meerut to Bombay in mid-1930, he discovered that 'some sort of hostility towards Communist leadership seemed to have sprung up'.⁹¹ The reasons given by these activists were the distance from the workers maintained by the new Party leadership, its bureaucratic-elitist failure to involve them in the running of the unions, its sectarianism towards the non-communist union leaders and the personal character of the attacks upon them, and its increasing inactivity. Deshpande's 'shouting from outside' at the Ruikar leadership during the already difficult GIP railway strike had been particularly resented.

Following the collapse of this strike the communists remained isolated and uninfluential in the GIPRU. After their expulsion from the GPU Deshpande formed a rival 'Ladhau (militant) GPU', but it received no support from the millhands, remained subordinate to the now Royist GPU, and maintained only a nominal existence.⁹² The Deshpande leadership's rejection of 'partial struggles', in favour of ritual calls for a general strike as the 'prelude' to the proletarian-led revolution, was both a prescription and a rationalisation for inactivity. The Royists could then step in, effectively unopposed, to fill the vacuum. Moreover, they were able to pick up as members many of those former WPP members or allies - such as Pendse, V.H. Joshi and Mrs. Dange, as well as Kandalkar and Ruikar - who had earlier been alienated by the communist leadership.⁹³

91. MCG:2; also BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit.

92. ibid.

93. BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit.

By the end of 1930 the new leadership had paid the price in full for its 'neo-Brahmanical' divorce from the labourers who had once provided its mass base. This divorce had been reinforced by the ECCI's representatives, with their predilection for direction 'from the top', and their Moscow-derived insistence that the working class remained undefeated, despite their (formalistic) emphasis on the importance of working class participation in its own leadership.

The Bombay leadership's growing impotence at the base was paralleled by the collapse of the position of influence it had won in the AITUC at the 1929 Nagpur session. In part, this followed directly from the loss of its mass base - and thus of its voting strength for the next annual session. But the communists' policy towards the Civil Disobedience movement and 'reactionary' trade union 'left-reformism' increased the antagonism of the nationalists with whom they had allied themselves at Nagpur, and whose support they now needed much more if they were to remain even a significant minority force in the organisation. Moreover, Deshpande's conduct as the AITUC's secretary both widened the split and provided the nationalists and the Royists with very effective ammunition in their campaign against the communists.⁹⁴ Under Deshpande's secretaryship the AITUC became almost completely moribund. Among other lapses, he failed to submit reports of the AITUC's work, provided no accounts of the expenditure of the Rs.2,300 which he received

94. MCG:2. For the Royists' campaign to oust the communists from the AITUC and capture it for themselves, see Haithcox, op. cit., pp.180-83.

at Nagpur from the treasurer, called only three executive meetings during his term of office, and, accurately predicting his demise at the next AITUC, refused to hold this session when it fell due. Among other consequences of these failings, Subhas Bose was able to use them to propagandise against the Bengali communists.⁹⁵ When the AITUC session was finally held in July 1931, at Calcutta, the communists faced an attack which they were quite unable to deflect. Rather than risking expulsion of remaining as a minority within the organisation, they seceded to form another rival organisation - the 'Red AITUC'. But, as with the Ladhau GKU, it was only a nominal body, even weaker than the parent AITUC which was captured by the Royists at Calcutta.⁹⁶

The Bombay leadership remained inactive in the local nationalist arena, too, despite the fact that the city had become the storm centre of the Civil Disobedience movement. Towards the middle of the year, during the BPCC's campaign in the mill area, Deshpande, on Ghate's suggestion, formed the Young Workers' League (YWL) as a 'front' political platform for the Party. This attracted a measure of support which, though very limited, marked an advance and indicated certain possibilities for further advance.⁹⁷ But following the

95. MCG:2. These shortcomings also strengthened the growing anti-communist 'prejudices in the minds of the workers'.

96. *ibid.*; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: notes on the Red AITUC; *IB, Communism*, (1935), pp.161-62; NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1931: Bengal FR2 Jul..

97. We do not have figures for the YWL membership in 1930, but as it had 'dwindled' to about 60 by mid-1931, its 1930 membership must have been appreciably higher than this figure (MCG:1). This suggests that there were significant numbers of potential cadres available for a determined leadership to mobilise. The YWL was in fact the main vehicle of recruitment of those who were to become Party members in this period.

imprisonment for brief terms of several of the leaders, they, as in Bengal, 'showed a marked inclination to keep within the law and to do no more than was necessary to retain their nominal leadership'.⁹⁸ By the end of the year the YWL had stagnated and Deshpande was engaged only in organising study circles and publishing ventures. Even these limited efforts produced few of the intended results.⁹⁹ As in industrial politics, the ECCI policy towards nationalist politics, too, became a rationalisation for inactivity.

The Meerut group was to describe 1930 as 'the blackest period' in the Party's history, 'a story of almost unrelieved gloom and set-back on all fronts'.

Apart from sheer wanton inactivity, the principal defect seems to have been lack of thought and study, and especially of self-criticism. ... in its objective value and effectiveness and in its subjective honesty etc., the Party leadership declined greatly in this period. ... a sort of disease or paralysis ... affected the whole Party life.¹⁰⁰

'Probably even a definitely incorrect policy', the Meerut communists commented with unintended irony, 'would not have led to such a complete collapse ... if it had been pursued vigorously'.¹⁰¹

The Meerut group's assessment of the situation was, apart from its non-recognition of the ECCI's substantial level of responsibility for it, a perceptive and accurate one. It

98. IB, Communism, (1935), p.161.

99. loc. cit.; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: notes on the Kamgar Vangmaya Prasarak Mandal (Workers' Literature Publishing Company) and the Marxist League; the limits of the effectiveness of Deshpande's publishing activity can be gauged from the fact that the sales of Workers' Weekly never exceeded 40: MCG:1.

100. MCG:2.

101. MCG:1.

was diametrically opposed to the assessments that were being provided in the Comintern press. The fiction that a significant, Bombay-led communist movement existed in India, would have died completely by this time had it not been maintained by Moscow.

Because of its many-levelled commitment to the unreal position it had adopted on the Indian situation, Moscow had a large stake in 'proving' it to be correct. It went to extreme lengths in its search for supporting evidence for this view. The pages of its weekly newspaper, Inprecor, regularly reported such evidence during 1930-31.¹⁰² Even the theoretical journal, Communist International, continued to lend its prestige to the Bombay group's barely discernable efforts. Having established that the proletarian-led Indian revolution was 'going ahead with flying leaps' to 'new and higher forms of struggle' after its early defeats,¹⁰³ it was Deshpande's formalistic 'left-sectarianism' that was most loudly applauded. The conduct of the GIPR strike, for example, was declared to be 'a very important step in advance': 'For the first time in the history of the Indian Labour Movement, the proletarian revolutionaries came forward openly before the workers against the "left" National Reformists'.¹⁰⁴ The Deshpande group's

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102. Much of this material was written by V. Chattopadhyaya. If the Meerut group's hypothesis about Chattopadhyaya's intentions was correct, then he had a particular interest - additional to that of the ECCI - in reporting the 'success' of the new leadership. Many of the Inprecor reports on India were the weekly's leading stories. Events such as the Sholapur insurrection and the Gharwali soldiers' revolt were portrayed as being typical of the mass response to Civil Disobedience, and the movement's leading edge.
103. G.Safarov, 'The World Economic Crisis and the Revolutionary Ferment in the Colonies', in CI, Vol.6(31), 15/2/30, p.1245.

sectarian attacks on the Ruikar and Kandalkar factions, the Royists and the Congress, were claimed to be events of 'historic importance'.¹⁰⁵ The communists' Comintern-financed publications and its sporadic militant actions were constantly publicised in Inprecor and Communist International as historically decisive ideological and political interventions. The ECCI rewarded the new Party leadership for its 'breakthrough' in the development of Indian communism by affiliating the CPI - for the first time - to the Comintern.¹⁰⁶ Observations that the communists had not achieved all that was possible in the 'matured' revolutionary conditions in India formed only a minor, counterpoint theme in the ECCI's public commentary at this stage.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, this failure continued to be reduced to problems of leadership - problems for which the old leadership continued to be given the main responsibility.¹⁰⁸

104. 'W', 'Prospects of the Labour Movement in India', in CI, Vol. 7(12), 15/10/30, p.258.
105. Eg., Valiya, 'The Struggle of the Working Class for the Leadership of the National Movement in India', in CI, Vol. 8(17), 1/10/31. p.520.
106. MCG:1.
107. Only R.P. Dutt seriously (though in a very qualified manner) recognised this fact: Dutt, 'Road to Proletarian Hegemony in the Indian Revolution', CI, Vol.7(13), 15/11/30, pp.282-88, & Vol.7(14), 1/12/30, pp.312-18.
108. This feature, and the others noted above, are encapsulated in the following quotation (Valiya, op. cit., pp.520-21) commenting on the Indian situation following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact: 'Now ... the situation has completely changed. It has now become clear to vast sections of the proletariat that the National Congress is a bourgeois, treacherous institution; freedom from the influence of the bourgeoisie has gone ahead rapidly among the working masses and the peasantry, the influence of the Community Party and belief in the party and its platform has begun to grow rapidly. This has become possible only on the basis of the struggle of the proletarian vanguard especially during 1930. (... for the first time there appeared in the name of the Communist Party illegal leaflets, there took place demonstrations under Communist slogans, illegal

Moribund, but seemingly warmly supported by Moscow, it is not completely surprising that the Deshpande leadership should restrict its activity to the 'window-dressing for the benefit of the Centre' (the ECCI) for which it was criticised by Meerut.¹⁰⁹ It was happy to provide the 'evidence' - such as the sporadic, publicity-gaining activities, the publications and the nominal rival 'Red' trade unions - that Stalin's ECCI needed as grist for its ideological mill. The Party was being kept alive only through artificial respiration, while the faint signs of life were being carefully monitored then vastly amplified by Moscow to demonstrate the health of the Indian section of the 'World Party' - and, thus, the correctness of the 'third period' analysis and strategy in this important colony. The CPI was playing its part in the justification of the program of rapid collectivisation and industrialisation in the Soviet Union. The basis for a symbiotic relationship, particularly destructive for the further advance of Indian communism, had been established.

This was the overall situation at the end of 1930. However at this point two changes occurred which were to catalyse a significant shift in the internal pattern of Party politics in Bombay. The first was Ranadive's release in November 1930. The second was the arrival in February 1931 of a third American

108. (Cont'd)

organisations began to be formed, etc.) ... [The Pact and the ensuing mass enlightenment were] helping the Communist Party to grow and to muster around itself all the revolutionary forces of the Indian people'.

109. MCG:1. The Meerut group believed that 'this line is taken deliberately with the intention of giving the Centre the impression that they are active and militant, so that they may continue to enjoy its confidence and money with the minimum of trouble'.

Comintern representative - Henry Lynd. Ranadive immediately raised the question, apparently for the first time, of why the Party had collapsed so badly.¹¹⁰ The ECCI had also begun privately, behind its enthusiastic public support for Deshpande, to ask the same question. One of Lynd's tasks was to carry out this investigation and to attempt to set things right.¹¹¹ However, paradoxically, these two new initiatives were to lead, not to a decisive new start, but to a further collapse in Bombay and to a further deterioration in the relationship with Bengal.

The Development of Factionalism in Bombay During 1931

Ranadive's questioning was based on a political analysis of some originality, and leading to quite different policy conclusions, developed during his year's imprisonment. The questioning, and the articulation of his unorthodox analysis and conclusions, contributed to three developments within the Party: it immediately precipitated a conflict with Deshpande; it later found a positive response among several of the subordinate members who had already begun to worry about the Party's situation; and it brought Ranadive into conflict with Lynd. Before looking at these developments we will first look briefly at Ranadive's analysis.

110. Ranadive characterised the Party's situation as one of 'complete isolation from the working class masses and complete shattering of our prestige as anti-imperialist fighters': quoted in MCG:2.

111. IB, Communism, (1935), ps. 174 & 176.

Contrary to an argument that is almost universal in existing accounts, Ranadive took a less sectarian view of Indian politics than Deshpande.¹¹² He agreed that the bourgeoisie was a 'counter-revolutionary' class, but argued that the driving force of the Civil Disobedience movement was the urban 'revolutionary petty bourgeoisie'. The bourgeoisie was represented politically by the Liberals. However the Gandhian Congress leadership also fulfilled important functions for the bourgeoisie. In particular, Gandhism, which had originally been a 'distinctly petty bourgeois philosophy', had in the 1920s become 'the most potent tool to hoodwink the masses in the interests of the native bourgeoisie. ... the conscious strategy of the treacherous bourgeoisie to liquidate the national revolutionary forces and to stabilise Imperialist terror'. Gandhism had successfully 'hoodwinked' the Congress's 'petty bourgeois' rank-and-file until the late 1920s. Then the latter had successfully revolted against the Gandhians' ideological and political control over the Congress and had forced this proxy-bourgeois leadership to participate in a second mass movement against imperialism. Civil Disobedience was launched under a heterogenous leadership - part 'bourgeois' and part 'petty bourgeois'. But although

112. Eg., Haithcox, op. cit., p.178, & Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., p.146. The misconception appears to arise from the fact that Ranadive's group became more active than Deshpande's. The following is based on: the summary of, and quotations from, Ranadive's analysis, in MCG:2; the summaries of his analysis in 'Open Letter to the Indian Communists from the Communist Parties of China, Great Britain and Germany', in Inprecor, Vol.12(22), 19/5/32, pp.436-42, and in V. Basak, op. cit.. (The latter two accounts do not refer to Ranadive or Deshpande by name.)

the 'bourgeois' Gandhian section participated in Civil Disobedience, a 'great gap' separated its aspirations from those of the 'petty bourgeois' leadership section and mass membership. Ranadive reaffirmed his view of the importance of the independent 'petty bourgeois' basis of Civil Disobedience after the movement's suspension. It collapsed, he argued, because of the success of the Raj's repression of the 'revolutionary petty bourgeoisie'.

Ranadive compounded his heterodoxy by arguing strongly that the working class had suffered long-term defeats in the collapse of the 1929 textile strike and the 1930 railway strike. Because of the 'physical and moral exhaustion' of the working class, strike activity had declined drastically and it was now inherently very difficult to organise the workers for either industrial or nationalist politics.

From his analysis Ranadive drew a number of political conclusions which differed very substantially from those of the Deshpande-ECCI line. Because of the predominantly 'petty bourgeois', revolutionary character of the Civil Disobedience movement, and the gulf between this section and the Gandhian component in the leadership, the CPI should actively participate in the movement. The communists should take a leading role in the mass movement. They should abstain from attacks on the Congress left and should try to expose the true role of the Gandhians and win the rank-and-file to a struggle against the Indian bourgeoisie and 'feudalism' as well as the British. Sharply criticising Deshpande, he argued that it was

... completely un-Marxist to expect that the masses would completely and consciously break away from the class ideology of the bourgeoisie until and unless proletarian leadership could be demonstrated to them in action, until and unless they have seen the proletariat act as the vanguard of the masses in their fight against imperialism.

Further, because of the contemporary weakness of the working class, a proportionally much greater emphasis should be given to organising the urban middle class in the political field, while in trade unionsim a less militant and sectarian policy should be implemented. In particular, the 'general strike' slogan should be replaced with a program of participation in the workers' partial struggles, and the policy of attacking the 'left-reformist' unionists such as Kandalkar should be rejected in favour of a policy of trade union unity.

The scope of Ranadive's analysis remained very limited, and his conceptual framework crude. Most notably, it retained a simplistic (and wrong) categorisation of the political strategy of Indian capital, misunderstood the relationship between Gandhi and the bourgeoisie and the role of Gandhism, was trapped in an exclusively urban framework, mechanically divided the different tendencies within the Congress on a rigid class basis, and over-estimated the political independence of the urban middle classes within the Congress. Nevertheless it possessed two virtues absent from Deshpande's position. It reflected a serious and independent attempt to understand the nature of Indian politics. And, despite its complete failure to grasp much of the dynamics of Civil Disobedience - particularly the significance of agrarian politics - it provided a much more realistic assessment of urban politics and a much more adequate policy towards the Civil Disobedience movement in Bombay.

However Ranadive's political differences led only to conflict with Deshpande, not to a productive dialogue within the Secretariat or a new lead for the Party.¹¹³ Indeed, within a month of Ranadive's release, he and Deshpande came to blows while leading a procession in the mill area.¹¹⁴ There were several barriers to the development of a more satisfactory Party policy. One of these was, of course, that Deshpande could draw on the ECCI's authority in defence of his formally 'correct' policy. This stand was strengthened when Lynd arrived in February, ending the brief period, since Kweit's and Somers' deportation in September, during which no American Comintern representatives were in residence in Bombay. Part of Lynd's mission was to reaffirm the ECCI's policy, as laid down in the CPI's 'Draft Platform of Action' (which probably arrived for the first time with him) and to fight the growing influence of the Royist heresy.¹¹⁵ Ranadive's policy was too unorthodox, and contained elements too close to the Royist analysis, to be tolerated. Accordingly, Lynd provided additional reinforcement for Deshpande's stand against Ranadive. Ranadive, however, sharply resisted Lynd's attempts to impose ideological orthodoxy.¹¹⁶ A stalemate resulted. A second reason for the conflict was that the political differences between the

113. MCG:2; BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit.

114. Labour Gazette (Bombay), Vol. X(5), 1931, cited in Haithcox, op. cit., p.178.

115. IB, Communism, (1935), p.176.

116. Basing itself on Lynd's and other reports, the Meerut group claimed that Ranadive and Nambiar had become very hostile towards Lynd, had criticised his command of Marxism, and had claimed that he was a Deshpande partisan: MCG:2.

two were accompanied and complicated by a personality clash and 'personal jealousy' arising from the relationships between these two and Nambiar.¹¹⁷ The animosities arising from the latter factor became even more bitter after Nambiar joined Ranadive in his criticisms of Deshpande. Finally, although Ranadive's analysis found a positive response among some of the middle class Party members, the ideological conflict within the Secretariat was not opened into a general Party debate. In fact the Meerut group found that the internal operations of the Bombay branch became even less democratic than during 1930. This precluded the possibility of a resolution of the Secretariat's differences within the main body of the Bombay Party.¹¹⁸

The stalemated leadership situation undermined any possibility that Ranadive's reemergence would mobilise the now substantial discontent of the lower level cadres and provide a new start for the Party. The discontent had been brewing since 1930. A few Party and YWL members, concerned at the Party's poor showing in Civil Disobedience and convinced that they should be participating in it, had taken initiatives which diverged from the official policy. S.G. Sardesai, for example, managed to persuade Deshpande, and then Shanker Rao Deo, who was in charge of the Maharashtra satyagraha committee, that he should lead a forest satyagraha among the tribals of Sanganner, in Ahmednagar District. At Sanganner he, as a Congressman,

117. BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit.; MCG:2.

118. MCG:2.

was able to establish a militant movement - nominally Congress but free of Gandhian controls - which won the Party considerable popularity in the area.¹¹⁹ This was one example of the results - albeit limited - which the communists might have won from the Civil Disobedience movement.¹²⁰ Another example^{of discontent} was D.B. Kulkarni's. In the closing stages of the GIPR strike Kulkarni, disillusioned with the results, left it to join the Gandhian movement.¹²¹ Many of the original YWL members had also left by this time.¹²²

By 1931, rank-and-file discontent had become general. Some, the Meerut group discovered, had 'even begun to doubt the correctness of the line itself'.¹²³ But despite Ranadive's new policy direction he did not initiate any real attempts to participate in the Gandhian movement during the five months between his release and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. After the Pact Sardesai was deputed to attend the Karachi session of the

119. Interviews with S.G. Sardesai and B.T. Ranadive; BSAI, 1930, para. 1109(16). Sardesai says that the area has remained a CPI stronghold to this day, and that the movement also brought some of the local Congress radicals towards - and eventually into - the Party.
120. However it should be again stressed that even if the Party leadership had been willing to authorise as Party policy this sort of participation in the Congress movement, it would undoubtedly have met with a great deal of resistance from the Congress leadership. In this case Sardesai was probably given permission primarily because, as a former private secretary to Sapru, he was well known to top Congress leaders such as the two Nehrus; and without Deo's authorisation he would not have been able to organise a Congress agitation at Sangamner (interview with S.G. Sardesai) and would thus have been isolated, and impotent to organise such a movement.
121. BSAI, 1930, para.651. Presumably he was also disillusioned by his exclusion from the Party in 1929 (see above). However he returned subsequently.
122. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the YWL; MCG:2.

National Congress to distribute the Draft Platform of Action and a Party manifesto.¹²⁴ In the post-Pact disillusion he found there he was able to make a modest impact on some sections - most notably at the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha Conference.¹²⁵ But, apart from occasional demonstrations and leafleting in the 1930 mode,¹²⁶ this was not followed up.¹²⁷ Some efforts were also made in the trade union field. In particular, Sardesai was able to reestablish contacts with the

124. The manifesto was titled 'Karachi Congress and the Struggle Against Imperialism' (in BSB, 1036/B/V/1935). There was an interesting discrepancy between the manifesto and the Draft Platform - a discrepancy which indicated the difference between Deshpande's and Ranadive's political positions. Unlike the Draft Platform, the manifesto did not attack the Congress leftists - an absence which was later criticised by the ECCI in the 'Open Letter' cited in fn.121 above.
125. MCG:1 & 2; BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit.
126. That Ranadive's methods of intervention in the nationalist arena were not substantially different to those of Deshpande's is apparent from the following examples. On March 16 the BPCC convened a meeting in the mill area. Gandhi addressed the 20,000 persons present. Ranadive led a procession of some 1000 YWL members to the rally then, repeating the Independence Day action of the previous day, rushed the platform, overpowered the Congress volunteers, and hoisted a red flag alongside the Congress flag. Ranadive subsequently participated in the radical attack on Gandhi for having concluded the Pact in the interests of the capitalists, landlords and Princes, at the expense of the workers and peasants. (BSAI, 1931, para. 940(3-6); NAI, H.Poll, 18/III/1931: Bombay FRI Mar.) In a similar fashion, Ranadive and Deshpande led a hostile demonstration of 75 YWL members against Gandhi on the day of his arrival in December from the Round Table Conference. They joined the welcoming crowd along the route to shout 'boycott Gandhi'. (NAI, H.Poll, 5/82/1932: report by the Bombay Commissioner of Police, 28/12/31.) However, in the atmosphere of radical disillusion after the Pact, these attacks on the Congress leadership probably did not have such totally negative repercussions on the communists' reputation as did the 1930 demonstration.
127. MCG:2. The Bombay leadership did make a brief attempt to reactivate and expand the YWL at this stage, but it was soon wrecked on the twin reefs on internal dissension and lack of working class support: NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the YWL.

Party sympathisers in the GIPRU and to build up a substantial nucleus of supporters within the managing committee.¹²⁸

Ranadive's limited efforts to reassert a communist presence in the mill area came to little, and the communists remained as isolated as before in the province's textile unionism.

The Royist GKU, in contrast, led a number of small strikes during the year and, though these were not successful, managed to increase the strength of the union. While the Ladhau GKU continued to exist only on paper and the BTLU to languish, the Royist GKU's membership rose from 100 in October 1930 to some 4,000 in July 1931.¹²⁹ Communist attempts to intervene in a strike which closed down five of the Madhaoji Dharamsi mills in July-August produced no significant results.¹³⁰

By the middle of the year, then, the Bombay branch was back in the rut it had found in 1930. But this time the rank-and-file were more restive. The Bombay Committee called a meeting in July to express its dissatisfaction with the stalemated leadership's inactivity, its divorce from themselves, their own lack of access to the Party's resources, and the impotence of the Central Committee. The Meerut group saw the meeting as

128. Eg., this faction was able to muster 11 votes against the Ruikar's 14 when the latter began moves to expel them, thereby staving off the attempt: MCG:2.

129. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the GKU, 1928-33. The union's income and expenditure for the preceding year was some Rs.2,500. The communists also lost the original WPP trade union base - the small Municipal Workers' Union - to the Royists.

130. MCG:2; Karnik, op. cit., pp.262-63.

the 'beginnings of a revolt' against the leadership.¹³¹

The calling of the meeting was in itself a significant development; but of particular interest was the class-based pattern of voting which emerged there. The working class members, who had been the most discriminated against in the allocation of the Party's resources, argued that the leadership as a whole was at fault and that the Party's main problem was the 'petty bourgeois' character of both the Secretariat and the Central Committee. This vote was another clear indication of the non-'proletarianisation' of the leadership - and, thus, of another of the consequences for the quality of leadership of the absence of interaction with a mass base. It also demonstrated the continued perils of an 'elitist' orientation towards working class Marathas; the vote indicated the reemergence of the rejection of 'outsider' leadership that, before the 1928 strike, had been a major obstacle to middle class communist access to the working class, and which had subsequently made possible the communists' 1930 expulsion from the GKU.

On this occasion, however, the working class revolt was contained by Sardesai, who was not identified closely with any of the leaders and was thus trusted by the Marathas. They accepted his argument that it was the leadership's inactivity, not its class character, that was the essential problem. This was also accepted by the middle class members and was passed by

131. MCG:2. Except where indicated, the following account of intra-Party developments during 1931 and the first half of 1932 is based on this detailed report. The MCG:2 account is based, in turn, on the following sources: interviews with eight of the participants between January and July 1932; two reports on the situation by Lynd; Ranadive's and Deshpande's replies to Lynd's reports to the Central Committee; the replies of five of the CC members to the same reports; the CC's resolution on the Party crisis; and several written reports to the Meerut group by other members.

the meeting. The meeting also sharply criticised the Central Committee for its weakness vis a vis the Secretariat.

Lynd completed his investigation of the Party situation at about the same time as the Bombay Committee meeting. He came to a similar conclusion - the Party's problems were due primarily to the leadership's inactivity, organisational incompetence and bureaucratic exclusion of the subsidiary organs from the decision-making.¹³² He immediately called the Central Committee together to submit his report and initiate discussion and remedial action.

However these complementary initiatives, from below and from above, did not produce the desired results. Soon afterwards Deshpande and Ranadive finally brought their differences into the open - and then proceeded to canvass support for their respective positions from among the general membership. The Meerut group argued that this was an attempt to defuse the potential rank-and-file revolt and to frustrate Lynd's attempts to mobilise the Central Committee. But, whatever the motivation, the attempt was successful. During the second half of 1931 the membership was gradually mobilised into two opposing factions until, by the end of the year, no neutral members were left; the attempt to create bolshevist 'monolithic' unity within the CPI was beginning to have some perverse consequences.

During the factional mobilisation Ranadive argued that the central cause of the Party's problems was Deshpande's personal shortcomings. Deshpande argued that it was Ranadive's political

132. ibid.; IB, Communism, (1935), p.178; BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit..

deviations from orthodoxy. As in the July meeting of the Bombay membership, a definite class pattern emerged in the faction formation. The Meerut group explained this as being a result of factors such as 'personal relations, places of residence, political backwardness, etc.', to Ranadive's covert appeal to the 'petty bourgeois prejudices' of the intellectuals, and to Deshpande's overt manipulation 'of the class consciousness of the worker members to discredit R[anadive] and his group'. The depth of the membership's frustration at the Party's situation was reflected in the bitterness of the factional conflict into which it was channelled:

Instead of thinking about the right course for the Party, the Comrades were acting to secure exclusive domination in the Party During the discussions they used words against each other as if they were class enemies and acted as if they were factions inside the Congress or a like body and not at all fellow members of the Revolutionary Party. They forgot the existence of the CI and their responsibility to it.

The class pattern of the two factions produced a further debilitating result: because the Central Committee was composed primarily of the middle class intellectual members, and the lower committees of working class members, Ranadive's faction dominated the former and Deshpande's the latter. Deshpande used his dominance in the Party's lower committees to block any activity initiated by the Secretariat and the Central Committee:

... they prolonged meetings indefinitely - up to 12 hours at a time, with the reading of the minutes alone taking 4 hours sometimes. In meetings, rowdy and uncomradely methods were used, including obscene and irresponsible language. In CC meetings R[anadive] and Sar[desai] were called spies etc. [by the Deshpande minority]. Proposals and plans of work were not considered on their merits but shelved or thrown out for factional reasons. Thus all of the internal work of the P[arty] was sabotaged.

Deshpande's blocking tactics, which completely stalemated the functioning of the Party, also consolidated the factional commitments of even the more neutral of the intellectual members.¹³³

Both Lynd and the Meerut group attempted to arbitrate the dispute. Lynd's efforts, however, were ineffective. The Meerut group's proposal that Nambiar and Ranadive be dropped from the Secretariat - the former for her alleged 'corrupting influence' and the latter because he was more influenced by her than Deshpande - added to the heat rather than dissipating it. Two visiting representatives (John Clark and William Bennett) of the Comintern's RILU - this time Canadians - took up Lynd's efforts after he was deported in December. While Lynd had been critical of all three Secretariat members, and particularly of Deshpande - and reported accordingly to the Comintern on his return¹³⁴ - Clark and Bennett supported Deshpande, encouraging his efforts to use the lower-level committees to fight the Central Committee. But Ranadive's faction remained recalcitrant, arguing (correctly) that the two RILU representatives did not have the authority to intervene in Party affairs.

From Factionalism to Party Split

It was the Ranadive faction which finally broke the

133. Eg., R.D. Bharadwaj. Bharadwaj first came to Bombay, to begin Party work there, during the July-August Madhaoji Dharamsi mill strike. After witnessing Deshpande's efforts to 'sabotage' Ranadive's initiatives during the strike, he decided that Deshpande was 'a terrible man': 'My whole experience is that Com. D[eshpande] will allow Party work only if he is to be the boss, otherwise he is ready to sabotage': quoted in MCG:2.

134. IB, Communism, (1935), p.178.

stalemate - by seceding from the Party in mid-December to form a new 'Bolshevik Party'.¹³⁵ Significantly, it did so in the name of the Comintern. In a statement to the Party it condemned 'the counter-revolutionary clique of Deshpande and his gang which is in a majority in the Communist Party of India', and announced that:

We affirm our loyalty to the Communist International.... We assure the Communist International that we will work ... on the lines laid down by [it] ... and because of this we announce our firm decision to work independently of the present counter-revolutionary clique, which has been sabotaging the work of revolution in every sphere.¹³⁶

Having seceded, the Ranadive group then sought Comintern recognition for the Bolshevik Party as the legitimate and most effective representative of that organisation. It intended to proceed in its political activity as if it was the real CPI, and it regarded its task as 'building the movement from the foundations'. It would not publicly attack the Deshpande Party and was prepared to work with it in the trade unions, but it intended to criticise individual members if they 'deviated from the correct policy'. The public truce did not last long, however, for the Deshpande group initiated a sequence of mutual attacks in the local press.¹³⁷

There were now three separate and mutually hostile groups in Bombay city - the 'official' CPI, the Bolshevik Party and Roy's Revolutionary Working Class Party - competing for

135. MCG:2; BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit.

136. Quoted in NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the 'Lal Bavta' Girni Kamgar Union.

137. In the Sunday Advocate: MCG:2.

recognition by the Comintern as its only legitimate representative leadership group in India; the claim to legitimacy became a weapon in the factional struggle. Of these, only Roy's group exercised political influence of any significance - though even this was fast disintegrating.¹³⁸

The seceding group began with about 15 members and the Deshpande group with about twenty.¹³⁹ By mid-1933 the former had increased to about 30, while the latter had dwindled to 15.¹⁴⁰ The Meerut group - who, on the grounds of Party discipline, supported the Deshpande group - gave the following comparative assessment of the composition and capabilities of the two factions:

The Party group is intellectually very weak. D[eshpande] himself is the only intellectual in the group Almost all the members are workers, but this does not mean much, as we should not take seriously any attempt to idealise them. The truth is that these comrades are intellectually very backward, with few opportunities of improving themselves in this respect. In practice they have shown no particular capacity as organisers or agitators. Almost all come from the textile workers but they have failed to get the mass support or even mass contacts for the Party. ... they are fairly completely divorced from the working class [nevertheless] it is necessary ... to acknowledge the loyalty and sincerity which the worker members of the Party and the YWL have displayed But ... they are not competent to build up by their own efforts a CPI which can be really called a CP. ... the seceders are distinctly superior. ... The seceders form almost the whole cadre of the Party, as it were. ... a strong element of this sort [middle class intellectuals] is indispensable for the Party. ... Nevertheless ... the seceders also are incapable of carrying out their declared programme of building up a CPI ... at least within a reasonably short time.

138. IB, Communism, (1935), p.169; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the GPU, 1928-34.

139 MCG:2.

140. Figures taken from membership lists of the two groups, in BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: op. cit.

Forming 'almost the whole cadre of the Party', the seceding group took with it virtually all of the Party's remaining contacts and influence.¹⁴¹ Moreover, once free of the Party stalemate, the Bolshevik Party undertook a more active campaign to increase their influence. In addition to their work in the existing unions they formed a new textile union - the 'Lal Bavta (Red Flag) GKU' - in Bombay, and the 'Mill Mazdoor Union' in Ahmedabad. After they had been expelled from the GIP and BB & CI railway unions they formed rival 'Red' unions.¹⁴² These, unlike the earlier communist rival unions, undertook some activity.¹⁴³ Though they were extremely small they retained some influence and were to provide the nuclei for the later development of the Party's trade union base.¹⁴⁴

Not only did the Deshpande group begin with a much weaker base, but it also suffered further disintegration within six months of the split.¹⁴⁵ In mid-1932 there arose a pattern of dissension within the official Party which almost exactly replicated that which had led to the split. Following the secession Deshpande was joined by the other remaining intellectual, N.S. Desai, to constitute the Party leadership.

141. The pro-communist factions in the two railway unions worked with the Ranadive group, and almost all of the Bombay office-bearers in the Red AITUC were among the secessionists: NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: notes on the GIP Railway Labour Union, the Red BB and CI Railway Workers' Union and the Red AITUC; MCG:2.

142. Source for the railway unions as in fn. 150; NAI, 7/20/1934: note on the Lal Bavta GKU and the Mill Mazdoor Union, Ahmedabad; MCG:2.

143. Eg., during the sharp wage-cutting in the textile industry during 1933, Ranadive's group, in contrast to Deshpande's and in competition with the Royists, undertook a fairly vigorous - if ineffective - campaign to mobilise the workers against the wage-cuts: NAI, H.Poll, 18/IV/1933 - 18/IX/1933: Bombay FRs Mar. - Aug.; NAI, H.Poll, 11/7/1933: note by Haig, 9/7/33.

Because of a shortage of cadres considered suitable for the job, the Central Committee, which had been reduced from eleven to five, could only be expanded to seven. It exercised no more influence on the new leaders than had its predecessor. Deshpande and Desai continued to exercise the same mode of control; in the words of a critique from Meerut, they were 'more interested in keeping the "Contacts" in their own hands than in using them in the interests of the building of the Party'. The result was, once again, a revolt by the working class members against the 'petty bourgeois' leadership, followed by the formation of two rival factions holding majorities at different levels of the Party's organisation. The conflict was, again, extremely bitter. Soon the working class dissenters that Deshpande had earlier praised as 'revolutionary proletarian elements' were being condemned by him as 'rabid counter-revolutionaries in league with the seceders'. The Party was stalemated for a second time. The last possible opportunity for a resolution of the situation - arbitration by the resident RILU representatives Bennett and Clark (which was requested by those in revolt against the Deshpande leadership) - was removed in September when they were arrested and deported by the British.¹⁴⁴ An attempt by the Meerut group to arbitrate, also requested by the dissenters, failed when it was ignored by the Deshpande

144. See the notes on the respective organisations in NAI, H.Poll 7/20/1934.

145. The following account of the second wave of factional strife within the 'official' Party is based on MCG:3. This report, too, is carefully documented.

146. ibid.; IB, Communism, (1935), p.179.

leadership. By the beginning of 1933 the situation within the Deshpande group was 'as chaotic as it was at the end of 1931', and with no prospects for an improvement in sight.¹⁴⁷

The Deshpande group's only remaining source of strength was the support he received from the Meerut and other provincial groups. Only Amir Haider Khan's small circle in Madras supported the seceding group.¹⁴⁸ The grounds for this support were provided by the Meerut group. Despite its recognition of the clear political superiority of Ranadive's party, it responded to requests for an opinion from both parties in the following manner:

... without being taken to be partisans ... we would of course, in principle, support the Party as such. ... We are proud to take our stand under the banner of the CI and are in duty bound to stand by its section in our country.¹⁴⁹

The imperatives of Party discipline overrode questions of merit.

At about the same time, the ECCI finally recognised the Party situation publicly and issued an explicit condemnation of the political behaviour of the Bombay leadership. In May 1932 a lengthy 'Open Letter' to the Indian communists appeared in Inprecor.¹⁵⁰ It was written after Lynd's return to Moscow and appears to have incorporated both his report and the report from the Meerut group which he took with him from India.¹⁵¹ It

147. MCG:3; the government reported that after Ranadive's secession the activities of the Deshpande group were 'generally confined to interfering in labour disputes ... and to creating trouble at meetings organised by rival parties': NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the YWL.

148. IB, Communism, (1935), p.178; MCG:2.

149. MCG:2.

150. This is the 'Open Letter' referred to in fn.121 above.

151. See IB, Communism, (1935), p.177. Much of the message of the 'Open Letter' was repeated in V. Basak, op. cit.

reaffirmed the indisputable 'correctness' of the ECCI's policy and placed all responsibility for the CPI's situation on to the shoulders of its current leadership (the old leadership being implicitly, and finally, absolved). In particular, it singled out the Bombay leadership. It sharply criticised Bombay for its bureaucratic dominance of its own branch, for 'reducing the whole Party merely to a local organisation', and for the respective 'deviations' of its two factions. Though without mentioning names, Deshpande was criticised primarily for his defeatist sectarian abstentionism, and Ranadive for his neo-Royist exaggeration of the political weight of the nationalist 'petty bourgeoisie' and his corresponding under-estimation of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. The 'Open Letter' did not refer directly to the Party split, but it was unambiguous on the general question of factionalism:

There can be no greater crime than if the Communists ... follow the path of unprincipled factional struggle, fractions and personal groupings ... [which] play into the hands of the British Imperialists. True Communist groups must put the interests of the proletariat above everything else, direct all their efforts towards the rapid formation of the Communist Party, settling all disputed questions within the framework of the Communist International and if necessary with its assistance.¹⁵²

However, because it did not state a definite preference for any particular group, the 'Open Letter' did not provide a clear lead for the reorganisation of the Party.

If factionalism was the 'greatest crime' then secession was a mortal sin. But, despite the combined pressure of the ECCI and the Meerut group, the Ranadive group remained firm in

152. 'Open Letter', p.442.

its resolve not to rejoin the official Party - at least not while it was led by Deshpande. When the Meerut group asked the five leading members of the secessionist group what would be their response to an ECCI ruling, either way, on the current situation, their replies reflected this attitude: two said that they would 'consider it', two said that they would accept it provided that it did not require them to work with Deshpande, and only one said he would accept it unconditionally.¹⁵³

But this stand did not entail an uncritical attitude towards Ranadive. In a collective statement to the Meerut group they accepted that Ranadive had 'committed many grave mistakes', and several were hostile to Nambiar's influence within the group. They believed, however, that Ranadive, unlike Deshpande, was 'capable of correcting his mistakes and of working in a sincere collective manner'.¹⁵⁴

By the beginning of 1933, then, the Bombay branch of the CPI appeared to be in the last throes of the agonies of its slow death. It had reached this point after a protracted four-years illness, beginning with the wounds it had suffered in 1929, and despite (and because) of the constant attention of a sequence of international physicians. Because of Bombay's dominance over the 'all-India' Party apparatus, the CPI, too, was sharing Bombay's fate. In Bombay, only the weak and illegitimate secessionist offspring stood any chance of survival.

153. Cited in MCG:2.

154. ibid.

Given time it might, possibly, become a viable force. By 1933 it had clearly outpaced the Deshpande group and, because of the gradual disintegration of the Royists following the imprisonment of their leader, it stood a chance of overtaking that group, too.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the foreseeable future of Ranadive's Bolshevik Party was hardly a promising one.

The prospect was no brighter elsewhere. The only other members of the 'family circle' that had survived as entities were those - the Meerut group and the unofficial Halim group in Calcutta - who had earlier been abandoned by Bombay; and the former was about to be condemned to long terms of imprisonment. We will now look at the latter's progress from 1930 and situation in 1933.

Bengal, 1930-33

After Deshpande had installed the Bukhari-Zaman group as the official Bengal branch of the CPI, it and the Halim group maintained an uneasy co-existence through 1930. Moreover, these two groups had to share the claim to Marxist leadership with several other groups. But, despite these competing claims and the substantial variations in the level of commitment to a Marxist ideology and politics, all of the groups shared a similar situation; they were opposed to

155. The Intelligence Branch conjectured that Ranadive also stood a good chance of eventual recognition as the 'official' Party, following Lynd's very critical report to the ECCI on Deshpande: IB, Communism, (1935), p.178.

Bengal's Congress leadership, but they did not have much influence in local nationalist politics and they had even less on the working class or peasantry.¹⁵⁶ Apart from these features, the aspects of the Bengal story most relevant to this account are the following: the 'unofficial' Halim group's development as a cohesive body, despite the factional conflict which surrounded it and its failure to establish a mass base; its eventual emergence as the predominant Marxist group in Calcutta; its continued inability, despite this relative success, to overcome Bombay's dominance in the CPI; and its growing hostility towards Bombay for this reason.

During this period there were four other groups, in addition to the Halim and the Bombay-supported groups, which saw themselves as Marxist.¹⁵⁷ The members of two of these had been involved with the Goswami-Chakravarty faction at the time of the split in the Bengal WPP, before the Meerut arrests. One of these, the 'Samyraj Party', evolved, under the leadership of Badul Ganguly and Aghore Sen, from Santosh

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156. The leaders of one of these groups, Bankim Mukherji, appears to have been a partial exception to this categorisation. His main arena of activity was the BPCC. His influence there is suggested by the fact that his vote in the BPCC for a resumption of Civil Disobedience in December 1931 was narrowly defeated by 189 votes to 143. (Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline', p.611.) Mukherji's group also had some contact with peasant organisations: NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the Indian Proletarian Revolutionary Army.
157. Roy also attempted to set up a Bengal group, but without noticeable success. The following paragraph is based on the following sources: the notes on the different organisations in NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934; MCG:1 & 2; IB, Communism, (1935), pp.240-42; Ranen Sen, op. cit., pp.4-7.

Mitra's Socialist Youth League. It consisted almost entirely of terrorists and ex-terrorists. Its membership grew to about 50 in 1932, but it then split in two in that year. The second group was led by Bhupendranath Dutt and Bankim Mukherji and called itself the 'Indian Proletarian Revolutionary Party'. Its membership, too, was primarily terrorist or ex-terrorist. A third group was organised around a Prabhas Banerji in 1929 - again, mainly from those with backgrounds in terrorist organisations.

Banerji was also associated with a small group of Indian communists in London.¹⁵⁸ They were almost all students at Oxford - 'of exceptionally good stock', in the Intelligence Bureau's words, and 'the sons of India's intellectual aristocracy'.¹⁵⁹ Almost all were Bengali; they were to be Bengal's first 'upper bhadralok' communists. They were in close contact with the CPGB, and particularly with its Indian member, Saklatvala. In fact their conversion was the first real success for the CPGB's efforts since the early 1920s to establish a communist nucleus among Indian university students in England. Under their leader, Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar, a former law student, they formed themselves in 1930 into a loosely organised Marxist circle, of about a dozen members, called the 'University Students' Group'. They underwent political training in London

158. This paragraph is based on IB, Communism, (1935), pp.248-54; D.M. Laushey, Bengal Terrorism and the Marxist Left, (Calcutta, 1975), pp.113-16 (Laushey's account is based partly on an interview with the group's leader, N. Dutt Mazumdar).

159. IB, Communism, (1935), pp.248-49.

and under Chattopadhyaya in Berlin, and published a magazine for Indian students in Britain.¹⁶⁰ In 1931 Mazumdar sent two of its members home to Bengal to begin work, then returned himself in August 1932. In Calcutta he developed an independent group called the 'Labour Party, Bengal', and undertook a vigorous campaign to establish contacts in other provinces and with working class organisations, and to penetrate other Marxist organisations.¹⁶¹

Mazumdar had one distinct advantage over the other groups - the legitimising factor of independent international communist contacts. He was to use this advantage to some effect. The CPGB, for its part, also valued the connection. Its relationship with the University Students' Group appears to have provided it with its only direct link with the Indian movement in this period. It was not a very satisfactory link, for, 80 percent of the students' group being Bengali, the CPGB's contact would be restricted to that province until Mazumdar managed to establish a wider network. But this situation proved to be even more unsatisfactory for the Halim group; the authority that Mazumdar and the envoys who preceded him derived from their independent international contacts with

160. The magazine was called New Bharat, later to become Indian Front. Copies are preserved in the Marx Memorial Library, London.
161. IB, Communism, pp.250-4; NAI, H.Poll, 25/51/1931: notes on Nirmal Sen Gupta, Nov. - Dec., 1931; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: notes on the Calcutta Port and Dock Workers' Union.

the CPGB and with Chattopadhyaya proved to be very disruptive.¹⁶²

Thus, during 1930-33 the Halim group had to exist as one Marxist group among several making the same claim. All built independent - and sometimes competing - trade union contacts, and all published separate organs. All except Halim's group existed in a state of considerable flux, with members moving from one group to another or leaving altogether.¹⁶³ In the longer historical perspective the phenomenon as a whole can be seen as the second terrorist transition towards communism - the first being that led by Goswami and Chakravarty in the early 1920s. These conversions were eventually greatly to swell the CPI's ranks in Bengal. But during this period the divisions between the different groups were to reinforce the weakness of communism in an already difficult period. The formation of these new groups marked a significant, if partial, ideological transition in one dimension of bhadralok politics; but, at this stage at least, they had not made a substantial transition from the modes of political action practised in their immediate past.

This was the immediate context of the conflict between

162. This was still the case in late 1934: see BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: letter from the CPI, Bombay, to the ECCI, ca. Dec. 1934. The letter is also a request for an ECCI resolution of the general problem for the Party of returnees with international communist contacts: 'The Party must be kept informed of the arrivals of these people, and they should be instructed definitely to work with the Party group. ... Since they are RETURNED from abroad, they get a particular advantage and status which it takes time to combat'. See also the sources cited in fn.170 for further evidence of Mazumdar's use of his international contacts.

163. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: notes on the different Bengal groups; MCG:1 & 2; Ranen Sen, op. cit., pp.4-10. However they cooperated on the Red AITUC.

the Halim and the Bombay-supported group during these years. After the disorientation of 1929, both groups entered 1930 in an extremely weak state.¹⁶⁴ It was in this condition that they became involved in the one noteworthy 'communist' event of the period - the Calcutta carters' strike in April. It was to demonstrate, once again, the frailties of the early Bengali communist approach to trade unionism.

The strike was a protest at a recently notified government restriction, inspired by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, on the hours of operation of bullock carts.¹⁶⁵ The carters, already affected by the trade recession, became very agitated about the measure. The Halim, Bukhari and Mukherji groups¹⁶⁶ then stepped in to organise the agitation - which appears to have been intended by them more as a challenge to the Raj than as an industrial dispute.¹⁶⁷ A 'Carters' Union' was hastily established,¹⁶⁸ and a 'satyagraha' organised for April 1, the day the new regulation came into force.

164. See, eg., NAI, H.Poll, 88/1930: Tegart to G of Ben., 27/1/30.

165. The strike, its background and its sequel are described in: IOL, L/PJ/6/2000, files 1974/1930 & 2987/1930: Tegart to G of Ben., 3 & 11/4/30; & IB, Communism, (1935), p.160 & pp.292-4.

166. Mukherji appears to have played the main role.

167. See, eg., the leaflet published for the occasion by Abdul Halim, titled 'To the Workers, Students and Citizens of Bengal' (in TNA, GO 549, Public, April 28, 1930). The Meerut group described it accurately as 'a rather silly and violent appeal to the carters to seize power etc.': MCG:1.

168. It is possible that the organisers were able to use earlier contacts with the carters. Gopen Chakravarty says that during the 1928 Lillooah strike they managed to organise a carters' union (Chakravarty, Interview, p.140). It also seems that the carters' chaudhris acted as intermediaries: see Tegart to G of Ben., 11/4/30, as in fn.165 above.

At midday on April 1, large numbers of carters unyoked and dismantled their carts on the Howrah bridge and surrounding streets. Simultaneously, thousands of youths barricaded the streets over a wide area of Calcutta. A pitched battle with the police - described by the Intelligence Branch as 'the first barricade street fight with the police in India' - then ensued.¹⁶⁹ Six were killed by police fire and 59 injured. The police sustained 57 injuries, a number of which were serious. The unrestrained violence soon persuaded the carters that the costs of this form of action were too high, and from the next day 'the Communist leaders had to rely to an increasing extent on the Congress rank and file for the furtherance of their aims'.¹⁷⁰

Although the event seems to have increased the 'Carters' Union' leaders' stocks with the students of Calcutta, it produced little else of value. In particular, it did not further the communists' working class program.¹⁷¹ However it did lead to several imprisonments. One of these was Halim's. Others, including Bukhari, were interned under the new Criminal Law Amendment Act during the year and subsequently. The repression of 1930 virtually immobilised both the Halim and the Bukhari groups.¹⁷² It also heightened the communists 'left-

169. IB, Communism, (1935), p.160. Very large numbers were involved in the street fights, which soon had little to do with the original issue.

170. ibid., p.293. See also NAI, H.Poll, 248/II/1930: note by Sir B.L. Mitter, 15/5/30, after a visit to Calcutta.

171. MCG:1 & 2. The carters were to organise a hartal two years later on the same issue; but this time it was peaceful, and no communists were involved (NAI, H.Poll, 18/VII/1932: Bengal FR1 Apr.). The Bengal FRs frequently reported poorly attended labour meetings, organised by the communists and the other groups, throughout this period. The workers showed little interest in them.

172. Ranen Sen, op. cit., p.4, who says that their only achievement for the year was the publication of one leaflet: MCG:1 & 2.

sectarianism': as one of the participants explained, the ECCI's Tenth Plenum line 'meant isolation from everyone but ourselves'; but it struck a responsive chord because 'we had been driven into a corner by imperialist persecution, which bred a psychology of trusting no one but ourselves'.¹⁷³ There was a particular reason for distrusting terrorists - close involvement with them invited police repression for a cause which the communists rejected politically. The Halim group vigorously denounced both terrorism and Congress politics.

But, unlike in Bombay, 'left-sectarianism' in Bengal appears to have promoted unity rather than destroying it. After his release Halim formed an unofficial 'Calcutta Committee of the Communist Party of India' with Abani Chowdhuri, Akhil Banerji, Ranen Sen, Ranen Bose and Somnath Lahiri.¹⁷⁴ Starting with this small nucleus, the Calcutta Committee slowly grew during 1931. The Bombay-supported group, in contrast, disintegrated - some of its members joining the Calcutta Committee. By mid-1932 the former had about 20 active members, compared to the latter's six to eight.¹⁷⁵ The Halim group devoted much of its attention during 1931-32 to attempting to develop a mass base. It maintained or established rudimentary trade union organisations among the transport workers, the EIR workshop men, on the East Bengal Railway, and among the Matiaburz, rice mill and match factory workers. (However it failed to make contact with any of the peasant movements of the period.) Along with several of the other groups, it also had representatives on

173. Interview with Somnath Lahiri.

174. *ibid.*; Ranen Sen, *op. cit.*, p.4.

175. MCG:2; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the Workers' Party of India.

the (powerless) Red AITUC.¹⁷⁶ It gave considerable attention to Marxist study and translation work.¹⁷⁷ Finally, it managed to form an alliance with the Calcutta branch of the Sikh Akali Dal.¹⁷⁸ But it became convinced that, even more important than immediately building a mass base, 'Party unity was the first necessity'.¹⁷⁹ The conviction was based on the debilitating experience of the WPP split before the Meerut arrests, and was confirmed by the current Bombay situation and the division which surrounded them in Calcutta's impotent left-wing politics.¹⁸⁰

Having successfully established its own unity, the Calcutta Committee initially made every effort to forge an inter-provincial unity with Bombay. Its cooperation with Bombay on the Red AITUC, despite Bombay's policy of excluding it from the Party, was one expression of this effort.¹⁸¹ But finally the Calcutta Committee abandoned its restraint. In mid-1932 it published a manifesto denouncing 'the present so-called, self-constituted CC of the CPI', and its Calcutta affiliate, in the most bitter of terms.¹⁸² It described the existing Central Committee as being

176. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the Red AITUC.

177. Ranen Sen, *op. cit.*, pp.6-7; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the Workers' Party of India; NAI, H.Poll, 90/1932: extract from Halim to Editor, Labour Monthly (London), 6/4/32.

178. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: note on the Akali Dal.

179. Interview with Somnath Lahiri.

180. ibid.

181. MCG:2.

182. ACH, 1935/25: 'Manifesto of the Communist Party of India'.

... dominated by a few careerists and adventurers of the worst sort who have made it a basis of their self aggrandisement only, allowing willingly the real work of the Communist Party of India to go to the dogs. ... We are against this bureaucratic opportunism.

The Bombay leadership was also attacked for its inactivity, 'careerism', factionalism, splitting of other communist groups, and for 'flirting and collaborating with persons of doubtful roles and police spies'. Included in the pamphlet's list of slogans was 'Down with rampant opportunism in the C.C. of the C.P.I.'. The manifesto also proposed the development of a CPI independent of the current Bombay leadership, but, hopefully, affiliated to the Comintern:

We appeal to all honest and sincere Communists... to organise themselves into local Committees independently of the so-called CC of the CPI and then to put up a united front against British Imperialism and native counter-revolution. ... we propose to organise an independent CC of the CPI on the lines laid down by the CI, and we appeal to all individual Communists and Communist groups to join and help us in this.

The pamphlet also inaugurated a significant shift in tactics towards the Congress rank-and-file and the terrorists. While firmly pointing out the 'illusions' of a belief in Congress nationalism or terrorism being able to win independence, it also made a concerted and sympathetic effort to win these sections to a communist position. This contrasted with the harshness of earlier criticisms. In line with this tactical shift, the Calcutta Committee began a serious attempt to contact, provide literature for, and convert, the internees in the detention camps.¹⁸³

183. Ranen Sen, op. cit., pp.8-9; interview with Somnath Lahiri.

But neither the call for the isolation of the Bombay leadership and for the creation of communist unity around an independent Central Committee, nor the campaign in the jails, could change the Calcutta Committee's immediate situation.

* * *

The Calcutta manifesto was a cry of desperation. It reflected the isolation and mutual hostilities that had overtaken Indian communism in the wake of the Meerut arrests and in the difficult, coinciding, Civil Disobedience and 'third period' phases.

The Bombay leadership's bureaucratic domination of the formal Party apparatus was the immediate cause of the more serious of the divisions among the communists. This dominance was made possible by the great regional imbalance that had developed in the CPI following the contrasting successes of the two communist centres in the critical late 1920s period. This contrast was, in turn, essentially a consequence of the great differences - created largely by the unevenness of the colonialisation of eastern and western India - in the objective possibilities for communist politics in the respective regions. Bombay's dominance was also made possible by the existence of a formal, centralised, 'all-India' Party, affiliated to, and supported materially and morally by, the Comintern. The experiences of this period demonstrated the prematurity of the great emphasis that was given from December 1928 to the creation of such a Party apparatus.¹⁸⁴ That it was established - if only

184. As distinct from a strong underground organisation. The irony was that while the formation of a centrally directed, 'all-India' Party in the conditions of the late 1920s and early 1930s was premature, the formation of an underground apparatus was long overdue.

in essentially formal terms - then legitimised and supplied with resources by Moscow, while the great disparity in the strengths of the provincial branches remained, made possible Bombay's subordination of the other branches even after it had lost its mass base. It made possible the projection of Bombay's intra-Party politics on to the other branches - with disastrous effects.¹⁸⁵

The situation which resulted was an ominous legacy for the future - particularly as it was created during the penultimate phase of the bolshevisation of the Comintern. The pattern of dominance and subordination that was established in India paralleled the escalation since 1928 of a similar process in the 'World Party'; as with the other national Parties, the CPI was expected to follow a path determined by the exigencies of domestic politics in the Soviet Union. But, for the CPI, the threat of bolshevisation was the greater because the ECCI-CPI relationship was not simply one of political dominance-subordination. In part it had an ideological basis. Initially at least, most of the Indian communists were willing enough to attempt to traverse this impossible path: because of their great faith in the revolutionary credentials of those who had made the Russian Revolution; because the Soviet Union was the enemy of British imperialism; because of their deep commitment to

185. In this we can perhaps see a parallel with the projection of Bombay factionalism on to the national Congress organisation in the Congress split of 1907: see G. Johnson, Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism, Bombay and the Indian National Congress 1880 to 1915, (Cambridge, 1973), Chapter 4.

revolutionary internationalism and their identification of this with the Communist International; and because in this particular phase 'left-sectarianism' reinforced the ideological-psychological response they had already made to an extremely defensive situation.¹⁸⁶ But, in addition to these ideological factors, the communists' attachment to the Comintern was determined very largely by a situation of political dependency. For the undivided Bombay leadership after the loss of its mass base and political momentum, the ECCI connection provided it with its only authority and resources; for the secessionist and excluded groups, unable to make immediate political progress, a favourable decision by the ECCI provided them with their only apparent means for beginning to resolve their immediate problem of lack of political authority. But, given the factionalism that had already been conducted in the Comintern's name and the continuation of the same objective conditions that had aggravated this factionalism, there was no reason to believe that even a clear ECCI decision would be capable of decisively resolving the wider problem of Party unity. The Meerut group's assessment - noted at the beginning of this chapter - that the outlook was 'hopeless', appeared to be fully justified; in the first half of 1933 it seemed that there would be a long haul ahead before a unified and effective Community Party of India could emerge from the debris of the 1929-33 collapse.

186. This is reflected in Indian communist recollections of this period - both in published form and from those that I have interviewed. Almost all stress that the 'left-sectarian mistake' was theirs as well as the Comintern's.

CHAPTER 8

THE FORMATION OF A COMMUNIST PARTY - 1934-1937

Towards the end of 1932 the Meerut group commented that 'Efforts have been going on now for 11 years and [yet] it cannot be said that a Party exists'.¹ In October 1937, only five years later, the Intelligence Bureau was describing a very different reality: a functioning, centralised, national CPI, with effectively combined open and underground organisational levels and a growing membership, had come into existence.² Though still somewhat unstable in 1937, this structure was to survive, providing the foundations of the CPI's subsequent history.³ Thus within a few years the 'hopeless' chaos of impotent, warring factions was transformed into an effective, centralised order. How was this dramatic change possible? On what terms was the transformation effected? And what were the implications of these terms for the Party's future history? This chapter argues that the transformation depended upon the incorporation of a basic contradiction into the CPI's foundations, that this contradiction corresponded to the inescapable dilemma

1. MCG:2.

2. NAI, H.Poll, 7/7/1937: IB, 'A Review of Recent Communist Activities in India', dated 26/10/37.

3. See, eg.: NAI, H.Poll, 7/7/1939: IB, 'Communism in India - a survey of recent developments (to 31/10/1939)'; Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., Chapters 8-14.

faced by the Indian communists, and that the bolshevist way in which they resolved the preceding crisis was the only way in which a national, centralised communist party could be formed at that time in the given conditions.

Two contemporaneous events which occurred in late 1933 made possible the formation of the Party between 1934 and 1937: the unexpected early release of the Meerut prisoners; and the ECCI's explicit recognition of their legitimacy as the leadership of the CPI. The keys to the formation of a national Party apparatus lay, therefore, in the Meerut jail and in Moscow.

The Meerut Group: The CPI's First National Leadership

The Raj's launching of the Meerut Case effectively broke the communist movement at a critical time. But, as we saw in Chapter 5, the logic of repression imposed by the Indian situation entailed certain costs to the Raj. Among these costs was the forging of India's first unified, national leadership from among the several provincial groups represented inside the Meerut jail. But for the Meerut Case, this process would undoubtedly have taken much longer. Another cost was the collective political education of these leaders during their four long years together, with the leisure to study their well-stocked Marxist library, to reflect on their past activities and the Party's present plight, and to observe political India at a time of crisis. A third cost was the early release of the newly formed leadership, allowing it to put into practice its recently acquired political wisdom.

From all accounts the Meerut jail experience was a

profound one for the imprisoned communists.⁴ The psychology of jail life took its toll. All of the communists appear to have been subject, in varying degrees, to the conflicting, fluctuating and often unheroic psychic states brought about in even the most politically committed by extended - and, particularly, indeterminate - imprisonment.⁵ Moreover, the unprecedented leisure of jail life allowed the communists not only to deepen their knowledge of theory; it also allowed reflection on the high personal costs of revolutionary politics and on the more unsatisfactory aspects of their received Marxism and contemporary Soviet, Comintern and Indian communist practice. These reflections led Usmani, who had so recently sat alongside Stalin on the Comintern's Presidium, and Nimbkar, to break with communism while still in Meerut.⁶ Spratt's reflections began a process of rejection of both communist politics and Marxist theory - a process which was completed during a period of extended solitary confinement in the Belgaum Fort to which he was sentenced soon after his release from Meerut.⁷ For the

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4. This became apparent from my interviews with the former Meerut prisoners. See also the reminiscences by Adhikari, Desai, Ghate, Goswami, Sohan Singh Josh, and Mirajkar in (CPI) S.V. Ghate, and Rao and Sen, Our Doc.
 5. Spratt, prompted by Nehru's reflections, in his Autobiography, on the jail experience, has stressed this dimension in an interesting analysis titled 'Some Notes on Jail Psychology', in Modern Review, LXI(6), 1937, pp.649-54. See also his Blowing Up India, Chapter IV.
 6. Usmani suffered a nervous breakdown when he was told that his companions on his trip to Moscow had been shot in Russia as spies: ibid., pp.41-42.
 7. Spratt traces this intellectual and psychological process in a moving letter to a friend written from Belgaum in 1936 (Spratt to G.A. Hutt, 19/2/36, in NAI, H.Poll, 7/2/1936). Spratt added that he had been broken by his seven years of imprisonment: 'I am tired, Allen, I am tired. I agree entirely with the Hindu classics that the ultimate aim must be release from the sorrowful cycle of existence in this weary world. Peace, Moksha, I shall achieve it some day,

majority of the communists, however, the Meerut jail experience deepened their commitment to communism and cemented deep and long-lasting bonds of comradeship. For most of them this was the first real test of their commitment. With very few exceptions they maintained an intransigent and principled stand for their convictions, despite the demoralising collapse of the movement they had left behind, and despite their awareness of the heavy sentences that would follow a refusal to recant.⁸ Their long defence statements, for example, and particularly their collective statement to the sessions court, were devoted to uncompromising declarations of faith in communism.

By early 1930 the communists among the accused had formed themselves into a formal and disciplined group with established operational procedures⁹ and under Adhikari's secretaryship. Only Dange was excluded. The grounds for his exclusion were similar to the charges brought against him in August 1928, during the general strike: breach of discipline through his unilateral initiatives during the 1929 general strike and through sending, without the knowledge of the others, a report to the ECCI.¹⁰ Dange was to remain outside the Party until after

7. Cont'd

I suppose'. See also his Blowing Up India, pp.54-56, where he remarks that 'Eventually I abandoned communism not because of any personal experience, but because of a gradual loss of confidence in it, brought about mainly by reading'.

8. M.G. Desai, for example, one of the non-communist accused, was particularly impressed by the communists' stand. They rejected their defence lawyer's pleas to omit such declarations of faith so that they might obtain lighter sentences. They were also approached by certain sympathetic court officials with the same argument.

9. The following is based on MCG:1 & 2.

10. This document - MCCC, P.2512 - contained accounts of the communists' continuing political involvement with both the Comintern and the Indian Party and of underground methods etc.

the Meerut releases. The bitter Bengal factional struggle preceding the arrests appears to have been subsumed by the new loyalties. However the solidarity of the communist group was matched by a definite split with most of their former non-communist allies, including Alve.¹¹ This arose in part from differences over defence strategy - the non-communists were not prepared to court heavy sentences by espousing a commitment either to the communists or to communist doctrine. Many of them were unhappy about the hidden cost of extended imprisonment for having associated with the communists. Hostilities were also exacerbated by the tensions of jail life. The split between the communists and most of the non-communists ended a number of alliances which had been very important for the communists' advances in the 1920s - in Bombay at least. Alve, for example, actively opposed the Party after his release.¹² Thus 1929 marked the end of the first phase of communist politics in this way, too.

The political development of the Meerut group can be judged by its theory of, and policy towards, Indian politics.¹³ Though the analysis reveals that the Meerut group's theoretical capacities remained seriously limited in certain respects, it

10. Cont'd

It was, after its capture, introduced into the Meerut Case by the prosecution. Dange's report also displays a response to his 1930 expulsion very similar to that which he made to his August 1928 censuring: he vigorously attacked his attackers.

11. On this see also Spratt, Blowing Up India, ps. 50 & 52.

12. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Note on the GKU.

13. Adhikari, Spratt and Joshi appear to have played particularly important roles in this work: 'Biographical Sketch', in Rao and Sen, Our Doc, p.7; Ghate, 'Most Human Comrade', in ibid., pp.13-14; Spratt, Blowing Up India, p.54.

did, nevertheless, mark an important advance. The analysis and policy contrasted sharply with both the ECCI's and the 'outside' CPI's contemporary alternatives.¹⁴ They can be seen in part as a continuation of the autonomous tendencies displayed by the Bombay group before the Meerut arrests. They were based on a selective and interpretative reading of the Sixth Comintern theses in the light of the communists' own political experience.

The Meerut group analysis took the Non-Cooperation movement as its point of departure and accepted the Sixth Congress's argument that the interests of imperialism and of the Indian bourgeoisie were in long term contradiction with each other. Non-Cooperation, the political thesis argued, emerged from the 1919 mass unrest catalysed by the inflationary post-War situation. The agitation was neither initiated nor supported by bourgeois interests; for the bourgeoisie had already obtained its political concessions in the Mont-ford reforms, and the announcement of the setting up of an Industrial Commission had already foreshadowed substantial economic concessions. Thus the bourgeoisie's class interests lay in the defeat of the potentially threatening mass agitation.

14. In fact the Meerut group produced two documents - one for public consumption (the collective defence statement) and one for Party and Comintern audiences (in MCG:2). The former was, at the request of the Bombay group, closer to the orthodox position than the latter. (This is explicitly recognised in both MCG:1 & 2.) The following account of the Meerut group's theoretical position is based on the MCG:2 version.

Once Non-Cooperation had begun the bourgeoisie was faced with a tactical choice: it could openly support the imperialist repression or it could 'join and disorganise the whole struggle from within'. The second choice was politically wiser. The former would have undermined the bourgeoisie's oppositional role vis a vis imperialism - a role which it was necessary to maintain as a possible future defence of its own interests. But the latter tactic would allow the bourgeoisie to defeat the mass upsurge while retaining, and perhaps increasing, its political influence. The Liberal bourgeoisie of the old Congress was not prepared to risk playing with the mass movement in this way, and so split from the organisation. But this did not mean that the Congress had changed its class character. It remained under the leadership of the 'national bourgeoisie' - politically represented by figures such as Motilal Nehru, C.R. Das, Lajpatrai and Malaviya - and its program was not changed after the split. The Congress, despite its increasingly petty-bourgeois mass membership, remained a bourgeois organisation. That the initial stated goal of the movement was the redress of specific grievances, and did not include Swaraj or a program of mass economic demands, underlined this reality. Swaraj was not mentioned until the mass pressure from below had increased. But by then the bourgeois leadership had successfully confused the political consciousness of the masses with its apparent opposition to imperialism, and had disorganised the agrarian struggle with its ideology of non-violence and class collaboration, thus paving the way for defeat by the British. Finally,

After the worst period of the crisis had been tided over and the revolutionary forces sufficiently dissipated, and when the peasant masses were about to break the shackles of the bourgeois leadership, the Congress betrayed the whole struggle by the Bardoli Resolution. The anti-Imperialist forces were not defeated, ... they were misled and finally betrayed.

The Meerut analysis stressed the importance of a 'correct' understanding of both the content and the function of the ideology of Gandhism. Its content was analysed in the following terms:

... it is a set of reactionary principles, which are definitely feudal Its essential ingredients are non-violence, truth, opposition to industrialism, and in general the idealisation of the feudal relationships of the countryside. As such this philosophy is opposed to the bourgeois mode of production and bourgeois aspirations.

It was, nevertheless, a potent ideology, its initial formulation having 'an electric effect on the rural petty bourgeoisie and allied classes'. This was because

... these principles appear to contain a negation of the existing conditions of oppression, although they propose to replace them by a "reactionary utopia". Gandhian philosophy appeared to be pitched against the existing satanic system and hence succeeded in rallying behind it the mass support of the rural and a section of the urban petty bourgeoisie

Neither the essential features of Gandhism's content, nor the power of its hold over the petty-bourgeoisie, had changed between the 1919-21 and 1930-31 movements. Gandhism had undergone some careful changes: non-violence had been developed into 'a whole technique of national-reformist ... [struggle] of the latest type'; and the apparent anti-capitalist bias of the first formulation had been 'eliminated' by, for example, combining Khaddar, the boycott of foreign goods, and protection to Indian industries, into a single program. Nevertheless these changes did not alter the fundamentally 'feudal' content of the

ideology. Moreover Gandhism, even after the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement, continued to enjoy the support of the 'rural petty bourgeoisie' and of sections of the urban petty bourgeoisie.

However the function of Gandhism in the overall strategy of the national bourgeoisie had undergone important changes. During NCO the bourgeoisie had patronised Gandhi, but it had remained uncertain about whether or not his was a safe method of political mobilisation. The NCO experience allowed the bourgeoisie to realise more clearly the utility of Gandhian politics. Despite its superficially anti-bourgeois thrust, Gandhism was particularly suited to the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie because of the latter's specific class location. In providing the following characterisation of this location the Meerut communists showed that they had developed a level of analytical sophistication which had previously been absent in CPI theorising. The explanation of the close fit between Gandhism and the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie, they argued, lay in the latter's relationships 'with feudalism and with the masses'.

The Indian bourgeoisie is integrated with feudalism, and therefore cannot champion a progressive social philosophy. [Its] class position ... condemns it to the acceptance of feudalism with Imperialism, but for its development even within the framework of feudal and Imperialist society it has to struggle for its continued existence. This it obviously cannot do without relying to some extent on mass support. But while seeking this support it has to guarantee that the mass awakening does not develop into a revolutionary mass movement which can menace the existing feudal-Imperialist order, because that would also result in its own annihilation.

Because of this rather delicate situation, the analysis continued,

Gandhism has proved itself of immense service to the bourgeoisie by affording it an ideological basis on

which it can build up the whole technique and tactics of ... the anti-revolutionary national reformist struggle ... of the Civil Disobedience type.

The bourgeoisie's growing realisation of the utility of Gandhism had led it definitely to embrace this political mode. This, in turn, had resulted in certain modifications of Gandhism - the ideological modifications noted above, and the promotion of reformist characteristics at the expense of the national-revolutionary possibilities initially inherent in this politics. The bourgeoisie's acceptance of Gandhism subsequent to the Non-Cooperation movement, and the resulting modifications in Gandhian ideological and tactical levels, marked the change in the function of the Gandhian mode in the bourgeois-nationalist struggle.

Another very important distinction between NCO and CD, the Meerut analysis continued, was the quite different relationships between the bourgeoisie and imperialism in the two movements. In the CD movement the class relationships, and thus the political tactics, were much more complex. During NCO the bourgeoisie was seeking only to assume the leadership of the movement in order to disorganise it, for it had already come to satisfactory terms with imperialism. In CD, in contrast, the bourgeoisie was in genuine opposition to imperialism and, thus, adopted a significantly different relationship to the mass revolutionary forces: 'The bourgeoisie had to launch the struggle ... to secure concessions for itself'. Between 1924 and 1929, after the NCO movement had successfully been broken, the Congress, 'as was befitting a true party of the bourgeoisie, returned to the tactic of constitutional opposition in order to reap the benefits of the concessions it had been granted..

However these concessions proved to be much less than promised. From 1927, moreover, the 'increasing dislocation of the world capitalist stabilisation of the post-war period' meant that British imperialism was less and less able to satisfy the nationalist bourgeoisie's need for concessions - either economic or political. From this point the bourgeoisie 'had to fight not only for advancing, but also for safeguarding its interests'. Because the Lahore Congress's threats against the British failed to break the colonial oppositional policy, the Indian bourgeoisie decided, early in 1930, to cease its constitutionalist tactic. The majority of the nationalist party resigned from the legislature; and, about the same time, the Annual Meeting of the Federation of Merchants' Chambers, following the final refusal of the Government of India to concede the rupee-sterling ratio and other economic demands, decided to support the Congress. From that point 'The organised bourgeois class fell into line with the Congress movement'.

But, during this growing radicalisation of the bourgeoisie, unrest was also developing among the petty bourgeoisie and the working class. The imperialist concessions to the bourgeoisie had done nothing to check the declining conditions of both the petty bourgeoisie and the workers. This resulted in a developing dissatisfaction not only with imperialism, but also with the passivity of the bourgeois leadership of the Congress. The events at the Lahore Congress demonstrated that 'if the Congress stuck to orthodox constitutionalism any longer it would lose considerably in political influence [over the petty bourgeoisie] and the revolutionary anti-imperialist movement would grow - and be directed also against it'. At the same time, from 1927 to 1929, a

'phenomenal rise' in the working class movement took place - and, for the first time, with the support of a militant class policy. But the proletarian challenge remained limited: 'The proletarian movement had become a challenge but not [yet] a menace' at the point at which the British launched the Meerut Case as 'the first blow against its mortal enemy'. However it 'was obvious that decisive struggles were ahead between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie' for the leadership of the nationalist movement. Nevertheless, the Meerut group argued in a polemical attack on Deshpande's current position, it 'would be an impudent exaggeration to say that proletarian hegemony had been secured. It had yet to be won'. But there were real possibilities that this could have occurred after 1929, the Meerut group believed. The Meerut analysis categorically rejected Ranadive's view that the working class was exhausted following its 1929-30 defeats. The problem had been one of leadership.

In 1930, then, the Indian bourgeoisie was, according to the Meerut analysis, in a complex and contradictory situation:

The bourgeoisie was being threatened by the growing revolt of its petty bourgeois rank and file and the emergence of a rival proletarian leadership, and it had to fight to retain its leadership. The bourgeoisie could not join the open counter-revolutionary front of imperialism because imperialism was not willing to compromise with it, and it had yet to secure the required economic and political concessions which it could only hope to do if it could retain the leadership of the national struggle.

Because of the need to find a compromise balance within these conflicting forces the bourgeoisie was forced to adopt the 'other' tactical alternative - 'leading the struggle and thereby retaining its leadership, while at the same time effectively sabotaging the revolutionary forces from within'.

Civil Disobedience was 'the reformist political weapon of the colonial bourgeoisie. Its use and importance is determined by the particular position of the colonial bourgeois class with foreign imperialism and the colonial masses'. It was used by the bourgeoisie to contain mass revolutionary possibilities, to build its own political credibility in the eyes of the masses, and to use mass pressure to gain concessions from imperialism. The Civil Disobedience tactic 'enables the bourgeoisie to fulfill its political class role, and it is undeniable that it has done this with great skill and some success'.

Because of Deshpande's and Ranadive's failure to recognise this complexity in its totality, the Meerut group polemicised, these two had misunderstood the true nature of the CD movement. Deshpande had seen only the leadership role of the bourgeoisie, and so saw the movement as only 'a counter-revolutionary manoeuvre of the treacherous bourgeoisie'. Furthermore, he had failed to see the real, if limited, oppositional role of the bourgeoisie in the CD movement, or the genuine mass character that it possessed. Ranadive had exaggerated the extent of petty-bourgeois leadership and initiative and, consequently, had exaggerated the revolutionary possibilities of the movement under this leadership.

In the Meerut group's view, both of the Bombay leaders had also failed to recognise the importance of the increasingly agrarian character of the CD movement.

The petty bourgeois character of the rank and file [of the Congress] continued only up to August 1930, and after that the results of the agrarian crisis were acutely felt ... and the movement assumed a primarily agrarian character. [the view] that the

truce came in March 1931 when the rank and file of the Congress had been crushed is as one-sided as the view that the movement had been brought about by its pressure. The truce came at that time because, among other things, the agrarian revolt was imminent.

The CD movement had acquired a changing character as different strata of the population were progressively affected by the economic crisis and so joined the movement. This had meant, in turn, changing tactical considerations for the bourgeois Congress leadership. Finally, the increasingly militant and independent agrarian revolt required that the movement be called off.

The conclusions for a political strategy for the CPI were obvious to the Meerut group. It was the duty of the communists to recognise the genuinely mass character of the CD movement and, consequently, to intervene in the movement to 'complete the rupture between the Congress leadership and the masses'. In this they agreed with Ranadive's conclusions, if not with his analysis, and condemned Deshpande's abstentionist position.¹⁵ Concurrently, the Meerut group argued, the communists should mobilise the working class's allegedly substantial political potential - but not through Deshpande's impotent tactic of ritual calls for a general strike. The workers could be mobilised only through close involvement in their day-to-day struggles. A general strike was possible, but only on this basis.

This was an analysis of some originality when compared

15. The Meerut group cited with approval the Ranadive attack (quoted in Chapter 7) on the 'completely un-Marxist' nature of Deshpande's abstentionism.

to Moscow's extant line. In their development of the ambiguous, and hence flexible, Sixth Comintern Congress theses, the Meerut group ~~did not incorporate~~^{- and,} through their criticisms of Deshpande's 'left-sectarian' crudities, implicitly condemned - the Comintern's subsequent mechanistic and quite inappropriate formulations.¹⁶ This was clearest in the scorn which the group poured on the notion that the Congress was 'the counter-revolutionary agent of Imperialism' - a formula constantly repeated by the Comintern commentators on India - and in their continued resistance to the abolition of the WPPs. The Meerut leadership had put into practice the resolution passed at the CPI which had begun consideration of the Sixth Congress theses prior to the Meerut arrests - to take the theses as a basis for discussion to be 'changed according to the conditions in India'.

In addition to having this level of originality, and despite its incorporation of a number of the 'third period' fallacies,¹⁷ the Meerut analysis also provided a reasonably plausible theory of contemporary Indian politics.¹⁸

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16. Spratt says that P.C. Joshi and Dange did explicitly question the wisdom of the Tenth Plenum line: Blowing Up India, ps. 44 and 54.
17. For example the Meerut analysis reproduces (though in a much more subdued and sophisticated form) the ECCI's prevailing mechanistic economic reductionism, its unjustified 'proletarianism', its failure to identify the political differentiation between industrial and merchant Indian capital, and its failure to realise that both the bourgeoisie and the Congress leadership were 'serious' about the eventual capture of state power.
18. See, eg., Chapter 5, above. Sarkar's 'The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism' shows that the broad political relationships sketched in the Meerut analysis corresponded fairly closely with Civil Disobedience realities, despite the shortcomings of the analysis noted in fn.17.

Further, it reveals a level of subtlety previously absent in the Indian communists' Marxism. This can be seen, for example, in the analysis of the structural location of the Indian bourgeoisie in Indian society, and of Gandhism's consequent appropriateness and value as the bourgeoisie's 'social philosophy' despite the apparent conflict between Gandhian 'feudalism' and the needs of a developing capitalist class. The explicit recognition of Gandhi's genuine popularity with the 'masses', and of the strength of the 'bourgeois' Congress leadership's hold over its rank-and-file, also marked the advent of a new level of realism in CPI analysis; and this recognition marked the beginnings of a break with the inadequate concept of 'false consciousness'. More importantly however, for immediate Party political activity at least, the tactical conclusions of the analysis provided a far more satisfactory orientation than that prior to the Meerut arrests and that currently being practiced outside the jail.

Nevertheless, despite these positive developments in the sphere of theory, there was one shortcoming of some importance for later theoretical work: the analysis did not incorporate a refutation of the assumptions of the earlier 'new Imperialist policy' theory. The omission of this critique seriously weakened the foundations of the new analysis. By not establishing a procedure of collectively criticising previous formulations before accepting a new position, the door was left open for later untheorised rejections of current strategies, and for an associated failure to recognise the consequent theoretical discontinuity: it meant an increased vulnerability to bolshevisation.

Spratt found another aspect of the Meerut group's

Marxism to be unsatisfactory - it was exclusively and directly political in orientation. The Meerut communists showed little interest in philosophical questions - such as the epistemological bases of the Comintern's current 'dialectical materialism' - or in ethical theory.¹⁹ These lacunae inhibited the development of an Indian critical Marxist theory which could develop beyond, and counter, the Comintern's 'vulgar' Marxism. They also weakened the communists' ability to deal adequately at a popular level with the philosophical-ethical challenge of Gandhism.²⁰ The Meerut group's lack of interest in these dimensions contrasted with the preoccupation with them of, for example, the Vietnamese communists, for whom philosophical and ethical questions were of burning importance; and that they were treated so seriously in Vietnam was a significant factor behind the popular success of Marxist theory and ideology in that country.²¹ It is significant that Spratt's rejection of

19. NAI, H.Poll, 7/2/1936: Spratt to Hutt, 19/2/36.

20. Particularly in the absence of close, continuous communist involvement with a mass base. Eg. it is apparent that the traditional ethical concepts which played a central role in the 1929 'Girni Workers' Poem' did not take firm root in the Bombay communists' consciousness.

21. This is a central theme of David Marr's current work. See also Nguyen Khac Vien (a leading Vietnamese communist theoretician) 'Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam', in Nguyen Khac Vien, Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam, (Eds, D. Marr and J. Werner), (Berkeley, 1974), pp.15-74. Vien stresses both Vietnamese communists' concern with ethical theory and the importance of the contribution of the Confucian ethical legacy in this.

Marxism began with his reflections on the inadequacies of the 'metaphysical materialism' of the Comintern's Marxism, and that while at Meerut he developed a new respect for Gandhism and its relationship to Indian mass politics.

Spratt, surveying what was currently offering, identified 'Marxism' with 'vulgar Marxism' and, accordingly, found it wanting, particularly in the Indian context.²²

A Problem and a Solution: the Dilemma of Indian Communism

At the time that they developed their theory of Indian politics the Meerut group also gave a great deal of attention to the question of the rehabilitation of the disintegrating Party. Initially they tried to intervene to rectify matters. However, partly because they did not fully comprehend the extreme difficulties faced by their successors, their efforts produced nothing more than a hostile reaction. As the Party situation worsened, as the demoralising effects of the endless trial increased, and, finally, as they approached their day of judgement and the long imprisonment for their political faith they were sure would follow,²³ the Meerut

22. Spratt, Blowing Up India, Chapter IV, passim, and his letter to Hutt cited in fn.19. Spratt later moved intellectually to an extreme Freudianism and a Cold War analysis of international and Indian politics (see Blowing Up India, Chapter I and Part II). It is interesting to contrast the jailed Gramsci's contemporaneous intellectual confrontation with 'vulgar Marxism'. Gramsci grappled with very similar issues to those raised by Spratt, but resolved them within a very different framework: see Chapter 1, fn.42.

23. See Spratt, 'Some Notes on Jail Psychology', on this. Also, interview with M.G. Desai.

prisoners reached a rather desperate conclusion. In their August 1932 report to the Comintern representative, Lynd, they formulated it in the following way:

... the CPI has proved itself unworthy of remaining a section of the CI any longer. It seems at first a logical conclusion that the CPI should be dis-affiliated. We are, however, definitely against this step being actually carried out. The CPI has committed many mistakes ... But it should not be treated in the same way as if it were a fully grown or even real CP. Its leaders have been very youthful and inexperienced and the Party itself is very small and young. We consider that the only practical and sensible course to adopt is to build up a real CP directly under the instructions and leadership of the CI. It would be a suicidal policy to leave the various communist groups to fight among themselves and leave it to time and fortune for a genuine CP to arise. ... the organisational connection of the CI with India would act as both a check and a spur ... We know that if this factor is absent the relations among the various groups will become worse rather than better, and no progress will be made within any reasonable time. Our concrete suggestions may at first give an impression that we are stretching too far the doctrine of building up the movement from the top. We have carefully considered the various aspects of the question and are convinced that there is no other alternative to letting things drift or stagnate ... It is only if the CI leads as the supreme leader and moves on the lines we have ventured to suggest, that we think that the matter can be set right and local initiative and response will be forthcoming in proper measure and in the right direction and a CP will be built which would earnestly and completely carry out the instructions of the CI.²⁴

Thus, in the Meerut group's considered judgement, Indian communism in the first half of the 1930s was faced with only two choices: it could 'leave it to time and fortune for a genuine CP to arise' - a process that would be extremely protracted and without guaranteed success; or a Party could be constructed 'from the top' under the direct instructions and

24. MCG:2 (emphasis added).

sanctions of the ECCI. The Meerut group had correctly identified the dilemma faced by the CPI, if not its deeper roots. The Meerut communists realised the essential artificiality of the latter alternative. But they opted for it nevertheless, for they could not accept the first. Moreover, as they did not question the revolutionary bona fides of the Comintern they did not see the longer term implications of the course they proposed.

The Meerut group sent with their recommendation a detailed plan for the benefit of the Comintern agents they hoped would be despatched to India to set things right.²⁵ They suggested that two Comintern representatives be sent - one to supervise the reorganisation of the Bombay branch and one for the other provinces. These delegates 'should be in sole charge of putting into practice the new instructions and should have the necessary mandate, with the right to override the decisions of the CC' - at least until a National Convention of the Party could be held. However the Central Committee should have the right to appeal to the ECCI against the decisions of its representatives. First a new Central Committee, genuinely representing the other provinces as well as Bombay, should be appointed on a provisional basis. Then the Comintern should publish an open letter to the entire Party membership and to the seceding group, analysing the experiences of the past three years: 'mistakes [should be] pointed out, blame apportioned to individuals ... and generally a final decision on the points of dispute be arrived at'. The open

25. ibid.

letter should condemn the seceders for their breach of discipline but allow them a certain period of time to return unconditionally and to admit their mistakes. Both Deshpande and Ranadive should, as a disciplinary measure, be barred from membership on the provisional Central Committee for at least a year: 'They are both competent and are yet young, and may improve themselves. It will be worthwhile to give them a last chance'. Nambiar, however, should be expelled. The provisional Central Committee should devote itself essentially to the formation of the Party - in the first instance it should concentrate on overcoming the factional divisions and preparing for a National Convention. The ECCI should provide detailed instructions for future political and trade union work. The Party membership must be substantially increased as quickly as was practicable, largely because this was 'the only effective way of ending factionalism, or at least of giving more earnest and less factious Comrades chances to improve themselves and do real work'. The Meerut group stressed that great tact would be necessary until the factions had been dissolved, and recommended that democracy should prevail over centralism until the problem had been overcome.

The Meerut group's desperate call for direct Comintern intervention contrasted with the level of autonomy it had attained in the creation of theory and policy. These two dimensions symbolised the meeting point between the old Bombay leadership's mass-based, non-bolshevised past and the Party's bolshevised future; they symbolised, that is, the differences between the political conditions of 1927-28 and those of the years that followed.

The Return of the Meerut Prisoners: 1933-34

When the Meerut prisoners began to be released in August 1933 they were suddenly in a position to begin implementing the detailed plan they had worked out for the proposed Comintern representatives. They began to implement their plan for the formation of the Party on the day of the Meerut Case appeals at Allahabad. P.C. Joshi and Adhikari were among those released immediately.²⁶ At Allahabad they met with a number of the Calcutta Committee members, who had travelled there to discuss with those who were on bail a campaign around the earlier Calcutta communist unity appeal.²⁷ The Allahabad meeting decided to begin work on the formation of a provisional Central Committee and the drawing up of a political thesis, and informed the Punjabi communists accordingly. Adhikari then returned to Bombay to begin reorganisation there and to draft the political thesis. In November a meeting was held in Calcutta to consider the thesis and to form a provisional Central Committee. Representatives from five provinces attended the seven day meeting, which approved the draft thesis and decided to constitute itself as the 'nucleus of the Provisional Central Committee of the CPI', with Adhikari as Secretary.²⁸

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26. NAI, H.Poll, 27/11/1936: Notes on the release of the Meerut prisoners.
27. Interview with S. Lahiri.
28. ibid.; Sen, 'Communist Movement in Bengal', pp.10-11; IB, Communism (1935), pp.188-89. Those present were: Bengal - Lahiri, Halim and Ranen Sen; Bombay - Adhikari and S.G. Patkar (of the Deshpande faction); UP - Joshi; Punjab - Gurudit Singh; Nagpur - M.L. Jaywant.

It resolved that the pre-existing federation of autonomous communist units must be replaced with a centralised Party linked firmly to the Comintern. The meeting planned a detailed program of work to unify and centralise the Party and to build an effectively combined open and underground all-India Party apparatus. The momentum generated by these early moves increased with the release of a second group of seven Meerut communists in November.²⁹

It was a good start. The next task was the clarification of the factional situation, particularly in Bombay. But this proved to be difficult. Adhikari, on his return to Bombay in August, joined the 'official', but less significant, Deshpande group, and appealed to Ranadive and his supporters to dissolve their secessionist group.³⁰ The Ranadive group refused to do so. Its members resented the Meerut group's assessment of the dynamics of the Bombay factional struggle, believed that any organisation in which Deshpande was involved could only be 'counter-revolutionary', and asserted that the Adhikari-Deshpande group did not have the Comintern mandate justifying its claim to be the 'official' Party group. In the Ranadive group's view, Adhikari had 'merged himself into Deshpande's clique completely and ... [had begun] to further its work of sabotage.'³¹ However Adhikari's efforts were boosted

29. See fn.26.

30. BSB, 1036/B/II/1935: Note on Bombay communist organisations, 1929-33; BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: Report by Jambhekar (of the Ranadive group), ca. mid-1935.

31. ibid...

by the coincidental arrival in Bombay of one Iqbal Singh Hundal, alias 'Nuruddin', who claimed to have come from Moscow with instructions that Ranadive's group should merge with Deshpande's.³² The secessionists replied that they were prepared to consider rejoining, but that 'if the C.P.I. were to be a functioning organisation, certain Comrades like Com. Deshpande will have to be removed'.³³ Adhikari's group then began a moderately successful campaign to win over the rank-and-file members of the Ranadive group. The Ranadive leadership's position was further weakened after the second batch of Meerut prisoners returned to Bombay and reinforced Adhikari's stand. Mirajkar, who was one of those released in November, recalls that:

When we came out we were able to patch up things. Of course in the beginning there was resistance. We said [to the Ranadive group] alright, if you don't come ... to join the Party within two days, ... [or] don't give us a reply ... we go ahead, and then we will condemn you ... we will hold public meetings and condemn you.³⁴

The Ranadive group decided, resentfully, that they had little choice but to capitulate, and so, by the end of the year, a fragile unity had been effected in Bombay.³⁵

The Meerut communists, in accordance with their jail plan, then barred Deshpande and Ranadive from membership on the Provisional Central Committee, and imposed additional restrictions, for a year's trial period. They hoped thereby to free the Party from 'the disease of factionalism'.³⁶ Indeed

32. ibid., & BSB Note, 11/6/35. It was later revealed that though he had come from Moscow he did not have any ECCI instructions.

33. ibid.

34. Interview with Mirajkar; also, interview with Ranadive.

35. IB, Communism, (1935), p.190; BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: Report by the Provisional Central Committee to the ECCI, ca. late 1934 or Jan. 1935.

36. ibid.

the new leadership did successfully suppress factionalism for some time. The Meerut leadership further increased its authority through the dominant role that it played in the two and a half months-long general strike which began in late April 1934 - the first substantial industrial action since the 1929-30 strikes. However the repression which the strike unleashed, combined with the banning of the Party and its Bombay subsidiaries in the second half of 1934,³⁷ led to a subsequent regression in the Bombay unity moves. The detention of most of the old leaders in the strike repression allowed the factionalism to resurface; and the banning of the Party prevented the convening of the intended national unity conference which, the Meerut group had hoped, would provide a clear national consensus for the reconstituted Central Committee.³⁸ Moreover, the government's breaking of the strike prevented the new leadership from backing up its increased authority with a mass base:³⁹ it remained little more than another powerless faction.

This time Ranadive was not the cause of the Party's factional problems. Though he had been demoted by the Meerut group, so had Deshpande. Deshpande's removal from leadership appears to have satisfied Ranadive's conditions, for the Meerut leadership had found Ranadive to be 'a very sincere and valuable

37. See Chapter 5, fn. 267, and the lists of those arrested during 1934-35, in NAI, H.Poll, 7/17/34, 7/25/34 and 22/93/35.

38. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: Report by Prov. CC to the ECCI.

39. IB, Communism, (1935), pp.195-7.

comrade' after he had returned to the Party.⁴⁰ It was the aggrieved Deshpande who was the new stumbling block. After his demotion he began secretly mobilising those of his old faction who were unhappy with the return of the Meerut leadership. At the same time Suhasini Nambiar who, given the Meerut group's attitude to her, had nothing to lose, re-formed an anti-Meerut faction among the old 'Bolshevik Party' faction. By late 1934 'this disease of factionalism' was once again 'standing in the way of a healthy growth of the Party', severely hampering the formation of the all-India Party organisation. In Calcutta, too, factional problems between the Calcutta Committee and the other communist groups were hampering the program of Party formation; and in the Punjab there was a division between the group led by the ex-Meerut prisoners, Sohan Singh Josh and Abdul Majid, and a Ghadr group.⁴¹ However these manifestations were not as serious as the Bombay problem, both because they were not as intense as in Bombay and because Calcutta and the Punjab remained less important centres.

40. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: Report by Prov. CC to the ECCI. This account of the 1934 factional problems is based on this report and on my interview with Mirajkar, who travelled round the provinces at this time with the mission of overcoming factionalism.

41. For the background of the Ghadr and other Punjab communist groups, see IB, Communism, (1935), Chapter 21, and for the post-Meerut Case factionalism see ibid., pp.279-84.

In the short term the new Provisional Central Committee could do little to overcome the factional problem. Apart from the fact that so many of the Committee members were under detention, it explained to the ECCI at the end of 1934, 'It must frankly be admitted that at this stage of the Party's growth any strong action against a prominent member would do more harm than good'.⁴² The problems involved in overcoming or neutralising the resistance to the Provisional Central Committee would probably have been insurmountable - in the short term at least - had the new unity initiatives not received the support which the ECCI began to give them from late 1933.

The ECCI and the CPI, 1933-34

In September 1933 Inprecor carried the first of a series of articles on the CPI situation. These often lengthy articles, published in late 1933 and during 1934, took much further the themes that were first raised in the 1932 'Open Letter' that had ended the period of public ECCI support for the post-Meerut arrests Bombay leadership.⁴³ The articles

42. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: Report from Provis. CC to ECCI, ca. Dec. 1934.

43. The 1933 (Vol. 13) articles are: V. Basak, 'The Present Situation in India', No. 39, pp.853-54, No. 41, pp.896-7, No. 42, pp.927-8, and No. 43, pp.946-48; 'Open letter to the Indian Communists from the C.C. of the C.P. of China', No. 51, pp.1153-58; 'The New Party of Bose and What Should Be Our Attitude to It' (Sect. 5), No. 52, pp.1187-88. The 1934 (Vol. 14) articles are: 'A Few Facts of History', No. 8, pp.221-25 and No. 10, pp.277-81; Orgwald, 'A conversation with Indian Comrades', No. 20, pp.517-32; V. Basak, 'A Few Remarks on the Indian Communist Movement', No. 32, pp.845-49.

endorsed the program of unification suggested to the ECCI in the Meerut group's August 1932 report, gave full support to the Calcutta Committee's mid-1932 manifesto condemning the Bombay leadership and calling for the formation of an independent Central Committee, and legitimised the new Provisional Central Committee against the claims of the other Party factions and of the non-Party groups hoping for Comintern recognition.⁴⁴ The articles stated bluntly that no CPI yet existed, despite allegedly 'fully mature' conditions for its existence,⁴⁵ and that the formation of an 'iron, monolithic

44. In particular, the important 'Open Letter' (purportedly from the Chinese Party, published in November), p.1154: '... we welcome the Calcutta Committee of the Communist Party of India, which energetically took up the call for the formation of an All-Indian Communist Party, which understood the necessity to shift the centre of gravity of Party work to activities on an All-Indian scale and which proposed to put an end to the pitiful chapter in the history of the C.P. of India, the chapter of petty squabbles and splits, and to open a new page by the formation of a powerful united Communist Party of India. We hope that the Calcutta Committee, just as other local organisations, will show initiative and will energetically take up the task of uniting the scattered Communist groups and thus form the foundation of a mass Party'. See also Vol. 13(52), p.1188, Vol. 14(8), p.221, and Vol. 14(32), p.845. Adhikari, in 'The Comintern Congresses and the CPI', Marxist Miscellany, No. 2, 1971, p.53, stresses the importance to the Provis. CC of this ECCI support. That the Calcutta Committee got this response to its call was a matter of great pride to its members: interview with S. Lahiri. For the ECCI's rejection of the overtures to it of the non-Party groups (such as the Royists and Dutt Mazumdar's Labour Party) see in particular: N., 'The Problems of the Labour Party', in Vol. 14(14), pp.345-48; and V., 'The Karnik-Roy-Shetty Group', in Vol. 14(16), pp. 421-24.
45. Vol. 13(43), p.948, Vol. 13(51), pp. 1153-54, Vol. 13(52), pp.1187-88, Vol. 14(8), p.221, Vol. 14(20), p.519.

Communist Party' was the paramount task of the moment.⁴⁶ The main problem preventing its formation was factionalism, compounded by the respective political 'deviations' of the two Bombay factions.⁴⁷ The factionalism, the ECCI asserted, was 'criminal', and was very possibly the work of agents of the bourgeoisie and the police.⁴⁸ Past mistakes and disruptions could be overcome only by a relentless 'Bolshevisation' of the Party: 'The Party must not allow any factions and groupings. It must carry on a consistent struggle against all deviations from the Bolshevik line'; 'You are faced with the task of the everyday struggle for the Bolshevisation of your ranks'.⁴⁹

Moreover:

Every communist must understand once and for all that we cannot break the framework of the Party in defiance of the instructions of the Comintern and form fractions, and still less can we split the Party organisation. ... all disputed questions of principle should be solved within the framework of the Comintern, and in case they cannot be solved on the spot they should be handed over to the E.C.C.I., and then the decision of the Comintern should be firmly and loyally carried out by all members of the C.P.I. This is the ABC of Communism, and no one has the right to call himself a Bolshevik Communist if he does not understand or if he violates this principle.⁵⁰

This series of articles reached its apotheosis in the March 1934

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46. Vol. 13(51), p.1153. Also Vol. 13(43), pp.946-48, Vol. 14(8), p.222, Vol. 14(10), pp.278-9, Vol. 14(20), pp.519-20 and p.527, and Vol. 14(32), p.845.
47. Vol. 13(41), pp.896-97, Vol. 13(43), p.947, Vol. 13(51), pp.1155-57, Vol. 14(10), pp.277-78, Vol. 14(20), p.521.
48. Vol. 13(43), p.947-8, Vol. 13(52), p.1188, Vol. 14(20), p.519.
49. Vol. 13(51), ps. 1153 and 1157 respectively.
50. Vol. 13(41), p.896 (emphasis in original).

piece titled 'A Conversation with Indian Comrades'. This article epitomises the bolshevist mode of ECCI 'guidance', not only in its content, but also in its format. It is allegedly a record of a question and answer session. A group of earnest but innocent Indian communists ask an avuncular authority-figure, Comrade Orgwald, how they should go about building their Party and developing their movement. Though he admits not having a detailed knowledge of the Indian situation, Orgwald patiently replies to some 50 questions in a series of 'correct' revolutionary maxims. However he fails to note that many of the extreme 'left-sectarian deviations' he counsels against had been initiated by the ECCI. The Indian comrades accept all of his answers without further questioning. Here we have, perfectly expressed, the 'Great Teacher'-disciple relationship that Damodaran discovered on entering the communist movement in the second half of the 1930s. Orgwald's 'conversation' was distributed widely within the Party in both English and vernacular versions.⁵¹

The Inprecor pronouncements legitimised the new Meerut-Calcutta-Punjab leadership and helped hold the fort for it during the repression of 1934-35. As both of the Bombay factions had previously placed a great deal of emphasis on their claims to be the Comintern's legitimate representatives in India, and as

51. BSB, 1036/B/X-2/1936: Report on house searches of communists in Bombay, 18/9/35, which lists the literature found; BSB, 1036/B/X-I/1936: BSB to G of Bom, 30/9/35; NAI, H.Poll, 7/6/35: Note by DIB, 8/5/35.

neither had established the political momentum that could have reinforced its claim, they were particularly vulnerable to the ECCI's 1933-34 pronouncements. The ECCI further curtailed Deshpande's and Ranadive's freedom of manoeuvre by instructing the Provisional Central Committee to send them to Moscow for a decisive resolution of the situation.⁵² The ECCI further reinforced the new Provisional Central Committee's position after the publication of the Draft Political Thesis in early 1934. Adhikari incorporated the current ECCI line into the thesis (thereby retreating considerably from the theoretical advance achieved in the Meerut analysis) and Moscow gave the thesis its imprimatur by publishing an abridged version in Inprecor in July.⁵³ Finally, Bradley's return to Europe greatly

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52. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: Report of Provis. CC to the ECCI, ca. Dec. 1934. This report is in response to ECCI instructions (probably conveyed through Teja Singh Swatantar, who had recently arrived from Moscow: IB, Communism, (1935), p.282; G. Adhikari, 'The Comintern Congresses' p.55) and refers to this particular instruction. As Ranadive was in jail he could not be sent, but Deshpande was despatched in Dec. 1934. (He was, however, caught in Singapore and sent back to India: NAI, H.Poll, 18/4/1935: Bombay FRI Apr.; interview with Mirajkar, who was with Deshpande in Singapore.) The Provisional Central Committee report stressed to the ECCI that, because of his factional intrigues, Deshpande was being sent only as a 'visitor', not as a Party delegate to the coming Seventh Comintern Congress. See also Dange, When Communist (sic.) Differ, p.43.
53. 'Abridged Draft of Political Theses of the C.C. of C.P. of India', in Inprecor, Vol. 14(40), pp.1024-34. Adhikari completed the Draft Thesis, which was based on the 1930 'Draft Platform of Action', in Dec. 1933 and it was circulated in India in the first number of the Party's new organ (The Communist, Vol. 1(1), Feb. 1934, in BSB, 1036/B/III/1935). Inprecor also published the Provisional CC's 'Draft Provisional Statutes of the CPI': Inprecor, Vol. 14(29), pp.775-78.

strengthened the new leadership's hand. He was released in November 1933 and left India soon after, taking with him the documents of the November Calcutta meeting and subsequent unity moves. He visited Moscow in mid-1934 and provided a full report on the situation in India.⁵⁴ Bradley then began a career as one of the Comintern experts on India. Inprecor carried an article of his in December 1934, and he was a regular correspondent in the newspaper throughout the second half of the 1930s.⁵⁵ At the same time the CPGB re-emerged as the primary Comintern agency for India. The British Party's contacts were strongest with the old 1920s leadership and so this development also reinforced the latter's position. Under Bradley's guidance, secret channels of international communication of both information and money were established in the second half of 1934.⁵⁶

Building a Party Apparatus: Stage 1, 1934-35

In the absence of the conditions which could allow the new leadership to establish its authority definitively through a rapid political advance, the factional problem made the building of a strong, centralised Party apparatus particularly urgent. But this was not easy, even with the Comintern's help.

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54. IB, Communism, (1935), p.206; Adhikari, 'The Comintern Congresses', p.65. It was Bradley who took the Draft Political Thesis and the Draft Statutes to Moscow.
55. B. Bradley, 'What the Congress Socialists Want', Inprecor, Vol. 14(63), pp.1694-98. In 1935-39, 14 articles by Bradley (some of them written jointly with R.P. Dutt and H. Pollitt) appeared in Inprecor.
56. IB, Communism, (1935), p.206; NAI, H.Poll, 28/31/1935: G of Bom. to G of I, 10/5/35.

In the same month that the Provisional Central Committee was formed in Calcutta the Home Department observed that the CPI was 'not functioning now';⁵⁷ the new leadership had to start almost from scratch. The Bombay and Calcutta groups remained weak and isolated. In the UP, Joshi, on his return in August, had gathered together only a few individuals - though these included Ajoy Ghosh, formerly of the HSRA terrorist organisation, who was later to become a Party General Secretary.⁵⁸ Sohan Singh Josh and Abdul Majid returned to Lahore and Amritsar after their release in November and attempted, with little immediate success, to forge a Party centre from the Punjab's divided leftist factions.⁵⁹ In Nagpur, one of Ranadive's contacts, M.L. Jaywant, had established a small nucleus and a weak 'Red' textile workers' union. Only tenuous contacts had been made with Sholapur.⁶⁰ In Ahmedabad, Bukhari's Mill Mazdurs' Union struggled to find a niche alongside the well established Gandhian labour association.⁶¹ And in Madras, Amir Haider Khan's small (about 10 members) Young Workers' League, and the few cells it had established in three local mills, maintained a bare existence during Haider's intermittent imprisonments.⁶² Moreover, there was virtually no

57. NAI, H.Poll, 17/II/1934: Note by Hallett, 6/11/33.

58. IB, Communism, (1935), p.190.

59. ibid., pp.279-81; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: G of Punjab to S of S, 17/9/34; BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: Provis. CC to ECCI, ca. Dec. 1934. The Punjab FRs for 1934-35 constantly report factional strife between the different Punjabi leftist groups.

60. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: G of CP & B to G of I, 26/11/34; NAI, H.Poll, 18/14/1933: Bombay FRI Dec.

61. NAI, H.Poll 7/20/1934: Note on the Mill Mazdur's Union, Ahmedabad.

62. NAI, H.Poll, 44/92/1934: passim.

organisational contact between the different provincial centres and, apart from Haider Khan's work, no attempt had been made to build an underground apparatus.

The new leadership was able to direct its attention increasingly towards the organisational question as the Bombay factional problem eased. As a Provisional Central Committee circular argued in late 1934, after the post-Meerut Case repression had begun:

This [organisational task] is, in general, the main task before us. If we succeed in this ... then we will have survived the ... imperialist repression. We will have rooted our influence deep among the masses. Let each member of each cell fight for this great organisational task with Bolshevik determination and resoluteness. It is only by this determined struggle that we can lay down a firm foundation for the magnificent ... structure that is in the process of building (sic.) - the Communist Party of India.⁶³

The new leadership began by attempting to re-form and extend the influence of the provincial branches - particularly in Bombay and Calcutta - and to establish the framework of an all-India organisation.⁶⁴

The Bombay branch made most progress. By September 1934 it had established a formal Bombay Provincial Committee, despite the disruption caused by the constant arrests.⁶⁵ The Committee had 15 members - representing the Meerut communists and the Deshpande and Ranadive factions - and a five-member Politbureau. Each Politbureau member had a particular function - Mirajkar

63. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: Provis. CC circular titled 'Work of the Cells of the CPI, Organisational Task'.

64. IB, Communism, (1935), pp.188-9.

65. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: report, 12/12/34.

supervised organisational work, Ghatge looked after mass work, Jambhekar dealt with 'agit-prop', Patkar was in charge of the underground 'tech' apparatus, and Tambitkar took over secretarial functions.⁶⁶

The Bombay branch also improved its position somewhat in local mill unionism. Conditions in the textile industry after the defeat of the April-June general strike were much less favourable for the building of trade unions than they had been before. However after the strike the rival Royist GKU fell victim to a pattern of internal dissension very similar to that which had culminated in the communists' expulsion in 1930, thus weakening the communists' main rivals.

When Alve returned to Bombay from Meerut in August 1933 he had immediately rejoined the GKU and begun working, with some success, to rebuild its organisational structure and its influence.⁶⁷ At the same time he stepped up the GKU's campaign against the communists - who responded in the same spirit. The two GKUs managed to form a temporary alliance for the preparation and execution of the general strike - which was intended by both the communists and the Royists to be a part of an India-wide textile general strike. However the alliance dissolved acrimoniously during the latter stages of the strike -

66. The budget for August-September was approximately Rs.2,500 - a significant sum, indicating the Bombay Committee's return to a regular program of work: ibid.: report, 8/12/34.

67. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Note on the GKU; NAI, H.Poll, 18/10/1933: Bombay FR1 and FR2 Sept.; NAI, H.Poll, 18/12/1933: Bombay FR2 Oct.; NAI, H.Poll, 18/13/1933: Bombay FR2 Nov.; BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: report, 13/9/33.

thus hastening its defeat.⁶⁸ But Alve, together with his old colleague Kandalkar, also fell out with V.B. Karnik's Royist group of 'outsiders'. The dissension between the two leaderships intensified after the collapse of the strike, leading to an open split in July. The Alve group charged the Royists with manipulating the workers for political purposes and with cooperating with the communists during the strike.⁶⁹ The Alve-Kandalkar group managed to expel the Royists in July, and then got the managing committee to resolve that only workers could be office bearers.⁷⁰ However Alve and Kandalkar followed a much more moderate, non-political policy than they had before the Meerut Case, and this led gradually to a loss of rank-and-file support. At the GKU's 1935 general elections in August an uneasy alliance of Royists and communists was able to defeat the Alve-Kandalkar leadership resoundingly because of the latter's

68. The preparations for, and conduct of, the strike, and the fragmentation of the leadership during its latter stages, are described in: NAI, H.Poll, 18/I/1934 - 18/VIII/1934: Bombay to FRs Jan.-Jul.; IOL, Brabourne Papers, Vol. 4B: Brabourne to Hoare, 27/4/34 and 28/6/34; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Note on the GKU; copies of several of the leaflets published during the strike are reproduced in NAI, H.Poll, 7/17/1934, pp.9-33; see also Karnik, *op. cit.*, pp.256-59. The communists' optimistic proletarian revolutionism, and its associated hostility towards its temporary allies, (both of which characteristics were in line with current ECCI policy) contributed substantially towards the disintegration of the strike leadership. This was later admitted by the Bombay Committee in a June 1935 pamphlet titled "Communist Bulletin No. 1": in BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935.

69. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Note on the GKU, & G of Bom to G of I, 21/11/34; NAI, H.Poll, 18/7/1934: Bombay FR2 Jul.; BSB, 1036/B/X-I/1936: Note on Bombay left-wing groups, 11/9/35 (which traces the whole history of the GKU factional struggles).

70. NAI, H.Poll, 18/10/1934: Bombay FR2 Oct.

increasing reformism.⁷¹ At that point the communists were still the junior partner in the alliance. But they were now in a much better position to begin to retrieve their earlier position as Bombay's dominant trade union leadership - particularly as the Royist group had already begun its decline. The Bombay branch also managed to hold a position in the railway unions, though this was very weak.⁷²

The Calcutta branch was unable to make much progress during 1934-35. It managed to form an official Bengal Provincial Committee in late 1934. But, largely because it was unable to come to terms with most of the other leftist groups, and partly because of repression, it was still not functioning regularly in early 1935.⁷³ The Party group achieved a modest increase in its middle class following, but it made little progress in trade unionism during this

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71. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Note on the GKU, and G of Bom to G of I, 21/11/34; NAI, H.Poll, 18/11/1934: Bombay FR1 & FR2 Nov.; NAI, H.Poll, 18/4/1935, 18/5/1935 & 18/8/1935: Bombay FR2 Apr., FR2 May & FR2 Aug.; BSB, 1036/B/X-I/1936: Note on Bombay left-wing groups, 11/9/35. The Alve-Kandalkar leadership was defeated in Aug. 1935 by 2,033 votes to 398. The defeat indicates that ideology and policy still played an important role for some millhands.
72. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Notes on the GIPRU Labour Union and the Red BB & CIRU.
73. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: report, 10/2/35; NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: notes on the Workers' Party, The People's Revolutionary Party and the Calcutta Communist Party (Dutt Mazumdar's group); Chapter 7, fn.171, above; IB, Communism, (1935), p.205; interview with Mirajkar. The Calcutta branch did manage, however, to effect a partial merger with it of Bhupendranath Dutt's People's Revolutionary Party. A number of leaders (including Mirajkar) from other provinces visited Calcutta to try to resolve the Bengal Committee's problems, but with little immediate success. Repression created problems. Eg. Ahmad was interned for another year immediately after being released from his Meerut sentence in July 1935.

period.⁷⁴ Of the Marxist groups, Dutt Mazumdar's Labour Party (which changed its name in February 1935 to the 'Calcutta Communist Party') had most success in the trade union field in 1934; but its achievements were fragile. Its most significant activity was in the Dockworkers' Union, and in November 1934 it managed to bring off a large dockworkers' strike.⁷⁵ However this was soon broken by the use of blacklegs, by the arrests of the leaders, and by 'one Bengali gentleman [H.S. Suhrawardy] having the courage to publicly denounce the Communist agitators ... [for] deceiving the labourers into the belief that they were working on their behalf, whereas they were merely exploiting the poor fellows for their own ends'.⁷⁶ He appears to have mobilised the sardars, who initially had supported the strike.⁷⁷ Suhrawardy's community-oriented form of labour organisation, combined with employer intransigence and government opposition, proved once again to be more than radical bhadralok trade

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74. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: Notes on the Red AITUC (Bengal), the BJWA, the City Motor and Transport Workers' Union, the Bengal Match Factory Workers' Union, and the Calcutta Corporation Workers' Employees' Union; WBA, Commerce, 2R-14(1-4) Progs A1-4, Jan. 1935: Report on the working of the Indian TU Act. The Bengal FRs for 1934 report only very limited working class activity by the Party group during 1934. It was more active in 1935, but mainly in organising demonstrations. Its achievements in organising strikes and TUs were very limited, partly because of increased repression after the banning of the Party's organisations. See, eg.: NAI, H.Poll, 18/2/1935, 18/3/1935, 18/4/1935, 18/5/1935, 18/6/1935: Bengal FR2 Feb., Bengal FR1 & FR2 Mar., Bengal FR1 Apr., Bengal FR1 May, Bengal FR2 Jun.; NAI, H.Poll, 24/29/35: G of Ben. to G of I, 8/4/35.
75. NAI, H.Poll, 7/20/1934: notes on the Calcutta Communist Party and the Calcutta Port and Dock Workers' Union; NAI, H.Poll, 18/11/1934: Bengal FR2 Nov.
76. NAI, H.Poll, 12/5/1934: note by Williamson, 3/1/35. Also: NAI, H.Poll, 18/12/1934: Bengal FR1 Dec.: IB, Communism, (1935), pp.255-56 & p.307; Karnik, op. cit., p.266. Suhrawardy's intervention was encouraged by the government
77. loc. cit.

unionists could match.⁷⁸

The UP group made some progress in late 1933 and early 1934 under P.C. Joshi's leadership. However this progress soon ceased following a strike organised by Joshi's group in March in the Muir textile mills at Kanpur. This was the UP group's first involvement in industrial activity, and the Kanpur strike - which the communists attempted to transform into a general strike - was badly organised.⁷⁹ It collapsed after a week. Moreover it earned Joshi and Ajoy Ghosh terms of imprisonment - Joshi's being for two years. After this blow the very small UP group was rendered virtually inactive. The Ahmedabad, Sholapur and Nagpur centres suffered similarly.⁸⁰

The campaign to build a centralised, all-India apparatus, capable of directing and coordinating the provincial centres, began in early 1934. Several members of the new

78. As the Intelligence Bureau commented, the 'pathetic' outcome of the strike 'augurs ill for the future of Communism in Calcutta': IB, Communism, (1935), p.256.

79. NAI, H.Poll, 18/3/1934: UP FR1 & FR2 Mar.; IB, Communism, (1935), p.199.

80. The communists were able to lead a strike against a 6½ percent wage cut in the Ahmedabad mills in January 1935. The strike involved some 22,000 workers at its height. It was defeated within two weeks by the familiar combination of employer intransigence and government intervention, and, in addition, the opposition of the powerful Gandhian Textile Labour Association. The strike demonstrated, nevertheless, that Gandhi's hold over the Ahmedabad working class was not total. See: NAI, H.Poll, 18/1/1935 and 18/2/1935: Bombay FR2 Jan. & FR1 Feb; IOL, Brabourne Papers, Vol. 43: District Magistrate, Ahmedabad, to G of Bom, 5/5/34; Karnik, op. cit., pp.259-61.

leadership travelled constantly between the centres, both to promote unity and organisation within them and to canvass support for the Provisional Central Committee and the draft political thesis.⁸¹ In February 1934 the first issue of the Party's first national organ, The Communist, was produced (illegally) and circulated.⁸² It was intended that it appear monthly. This was an important step forward in the formation of a national Party - for the first time there existed a national medium which could link a central leadership with the provincial centres. The first issue, basing itself on Lenin's conception of the function of a central Party organ, defined its task in the following way:

The Provisional Central Committee ..., which has set itself the task of unifying all genuine Communist groups who accept the Draft Platform [of Action]... and who are prepared to work under the guidance of the Communist International, is taking the initiative in issuing "The Communist" - which is to act at the same time as a collective organiser of the Party and as a weapon in the struggle for the Bolshevik unity inside the Communist ranks. ... [it] will be the main channel through which ideological guidance and material will flow from the Centre to all provincial branches ... it will give the correct Communist analysis on all problems facing the Indian people as a whole. It will thus act as a mass organiser of the people of India ... It will mercilessly criticise the reformist solutions and actions and consistently put forward the only revolutionary solution - the one laid down in the Draft Platform ... Thirdly, it will invite discussions on certain proposals ... on which the Party P[olit] B[ureau] wishes to get the viewpoint

81. IB, Communism, (1935), p.195, pp.205-06; NAI, H.Poll, 27/11/1936: Note on the activities of the Meerut group after their releases from prison.

82. Editorial, in The Communist, Vol. 1(1), in BSB, 1036/B/III/1935.

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Pagination jumps from p.659 to p.670.

of the Party members. It will invite and promote discussion on certain points on which perfect ideological unity has not yet been achieved.

"The Communist" will carry out the task of preparing for the [National] Convention - which is to set the final seal on the realisation of the ideological and organisational unity inside the Communist ranks and to result in the election of a properly elected Central Committee of the Communist Party of India.

The paper made a special point of praising the progress towards unity that had been achieved so far:

'"The Communist" sincerely extends the hand of welcome to all those comrades who by a magnanimous gesture have thrown the past overboard and have offered their unreserved cooperation to the Provisional C.C. and have shown that they accept the Communist principle of clearing up all the differences within the framework of the Comintern'.

Most of the first issue was devoted to the publication of the Draft Political Thesis, upon which the editors invited critical comment. The second issue, in the following month, emphasised strongly that the CPI was 'a Section of the Communist International - the World Communist Party', and was therefore 'bound to carry out the program and the policy laid down by that central organisation. It is the duty of the section to explain to its members and popularise ... the program which the C.I. from time to time adopts':⁸³ there was no longer any room for taking Comintern decisions as 'a basis for discussion' as with the Sixth Congress theses. The second issue mainly consisted of an abridged version of the Inprecor report of the ECCI's January 1934 Thirteenth Plenum.

Unfortunately the disruption created by the repression delayed the second meeting of the Provisional Central Committee

83. Editorial, in The Communist, Vol. 1(2), in ibid..

until October 1934, prevented the holding of the National Convention, and stopped publication of The Communist for a year. In October the provisional secretary, Adhikari, confined to remote Bijapur since his release from a three month sentence in July, managed to make contact with Bombay. He nominated a national Politbureau consisting of Mirajkar (secretary), Ghosh (mass organisation) and Lahiri (agit-prop), and sent detailed instructions on organisational policy. He laid particular stress upon the paramount importance of effective underground organisation, clearly separated from the open apparatus, to meet the repressive situation. He also emphasised the importance of reestablishing The Communist and of getting a representative to Moscow for the Seventh Comintern Congress.⁸⁴ The October Provisional Committee Meeting - held to coincide with the Bombay session of the National Congress to minimise detection by the authorities - endorsed Adhikari's proposals, considered the provincial reports, and planned a program for 1935.⁸⁵ The provincial reports revealed that the

84. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: reports, 13/10/34, 17/11/34 & 27/12/34; IB, Communism, (1935), p.204.
85. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: reports, 30/10/34, 2/11/34 & 8/12/34; BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: report, 9/11/34; IB, Communism, (1935) pp.208-09. The meeting elected the following as Provis. CC members: Mirajkar (Bombay), Patkar (Bombay), Ghosh (UP), Santosh Kapur (UP), Ghatge (Bombay), Sundarayya (Madras), and Lahiri (Bengal). The new committee then coopted as members Bukhari and Jambhekar, as representatives of the former Bolshevik Party group. It also confirmed Adhikari's nominations for the Politbureau. Ghatge subsequently replaced Mirajkar as secretary after the latter left for Moscow: BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: report, 10/2/35.

Bombay branch had been the most active - for example it was the only one to have translated the Party's basic documents into the vernacular. The membership of the Party as a whole had increased to about 150, with about the same number awaiting acceptance. But virtually no efforts had been taken anywhere to establish an underground apparatus. The Committee resolved to rectify this and to implement Adhikari's recommendations on international contacts and the Party organ.

The leadership began to effect these decisions from late 1934. They were aided by the recently arrived Moscow-trained communist, Teja Singh Swatantar, an expert in underground work, who had arrived with definite Comintern instructions to establish a functioning organisation as quickly as possible.⁸⁶ Mirajkar was immediately despatched (unsuccessfully) as a delegate to the Seventh Comintern Congress.⁸⁷ The first steps towards establishing a Leninist Party apparatus were taken in early 1935,⁸⁸ and The Communist reappeared in April.⁸⁹ However,

86. NAI, H.Poll, 44/23/1936: G of I to S of S, 14/4/36; see also sources cited in fn. 52, above.

87. See sources cited in fn. 52, above.

88. These initiatives were guided by a report drawn up by either Adhikari or the October Provis. CC meeting and then circulated among Party members. Titled 'Work of the Cells of the CPI, Organisational Task', it incorporates the experiences of 1934 (particularly the Bombay general strike and its repercussions) and urges Party education and the rapid formation of a cell structure capable of functioning in conditions of illegality: in BSB, 1036/B/V/1935, together with a report dated 6/12/34. See also: *ibid.*, report, 15/1/35; BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: reports, 4/2/35 & 10/2/35 (reporting a tour by Ghatge and Lahiri from Bombay to Lahore and Calcutta); *ibid.*: letter from a Provis. CC member (probably Ghosh) to other members, early Mar. 1935; NAI, H.Poll, 27/11/1936: note on the activities of the Meerut group after their releases from prison.

89. The Communist, Vol. 1(3), in BSB, 1036/B/III/1935.

despite Adhikari's instructions that the leading figures should restrict their activities to underground work and not risk themselves in open activity, most of the leadership was imprisoned or detained during the year. Once again the Provisional Central Committee had been reduced to virtual inactivity.⁹⁰ Symptomatically, The Communist did not reappear till November.⁹¹ The final blows came in August and September. In August the police captured the secretary, Mirajkar - who had successfully evaded arrest up until that point by going underground - along with the documents he was carrying for a Provisional Central Committee meeting scheduled for the following day.⁹² Then, on September 18, the police conducted widespread searches of communist centres and confiscations of Party literature and records throughout the Presidency. The police were not able to find any documents that could be used in court - a fact which showed how much the communists had learnt from the Meerut Case.⁹³ But the confiscations very seriously disrupted the work of both the Bombay branch and the Central Committee.

After the Meerut releases the Bombay government had carried out most of its anti-communist actions under the Executive powers provided by the temporary emergency legislation enacted during Civil Disobedience.⁹⁴ It used these powers rather

90. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: Note on the history of the CC, 27/1/37; BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: Ghate (acting Sec.) to Bombay Ctee., late Mar., 1935; NAI, H.Poll, 7/8/1935: G of Bom to G of I, 20/6/35. Two of the three Politbureau members were arrested during the year.

91. The Communist, Vol. 1(4), in BSB, 1036/B/III/1935.

92. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: report, 10/8/35.

93. ibid., BSB to G of Bom., 30/9/35.

94. See the table listing the details of the actions taken by the Bombay government against communists and other radicals during 1934-35, in NAI, H.Poll, 22/93/1935.

than the legislation banning the Party because the latter required judicial proceedings and was not as effective.⁹⁵ However the special Emergency legislation was in force only until the end of 1935 - a fact offering some hope for the future of communism in the Presidency. But this hope was dashed by New Delhi's mid-1935 decision that both the Bombay and Bengal governments should make their legislation permanent.⁹⁶ In fact

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95. This was also New Delhi's view. In April 1935 it informed its provincial governments that 'to counteract such a movement Government must rely primarily on executive rather than judicial action' (NAI, H.Poll, 7/13/1934: G of I to all LGs, 29/4/35). New Delhi considered that the legislation banning the Party and its subsidiary organisations was useful more for its moral effect than for the additional legal powers it gave the government - it would make it clear to the country that 'we are declaring war on communism root and branch': IOL, L/PO/43: V to S of S, 30/6/34.
96. NAI, H.Poll, 7/13/1934: Notes by Hallett, 17/6/35, and Craik, 20/6/35. The background to this decision is recorded in *ibid.*. See also the correspondence and notes in NAI, H.Poll, 7/7/1934, 7/11/1934, 17/II/1934 and 17/13/1934. New Delhi decided on permanent provincial emergency legislation after London had vetoed its proposal to pass central legislation (by Ordinance if necessary) giving the Government of India similar powers to move against 'anything like' communist activity (NAI, H.Poll, 17/II/1934: V to S of S, 13/4/34, and note by Haig, 14/4/34). As New Delhi moved a little further from the siege mentality of the Civil Disobedience period, and as it became more certain that the Congress leadership sought a return to constitutionalism, it saw more clearly the wisdom of London's viewpoint. As Hallett minuted in August: 'if we combine an attack on ... [the CPI] with an attack on the Congress Socialist Party, we will have the whole of the Congress ostensibly against us. ... it would be a great pity to lose such support as we have got from that direction': NAI, H.Poll, 7/13/1934: Note by Hallett, 7/8/34.

the Bombay house searches were intended to uncover communist documents that could be used in the currently 'rather tame' Legislative Council to persuade the 'waverers' to support the government's legislation.⁹⁷ Sufficient waverers were convinced, and the new Act was passed in October.⁹⁸ Bengal's was passed in August.⁹⁹ The communists now faced the prospect of permanent 'civil martial law' in both provinces. This situation was a measure of, primarily, the Bombay communists' late 1920s successes and the government's assessment of their probable future success should they be allowed free rein. The Bombay government immediately exercised its permanent legislation by moving against six top Party leaders between November 1935 and January 1936.¹⁰⁰

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97. BSB, 1036/B/X-I/1936: BSB to HD, G of Bom, 30/10/35, and DIB to BSB, 23/10/35.
98. The Bombay Act was passed 49:27 (IQR, 1935, Vol. II, pp. 168-74). During the debate the Bombay government's Home Member stressed that the legislation was directed only against 'the menace of communism': *ibid*, p.171.
99. *ibid.*, pp.142-47. The government introduced the Bengal Bill as a measure directed against terrorism rather than communism. The government agreed to compromise by restricting the Act's duration to three years in the first instance, and it was then passed without opposition. However in August 1936 the Bengal government took additional powers specifically against industrial agitation in the Calcutta-Howrah-24 Parganas area: NAI, H.Poll, 6/7/1936: G of Ben to G of I, 31/8/36.
100. NAI, H.Poll, 18/11/1935, 18/12/1935 and 18/1/1936: Bombay FRI Nov., FRI Dec., and FRI Jan. - reporting the restriction of Joglekar's movements and activity, Ghate's externment to the Madras Presidency, and the arrests of Lahiri, Iqbal Singh Hundal, Teja Singh Swatantar and Chinta Singh. A large quantity of literature, and Rs. 4,500 in Party funds, were captured during the latter arrests.

The intense repression in the Bombay Presidency during 1935 effectively disrupted the task of Party construction. This disruption, combined with the passage of the emergency powers act, forced the beleaguered leadership to undertake more seriously the construction of an underground apparatus and to take new initiatives.

By the end of 1935 Ghate's statement in March that 'we are still far too open' was beyond argument: an underground network was absolutely necessary 'not for achieving big results, but merely for the existence and continuity of the Party'.¹⁰¹ Accordingly the leadership decided both to concentrate on this task and to move the Party centre out of Bombay to a relatively repression-free province.¹⁰² The Provisional Central Committee took the opportunity of the National Congress's Lucknow session in April 1936 to meet and make new arrangements.¹⁰³ It chose UP as the Party centre's new location, and appointed the recently released P.C. Joshi as secretary. Ajoy Ghosh and Bharadwaj joined him on the Politbureau.¹⁰⁴ It was the first time that the top Party leadership had been filled by non-Bombay men and that the Party centre had been located outside Bombay.

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101. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: Ghate (acting sec., Provis. CC) to Bombay Provincial Ctee, late Mar. 1935; also Tambitkar to Jambhekar, Jul. or Aug. 1935.
102. NAI, H.Poll, 7/2/1936: Note in the HD, 29/5/36, which commented that 'Pressure by the Bombay police has caused the removal of the headquarters'.
103. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: Note on the development of the CPI's CC, 27/1/37; NAI, H.Poll, 45/22/1936: Intelligence reports of the Lucknow session.
104. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: Note on the development of the CPI's CC, 27/1/37.

The Party's vulnerability and continued ineffectiveness in 1935 also forced some communists to begin to question the wisdom of the CPI's current trade union and nationalist policies. Open activity was essential for the development of mass influence, but with its trade unions and political organisations banned, and without access to other organisations, the open activity that the Party could undertake was very limited. A number of the Party leaders became increasingly concerned about this situation. By early 1935 Ghate was very worried by the prospect of the Party being isolated from the industrial and nationalist mainstream and then crushed with ease by the British: 'The reformists wish to liquidate us not by entangling us organisationally but by isolating us and leaving us to the tender mercies of Imperialism'.¹⁰⁵ If this was so then the CPI's extreme 'left-sectarian' strategy played right into the 'reformists' hands. Ghate argued strongly that for the Party to survive it must concentrate not only on building a strong underground organisation, but also on forging some sort of unity with the 'reformists'. This had been the policy that, in line with its jail analysis, the Meerut leadership had adopted towards the rival GKU from late 1933 in preparing for the 1934 textile strike. In October 1935 the Bengal Provincial Committee, also, affirmed the wisdom of that approach and criticised the Bombay communists' abandonment of the alliance during the strike:

105. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: Ghate to Mirajkar, late Mar. 1935.

... in the later stages of the strike the weakening of the ranks of the conscious revolutionary cadres through numerous arrests ... led to a gross violation of communist tactics and principles. The national reformist union [the GKU] was declared to be a police union and the infantile left tendencies went so far as to proclaim the necessity of organising purely communist trade unions. Sectarian blindness found its expression in numerous attempts to heap into one pile the treacherous national reformist trade union leaders and the masses of the workers following them and being misled by them.¹⁰⁶

This 'sickness of sectarianism', the critique continued, had been manifested in Calcutta too. The communists, in their attempts to mobilise an opposition to 'the reactionary and bourgeois ideology of Gandhism', had made the mistake of 'lining up the whole of the deceived rank and file ... with the treacherous leaders of the Congress'. Consequently the 'Gandhi Boycott Committee' that the Calcutta communists organised in 1934 'did not grow into a platform of anti-imperialist struggle ... - rather, with the imprisonment and persecution of its leaders it dwindled in strength and slowly went out of existence'. For the Bengal Committee the lesson was clear. The communists must take advantage of the legality that the Raj allowed the Congress by entering that organisation and working within it to mobilise the rank-and-file against the leadership, while simultaneously organising an independent mass base outside the Congress.¹⁰⁷ The alternative was to perish.

106. NAI, H.Poll, 17/10/1936: extracts from Communist Review (organ of the Bengal Ctee of the CPI), Vol. II, Oct. 1935.

107. The Bengal Ctee nevertheless saw that the possibilities for mobilising support in the 'bankrupt, semi-feudal' Bengal Congress were very limited. But even the Bengal Congress would provide added protection for the communists' underground work.

In the years that followed the Calcutta branch remained a strong advocate of the 'united-front' approach.

Ghate's and the Bengal Committee's analyses reflected the views of others within the Party, who saw in the unanticipated emergence from Congress ranks of the Congress Socialists the basis for a possibly fruitful alliance. However some sections of the Party vigorously opposed this perspective. For one Provisional Central Committee member this approach was the 'discarded policy of forming fractions inside the Congress', and it would mean 'repeat[ing] the whole history since the very formation of the Party'.¹⁰⁸ The Congress, he argued, echoing the viewpoint of several leaders, had no genuine mass basis, and there was little chance of forcing the Congress leadership to accept the collective affiliation of mass organisations. To enter the Congress would be a 'right opportunist step'.

Thus during 1935 considerable ideological and policy differences coexisted inside the Party. Because the Provisional Central Committee and its organ were unable to function during the year these differences threatened to lead the various Party centres in different directions.

The Comintern's Changing Policy

However this threat was reduced by the ECCI's stand in favour of a 'united-front' approach, against the extreme 'left-sectarianism' it had counselled in the preceding years.

108. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: a Provis. CC member (probably Ghosh) to the Bombay Ctee, Feb. or early Mar. 1935.

This strengthened the hands of those within the Indian Party who favoured the former approach. In its 1933-34 Inprecor articles the ECCI urged the Indian communists to rectify their past sectarian 'mistakes' and to enter the reformist unions.¹⁰⁹ The communists could fight the 'reactionary national reformists' (i.e., the non-communist labour leaders) from within their unions as well as from outside, and should not be afraid to consider merging their 'Red' unions with the dominant 'reformist' organisations wherever that seemed advisable. Similarly, the communists should participate in the mass nationalist movement with the same aim - winning the masses from the 'reactionary' Congress leadership. However these articles remained ambiguous. Part of the ambiguity arose from the facile 'false consciousness' argument employed in the articles - the ECCI could assert, without apparent discomfort, that the 'national reformists' were either consciously or objectively pro-imperialist, while recognising that they exercised a powerful influence over the 'deceived' masses. The ECCI articles did not attempt to explain how this 'deception' was sustained, and so failed completely to come to terms with the problem. But, secondly, the tactical advice provided in these articles was internally contradictory. They counselled the Indian communists both to maintain the old policy of 'merciless' attack on the 'national reformists' (a tactic which would make unity impossible) while simultaneously advising

109. This aspect of the Inprecor articles is summarised in Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., pp.152-56.

the merging of the 'Red' and the 'reformist' unions. Thus these articles could provide support for both sides in the CPI tactical debate.

However early in 1935 the ECCI clarified its stand in a long letter to the CPI's Provisional Central Committee.¹¹⁰ The letter retained the analytical ambiguity embodied in the Inprecor articles. But it did state definitely that the communists must enter both the 'reformist' unions and the National Congress and carry on inside them as well as outside the struggle for the allegiance of the masses:

The struggle ... to enter the National Congress does not by any means signify that the C.P. has changed its attitude to the I.N.C. in principle. It merely means that on the basis of an estimate of the actual state of affairs and taking into account the fact that the National Congress still exists as a mass organisation, the Communists cannot neglect to set themselves the task of carrying on mass work inside the National Congress so as to win over the rank and file members of the Congress who are really striving towards the struggle against imperialism, but who have not yet taken the correct path. ... An equally urgent task for the CPI is the struggle for trade union unity. ... the Party has not yet brought about a sharp change in the struggle for trade union unity.

In this way a 'wide anti-imperialist front' could be built, setting itself 'in opposition to the whole policy of the leaders and calling over their heads on the masses'. The

110. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: ECCI to the Provis. CC, CPI, 17/3/35. Intelligence, who first saw this letter in June, surmised that it had probably reached Bombay in the first half of April: ibid., Note, 19/6/35. An article in the March 9 issue of Inprecor (Vol. 15(10), pp.289-92), titled 'Problems of the Anti-Imperialist Struggle in India', contained similar advice.

communists should exploit all opportunities for joint actions with all organisations 'reformist or otherwise'. This did not mean giving up the right to criticise the reformists; 'This criticism, however, must not be abusive, but clear and based on principles'. Finally, the letter administered a snub to the CPI's 'left-sectarians':

'we cannot help noting that some of the Indian comrades are having great difficulty in getting over their sectarian remnants on the question of a united front. ... The biggest danger for a young Party is precisely its isolation from the struggle for the immediate needs of the workers and peasants, its isolation from the national-liberation struggle against British imperialism'.

Having legitimised those within the CPI who advocated a 'united-front' approach, the ECCI reminded the Party membership that 'the complete elimination of all group tendencies' was long overdue. With the receipt of this letter the 'third period' legitimisation of the CPI's 'left-sectarians' was definitively withdrawn.

However the 'left-sectarians' did not give up without resistance. The CPI's responsiveness to the ECCI's instructions came to the test almost immediately. In January 1935 the EC of the Royist dominated AITUC had issued a set of unity proposals to the other national labour federations. In the view of some communists the Party should regard these proposals as simply 'the latest manoeuvre of reformist trade unionism'.¹¹¹ Nevertheless a majority of those on the Provisional

111. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: CPI thesis on TU unity - probably by Deshpande. See also the Party document quoted in M. Limaye, Communist Party: Facts and Fiction (Hyderabad, 1951), p.23. In fact the first, very tentative moves towards unity had begun in October 1934: NAI, H.Poll, 18/10/1934: Bombay FR2 Oct..

Central Committee accepted the ECCI's instructions and fell in with Ghatе's view that, 'under the circumstances', the AITUC's unity proposals were acceptable.¹¹² At the Fourteenth AITUC annual session in Calcutta in April the communists and Royists drew up an agreement for the subsequent merger of the Red AITUC with the main body.¹¹³ The Provisional Central Committee then took up more seriously the question - first broached at the October 1934 Congress annual session - of forging an alliance with the Congress Socialists.¹¹⁴ The Congress Socialists, for their part, were very interested in an alliance against the Congress leadership.¹¹⁵ With the old factionalism dampened and with sufficient consensus within the Party achieved, the CPI appeared to be set on a new course.

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112. BSB, 1036/B/V/1935: Ghatе to Bombay Ctee, late Mar. 1935, and BSB report, 18/4/35.
113. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: copy of the Calcutta agreement, and CPI Notes on it; British Museum, Proscribed Indian Books, 11/5: a manifesto issued by the Vice-Pres. Red AITUC, Apr. 1935, titled 'An Appeal to Indian Workers to Unite' (translated for the author from the Marathi original by Mrs. P. Paricharak); NAI, H.Poll, 18/4/1935: Bengal FR2 Apr. (report of the AITUC session); BSB, 1036/B/X-I/1935: Note on the unity moves, 11/9/35. See Punekar, op. cit., pp.328-35 for the overall history of the attempts in the 1930s to forge unity between the different TU federations. The April agreement was immediately put into practice on May Day: NAI, H.Poll, 18/5/1935: Bombay FR1 May.
114. NAI, H.Poll, 18/10/1934 and 18/1/1935: Bombay FR2 Oct. and FR2 Jan.; BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: pamphlet issued by the Provis. CC, titled 'To the Congress Socialists and Anti-Imperialist Revolutionaries'.
115. See Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., pp.156-57 and p.161.

However the Party's internal balance and sense of direction were soon disrupted once again - this time by the Comintern's Seventh Congress, held in July-August 1935. This was serious because the Party's recently achieved, and still tenuous balance, was highly dependent on the Comintern's mediation. Paradoxically, the Party crisis which ensued heightened the CPI's dependence on Moscow's authority.

The new policy directions which the ECCI 'recommended' with increasing insistence to the CPI between late 1933 and early 1935 arose more from changing Soviet priorities than from the changing situation in India. From 1933 the Soviet leaders became increasingly concerned about Hitler's rise to power and the associated threat to the Soviet Union.¹¹⁶ At the same time the imperatives which had led to the 'third period' policy diminished in intensity: Stalin had defeated the 'Right Opposition' CPSU faction, and the industrialisation and collectivisation programs were well advanced. Accordingly, between 1933 and 1935, a subtle shift in Comintern policy occurred. The Comintern moved from the 'class against class' strategy that had been enshrined by the 1929 Tenth Plenum to the 'popular front' line which was finally decided upon at the Seventh Congress. At the Seventh Congress, as at the Sixth Congress seven years earlier, the Soviet leadership expected the endorsement of an already decided policy shift. This time, however, the shift took place in a different way. The Sixth Congress policy change arose primarily from Soviet domestic

116. For an analysis of the context and content of the ECCI's policy changes in 1933-35, see Claudin, op. cit., pp. 166-99.

issues and received a highly 'theoretical' justification. The Seventh Congress policy shift was equally Soviet-centred. However the issue which prompted it was external - the growing fascist threat to Russia - and no attempt was made to justify the change through an analysis of the dynamics of world capitalism.¹¹⁷ The issue was presented in simple terms. The Seventh Congress policy was based on the assumptions that the Soviet Union was progressing rapidly towards the construction of complete socialism and that it was therefore the fountainhead and the bulwark of the World Revolution. If these assumptions were accepted - and the Sixth Congress had accepted them - then the logic was faultless: the Soviet Union was under a grave threat; therefore the world's communist parties' first duty was the defence of the Soviet Union; the defence of the Soviet Union would be maximised by the mobilisation of the broadest possible front of anti-fascist forces - including the liberal, anti-fascist bourgeoisie; therefore the 'revolutionary' strategy of the 'third period' must be replaced by an alliance with many of yesterday's enemies - principally the formerly 'treacherous' social democratic movement. Simultaneously, it was argued, because of the extreme gravity of the situation,

117. Claudin (ibid., p.91) has commented rightly that the Seventh Congress was 'the least theoretical congress ever held by the Comintern - the transition to what Dimitrov called "a new tactical orientation" was effected without any critical analysis of the past. Thus, the crisis of the Marxist theory of world revolution was "resolved" by renouncing, in practice, any explicit theory of world revolution'. The key Seventh Congress policy document was Dimitrov's report, 'The offensive of Fascism and the Tasks of the C.I. in the Struggle for the Unity of the Working Class Against Fascism', reproduced in Inprecor, Vol. 15(37), pp.957-78.

there was absolutely no room for 'deviationism' within the communist parties.¹¹⁸

Because the European situation was now the major object of Soviet concern the colonial world received little attention at the Seventh Congress.¹¹⁹ Moreover, because theory was not at a premium, India did not have the important theoretical-ideological role to play that it had had at the Sixth Congress. A Chinese delegate, Wang Ming, delivered a report on the Chinese situation,¹²⁰ but India was mentioned only in passing at the Congress. The strategy to be followed by the CPI was treated in more detail after the Congress, in a revised edition of Wang Ming's report.¹²¹ But it was not until February 1936 that a special report on India - prepared by R.P. Dutt and Bradley - appeared in Inprecor. The Dutt-Bradley thesis, titled 'The Anti-Imperialist People's Front', was the definitive statement of the Seventh Congress line for India.¹²²

118. See Claudin, op. cit., pp.122-23, for an account of the extremities to which the demands for 'monolithicity' were taken in the mid-1930s.
119. This probably also arose from Stalin's concern not to provoke trouble with those democratic imperialist powers that might join with the Soviet Union in an anti-Hitler pact. For Stalin's overall concern not to alienate the capitalist democracies see ibid., pp.89-90.
120. 'Report on China', in Inprecor, Vol. 15(60), pp.1488-92. Apart from the controversial question of the Chinese revolution, China was important to the Soviet Union's foreign policy because of the Japanese expansion; for the Japanese also threatened the Soviet Union.
121. This is summarised in Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., pp.157-58.
122. In Inprecor, Vol. 16(29), 1936, pp.297-300.

The Dutt-Bradley thesis went far beyond the ECCI's 1933-35 instructions to the Party. It recognised the Congress radicals as genuine socialists, pressing for 'irreconcilable struggle with imperialism' and engaged in a radical challenge to the non-revolutionary Congress leadership.¹²³ Moreover it portrayed these radicals as the wave of the Congress future who, with communist help, could oust the Gandhian leadership and transform the character of the Congress. Thus the Congress was already 'the united front of the Indian people in the national struggle'. The Congress could 'play a great and foremost part in the work of realizing the Anti-Imperialist People's Front'. It was 'even possible that the National Congress, by the further transformation of its organization and programme, may become the form of realization of the Anti-Imperialist People's Front; for it is the reality that matters, not the name'.¹²⁴ The communists should therefore concentrate on entering the Congress and in working there with the Congress Socialists to transform the organisation.

The sudden, untheorised, Comintern switch to the 'popular front' line greatly disrupted the Party. For some communists even the earlier transition had been too much to accept. But the Dutt-Bradley line required the Indian communists fully to acknowledge as comrades those 'national reformists' who yesterday had been branded as enemies of all that was

123. ibid., p.297.

124. ibid., p.298.

progressive. It was very similar to the line pursued by the arch-enemy, Roy. Many found this too great an ideological and psychological readjustment to make. Nor would they abandon without a struggle the notion that policy should be based on theory. The Seventh Congress line negated the rationale justifying the sacrifices that had been endured and the commitments that had been made during the past six years. However others within the Party welcomed the unqualified shift from sectarianism to participation in the nationalist mainstream, for it appeared to offer greater political opportunities. The ensuing polarisation of the Party centred around a conflict between the new P.C. Joshi leadership and a re-formed Ranadive faction. The final stage in the process of Party formation was accompanied and conditioned by this ideologically motivated factional struggle.

Building a Party Apparatus : Stage 2, 1936-early 1937

Joshi, who was the son of a school master and was a law student at Allahabad University at the time of his arrest for the Meerut Case, was a serious and capable intellectual.¹²⁵ But for both him and a majority of the Provisional Central Committee which appointed him as the Party's leader, the perceived benefits of accepting the new 'popular-front' line outweighed the costs to the CPI's theoretical and political continuity.

125. E.g. in the Meerut jail Joshi, in particular, devoted himself to a comprehensive study of the Marxist classics, while at the same time completing his law degree: interviews with M.G. Desai and D. Goswani.

Because of these benefits the leadership was prepared to accept this externally determined, pragmatic, theoretically unjustified negation of the basis of the Party's previous position. The carefully constructed Meerut analysis, which could have provided a valuable starting point for the future development of theory and policy, was jettisoned along with the more negative legacies of the party's 'third period'. This negation of the past was closely related to the most serious weakness of the Meerut group's theory of Indian politics — its failure to proceed from a critique of the preceding analytical basis of communist politics.

Apart from its faith in the Comintern and the Soviet Union, the Joshi leadership accepted the Dutt-Bradley thesis for two quite different reasons. The first was positive — a definite preference for this policy over 'left-sectarianism'. Joshi was a 'moderate' — a man for the 'popular-front' times. During the Meerut Case he had questioned the wisdom of the Tenth Plenum policy, and he now believed that the Dutt-Bradley line was appropriate for current Indian conditions.¹²⁶ Others felt the same way — in part, no doubt, because of their 'war-weariness' after years of hardship in political isolation.¹²⁷ The very

126. That Joshi, from Allahabad, was a personal friend of Jawaharlal, probably contributed to his enthusiasm for the Seventh Congress line; for he could see at close quarters the post-CD disillusion of the Congress 'radicals'.

127. E.g. Lahiri commented that after the communists' 1930-33 experience, and after the Calcutta Committee's efforts to find a way out of the cul de sac, he was 'just electrified' by the news of the Seventh Congress's policy change: interview with S. Lahiri.

extremism of the Tenth Plenum line encouraged an equally extreme reaction. The 'popular-front' provided a welcome change, offering an opportunity to capitalise on new developments and engage in real political activity. Besides, no mass revolutionary wave existed which might have led a majority of the leadership seriously to question the appropriateness of the Seventh Congress approach. But the second reason was more fundamental. In 1932 the Meerut group had resolved that Comintern authority was indispensable to the CPI's continued existence, for it offered the only means of countering the centrifugal forces which threatened to disintegrate the Party. The progress achieved since the release of the Meerut prisoners was not sufficient to warrant a change in that viewpoint. For the Meerut leadership and those that had allied with it against the Bombay factions, there still could be no question of going against the Comintern: for to do so would jeopardise the most important task of all — the formation of a strong national Party apparatus. Thus, because the Seventh Congress policy provoked disunity in the CPI, it in fact led to the leadership's heightened dependence upon the Comintern — at the very time that the Soviet leadership's special ideological need of the CPI's orthodoxy had diminished.¹²⁸

128. The ECCI's declining interest in India in general, and in the CPI in particular, was reflected in Inprecor in 1936-39. There were far fewer articles on India than in the preceding period and, from 1937, the CPI was barely mentioned. As the IB commented in Oct. 1937, the ECCI's interest in India in this period was 'somewhat desultory and patronising': NAI, H.Poll, 7/7/37: 'A Review of Recent Communist Activities in India', 26/10/37.

Comintern authority had regularly to be invoked to legitimise the CPI leadership's policy change and to get on with the job of Party-building. For all these reasons the Joshi leadership accepted wholeheartedly the Seventh Congress line — and the rationale for it — as provided in the Dutt-Bradley thesis: the Sixth-Congress/Tenth Plenum line had been 'correct' for the conditions of 1929-33, though the Indian communists had committed sectarian 'mistakes' in executing it; but now the objective conditions had changed fundamentally and this required a new policy — the 'popular-front'.¹²⁹

Ranadive had been 'a very sincere and valuable comrade' after he had made his peace with the Meerut group and rejoined the Party in early 1934. But he refused to accept the Dutt-Bradley line unquestioningly. Moreover, he articulated a growing sentiment in some sections of the lower levels of the Party. Though factionalism had been dampened before the arrival of the Dutt-Bradley line, it had not been 'liquidated'. For example, even in September 1935, before the Dutt-Bradley thesis had materialised, the Nagpur centre was near revolt. It wrote to the Provisional Central Committee member, Jambhekar in protest against the Committee's decision to unite with the Congress Socialist Party:

129. E.g.: ACH, 1936/19: The Editor, 'Collective Affiliation to the Indian National Congress', in The Communist, Vol. 1 (7), March 1936; BSB, 1036/B/III/1935: 'Hans Raj', 'About Our Minimum United Front Tactics', and the Editor, 'The Communist Party and the Coming Elections', in The Communist, Vol. 1(10), July 1936.

We simply fail to understand how the E.C.C.I. instructions can be interpreted in this manner. ... such a step would mean giving up our correct theoretical position [that the Congress is an organ of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie] and would be the worst kind of opportunism. This decision has got to be immediately revised. In our opinion this decision is a hopeless capitulation to the Royist slander and would lead the whole Party straight into the mire of liquidationism. I hope you realise the gravity of the issue and try to repair the mischief if it can be repaired. 130

For the Nagpur branch the Committee's decision demonstrated the latter's 'complete inability ... to face issues squarely'. If the Committee did not reconsider this decision and also improve its organisational contact with Nagpur then it would be 'goodbye to the C.C. It will have once more proved that it is a bunch of irresponsible, spineless Bureaucrats who don't deserve to be at the head of an organisation'. We see expressed in this letter the consequences for the Party's integrity of both government repression and the nature of the Comintern's switch. The writer, in his protest against the Committee's 'bureaucratism', did not take into account the extreme problems created for the leadership by the repression. For him the Committee's failure to maintain adequate organisational contact with Nagpur, and its failure to involve the Nagpur members democratically in the decision to change Party policy, were simply failures of leadership. Secondly, he could not believe that the ECCI would sanction such an extreme and untheorised policy change; the fault lay squarely with the CPI leadership.

The 'Ranadive-Sardesai group', as it was called by Intelligence,¹³¹ took further the ideological theme raised by the Nagpur branch. This group championed 'the VI World Congress Line as opposed to the VII World Congress Line'.¹³² It was an organised, ideologically motivated faction based on the suppressed Bolshevik Party group.¹³³ It began to form in late 1935,¹³⁴ and from early 1936 it conducted its opposition to the leadership's 'popular-front' policy through an organ called Red Star. The paper's slogan was, significantly, 'Comrades! To the Masses!'¹³⁵ It appeared monthly, with some 10 issues being produced during 1936 and early 1937. According to Intelligence some 400 to 500 copies of each issue were circulated.¹³⁶ Overtly, Red Star directed its attack not against the

131. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: Note, 5/1/37.

132. loc.cit.

133. Sardesai had been Ranadive's main lieutenant. Jambhekar, in whom the Nagpur group had confided, had also been an important member of the Bolshevik Party group. It is significant that it was not until late 1935 that the Ranadive group launched an open attack on the Meerut group for the way in which it had suppressed the Bolshevik Party in late 1933 and early 1934: BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1935: 'Charge Sheet by Jambhekar Against "Nuruddin"', ca. Sept. 1935.

134. ibid.; the Nov. 1935 issue of The Communist went to some lengths to demonstrate the 'incorrect views' of an unspecified 'left-sectarian' group: BSB, 1036/B/III/1935: the Editor, 'The Trade Union Movement and Our Tasks', in The Communist, Vol. 1(4), 1935.

135. A number of issues of Red Star are filed in BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937.

136. ibid.: Note, 5/1/37.

Party leadership, nor against the current Comintern line, but against Royism. But the covert parallels were obvious.¹³⁷ The Red Star group's opposition to the new line was sufficiently vehement for the leadership to suspend Ranadive's Party membership and to drop Jambhekar from the Provisional Central Committee during 1936.¹³⁸

It is significant, too, that the Bombay Committee, as well as the Red Star group, was less receptive to 'popular-frontism' than were the other provincial centres. Bombay's resistance arose from the dynamics of re-establishing a mass base — a possibility which was still absent in the other provinces in this period. These dynamics conflicted with the political restrictions required by the Joshi-Comintern line. Thus the Bombay situation in 1936-37 reinforces the argument that the political momentum provided by a mass base was a prerequisite for relative autonomy from the Comintern, even though in this case both the momentum and the autonomy were very limited. It also illustrates the inappropriateness of universalised, India-wide policies.

137. See, e.g., the editorial titled 'Communist Attitude to Nationalism and Struggles for National Liberation', in Red Star, No. 9 (in ibid.). The article draws on the Sixth Comintern Congress theses for support but ignores the Seventh Congress line. See also fn. 143, below.

138. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: note on the development of the CPI's CC, 27/1/37.

By late 1936 the Bombay communists had re-established themselves as the dominant labour leadership in Bombay. To a significant extent this followed from Dange's mid-1935 return from prison. Dange was 'undoubtedly a most popular person with mill labourers',¹³⁹ and quickly rebuilt a working class following. Dange, together with Nimbkar, led the very successful campaign against the Alve-Kandalkar leadership in the August 1935 GKU elections,¹⁴⁰ though at that point Dange was still outside the Party. In 1936 Dange also won election to the BPCC and, from there, to the AICC. For these reasons he could no longer be ignored by the Party leadership and, in mid-1936, on Ghatge's initiative, he was readmitted.¹⁴¹ Bombay's growing confidence in its working class support led it to differ with the national CPI leadership over the correct application of the new line. The 1935 Government of India Act provided for special seats for labour representatives, and the AITUC decided to field candidates for these seats in the 1937 elections for the provincial legislatures. It selected Joglekar as its Bombay candidate. The Bombay Committee decided that the election campaign would provide an excellent, legal propaganda platform from which to rebuild the Party's influence over the working class.¹⁴² The

139. NAI, H.Poll, 18/5/1935: FR2 May; see also ibid. : FR1 May.

140. For source, see fn. 71, above.

141. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: note on the development of the CPI's CC, 27/1/37.

142. ibid.; report, 2/2/37. According to a Party document, Joglekar received a very encouraging 10,000 votes in the election: BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: circular from Ghosh to the Bombay Cttee, Mar. 1937.

competition became bitter, with the communists attacking the Congress as a pro-capitalist 'factory of lies and intrigues' opposed to the interest of the working class;¹⁴³ it was reminiscent of the late 1920s. Because of this situation Dange, as an AICC member as well as a communist and AITUC executive member, had conflicting loyalties. He decided to support Joglekar against the Congress candidate — a decision which led him into serious trouble with the Maharashtra Provincial Congress Committee. Eventually it suspended Dange from the AICC.¹⁴⁴

The Party's national leadership strongly disapproved of the Bombay Committee's campaign and Dange's open support of Joglekar's candidature.¹⁴⁵ It regarded Dange's action as a breach of discipline and 'popular-front' principles, and his suspension from the AICC as a serious blow to the Party's program. It even considered withdrawing Joglekar from the campaign, but then decided that this would cause too much damage to the Party's trade union interests. The 'popular-front' line was, thus, inimical to militant mass organisation, for this would inevitably bring the communists into conflict with the Congress.

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143. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: report, 9/2/37, reporting speeches in the mill area and citing a Marathi manifesto to the workers signed by Nimbkar, Pendse, Ranadive, Tambitkar, Dange, and several others. See also: Red Star, No. 10, Jan. 1937 in ibid. which carries an article titled 'The Two Camps' condemning the representatives of 'the bourgeois National Congress' and praising the 'proletarian representative', Joglekar; and NAI, H.Poll, 18/1/1937 and 18/2/1937: Bombay FRI Jan. and FR2 Feb.
144. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: reports, 13/1/37 & 15/1/37.
145. ibid.: reports, 2/2/37 & 5/2/37.

The national leadership prevailed over both the Red Star group and the Bombay Committee. By the end of 1936 Joshi had built a national Party apparatus capable of withstanding such divisions and of asserting its viewpoint over those of sub-groups. The health of the national organisation in this period is indicated by the fact that during the year from March 1936 The Communist appeared monthly. The youthful Joshi was a capable and energetic leader, and from the time of his appointment as secretary he firmly 'took the reins of the Party in his hands'.¹⁴⁶ Operating from the relatively safe base of the United Provinces, the new Politbureau began implementing the Lucknow Provisional Central Committee's decision on organisation immediately after that meeting.¹⁴⁷ Joshi became a roving organiser, travelling from centre to centre, making personal contact with the membership and encouraging and guiding the formation of both underground and open organisation.¹⁴⁸ He also managed to undercut some of the CPI's leftist competition by

146. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: note on the development of the CPI's CC, 27/1/27 — which added that 'a man of Joshi's energy would hardly allow any grass to grow under his feet.'

147. NAI, H.Poll, 7/II/1936: note in the HD, 29/5/36.

148. Sources in fn. 146. In my interviews several communists recalled the importance of Joshi's personal approach (e.g. interviews with K. Damodaran and D. Goswami). In Goswami's words, 'One of P.C. Joshi's highest qualities ... was that he knew all of the Party members by name and could remember them, and he took an interest in their family members also'. According to Sardesai, Joshi was such a proficient organiser that even the leading Party members were not aware until after Independence of the identities of the communists working underground (interview with S.G. Sardesai). The Intelligence Bureau surveys of the Party in NAI, H.Poll, 7/7/1937 and 7/7/1939 are testimony to the organisational skills of Joshi and his colleagues.

incorporating non-communists into the Party.¹⁴⁹ Because of his personal qualities, and because he was not identified with any of the old Bombay or Calcutta factions, he was uniquely qualified for the conciliatory and integrative task required.¹⁵⁰ For the first time the CPI had a leader who could be identified in primarily national terms.

Joshi's project of building the Party apparatus and membership was facilitated both by the policy he pursued and by the contemporary situation, which allowed new opportunities for implementing it. In particular the Marxists among the Congress Socialists, and the emerging Marxist ex-terrorists of Bengal and north India, were amenable to an alliance or merger with the Party against the conservative Congress leadership.¹⁵¹ The communists' penetration of the CSP provided a new measure of freedom from repression — and, to the CSP's eventual chagrin, a new source of membership, particularly in Kerala.¹⁵²

149. E.g. He brought Dutt Mazumdar into the Party and then on to the Central Committee. A number of important Congress Socialists, such as Soli Batliwala, who was soon to be elected to the Central Committee, also joined the Party at this point. Batliwala was attracted away from the CSP because of its middle class 'dilettantism': BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: note on the development of the CPI's CC, 27/1/27; interview with S. Batliwala.

150. According to one Party source Joshi was chosen as Party secretary 'as a representative of the younger comrades who were outside the factional groupings': Deven & Balkrishna quoted in Overstreet & Windmiller, op. cit., p. 564.

151. For CPI-CSP relations, see Overstreet & Windmiller, op. cit. pp. 161-70. For the Bengal terrorist conversions to Marxism, see: Laushey, op. cit., pp. 100-110; Hale, op. cit., pp. 7-8 & p. 65; IOL, L/PO/43: a 1936 report by Tegart on conversions among detenus, & memo on the situation by Williamson 7/5/37, and Anderson (Governor of Bengal) to Linlithgow, 27/3/37, commenting on Tegart's report. For north India see: Hale, op. cit., pp. 65, 86, 94, 96 & 117; Harcourt, op. cit., pp. 373-81.

152. For the wholesale 'capture' by the Party of the Kerala branch of the CSP, see Jeffrey, op. cit.

But even though the strength of the emerging national organisation was sufficient to contain the factions, the Provisional Central Committee felt it necessary during the year to pay special attention to the problem. The unity theme was a prominent one in The Communist throughout 1936 and into 1937. At first the leadership adopted a conciliatory, cooptive approach towards the factions. The June 1936 issue of the paper, which carried the caption 'At All Costs: Against All Odds: FORWARD TO A UNITED PARTY!', spoke to the dissenters in the following way:

... The Central Committee throws open the doors of the Party to ... [the dissenters] and expects all Party members to give these comrades a ready revolutionary welcome ... and to assimilate them in our Party organisation. ... The existence of the independent groups is a living proof of the weakness [and mistakes] of the Party. 153

But this attempt at reconciliation was followed by a hint of coercion:

... the Central Committee declares that it is [now] improper for a Communist to remain outside the Party and impermissible to form an independent group. ... no real abiding work is possible except through the Communist Party. ... The Central Committee calls upon all Communists to cease forthwith all carping criticism of each other, give up the hunt for imaginary deviations ... In our struggle for Party unity we must concentrate on finding out our points of agreement, which will enable us to see our remaining differences in their true perspective. 154

Finally, the dissenters were gently reminded that the leadership had the Comintern on its side and The Communist called on the factions to rally to the cause of the World Party:

153. BSB, 1036/B/III/1935: The Communist, Vol.1(9). Initially Joshi also wanted to bring Ramadive on to the Central Committee, but this suggestion was overruled: BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: note on the development of the CPI's CC, 27/1/37.

154. ibid.

... We whole-heartedly accept the line of the Seventh World Congress ... working out and applying our new line to the concrete situation in India. ... Who dare deny this? ... let us not lag behind but fulfill our Bolshevik role. We would be justifying ourselves before the Communists of the whole world by establishing a united Party and then launching ourselves successfully on the path of the United Anti-Imperialist People's Front.¹⁵⁵

But by early 1937 the Politbureau was taking a harder line. In February Joshi prepared a Party circular which pointed out that the Politbureau was executing recently received instructions from the ECCI.¹⁵⁶ In it he produced the following quotation from the ECCI's communication:

The opportunists and sectarians from the left and right, among them hidden agents of the police, will criticise the new line, which arises from the decisions of the VII Congress. This must not disconcert you. You can state outright that you are applying a new line in accordance with the demands which are raised before the emancipation movement by the interests of our people at the present stage.

Thus there was no more room for discussion. The Party as a whole had to accept that the leadership's policy was 'correct'; and the proof of its correctness was, finally, that Moscow had certified it as being so. The dissenters' criticisms arose, Joshi wrote, from

... an over preoccupation with theory divorced from practice. ... it arises only in the minds of those who have studied Marxism as a philosophy of history but who have been unable to apply it to the practical questions confronting the working class in the situation in which it finds itself in India at the present time. Not until we have fully understood this shall we as a Party break free from ... those factional disputes which render us ineffective and isolate us from the working class and the masses in general.

155. ibid.

156. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: 'The Communist Party in the Fight Against Imperialism'.

The writer's assessment of the shortcomings of his opponents may have been appropriate; but was this a call to praxis or to pragmatism?

The Politbureau also made a special effort to bring the Bombay Committee on to the 'people's-front' rails. In March 1937, after the election campaign was over, Ajoy Ghosh circularised the Bombay Committee to delineate the path forward in the new era of popular government in the provinces.¹⁵⁷ His circular reveals the profound impact of the Congress triumph at the polls on the thinking of the Party leadership. The Bombay Committee was reminded that now that the elections were over 'our method of approach ... must be radically different from the approach during the elections'. The Congress had scored a 'phenomenal' victory — 'a victory of the Indian people'. Therefore:

As Indians, as anti-imperialists, we rejoice at this popular victory, at this unprecedented triumph of our great national organisation — the Congress ... through whose triumph our nation voiced its determination to end the foreign rule.

For this reason the communists had to be especially careful in their choice of tactics for the Party's campaign against the acceptance of office:

157. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: 'Circular to the Bombay Committee on Anti-Ministry Agitation and Preparing for a General Strike', and BSB note, 5/3/37.

By merely substituting the word 'Congress leaders' for Congress in our criticism, we shall not succeed in winning over the Congress masses. Any frontal attack on the Congress, or even its leadership, is bound to create a hostile atmosphere for our case against acceptance of ministries ... we must not impute motives to the Congress right wing. Ours must be in line of emphatic support to Jawaharlal and the socialists ... and fraternal appeal to the Congress as a whole ... It is not only what we say but also how we say it that affects the masses. ... Appeal for United Front is not a challenge to an adversary to prove his honesty. Our United Front approach must be sincere and warm, not soulless. Lastly it must be unequivocal. ... There is no place for ifs and buts in the United Front Appeal.

The exaggerated moderation of this approach increased during the year.¹⁵⁸ It must have been extremely galling to the Red Star group.¹⁵⁹ But by March 1937, at the end of Joshi's first year of leadership, the Party's organisation was sufficiently developed for the holding of its first National Convention. This took place during an AICC meeting at Delhi.¹⁶⁰ The National Convention confirmed the Joshi leadership and freed it from its provisional status. In the same month Ranadive's group decided, for the second time since the Meerut releases, that it had no real choice but to capitulate.¹⁶¹ In March 1937, with the holding of the first National Convention and the capitulation of the Red Star group, the final step in the formation of the Communist Party of India had been taken and the defeat of the last stand against bolshevisation had occurred. From that point, in the

158. Eg.: Ishaque, 'The Anti-Imperialist People's Front and the United National Front', and Venkatayya, 'The Role of the Indian Bourgeoisie in the United National Front' - both articles in The Communist, Vol.1(18), Jun. 1937.

159. Even the CSP found the Joshi leadership's moderation excessive: Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., pp.163-64.

160. BSB, 1036/B/XIV/1937: reports, 9/3/37 & 31/3/37.

161. ibid.: report, 24/3/37.

relatively freer political conditions provided temporarily by the popular ministries, the united Party was able, for the first time, to concentrate successfully on extending its apparatus, building its membership and implementing its political strategy. By the end of 1937 it was clear that the Party was established permanently, with a resilient organisation based on the Leninist principle of 'democratic centralism' as its foundation. The former regional-group basis of Party organisation had been replaced by a hierarchical system of functional cells firmly controlled by the Politbureau. Special 'auxilliary cells' exercised disciplinary functions to undercut factionalism and 'purge' the inactive and suspect. At the same time contact with Moscow and London was improved.¹⁶² With this organisational basis the Party was in a much better position to involve itself purposefully in political activity.¹⁶³ By late 1939 the Party was, in the words of the Intelligence Bureau, 'numerically weak but organisationally strong', its leadership displaying a 'marked ability in planning' and its cadres distinguishing themselves by their 'zeal and better organisation' from their non-communist colleagues and rivals.¹⁶⁴ By the end of the decade the CPI's membership had increased from about 150 in 1934 to between 1,000 and 2,000.¹⁶⁵ The Party's foundations appeared to be firm.

162. This description is based on the IB's October 1937 study of the Party, in NAI, H.Poll, 7/7/1937.

163. Eg. by January 1938 the IB was worried because 'Communist agitators in three provinces may, without risk of overstatement, be said to threaten public peace and industrial prosperity': NAI, H.Poll, 44/60/1937: note by Barley, 17/1/38.

164. NAI, H.Poll, 7/7/1939: IB survey of the CPI's activities, 31/10/39.

165. ibid.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has taken as its starting point the fact of the historical failure of Indian communism. It has argued that the bolshevisation of the CPI has been the most immediate cause of this failure, for the bolshevist mode has continuously alienated the Party from both its Indian environment and its own history. But the bolshevist mode has also been employed to help 'resolve' the Party's recurring internal problems - problems which have largely been symptomatic of the very great difficulties for communist politics imposed by the Indian environment. I have therefore sought to identify the factors which led to the initial bolshevisation of the CPI during the process of its formation.

As we have seen, the bolshevisation of early Indian communism was partly a consequence of the prominent role which India played in the politics of the post-Leninist Comintern throughout all but the last few years of the Party's formative period. India, as the preeminent colony of the dominant world capitalist power, played a key role in the Comintern's theoretical and ideological schemas. Accordingly the CPI received more of the Comintern's attention than did any other colonial communist party except the Chinese Party. This level of attention, combined with the generally inappropriate content of the theory and policy which the Comintern and its intermediaries provided to the Indian communists, meant that the

CPI began its life under a particularly severe handicap.

However bolshevisation was also a product of the Party's Indian context. I have argued that, given the relative intensity of the Comintern's 'Bolshevisation' program for the CPI, the Party could remain non-bolshevised only if it could maintain a position of mass-based political momentum. During the Party's formative period the communists were unable to maintain such a position. The main body of this thesis has been devoted to investigating why this was the case and to examining the consequences for the modes of Indian communist leadership.

I have argued that, broadly, there were two structural features of the Indian environment which prevented the communists from developing a sustained political momentum. The colonial presence played a critical role in both features. The first was the intensive colonialisation of eastern India. This, I have argued, effectively prevented the Bengali communists from even beginning to establish a mass base. The second was the lack, except for one brief period, of 'political space' for radical mass politics. This absence prevented the Bombay leadership from maintaining the 'revolutionary momentum' it did manage to initiate in the late 1920s. The contrasts between Bombay and Calcutta throughout the period studied, and between Bombay before and after 1929, help us to delineate the contours and roles of these two structural features.

Any generalisation about the reasons for major contrasts in regional political patterns needs to be carefully qualified. Nevertheless in attempting to explain the very marked contrast in the inherent possibilities for revolutionary mass politics in Bombay and Calcutta, the differential colonialisation hypothesis appears, at this stage of research, to provide the

most adequate explanatory framework. We can identify some of the negative consequences for revolutionary politics of intensive colonialisation with some confidence - for example the divorce of the intelligentsia from pre-colonial tradition and from the masses. However the precise relationship between colonialisation and, for example, the heterogeneous, primarily extra-provincial character of Calcutta's industrial workforce, has yet to be established. Nevertheless it appears safe to argue that because eastern India was far more intensively colonialised than western India it was inherently far more difficult for a Marxist intelligentsia in Bengal to mobilise a mass base than it was in Maharashtra. Maharashtrian society had been dislocated by the colonialisation process, but it retained a much higher level of continuity internally and with its pre-colonial past. As was demonstrated in the 1927-29 period, this combination of dislocation and continuity provided a more promising environment for communist-led radical working class politics than in Calcutta.

As Chapter 5 showed, the political conditions allowing the Bombay communists to take advantage of this inherent potential in 1927-29 were atypical. The significant degree of political space available for radical industrial politics in this period was conditional upon a temporary configuration of political alignments in the continuing struggle between 'bourgeois' nationalism, in its various manifestations, and the colonial state. The Raj's need for extensive collaboration, combined with the relative strength of 'bourgeois' nationalism, led the Raj to adopt a restrained, discriminating and very legalistic approach towards political opposition. The communists

and their radical working class movement benefited temporarily from this situation. But the political space available until 1929 was progressively closed between 1929 and 1935. By early 1929 the Raj had found a formula allowing it to move against the communist leadership without provoking a significant Congress or moderate reaction. With the launching of Civil Disobedience in 1930 the Raj's inhibitions about repressing radical working class activity were further reduced. From 1932, after the government had won back the collaboration of virtually all elements of the big bourgeoisie by granting it concessions, it was much freer to move against all forms of opposition - including the Congress. Finally, with the return of the Congress to participation in constitutional politics the Raj was able safely to take the measures against the communists which were not possible in the late 1920s - the banning of the Party and the enactment of permanent emergency legislation.

Thus the logic of the Raj's repression allowed the communists limited but significant advantages - both in the delaying of the 1929 repression and in the fact that it and the subsequent repression were less than total. But the same logic also reflected the strength of the communists' indigenous opposition, and the repression was sufficient for this opposition to recapture the ground on to which the communists had encroached. The Raj's approach maintained the communists in isolation from the mainstream of Indian nationalist politics while depriving them of their working class base and the chance of extending it to other areas. Meanwhile, while the communists struggled for survival, Congress nationalism went from failure in Civil Disobedience to success at the polls, thus heralding its eventual supersession of the Raj: the communists lost ground

both absolutely and relatively.

Thus, because of the intensive colonialisaton of eastern India and the logic of the conflict between nationalism and the Raj, the Indian communists were able to establish mass-based political momentum in only one centre and in only one period. The overall consequences of this situation for the autonomy of Indian communism have been demonstrated in the thesis by contrasting the leadership modes which developed in Bombay in the late 1920s with those in Calcutta throughout the formation period and with those in Bombay after 1929.

In Chapter 4 we saw that the opportunities provided by a mass base, and the demands it imposed upon the leadership, both allowed and forced the Bombay leadership to begin to progress towards a creative 'proletarianised' and 'Indianised' mode of leadership. In particular, the Bombay leadership came to adopt a markedly autonomous stance towards the Comintern. Contemporaneously the Bengal leadership disintegrated and the dominance of the leading faction was secured largely through its orthodoxy. But in the early 1930s, after the Bombay leadership had been drastically reduced by repression and had lost its mass base, it, too, exhibited many of the features which characterised the Bengal leadership in the late 1920s. One consequence of this situation was, as we saw in Chapter 7, that Comintern authority began to play a very active - and solicited - role in intra-Party factional politics. Because this period coincided with an intensification in Moscow's 'Bolshevisation' campaign the role of the ECCI in the CPI's affairs became even more pronounced. Moreover, because of the contrast in the political achievements

of the Bombay and Calcutta branches in the late 1920s, and because of the ECCI's apparent support, the Bombay leadership was able to dominate the Calcutta branch in a bureaucratic-centralist manner in the early 1930s. This undermining of regional autonomy within the Party contributed to the bolshevisation of the Party.

With the release of the Meerut group in the mid-1930s the final phase in the formation of the CPI began. In Chapter 8 we saw how the Meerut Jail experience had forged India's first national communist leadership. Further, this leadership recognised that Indian communism faced a dilemma. On the one hand, if the formation of a centralised Party was left to the unaided efforts of the Indian leadership(s) and the natural course of events it would be an extremely protracted and uncertain process. This was because of the impossibility of developing a mass-based momentum in the foreseeable future and because of the attendant great difficulties in maintaining the unity of the Party on an India-wide basis. On the other hand, the Party could possibly be formed in the foreseeable future if the ECCI intervened directly in the Party's affairs. Dange, many years later, formulated this choice in the following way:

If we had no sense of proletarian internationalism, if we had no Comintern to guide, if we had no loyalty to the Communist International and its democratic centralism, we would not have remained on the map of revolutionary history and would have been consigned to the dustbin. 1

The Meerut group recognised that there was a certain artificiality in thus forming the Party 'from the top'. But because they did not doubt the revolutionary bona fides of the 'World Party' they did not suspect the dimensions of the dilemma

1. Dange, When Communist (sic) Differ, p.45.

they faced. The extent of their illusion was summed up by Spratt in a 1927 pamphlet:

... we oppose ... [the Church and the State] because they use all the power of the masses to force their rule upon the latter in an authoritarian, official and brutal manner. If the International ... organised itself in the State manner, we, its most enthusiastic friends, would ... become its bitterest enemies. But it cannot possibly organise itself in such a form. The International cannot recognise limits to human fellowship and equality, while the State cannot exist unless it limits, by territorial pretensions, such fellowship and equality.²

In the mid-1930s this view of the Comintern still prevailed; Spratt was one of the very few who had begun to question the fundamental divide he had drawn between the International and the State and the Church. Thus, with this conception of the Comintern, the Meerut leadership opted firmly for the second alternative, despite its artificiality; because for them the formation of the Party was the necessary basis of the revolution.

Following the Meerut releases the Meerut group, together with the Calcutta Committee, received the ECCI's blessing and thus became proxy Comintern representatives. The rationale for the Meerut group's program retained its force in the 1934-36 period because of the continuing obstacles (particularly repression) to sustained political leadership and activity and, finally, because of the factional strife provoked by the Seventh Congress's sharp change in policy. Despite the great problems, the Joshi leadership was able to build the framework of a functioning, centralised, national Party. With this achievement the fate of the dissenting factions was sealed: those who could not be coopted could be suppressed. The Party had been formed. On this basis its organisation and membership developed rapidly.

2. MCCC, P.1003: 'The Organisation of the International' (early 1927).

The CPI's leaders had unwittingly incorporated a basic contradiction into the Party's foundations. They did not realise that because the Party had become a 'frontier guard' of the Soviet state it could not become - except perhaps for brief periods when Soviet foreign policy accorded with Indian realities - the 'vanguard' of the Indian revolution. The contradiction remained camouflaged until the second change in Comintern policy after the 'popular-front' line - the 1942 'People's War' policy. After having signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler in 1939 and then characterising the Second World War as an 'Imperialist War', Stalin declared it to be a 'People's War' when Hitler broke the pact by invading the Soviet Union in 1942. The world's communist parties were now enjoined to do all in their power to support the allied war effort. In India this required the Party to support the British colonialists - and at the same time that the Congress was launching its 'Quit India' campaign against the Raj. Despite discontent in the ranks the Joshi leadership accepted this about-face. The CPI has lived with the considerable disadvantage of the resulting 'pro-British/anti-nationalist' stigma ever since. It caused it very great damage.⁴ When the hidden contradiction finally emerged it did so with a vengeance.

The hidden costs of the bolshevist mode were again demonstrated soon after, following a 'radicalisation' of Soviet foreign policy. This provided Ranadive with an opportunity to win the leadership of the Party and to implement the policy

3. For these two War-time policy changes and their application in India see Overstreet & Windmiller, *op. cit.*, Chapters 9 & 10, and Damodaran, 'Memoir', pp.39-42.

4. Some communists have argued that the Party was strengthened during the 'People's War' time by having 'swum against the stream'. Damodaran (*ibid.*, p.41) argues that this was a dubious virtue when the stream was flowing in the right direction

he had earlier counter-posed to Joshi's 'popular-frontism'.⁵ It was not so much the change in policy content that was so destructive to the Party as the way in which it was effected. Ranadive was able to claim legitimacy for the policy that had previously been rejected and, thereby, to move from being the leader of a suppressed faction to being the leader of the Party. The Joshi leadership now became the victim of precisely the same logic that had enabled it to secure the 'popular-front' line and its own hegemony in 1936-37. Joshi's contributions to the building of the Party were not remembered. The enthusiastic new leadership finally had the opportunity to prove the correctness of the policy it had championed a decade earlier. It ejected both the old leadership and all traces of its policy and, following this sharp break in the continuity of policy and leadership, ineptly led the Party into disaster. Thus we see within a decade of the Party's formation the full functioning of the bolshevist 'factional balance of power' that we noted in Chapter 1.

Having identified the most critical features contributing to the bolshevisation of the Indian Party it is perhaps profitable to compare its experience schematically with that of the Chinese and Vietnamese Parties, which remained essentially

5. For the Ranadive leadership succession and its context and consequences, see Overstreet and Windmiller, *op. cit.*, Chapters 12 and 13. On his succession to leadership Ranadive reproduced many of the key documents of the pre-'popular-front' period, such as the two 'Open Letters' published in Inprecor in 1932 and 1933 and the Draft Platform of Action. This indicates his continuing commitment to this theoretical position despite his suppression. (The documents were kindly supplied to the author by Chinmohan Sehanavis.)

non-bolshevised.⁶ However this comparative testing of the hypotheses developed in this thesis can only be tentative, and suggestive of possibly profitable lines for more systematic future research.

Did the Chinese and Vietnamese Parties face a dilemma equivalent to that which made the bolshevisation of Indian communism a pre-condition for the formation of a centralised national Party? If we investigate the nature of state repression, and the factors conditioning it, in the Chinese and Vietnamese contexts, we begin to see some rather different patterns from that in India. These patterns suggest that the Chinese and Vietnamese Parties' situations were more open-ended than the CPI's.

In China the fact that the repression of the communists and their 1920s working class movement was so brutal appears to have been largely a symptom of the Kuomintang's essential weakness.⁷ The Kuomintang government did not rest upon stable institutions of social control, did not have complete control over all of China, and was insecure even in those areas which it did control. The Chinese communists suffered a terrible defeat in the cities in the late 1920s. But after the urban defeat the communists and working class militants who survived did have somewhere to go, beyond the Kuomintang's reach.⁸ Indeed, in order to survive as a political force of any significance they

6. For example Mao's views on Comintern intervention were bluntly stated: since the Seventh Congress, Mao commented, the Comintern 'has not intervened in the internal affairs of the Chinese ... Party. And yet, the ... Party has done its work very well': quoted in S. Schram, The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung, (London, 1963), p.290.

7. On this see L. Bianco, The Origins of the Chinese Revolution, (London, 1972), Chapter 5.

8. See, eg., Guillermaz, op. cit., pp.147-226.

were compelled to move to the countryside. Moreover, after reaching their rural fastnesses they had the 'revolutionary space' to make full use of the rich political experience of eight years of struggle in the cities, and Mao had already given serious thought to the question of peasant-based revolution.⁹ The existence of this space allowed, in turn, a political resolution of the factionalism that overtook the Party following the urban defeat - factionalism which was exacerbated by the ECCI's apportioning of blame. Both the compulsion and the subsequent possibilities were necessary conditions of the unorthodox Maoist faction's rise to dominance within the CCP in the 1930s.¹⁰

In India, in contrast, neither the compulsion nor the rural possibilities existed to such a marked degree. The CPI faced a fundamental dilemma as an urban, working class-based Party - a dilemma it might possibly have avoided had it managed to build a strong peasant base. But this was something which the dominant Bombay-Calcutta section of the CPI did not seriously attempt during the critical formative period. The problem of rich peasant dominance and effective state control in the villages, and the 'petty-bourgeois' psychology of the communists, inhibited them from taking the necessary step from urban successes (in Bombay) and defeats into the countryside. Moreover there were no peasant revolts of the Hunan type to

9. See Mao's classic analysis of, and eulogy to, the 1927 Hunan peasant revolt: 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan', in Mao Tse-tung, Selected Works, Vol.1, (Peking, 1967), pp.23-56. Chesneaux argues that the working class radicalism of the 1920s contributed directly to the contemporaneous peasant revolts: op. cit., p.410.

10. See fn. 8 for this.

command the communists' attention - Satara in 1927-28, for example, was not a Hunan. The peaks of peasant revolt in India remained out of phase with the peaks of working class radicalism. It was thus less likely that the Indian communists would 'discover' the importance of the peasantry in the way that sections of the Chinese Party did. Moreover the comparatively limited character of the Raj's repression made it both possible and tempting for the Indian communists to continue to believe that a strong proletarian based Party was feasible.¹¹ Both the possibility and the temptation remained after the release of the Meerut prisoners and the partial reconstruction of the Bombay unions. Dange, for example, who had earlier recognised the 'suicidation' of an exclusively proletarian perspective, returned to the city of Bombay, not to its mufussil. In contrast to China, those branches of the CPI - such as the Keralan section - which established a peasant base remained peripheral in the Party in the colonial period.¹²

In virtually non-industrialised Vietnam, 'proletarian orthodoxy' was hardly possible.¹³ Moreover, the very severe repression of the communists before and after the period of the Popular Front government in France, in the second half of the 1930s, appears to have been/partly related to one advantage that the Vietnamese communists had over their Indian comrades. This was the extreme weakness of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie and, hence,

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11. I am indebted to Professor Low for having stressed the importance of this point.
 12. For the building of the Keralan communists' peasant base see R. Jeffrey, 'Peasant Movements and the Communist Party in Kerala, 1937-57', paper presented to the South Asia History Section, Australian National University, August 19, 1976.
 13. Nevertheless the tendency existed until the Nghe-Tinh peasant revolt of 1930: communication with David Marr.

of nationalist movements of the Congress type.¹⁴ Therefore the French would not have had to concern themselves with the problems created for the British by a strong bourgeois opposition when repressing radical movements. Consequently, although the immediate costs of repression were higher for the Vietnamese Party than for the CPI, there was no alternative anti-imperialist movement of consequence to exploit the opportunity provided by the extended removal of the communists from open politics.

This very cursory comparative survey does not attempt to provide an explanation for the respective successes and failures of the different Parties considered; but it suggests that the CPI was confronted with a number of particularly intractable problems arising from its national environment. When one considers these in conjunction with the special problems it faced in its Comintern environment, then the truth of the statement made in Chapter 1 that the failures of Indian communism have a context becomes more apparent. It was for these reasons that the CPI came to embody the more negative aspects of the isolated Russian Revolution's ambiguous legacy.

14. For the weakness of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie and of bourgeois nationalism, see D.G. Porter, 'Imperialism and Social Structure in Twentieth Century Vietnam', (Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 1976), Chapters I, II & III. For the factors governing French political policy, see D. Hemery, 'Aux Origines des Guerres d'Indépendance Vietnamiennes: Pouvoir Colonial et Phénomène Communiste en Indochine avant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale', in Mouvement Social, No.101, 1977, pp.3-35. (Translated for the author by Nguyen Anh Thu.) The differences between British and French colonial policy of course involved much more than the relative strengths of the respective indigenous bourgeoisies. Eg., unlike India, French investment in Indochina increased markedly during the 1930s, thus increasing French determination to stay (ibid., pp.12-13).

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1.2 With others

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4.1 Trials

4.2 Government Departments

4.3 Official Publications

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