

Chapter VII

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Political environment is a texture of criss -cross views manifest particularly where multiparty functioning exists to represent definitely the rival class or group interests. Therefore, any views of a particular political party or parties is a relative view and only could be properly understood if that is analysed side by side of the others. In the foregoing chapters this study has solely and extensively dealt with the programmatic policy and practical activities of the CPI and the CPI(M) on two basic issues, namely, agrarian reforms and rural democracy. Here an attempt has been made to highlight the views of other political parties in India over the issues under study. It has been carried out to mark the relative position of the CPI and the CPI(M) on the question of agrarian reforms and rural democracy.

Here 'other parties' means other two political parties, namely, the Indian National Congress Party (INC, which is also popularly called as Congress) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPIM-L). They have been chosen as they could provide the representative views from the two entirely opposite corners. These two parties are unique in many respects. Besides, they have concrete programmes on the issues involved here.

1. Views of the Indian National Congress (INC) on Agrarian Reforms and Rural Democracy

Here the study will focus on the agrarian policy of the Indian National Congress & this study also examine its efforts for the establishment of rural democracy. For this analysis, the study will cover also in brief the pre-independence period as the basic philosophy of the party regarding the land & rural democracy had been developed in this period under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Due emphasis has also been given to study the land policy and measures of rural democracy when Jawaharlal Nehru took the reins of the party & the Government.

Besides the party's approach to the agrarian reforms and rural democracy, the actual activities can be examined if the analysis covers the legal and administrative measures of the state governments. Since land reform is not a Central but State subject under the Constitution of India, this study will cover the measures of the Congress government of the state of West Bengal for outlining the basic features of agrarian reforms and its activities for extending democracy to the rural people.

1.1 Views of the Indian National Congress (INC) on Agrarian Reforms

The Indian National Congress (INC) is the oldest political party in India which served as a platform in the anti-British nationalist struggles during the period of direct colonial rule over India. After independence this party came to power both at the central and state levels. All communists and communist parties while framing their alternative political programmes took the INC as a confirmed opponent against which their main struggles should be launched. Therefore, it seems very necessary to cite the INC's views on agrarian problem and democracy for the rural people.

The INC has the distinction of continuing in power in the central government barring a few years and in most of the state governments for decades. Therefore, in order to present a concrete view of the INC's position over the issues indicated here one has to go through the landmarks of the INC's policy both of the pre-independence period and after.

The earliest reference to the agrarian problem can be traced back to the 4th Session of the INC held at Allahabad in 1938 at which a committee was appointed to enquire into the misery caused to the ryots by the periodical revision of land settlement. Also the leaders of the early Congress took the view that the extension of the Permanent Settlement

would ensure security of tenure and bring some improvement in the condition of the landlords as well as the cultivators.

At its next session (1890) the Congress decided to urge the government :

"... to take up this question of Permanent Settlement without further delay, with a view to practical action there on such that fixity and permanency may be given to the Government Land Revenue demand, as explicitly promised by Her Majesty's Secretary of State more than a quarter of a century ago"¹.

The emergence of Gandhiji's leadership signified a turning point in the history of INC who for the first time took the nationalist politics to the multitude in the villages. The two peasant struggles led by Gandhiji - one in Champaran (Bihar) in 1917 against the foreign indigo planters and the other in Kheda (Gujrat) in 1918 during the same year against exorbitant land revenue, could be regarded as the forerunners of the new era of mass struggles in India. Although he wanted to involve the peasants and the working class in the struggle for political independence, he did not support their cause against the Zamindars and the industrialists on the ground that such a step would divide the nationalist forces².

The spread of socialist ideology inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917 emerged as a powerful factor in Indian political life and began to influence the youth and

radical sections inside the Congress, giving to the national movement a new life, energy and wider horizon. This resulted in the birth of a new left wing inside the Indian National Congress. Under pressure of the Left Wing, the Congress was forced to adopt more radical programmes of agrarian reforms during the thirties. However, the Congress at this stage, while committed to limited agrarian reforms, was not inclined to do harm to or antagonise the feudal landlords.

The Congress Working Committee Resolutions of 1932 reiterated its assurance to the zaminders - stating :

"In-as-much as some misapprehension has been created in the minds of the zamindars of U.P. [United Provinces now Uttar Pradesh] in particular and others in general, that in the discussion of the proposals for non-payment of rent or taxes under given circumstances, the Congress was contemplating a class war, the Working Committee assures the zamindars concerned that no rent proposals referred to were in no way aimed at them, but they represented an economic necessity for the peasantry which is known to be half-starved at present and suffering from unprecedented economic distress. The Working Committee has no design upon any interests legitimately acquired and not in conflict with national well being. The Working Committee, therefore, appeals to all landed and moneyed classes to help the Congress to the best of their ability in its fight for freedom of the country"³.

However, the national leaders of the INC would emphasise the need for greater unity of the peasants and the landlords, and the pressing agrarian issues would always be swept under carpet. Dr. S. Gopal writes about Jawaharlal Nehru's attitude to the peasant upsurges in U.P. during 1921-22. "Jawaharlal glamorized the Kisans ... but he was not deeply moved by their economic wretchedness. He asked to enlist them wholly for the political struggle as was being waged by the Congress; but he did not envisage the co-ordination of these scattered outbursts against the local misery and the development of a large scale peasant revolt and even perhaps a revolution. He agreed with Gandhi and the other leaders of the Congress that the Kisans should pay their rents and devote their full attention to the non-violent struggle for Swaraj"⁴.

Nevertheless, the influence of the Left wing inside the INC grew along with the rise of the independent Kisan movement in the vast Indian countryside. In 1931, the Karachi session of the Congress, under the influence of the Left wing, was forced to formulate a distinctly progressive agrarian programme. The salient features of the programme⁵ were : 1) abolition of serfdom, 2) reduction of rent or revenue and exemption thereof for uneconomic holdings, 3) progressive agricultural income tax, and 4) control of usury.

Here it is seen from the above programme that there is no reference in it to the abolition of zamindari. Then came the agrarian programme adopted by the Faizpur session in 1936⁶. This session reiterated the demands raised at Karachi in 1931 and add a few more demands, such as lowering of irrigation rates, abolition of feudal levies, fixing tenure with heritable rights, fixing a living wage for agricultural workers, etc.

Regarding the formation of the All India Kisan Congress or Sabha, M.A.Rasul stated "On the Occasion of the National Conference of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) held at Meerut (U.P) in January 1936 a number of left minded political workers including leading members of the CSP met there specially on 16 January 1936 to discuss the question of the peasantry and the horrible situation created for them by the great depression. They decided to form an organising committee, with N.G.Ranga and Jaiprakash Narayan as joint conveners, to convene All India Kisan Congress"⁷.

He further stated, "the matter was followed up with enthusiasm and culminated in the holding of a conference of representatives of Kisan organisations in different provinces of India at Lucknow session of the Indian National Congress. The All India Kisan Sabha was thus formally brought into existence and the conference of the representatives was recorded as the first session of the Sabha or its first all-India Conference"⁸.

The organisation was first officially called the All India Kisan Congress. Later it was changed. The conference elected the All India Kisan Committee (AIKC) with its office-bearers and also the Central Kisan Council (CKC) as the executives of that committee. Swami Sahajananda was elected as the president and N.G.Ranga, General Secretary.

The conference adopted the following main resolution⁹:

1. The object of the All India Kisan Congress is to secure complete freedom from economic exploitation of the peasantry and the achievement of full economic and political power for the peasants and workers and all other exploited classes.
2. Whereas the present system of Zamindari instituted and supported by the British government in India, is inequitable, unjust, burdensome and oppressive to the Kisans (peasants), all such systems of landlordism shall be abolished and all the rights over land be vested in the cultivators.
3. Whereas the present system in ryotwari areas has proved too oppressive and resulted in pauperisation of the peasant, this system be abolished.

Though the formation of the All India Kisan Sabh in 1936 was initiated by the Congress Socialists, soon it was taken over by the Communists, as their party was banned by

the Government in 1934, they began to show considerable interest in the Kisan Sabha. During the war years, the kisan Sabha followed the CPI's party line particularly from 1942¹⁰.

In the Election Manifesto in 1936, the INC reiterated most of the demands of the Faizpur agrarian resolution and it pledged itself to the abolition of all kinds of landlordism¹¹. Yet the Congress ministries which assumed office in many provinces under the Government of India Act 1935, failed to fulfil most of the measures it had promised in its manifesto¹².

In 1938, the Congress appointed a national Planning Committee on Land Policy under the Chairmanship of Prof. K.T. Shah. Radhakamal Mukherjee was appointed Secretary of the Committee. The committee enunciated the following general principles as the basis of land policy in India after independence¹³ :

1) Ownership of agricultural land, mines, quarries, rivers and forests should vest in the people of India collectively. 2) Developing collective and co-operative farms. 3) No intermediaries of the type of talukdars, zamindars, etc. should be recognised. The right and the title possessed by these classes should be progressively bought out by granting such compensation as may be considered necessary and desirable. [Emphasis added]. 4) The

practice of sub-infeudation and subletting of land should not be permitted.

It was only in 1945, that the Congress officially proclaimed abolition of zamindari as its objective.

The Congress Economic Programme Committee¹⁴ set up soon after independence (1947-48) by the Congress Party under the chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru brought out a report containing radical proposals for changing the agrarian structure. It recommended that land should be held for use (as opposed to profit) and as a source of employment. The use of lands of non-cultivating landlords or those otherwise unable for any period to cultivate them must vest in the village cooperative community subject to the condition that the original holder or his successor could come back to the land for genuine cultivation¹⁵.

The committee also wanted fixing a land ceiling, the surplus over which should be acquired and given to the village cooperatives¹⁶.

Another landmark was the Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee set up in Dec. 1947, under the chairmanship of Shri J.C.Kumarappa¹⁷. The report was submitted in 1949. Its main proposals¹⁸ were : 1) removal of intermediaries, 2) land to be given to the tiller, 3) subletting to be restricted, 4) those cultivating for six continuous years

to be given occupancy rights, 5) only one who puts in physical labour should be recognised as a cultivator 6) resumption of holdings to be permitted to making one's holding economic and 7) tenant to be given the right to purchase a holding on payment of price determined by a land tribunal. The Committee laid "special emphasis on immediate prevention of all eviction" and recommended prohibition of "rackrenting and illegal exactions"¹⁹. It stated, "... the optimum size of holding has to be fairly low"²⁰.

On the pattern of agrarian economy, the Committee recommended a composite pattern "of individual farming assisted by co-operative organisation, co-operative joint farming, collective and state farming"²¹.

However, the All-India Congress Committee did not endorse the proposals.

Under the Indian Constitution, land reform is left to the discretion of a particular state. So slow was, however, the government machinery in framing land legislations as could provide ample scope of flouting by the zamindars.

The First Five-Year Plan recommended expeditious abolition of intermediaries. The Plan had prescribed ceiling on land holdings by each state but wanted efficiently managed farms to be exempted from land ceiling, irrespective of the area commanded by them.

The Plan wanted occupancy right of tenant to be subject, to the owner's right to resume for personal cultivation. Thus, the plan proposal exposed the entire class of tenants to the danger of eviction.

The Second Five-Year Plan continued the earlier policy and developed the concept of reconstruction of the village community along co-operative lines²².

The Third Five-Year Plan stressed more on institutional changes in agriculture and emphasis was given more on making economy self-reliant in food production within the shortest period through better irrigation, supply of fertilisers, improved seeds and implements and education of farmers in better methods of cultivation²³.

The Fourth-Five-Year Plan continued the basic strategy started since the previous plan and basically relied on intensive agriculture taking into consideration the limitation of bringing of additional area under cultivation²⁴.

During the entire period since the mid 1960's, the Congress Party and its Government put its basic thrust for agricultural reforms than agrarian reforms. The Government was much worried over the chronic food crisis and rising unemployment in all sectors for which it all along encouraged packages like 'green revolution' garibi hatao (poverty alleviation) and other 20-points' programmes.

However, the Central Government and its various Committees had time and again provided some guidelines for land reforms. These are noteworthy. Here we may refer to the national guidelines on land reforms, particularly on ceiling on agricultural land enunciated in July, 1972 in the Chief Ministers' Conference at New Delhi by the Prime Minister. It provided for new ceiling within the range of 10 to 18 acres. The amended ceiling laws prescribed for retrospective effect from a date not later than 24th January 1971.

The Congress Government at the Centre enacted The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1967²⁵. It issued directives often regularly to the State Governments for implementation of the provisions of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948.

Entrusting the responsibility for implementation of land reform measures to the state, the Congress leadership created no special national agency to provide the necessary over-all guidance and supervision. Besides, the Congress leadership did not develop any strong peasant organisations to complement the government machinery. For the implementation of Acts and policies it had initiated, the Congress government at the Centre and the States depended too much on bureaucratic machinery.

In West Bengal, for instance, the Congress Party in

power had taken radical steps for land reform through its legislative measures, namely, the W.B.E.A. Act, 1953 and W.B.L.R. Act, 1955. But most of the reform measures were kept in abeyance for nearly 20 years of independence. It had admitted that this inordinate delay was due to "the delay in the preparation of the records-of-rights"²⁶.

The table appended below shows the progress of implementation of various land reform measures in West Bengal by the Congress Government in power from the beginning upto 1977.

Achievement on Land Reforms in West Bengal
(as in September, 1977)

Vesting and distribution of vested agricultural lands in West Bengal

(area in acres)

	Under W.B.E.A. Act (enforced since 1955-56)	Under W.B.L.R. Act (enforced since 1971)	TOTAL in West Bengal
Agricultural land vested	9,70,000	87,000	10,57,000
Area taken possession of by Government	8,52,000	64,000	9,16,000
Area distributed for agricultural purpose	5,93,000	39,000	6,32,000

Source : Land Utilisation and Land Reforms, Land and Land Revenue Deptt. Govt. of West Bengal, 1977.

Of 4 million acres of land vested in India upto 1977, only 2.1 million could be taken possession of and not more than 1.3 million acres could be distributed. The comparative figures for West Bengal were 1.05, .91 and .63 million acres respectively.

In an analysis of the Congress land reform activities S.K.Basu & S.K.Bhattacharya found in their study in 1963 that land reform in West Bengal present a dismal picture of tenurial conditions in the state. The study reveals that the W.B.E.A. Act of 1953 & the W.B.L.R. Act, 1955 have been ineffective in changing the bargadari system in matter of sharing of produce or recording-of-rights of bargadar which covers 25 to 30 per cent of land under cultivation. With regards to the programme of ceiling, it points out that malafide transfers that can more or less be identified with transfers by modes other than inheritance varied between districts from 10 to 25 per cent of the total transferred area and quite a number of these transfers were made in anticipation of the law for its undue delay during enactment²⁷.

"Land reform is certainly not to be equated with the Legislative measures touching on land reforms"²⁸. Since land reform "involves the most drastic change of the property structure and an attack on established interests"²⁹ a "certain degree of politicisation of the poor peasantry

on militant lines is a prerequisite for any successful legislative and administrative action for conferring rights and privileges on them. Otherwise, there is always the possibility of such conferment of rights not only becoming illusory but also turning to be positively harmful as the vast majority of the beneficiaries would succumb to the pressure of the landowners and relinquish their rights and privileges either voluntarily or through open or naked coercion. Even reform will not succeed unless it is accompanied by massive economic support to share-croppers through institutional sources"³⁰.

In West Bengal under the Congress rule, the two important land reform laws, namely, the W.B.E.A. Act, 1953 & the W.B.L.R. Act, 1955 initially did not bear any efficacy for the targetted peasants and agricultural labourers. This statement holds good upto the period of 1965. The inherent lacunas within the land reform laws were many. Before enactment of each of the laws, a long & time taken process of deliberation in the floor of the legislature were enough to make aware of landlords about the impending land reform laws. Therefore, there could be large scale benami, transfer avoiding ceiling laws. Actually benami transferred land was sold often for a higher price which provided the intermediary with finance adequate for purchase of land and property in urban areas. Besides, there was the scope for retaining land which without exception constituted the best

quality of cultivable land for self cultivation by the intermediaries. Land used for garden, fishery were kept outside from the perview of land ceiling laws, some time the ceiling rate or these types of land was far higher than expected. The Congress Party in the Government did not encourage peasant movement for application of the land reform laws. The excessive dependent on bureaucracy for reclamation of the vested land resulted in a situation where either vested land still directly occupied by landlords or occupied by them through multiple suits in the law courts over the excess amount of land. Actually the beneficiaries were not given any scope of involvement for the effective implementation of L.R. laws for themselves. Possession of the vested land & distribution of the same among the targetted peasantry were rather slow process. A huge compensation for the vested lands was paid to the intermediaries by the Government which ultimately dwindled the required agricultural finance. Therefore, the land reform laws could be questioned as they justified the right of the intermediaries over land through paying compensation as policy. Above all, the rich peasant economy was thoroughly encouraged through the community development project, blocks and cooperative institutions as directed by the policy of the successive five-year plans. As a result the lower strata of the peasantry were kept aside from any significant benefit.

But the land reform Amendment Acts of 1965, 1971 & 1972 were significant for providing the scope of preserving interests of the bargadars and other lower strata of the peasantry. However, the Congress government did not expedite the land reform measures beyond the legislative & bureaucratic boundaries as indicated earlier. Therefore, progress was doubtlessly limited & halting. Land reforms in the real sense, involves drastic changes in the existing property relations which require an organised attack on the established interest in the rural side. The Congress party in this state power always avoided this class confrontation due to its dependence on to the rural propertied. Land reform through class struggle was encouraged by the U.F. governments of 1967 & 1969 in West Bengal and since 1977 from an altogether different stand point. Performance of the latter has been elaborated in the foregoing Chapter V. In the eyes of Communists, the basic difference of outlook between the Congress and the left as a whole lies in "... the question of combining land reforms legislations with peasant organisation and mobilisation of non-peasant support"³¹. Whereas the Congress Party both in the centre and state is understood by communists to desire changes in the agrarian set-up slowly without bringing any radical change in the existing balance of class forces. The Congress Party has favoured the rich peasant economy with technology-intensive cultivation with a view to sort out the

stalking food problem & steady supply of raw materials to the industry. The left as a whole see the thing from the definite class points of view and encourage the struggle for land so that benefits could accrue to the rural have-nots. This is a step without which, according to the left, actual democracy based on economic right could not usher in the vast countryside.

1.2 Views of the INC on Rural Democracy

The Indian National Congress has stood all along in favour of Panchayati Raj (self-government in rural areas). After coming to power the INC has helped developing panchayat as a statutory institution for administering the local affairs and the implementation of developmental programmes in the rural areas.

The traditional village council (based on self-sufficient village economy which was typically the Indian system) was made defunct during the British period by interference of the agencies of the British Government.

The British Government in order to preserve and stabilise its political control over rural areas gradually adopted various measures for reorganising the village administration. The Royal Commission on Decentralisation of 1909 recommended a membership of five as a good average for the reconstitution of the village panchayat. The

village headman according to the Commission's recommendations was to be made ex-officio chairman of the panchayat. The members of the village council were to be informally elected by the village under the supervision of government officials. The commission also suggested that the work of the panchayats should be free from interference by the lower government subordinates and that a portion of the land revenue levied by the local boards should be assigned to the Panchayats.

Subsequently, various legislations like the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919, Bombay and United Provinces Village Panchayat Act of 1920, Bihar and Orissa Village Administration Act, Assam Rural Self-Government Act of 1926, Punjab Village Panchayat Act of 1935 were passed to decide on their composition powers and functions. However, there was no uniform policy in regard to the establishment of village panchayats. One overriding recommendation of the commission that village panchayats should be under the control of the district authorities negated the value of all other suggested improvements.³²

The Gandhian approach for gram swaraj (independent village) emphasised rural reconstruction programme through economic reorganisation of rural society. The underlying implication of the programme of rural industries, including Khadi (hand-loom cloth) was thought to be the basis of

rural life. Gandhi sought to introduce his new plan of education which was known as Nai Talim. Harijan welfare or the social emancipation of the depressed section found an important place in the programme of rural reconstruction of the Mahatma³³.

In the Constitution of India the Directive principles (Article 40)³⁴, entrusted the states to organise village panchayats and to delegate to them powers and authority to function as units of self-government. The intended planned development recognised need of making the village panchayat an integral part of the decentralised administration.

Accordingly, the First Five-Year Plan (1951 - 1956) recommended that legislation should confer on the panchayats specific functions relating to village production programmes and the development of village lands³⁵. A Village Panchayat Committee of the All India Congress Party was formed and it submitted its recommendations in 1954. It, recommended that the states should provide full scope for the village panchayats to perform in the village society functions such as credit, marketing, supplies, etc. and that the functions should include also civic, social, economic and judicial activities³⁶.

The Second Plan (1956 - 1961) emphasised that the village panchayats should be organically linked with popular

organisations at a higher level³⁷. As regards finance, it was suggested that allocation to village panchayats by the states be in two parts : a basic proportion to 15 to 20 per cent of the land revenue and an additional grant extending upto 15 per cent additional amount by taxation or voluntary contribution³⁸.

A Study Team which is popularly known as Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1956)³⁹ appointed by the Congress Government at the Centre during the Second Plan period.

In the opinion of the Committee, the block administration functioned more bureaucratically and did not imbibe the spirit behind the rural development programmes. For generating people's enthusiasm for the programme, the Committee recommended that all developmental programmes in the bloc areas should be entrusted to representative institutions and the block staff and other officials should be placed at the disposal of these institutions.

The Committee also recommended for the provision of sufficient funds and sources of revenue for these local bodies. The Committee suggested a three-tier system of local government, consisting of directly elected panchayats at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at block and Zilla Parishad at district level with a term of five years.

It recommended the entrusting of entire rural

developmental work in the hands of the Panchayat bodies and suggested a number of sources of revenue for them. The Third Five-Year plan laid down the main objectives⁴⁰ of Panchayati Raj, such as increasing agricultural production, developing rural industries, fostering cooperative institutions, assisting weaker sections of the community etc.

In pursuence of the policy of the Central Congress Government the Congress Government in the state of West Bengal enacted the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 (W.B. Act I of 1957)⁴¹ and made the West Bengal Panchayat Rules, 1958⁴². These Act & Rules were obviously for extending democracy to the rural people.

However, these Panchayat Act & Rules came into force only in 1964⁴³. The State Government held Panchayat election in 1964 in W.B. on a non-party basis according to the W.B. Panchayat Act, 1957. The different layers of the Panchayat bodies were : (1) Anchal Panchayat composed of Gram Sabhas at the lower level, (2) Anchalik Parishad at the Block level and (3) Zilla Parishad at the District level.

The Anchalik Parishad (as elected body working at the Block level was constituted in 1964 but it became dysfunctional in 1967 by a State Government Order. The same order entrusted the Block Developmental Officer to look after the whole developmental work within the Block areas⁴⁴. Even the

Anchal Panchayats and their Gram Sabhas though not liquidated also became dysfunctional as the developmental work and financial powers were dealt by the Block Developmental offices. This was also the case of the Zilla Parishad.

Another important landmark in the drive for ensuring self-government in the rural areas of West Bengal by the ruling Congress Party was the enactment of Panchayati Act, 1973⁴⁵ afresh by total revision of the earlier Panchayat Act, 1957. The W.B. Panchayat (Election) Rules, 1974, was also issued immediately⁴⁶. According to this new Act of 1973 the Gram Panchayat did not have any Gram Sabha as provided in the Panchayat Act of 1957. The new Act (1973) also incorporated the provision for Nyaya Panchayat for administering justice in specified local disputes.

Whatever the merit of this Panchayat Act, 1973, it did not come into practice in the subsequent years of the Congress rule in the State. The Panchayati system of 1964 continued without any election till the end of Congress rule in 1977 with breaks of limited periods when left and other democratic parties ruled the State in 1967 and in 1969.

There were much criticisms of rural democracy as established by the Congress party in West Bengal, such as of overdependence on bureaucracy for developmental work and utilisation of Govt. funds, rural elite-leadership, and

discouragement of mass participation by avoiding regular election to the different levels of panchayat bodies.

In the next, this study will analyse, in brief, the views of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPIM-L) on agrarian reforms and rural democracy. The position of the CPI(M-L) is quite radical on these issues. The position of the CPI(M-L) on these issues may be considered as extreme left compared to the positions of the CPI and the CPI(M); while the position of the Indian National Congress has been held as on the right.

2. Views of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPIM-L) on agrarian question and rural democracy.

India's third communist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPIM-L) was formed on 22nd April 1969 on the occasion of Lenin's hundredth birthday. The CPIM-L emerged from a split of the CPI(M). Mention may be made that the CPI(M) also emerged from the first split from the CPI in 1964. Unresolved inner-party contradictions resulted in successive splits in the communist organisations at different times on national and ideological issues. The issue of ideological position of the party was left open because the newly formed CPI(M) comprised moderate and extremist lefts who had serious differences and remained

unconvinced of the international general line. The CPI(M) leadership accepted neither the Soviet line nor the Chinese line unreservedly.

Within the ranks of the CPI(M) dissension took a turn while the party had decided to use parliamentary struggle to a great extent. The CPI(M)'s participation in the United Front Governments of Kerala and West Bengal was justified thus : "it is imperative that our party realizes that its immediate future, in no small way depends on how it plays its worthy part in running the two state governments of Kerala & West Bengal"⁴⁷ and " since the fortunes of the entire party, at the present stage of development, are closely linked with the successful running of these ministries and the role our party plays in them, the whole party throughout the country will have to be mobilized to back the argued programmes of these two non-Congress ministries and to see that they are earnestly implemented"⁴⁸. Being in power in two states and in opposition in the rest and in opposition at the centre imposed peculiar constraints on the party's style of functioning.

It was still believed, that the struggle of the democratic parties and groups "alone can pave the way for consolidating and widening the unity achieved by the democratic forces and open the prospects of realizing the slogan of a non-Congress democratic government at the Centre"⁴⁹.

The two ministries in Kerala and West Bengal were to be the principal instrument in the hands of the people in the revolution to come. For the extremists in the CPI(M), the party (CPI(M)) had settled for respectable parliamentarism by bringing its line in focus with that of the 'revisionist' CPI and they had settled for peaceful transition.

When the Central Committee of the CPI(M) was reviewing the election results of the states and drawing up its resolution, New Situation and Party's Tasks, the party's programme, political line, and its participation was coming under a two pronged attack - from the extreme left group of West Bengal within and from the Chinese party from without. The Central Committee decided to take action against the ultra left faction which had attacked the party leadership for participating in the coalition government in West Bengal. This phenomenon was not confined to West Bengal and similar extremist trends were present in Kerala, the Punjab & Uttar Pradesh⁵⁰.

Some left extremist elements in West Bengal, who had been defying the party had been guiding the local party units and organizing peasant movement in Naxalbari area for quite sometime. Soon after the United Front Ministry had assumed office in West Bengal in February 1967, the extremists called a peasant conference in March in Bagdogra (near Siliguri) and come to the conclusion that the United Front can

not solve any of the land problems and the new government could at best give some relief to the working class.⁵¹ They called for seizure of land, the setting up of liberated areas⁵². However, the Naxalbari peasant revolt was crushed in no time but the challenge from the extremist left within the CPI(M) grew.

As the Sino-Soviet ideological dispute intensified early in 1963, communist parties of the other countries were forced to take sides.⁵³ The CPI joined ranks with the CPSU and attacked the CPC's ideological positions, besides changing that the CPC was violating the 1957 Moscow declaration and the 1960 Moscow Statement⁵⁴. As early as October 1963, the CPC had outlined its thesis on which Lin-pio's Third World Strategy was based. India was central to Lin's Third World Strategy and just as the CPSU had to prove that non-capitalist development and peaceful transition was possible in India, the CPC had to prove that neither of these was possible and India's path to revolution lay in an agrarian revolution through a Maoist people's war⁵⁵.

The CPC's disapproval of the CPI(M)'s participation in the parliamentary system as a whole became unmistakable. The CPC commented : "These facts prove that without a people's revolution, without the seizure of political power by force and without the smashing of the old state apparatus

there can be no change in the social system in the nature of the political regime, and there can be no real social reform. There is no precedent in history, nor will there be any in the future"⁵⁶.

The CPC observed : "To fight for their liberation, the Indian people must resolutely smash this renegade clique and the revisionists of all forms and wage resolute revolutionary struggle"⁵⁷. For the CPC "revisionist of all forms" outside the "Dange clique" obviously meant the section of the CPI(M) leadership which according to the CPC, wanted to settle for parliamentarism.

The CPC read great revolutionary significance in the Naxalbari peasant revolt which called for the overthrow of the Indian government. In February 1967, Peking had seen the "storm" of the mass struggle "making a violent assault on the rule of the Indian reactionaries"⁵⁸.

In June, as the Naxalbari campaign was gaining momentum, Peking renewed its call for armed struggle to "overthrow" the government and "forcibly seize power". To call came through a People's Daily article credited to the "Red Guard", and repeatedly broadcast by the Radio Peking⁵⁹. This was followed by warm applause for the "revolutionaries of the CPI(M) who had deserted the united front government" in West Bengal. More elaborate exposition of the Maoist line for India was available in the People's Daily article on the

significance of Naxalbari, poetically captioned "Spring Thunder Over India". Naxalbari was the "Prelude to a violent revolution by hundreds of millions of people throughout India but to achieve it the Indian revolution must take the road of rallying on the peasants, establishing base areas in the countryside, persisting in protracted armed struggles and using the countryside to encircle and finally capture the cities"⁶⁰.

The climax was a call for a new party of genuine Marxism-Leninism guided by Mao's thought. A commentary titled "Let the Red Flag of Naxalbari Fly Still Higher" urged the "revolutionaries in Indian Communist Party" and the revolutionary people of India "to draw a line between themselves and the revisionist line politically, ideologically and organizationally" and to wage "a resolute struggle against modern revisionism centered on Soviet revisionist clique"⁶¹.

Though the CPI(M) leadership had not settled its own ideological issues, still it could not do without responding to the challenges of the left extremists within the party and the CPC's repeated attacks. The CPI(M) in its Central Committee Resolutions revealed serious differences with the CPC "on a number of issues connected with the Indian Revolution"⁶².

The Central Committee of the CPI(M) adopted a draft

on ideological issues in August 1967 and released it for discussion by the different state units of the party. Later in April 1968 this draft was adopted by the party plenum at Burdwan in the face of opposition from the left extremists. The draft called for simultaneous struggle against the Soviet revisionism and the China's left deviation. However, in the Andhra Pradesh plenum the majority ultra-leftists rejected it outright. T.Neggi Reddy, Pulla Reddy, and Kolla Venkiah placed two draft resolutions on the ideological issues. The Andhra document attacked the CPI(M) leadership and accused it of compromising with Soviet revisionism abroad and with Dange revisionism at home. In Sept. 1968, Andhra extremists formed 'Andhra Pradesh Revolutionary Co-ordination Committee' (APRCC). It was said to have functioned as state unit of the All-India Co-ordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) formed in Nov. 1967, six month after the Naxalbari peasant revolt.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPIM-L) was formed in April 1969 by the expelled Left-extremists of the CPI(M). The CPIM-L is also known as the Naxalite Party. The name 'Naxalite' derived from the peasant revolt in Naxalbari village in Terai Darjeeling. The principal theoretician of the CPIM-L was Charu Majumdar. The tactics pursued in Naxalbari and in SriKakulam in Andhra Pradesh peasant movement were endorsed by the CPIM-L after its formation.

The Chinese Maoist leadership found encouraging trend within the CPI(M)'s extremists who were organising peasant movements in Naxalbari areas of West Bengal and in SriKakulam in Andhra Pradesh. These extremist-groups from the beginning were propagating Maoist strategy and peasant partisan war for achieving state power.

The CPIM-L in a political resolution extolled Mao's thoughts as guideline and declared Soviet Russia as 'social imperialist'. However, the party adopted the first party programme and political resolution in its first party congress in May 1970.

Actually the programme and political resolution of the CPIM-L was not acceptable by many in the party. Soon after, various groups came forward with their independent political understandings different from that of the official party. Prominent among these groups were Negi Reddi's group in Andhra Pradesh, Dakshin Desh group in West Bengal. However, this study will only focus here the views of the official CPIM-L.

2.1 Views of the CPIM-L on Agrarian Question

The CPIM-L considered the agrarian problem as central to the present stage of India's unfinished democratic revolution. It has considered the agrarian question as the

main issue in this people's democratic stage; therefore, it preferred to call it agrarian revolution rather than agrarian reforms.

The CPIM-L claimed, its programme was based on the thoughts of Mao Tse-tung. Its political resolution identified the principal contradiction in India as between feudalism and the masses of the peasantry. Comprador-bureaucratic capitalism and United States-Soviet imperialism were the main props of feudalism and had to be fought too. Its rejection of parliamentary methods demarcated the new party from the existing two communist parties. The Political Resolution of the CPIM-L strongly criticised the CPI and the CPI(M) as these were "lackeys of imperialism and domestic reaction" and were creating illusions among people about the united front governments in W.B. and Kerala "to blunt their revolutionary consciousness and divert them from the path of revolution"⁶³.

The Political Resolution of the CPI(M-L) had stated : "It is the responsibility of the working class as the leader of the revolution to unite with the peasantry - the main force of the revolution - and to advance towards seizure of power through armed struggle. It is on the basis of the worker - peasant alliance that a revolutionary united front of all revolutionary classes will be built up. The basic tactics of struggle of the revolutionary peasantry led by

the working class is guerrilla warfare.

As for the forms of struggle, there were three specific issues in debate : (i) Should the party be secret organisation ? (ii) Was there any need for mass organisation ? (iii) Was guerrilla warfare the only form of struggle ? Charu Majumdar answered these questions. He stated : a mass organisation cannot organise the agrarian revolution, only an underground party organisation can do it. The leadership of the poor and landless peasants over the peasant movement can be established only through underground party organisations among peasantry, and guerilla warfare was the only tactic for carrying on peasant revolutionary struggle. An advanced, class-conscious section of peasant masses could clear an area of class enemies by annihilating some of them and forcing others to flee the countryside⁶⁴.

Between January 1965 and May 1967, Charu Majumdar wrote eight documents to party comrades analysing the Indian situation and outlining his views on how to make revolution in this country. These formulations were grounded on his analysis of the basically feudal and semifeudal character of the Indian ruling class where Indian bourgeoisie had been considered as comprador agent to the international imperialist capital⁶⁵.

The Programme of the CPIM-L was adopted in its party congress held in May 1970. It read :

"Our country is the country of the peasant masses who constitute over 75 per cent of its population. They are the most exploited people of our country living in conditions of gemi-starvation and absolute pauperisation. In India's semi-feudal economy, 80 per cent of the land is concentrated in the hands of the 20 per cent landowners, i.e., rajas, landlords, and rich peasants, while the starving peasantry constituting 80 per cent of the rural population has no land or very little land"⁶⁶.

"The landless and poor peasants have to turn over 50 per cent to 90 per cent of their annual harvest in the form of rent to the landlords. The extortionate usurious capital continues to fleece the peasant. Eviction of peasant is the order of the day. Special oppression on scheduled castes, including the lynching of Harijans reminiscent of the middle ages, is continuing unabated"⁶⁷.

"The semifeudal land relations have transformed our country into a land of perpetual famine as a result of which millions of people die of starvation every year"⁶⁸.

The programme elaborated, its strategy thus : "the basic task of the Indian revolution is to overthrow, the rule of feudalism, comprador-bureaucrat capitalism, imperialism, and social-imperialism. This determines the stage of revolution. It is the stage of democratic revolution, the essence of which is agrarian revolution"⁶⁹.

people's war has been visualized as the main path in the semi-colonial, semi feudal countries like India. The programme stated : "The working class can wage a successful people's war by creating small bases of armed struggle all over the country and consolidating the political power of the people. This is possible only by developing guerrilla warfare which is and will remain the basic form of struggle throughout the entire period of our democratic revolution"⁷⁰.

It has further elaborated the agrarian programme thus : "Confiscation of all land belonging to the landlords and their redistribution among the landless and poor peasants on the principle of land to the tillers; cancellation of all debts of the peasantry and other toiling people. All facilities necessary for development of agriculture to be guaranteed"⁷¹.

In the field of national economy other measures are : "Confiscation of all the banks and enterprises of foreign capital and liquidation of all imperialist debt". And "Confiscation of all the enterprise of the comprador -bureaucratic capitalists"⁷². Comrade Charu Mazumdar, upheld Chairman Mao's great teaching : 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun ...'⁷³

Defending the tactics of annihilation as a higher form of class struggle, Charu Majumdar said that out of the process would emerge a people's army. He saw the possibility

of a big mass uprising in the country.

The CPIM-L equated agrarian revolution and seizure of power. For it, the mass should be made to understand that the gains of their agrarian struggle could be protected only by wresting political power, which was possible only through people's war.

But by the passage of time, Charu Majumdar's tactics of annihilation was questioned by some of the rank and file. Mao was quoted indiscriminately. But Mao specifically meant the annihilation - and not killing the enemy (that is Japanese occupation army) and not any class enemy. Mao asked his partymen "to wipe out landlord as a class not as individual"⁷⁴. As for killings, Mao had a very cautious approach : "To advocate killing more or killing without discrimination is entirely wrong; this would only cause our party to forfeit sympathy, become alienated from the masses and fall into isolation"⁷⁵.

However, the tactics pursued by the CPIM-L Organisation was not yielding desired results. The struggle was fast losing its mass character. The guerrilla squad dispersed over a wide area to escape the 'encirclement and suppression' by the police forces and the people had to bear burnt of the police repression with no guerrilla squad to protect them. Within a year (from the first Party Congress in 1970) SriKakulam, Debra-Gopiballabhpur and Naxalbari peasant

movements were decimated and the armed resistance of the peasant army and guerrilla squad did not get into the systematic raids and the party was isolated from the people and riven itself on the question of tactics it so far pursued.

The CPIM-L sees the agrarian question of the country from a different standpoint. As it visualises the principal contradiction in India to be between feudalism and the masses of peasantry. The party from the beginning neither encouraged peasants to fight for land nor for crops but for political power.

Later many groups doubted the tactics of the party. In the next, this study will highlight the views of the CPIM-L on the democratic set up in the rural areas (liberated areas).

2.2 Views of the CPIM-L on Rural Democracy

The CPIM-L's concern for the peasantry and for the agrarian economy is well known from its programme and practice. It considers "The main force of the democratic [people's democratic] revolution led by the working class is the peasantry"⁷⁶. [Emphasis added]. Therefore, necessarily it is a point of interest to study as to how

the CPIM-L has designed the policy to ensure democracy for the oppressed peasantry living in the vast rural areas in India.

To the CPIM-L, democracy at the rural or urban area is not an isolated phenomenon. The CPIM-L reckons the semi-feudal set-up, the big comprador-bureaucrat bourgeois and big landlords,⁷⁷ U.S. imperialists and Soviet social-imperialists are the confirmed enemies of actual democracy for the poor and landless peasantry and the toiling masses⁷⁸ and the basic task for establishing people's democracy "is to overthrow the rule of feudalism, comprador-bureaucrat capitalism, imperialism and social imperialism"⁷⁹.

The CPIM-L declares that this people's democratic revolution "will establish the dictatorship of the working class, the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie and even a small and middle bourgeoisie under the leadership of the working class. They together constitute the overwhelming majority of the Indian people. It will be a state guaranteeing democracy for 90 per cent of the people and enforcing dictatorship over a handful of enemies. That is why it is people's democracy"⁸⁰.

The programme of the party stated that the people's democratic state after the revolution will carry some major tasks among which those relevant for democracy are quoted :

"People's political power to be exercised through revolutionary people's councils at all levels".⁸¹ / Emphasis added /

"Develop democratic culture in place of colonial and feudal culture".⁸²

"Abolish the caste system, remove all social inequalities and discrimination on the religious ground and guarantee equality of status of women".⁸³

"Enforce better living conditions of the people and remove unemployment".⁸⁴

From the above analysis it is presumed that the revolutionary people's council in the villages composed of landless and poor peasants are the main forces to establish democracy in the liberated areas. After annihilating the class enemies - the landlords, usurious money lenders, the distribution of the confiscated land, crop and property among the landless and poor peasants are the essential democratic activities. All these activities will be carried out by the revolutionary people's council which will hold the ultimate power in the countryside under the guidance of the working class and its party - the communist party. People's court will be organised to adjudicate the local disputes and trying of the oppressor landlords in the countryside.

Among the three liberated areas though temporarily, namely, SriKakulam, Naxalbari and Debra-Gopiballabhpur, SriKakulam experience was more methodical and it had

presented that the village committees attempted formal redistribution of land, control of village affairs including appropriation of crops. Seizure of lands, social and political power by annihilating the enemy or forcing him to flee and seizure of crops of the landlords, distribution of land and seized crops among the landless and poor peasants and adjudication by 'people's courts' were forming core of the agrarian and democratic programme in the liberated areas of Srikakulam⁸⁵. All these are due to the long experience of fighting in Telengana armed peasant movement in 1950's.

The concept of democracy i.e. people's democracy propagated by the CPIM-L appeared in more radical form than that of other two communist parties in India. However, the establishment of people's democracy by armed struggle did not take place. Failure of the tactics gradually came under criticism within the CPIM-L. Inner-party differences came over ground in 1970 but appeared more vigorously after the death of Charu Majumdar (28.7.1972). The party was broken up into various groups, some of which repudiated the Naxalbari line of Charu Majumdar.

However, contrasts were the areas where there was precedent of peasant mass struggle for land and crop. In these areas armed squads were formed mainly with the youths of landless and poor peasants. As has been mentioned earlier, in Srikakulam the nature of struggle was mainly mass struggle.

By now, many groups of the earlier CPIM-L have claimed to have corrected their tactics and have strongly criticised the stand of the earlier party as adventurist in nature. However, all shades of CPIM-L insisted on revolutionary solutions of the agrarian problem and establishment of democracy in India.

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