CHAPTER III

NATIONAL REVOLUTIONISM, MARXISM AND THE EMERGING WORKING CLASS & PEASANTS’ MOVEMENT: THE INTERACTIONS, 1917-1934

The National Revolutionaries’ First Contact with Marxism and the Consequences:

In this chapter, an attempt may be made to find answers to some of the basic research questions:

a) What were the initial reactions of the Indian national revolutionaries towards socialism/Marxism in the wake of Russian Revolution of 1917 and emerging working class movements in India?

b) What were the patterns of interaction between Marxist ideology and national revolutionaries before their conversion to Marxism?

The above are some of the questions related to the general theme of the present work which merit discussion. We hope, for the sake of the clarity and understanding of the then situation of national revolutionary movement, a comprehensive discussion encompassing the questions listed above would be sufficient. However, our discussion would include some other issues related to those two questions and, hence, not to remain restricted only in seeking answers of those two question without disturbing the focus of our objective of the study. There have been a number of authoritative publications on this long drawn process of conversion, which, in the main, attempt to understand this process keeping in mind general or some particular group’s conversion. (Mazumdar, SN, 1979; Laushey, 1975; Pramanik, 1984; Ghosh, Sibdas, n.d.; Sinha, 1988; Dasgupta, 1994; Das, N, 1983); Bhattacharyya: 1982; Guha, A, 2002; Chandra, 1992; Bandyopdhay, 1993; Adhikari, 1984; Ray, A N, 1993); Mukherjee, S, 2012)

The Indian revolutionaries in a general sense came from the lower strata of the Hindu middle class population which as a product of nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance led by Rammohun Roy, Vidyasagar, Derozio, Akshay Kumar Dutta and many others, developed in them a genuine sympathy for the exploited classes. They also inherited a frame of humanist mind which provided, though may be on limited scale, fertile ground for sowing seeds of socialism. Thus, some of the revolutionaries started reading socialist literature even before the Russian Revolution. The success of a proletarian revolution in Russia cast its influence on the thinking of the Indian revolutionaries. The success of the Russian Revolution imbibed them to the study of scientific socialism as a method and programme of revolution.
It put them to serious thinking towards reconsideration of the aim of revolution and of the path of its realisation.

In this connection, Soviet Scholar M A Persits makes an interesting comment:

 Petty - bourgeois intellectuals, coming from the midst of national revolutionaries, played an especially great, even major role among the pioneers of the communist movement of India along with INC left-wingers and trade unionists. Once convinced of the futility of their earlier commitment to individual terrorism and conspiracy, national revolutionaries turned to Marxism which had attracted them by its anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist message. (Persits, 1983: 279)

According to Persits, petty - bourgeois exponents of revolutionary nationalism and revolutionary democracy were logically attracted to Marxism by a totality of real factors - first, by their own radical anti - imperialism and anti - despotism ; second, inevitable failure of their conspiratorial and other methods of struggle, ignoring the mass movement of the working people ; third, the influence of the success of the international working class and communist movement particularly manifest in the victory of the October Revolution and in the process of Soviet political development. He further observed that the particular historical setting was such that the appearance of the first communists and the formation of the first communist groups which initiated the communist movement from the rank of the national revolutionary and revolutionary democratic intellectuals in Oriental countries was quite natural phenomenon. As it had been natural for other countries, same was true for India as well that the proletariat itself did not produce the socialist ideology, but this ideology was brought in from without and the working class joined the communist movement a later stage.

Persits generalised the phenomenon as follows:

 The emergence of the communist movement in all colonial Eastern countries precedes the conversion of the proletariat into a "class for itself". Consequently, it was not an advanced struggle of the working class (there was none as yet), but the sweeping national liberation movement that due to its anti - imperialism and influence of the October Revolution, gave rise to the communist movement of the East. It acquired its adequate basis later in the form of a class - conscious movement of the proletariat. (Persits, 1983: 279-280)
In the same breath, Persits has also tried to point out the reasons why many of the Indian revolutionaries having declared themselves communists, still stick to quite a few of their earliest concepts of Petty - bourgeois revolutionism with its invariable components: disbelief in the capacity of the working class and the peasant masses for conscious political activity, virtual abandonment of mass work, an exaggerated sense of the role and significance of the military factor in preparing and making a socialist revolution. This is because of the reason that the swiftness of accepting Marxism and even joining the communist party did not match by just as swift and complete recasting of the ideological and political views of national revolutionaries who had indulged in conspiratorial activities for years on end. (Persits, 1983: 109-110)

The above observation on the national revolutionaries’ growing attraction towards communist ideologies and the vacillations there to since the beginning of the twenties of the twentieth century has also been corroborated in a number of discourses written by a number of eminent participants of the movement. Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee writes that while he was in Rajsahi Jail along with a host of revolutionaries during 1916 - 20 came in contact with socialist literature and October Revolution. (Chatterjee, 1977: 188-191) Chatterjee and Pratul Ganguly, another eminent leader of the Dhaka Anushilan Samiti at that time, became deeply attracted towards socialism. Upon his release from jail in 1920, Chatterjee felt that for fighting against a powerful colonial ruler through secret revolutionary activities assistance from foreign countries was essential. So, around 1924 when he received four undated letters from M N Roy, through secret channel, he wanted to use the connection of Soviet Union for the benefit of Indian revolutionary movement. He wanted to contact Pratul Ganguly on the issue but could not establish any communication with him because of very strict British surveillances. However, Ganguly failed to establish any contact with the Bengal revolutionaries during that time for discussing M N Roy’s offer of accepting Marxism as he was then working in the Northern India. Another emissary, Nalini Dasgupta, sent by M N Roy could come to Bengal in 1922. At the same time, Abani Mukherjee also came from Moscow to have a talk with the Bengal revolutionaries. On the other hand, the Anushilan leaders sent Gopen Chakraborty to MN Roy for obtaining first-hand information about the details of the lines of action which communists had been experimenting within Soviet Russia with the object of translating the idea of communism into practice. (Lahiri T, 1979: 187) The sending of Gopen Chakraborty to Russia by Naren Sen, leader of Dhaka Anushilan Samiti, proves the sincerity and eagerness of the Samiti to know all about the revolutionary path opened up by the October Revolution in Russia. However, on his return from Moscow, Gopen Chakraborty was not given ‘expected’ welcome from his ex-Anushilan colleagues. (Lahiri T, 1979:187) Actually, the most of the Anushilan leaders accepted
Marxism as guiding principle in the late thirties, though Chatterjee observes that they could have easily associate themselves with 'international communism' even in the twenties. (Chatterjee, 1977: 191) However, history shows that another decade or more was necessitated to accept Marxist ideology in totality.

Another eminent national revolutionary belonging to Anushilan Samiti, Satyendra Narayan Mazumdar writes that the mass upsurge in the country and the impact of the October Socialist Revolution began to influence the thinking of revolutionaries by making the horizon of outlook wide. Advancement in understanding and the adaptation of new ideology were in varying degree for different individuals but surely were turning towards taking a distinct shape. The ideals of social justice, for which they were passionate enough in the earlier period, attracted their mind towards socialism, though not yet clearly understood. (Mazumdar, 1979: 100-101)

Eminent national revolutionary, Sachindranath Sanyal also believed that though most of them cherished the same ideals and were followers of the same path, yet there were differences among them on a large number of issues. (quoted in Pramanik, 1984: 243) Sanyal even read Marxist classics like Bukharin's ABC of Communism and some of the writings of Lenin. He was very much impressed with Marxism initially. But, later on, he came to the realisation that he could not accept a materialist philosophy of life like Marxism. Sanyal also later categorically denied that he believed in the principles of Communism. (Laushey, 1975: 38) However, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee writes that Sanyal was a non-believer in socialist ideology and, though, both of them were associated with the HRA, ultimately concerning attitude towards socialism there emerged big differences between Sanyal and Chatterjee. (Chatterjee, 1977: 191) In this connection David M Laushey is of the opinion that although Balshastri Haridas categorically named Chatterjee a confirmed Marxist, it is unlikely that Chatterjee ever completely accepted the full Marxist ideology. (Laushey, 1975: 38) The young revolutionaries of the HRA tried to alienate themselves from old trends of ‘religious nationalism’ but failed to do so as they worked during 1924-1927 under the leadership of Sanyal. (Habib, 2010: 23)

So, after the October Revolution in Russia the Indian national revolutionaries were deeply attracted towards Marxism. But, this new trend of thought agitated the Anushilan group of revolutionaries more than it had affected any other group. (Lahiri T, 1979: 181) On the other hand, among the Jugantar revolutionaries only a few were seriously attracted towards socialism. The Jugantar leadership conceptualised the new situation from a different view point. Arun Chandra Guha, an important Jugantar activist writes in this connection that since 1921 Jugantar workers decided to join the Gandhi-
led non-cooperation movement with all seriousness. They realised that any rebellion by a batch of daring young men even with sophisticated arms, though procurement of sufficient and effective arms to fight the mighty British Empire was impossibility, might be turned out to be, at best, a coup, but not revolution without mass upsurge. They concluded that the phase of inspiring the people by self-sacrifice and suffering of young valiant revolutionaries was practically over and the politics came to a stage of preparing the masses for revolution. Though the fear complex of mighty empire had been removed from the minds of middle class, but the task was to remove the same from the mind of the masses before any mass-based and effective revolution could be attempted. In this connection they recollected preaching of Aurobinda that the programme of passive resistance as best suited to India and considered to join with Gandhi who was advocating nothing but passive resistance at that time. It was thus that Jugantar decided to join with the movement of Gandhi. (Guha, nd: 48-49)

Therefore, during that period i.e. in 1921-22, there developed two major trends in the politics of Bengal. The first one was the non-cooperation movement in which more than 16,000 persons including the Jugantar activists were arrested in Bengal. (Guha, nd: 50) Another trend was the attempted effort to propagate communist ideas and theories among the national revolutionaries.

While in jail during the first term of detention (1915 - 1920), like the Anushilan revolutionaries, the Jugantar workers also became enthusiastic about the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Arun Chandra Guha recollects how he managed to get the first book on Russian Revolution in the Hazaribagh Central Jail in 1919. The book was Trotsky's 'Russian Revolution - October to Brestlitovsk'. (Guha, nd, 50-51) After their release from detention, Jugantar workers got some letters and messages from their old colleague MN Roy. (Laushey, 1975: 87; Roy, D, 1989: 21; Sengupta, S, 1994: 413-414)¹ MN Roy wanted to see, at least, two of his ex-colleagues in Moscow prior to the Second Conference of the Third International to be held in 1920. But it has been claimed that the Jugantar workers did not like to be diverted from the work undertaken by them in connection with the non-cooperation movement. So instead of sending anybody, a thesis or note was sent on their behalf to be placed before Lenin in the Second Congress of CI. It was sent in the name of Dr Jadugopal Mukherjee as their senior most colleagues. (Laushey, 1975: 87)

Lenin placed a document before the Second Comintern Congress held in 1920 as Colonial Thesis and MN Roy also submitted a Supplementary Thesis. Lenin's original draft thesis as well as Roy's draft Supplementary Thesis, following a substantial modification of the latter by Lenin, was examined by a
Commission on National and Colonial Questions. Both the Theses were later adopted by the Congress, following discussions and some modifications.

In the adopted text of his Colonial Thesis, Lenin introduced a distinction between two types of bourgeois democratic movements within the framework of nationalism: one being reformist oriented towards cooperation with imperialism, the other being radical, playing a militant role vis-à-vis imperialism. (Seth, 1995: 66)

While Roy's strategy of revolution in colonial countries like India was based on the premise that it had to be a proletarian revolution led by communist party, for Lenin, it was bourgeois nationalism which was the driving force in the colonies. Accordingly, for him, the agenda was to militaries the peasantry through the organization of peasants' soviets rather than to harbour the dream of a proletarian revolution, since industrialisation was yet to take off in the colonies. (Datta Gupta, 2006: 67) So, Lenin was of the view that the project in the East was one, namely, national liberation and, consequently, the Comintern should extend support to nationalist movements in the colonial countries.

The Second Congress proceedings of the Comintern appeared to have boosted the conviction of the Jugantar revolutionaries that Lenin 'preferred the line of work suggested in the note sent by Jadugopal on behalf of Jugantar'. (Guha, nd: 51) They felt that Jugantar put priorities on national liberation and Lenin endorsed that line. However, what appears from the above discussion is that the Jugantar leaders selectively used Leninist formulation to suit their agenda of joining non-cooperation movement. What they have missed, perhaps, is the Leninist concept that the liberation movement in colonial countries constituted the first stage of revolutionary struggle in those countries and the communist international has to build up a temporary alliance with the bourgeoisie in the colonial and backward countries, it must not merge with the later and must retain unconditionally its independent, proletarian character. (Datta Gupta, 2006: 70; Lahiri T, 1979: 183) Therefore it is evident that the Jugantar revolutionaries were, in the main, not in favour of initiating party on class line or on communist line before achieving national liberation. (Guha, nd: 51) Among the Jugantar revolutionaries, only a few were seriously attracted towards socialism during the first few years of the twenties. (Pramanik, 1994: 243)

In this connection, a few more lines may be added here regarding MN Roy's role in the Second Congress of the Third International. Writing in this context, Tarapada Lahiri opines that Roy, as opposed to the view propounded by Lenin, held that the National liberation movement of the then India could not be revolutionary, because those were led by the national bourgeoisie who were likely to compromise with
the imperialists. He thought that in colonial countries two parallel movements were going on: one, movement for political independence under bourgeois leadership and another, a mass struggle of the toiling classes for their own liberation from various forms of exploitation. He saw in those latter movements, ‘the seeds of progress’ and he insisted that communist parties in colonial countries ‘should organise the peasants and workers and should lead them to the revolution and to establish Soviet Republics’. Now, for many, Roy, a new convert to communism had very little experience and realistic approach like that of a communist of the stature of Lenin. (Lahiri T, 1979: 183-184) Roy’s association with Marxism began in or about 1917. As a national revolutionary he had no opportunity to mix with the masses, because the secretive methods of national revolutionary movement did not leave enough opportunity for mass - contact by revolutionary leaders. He had been away from the Indian scene since 1915 which created hindrances in getting exact information on the then Indian political development and movements. It has been stated that Roy’s appreciation and understanding of communism, at that time when he prepared his draft supplementary thesis on colonial question, were purely academic, not backed by practical experience about the toiling masses of colonial countries (Lahiri T, 1979: 184). Roy, perhaps, had no information of the approach of a radical change-over of the philosophy and tactics of the liberation movement in India. ‘Roy ...... probably thought that the revolutionary and terrorist groups with which he had contacts when he left India in 1915 could form the nucleus of a communist movement’. But, in actuality, his plan of ‘simultaneous democratic socialist revolution through organization, simultaneous anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggle of the toiling masses by speeding up class struggle on a wide scale’ had no takers in the then India. Neither the Anushilanites nor the Jugantar activists were keen to accept the Royist formulation. (Lahiri T, 1979: 184-185)

It has been observed previously, that the Jugantar revolutionaries refused to accept the Royist call of joining class-based organisation and preferred to join the non-cooperation movement. In the same vein, as written by Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, the Anushilan revolutionaries even after having scope to involve themselves with the international communism through MN Roy did not do so. In spite of their attraction for communism, they preferred not to accept Marxism during that time. (Dasgupta, A, 1970: 1) Perhaps, Roy’s overzealousness to have a class based party in India during the twenties had a deterring effect in accepting Marxism in an organised from or switching from national revolutionism to Marxism. Therefore, it can be asserted that the Indian national revolutionaries though welcomed the Russian Revolution of 1917 and liked the spirit of Bolshevik Revolution refrained themselves from forming or joining any Marxist party en-masse during the twenties of the last century.
Propaganda of Marxist Ideas and its Effects on the National Revolutionaries:

In this connection, disseminating process of new ideas may be studied for a better understanding of the transitional phase. The contemporary newspapers have played an important role in the process of transmission from national revolutionism to communism. Articles on Russian revolution and on Lenin were frequently published in the then newspapers. Just after few days of the success of the Bolshevik Revolution articles highlighting various aspects of the revolution were published in *Dainik Basunati*. After that, regular articles and news concerning the Russian Revolution have been published in the other newspapers and periodicals as well. (Chandra, 1992: 76) Among the newspapers, most important role were played by *Dainik Basunati*, *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Amritabazar Patrika*, *Bengalee*, *Forward*, *Dainik Bangabani*, *Banglar Katha*, *The Hindu*, *Bombay Chronicle* etc. Among the periodicals published in Bengali language, the leading role in disseminating the tenets of the new ideology and the different courses of revolution had been taken up by *Atma Sakti* (edited by Upendranath Bandyopadhyay), *Sankha* (edited by Nalini Kishore Guha and Sachindranath Sanyal), *Bijoli* (edited by Barindra Kumar Ghosh), *Nabasakti*, *Dhumketu*, *Langal*, *Ganabani*, *Bangabani*, *Prabasi*, *Bharatbarsha*, *Prachi*, *BanglarBani* (Dhaka), *Desher Bani Mohammadi* (monthly), *Maslem Bharat*, *Samyabadi*, *Shramik*, *Masik Basumati*, *Sonar Bangla*, *Sanhati*, *Jana Sevak*, *Nabya Bharat* etc. (Chatterjee, 1977: 191) However, the journals like *Atma Sakti*, *Sankha*, *Bijoli* and *DesherBani* published by national revolutionaries deserve particular mention in this connection.

As has already been noted above, among the Jugantar revolutionaries only a few were seriously attracted towards socialism during the twenties. Among them the name of Upendranath Bandyopadhyay deserves particular attention. (Mazumdar, 1979: 143) Though the main driving force behind the journal *Atma Sakti* was the members of Jugantar, Upendranath preached the gospel of socialism freely in this journal edited by him even knowing very well that most of the Jugantar members were not very much keen to accept Marxism as their guiding philosophy during that time.²

As for the *Sankha*, it was known as the undeclared organ of Anushilan Samiti. (Mazumdar, 1979: 123) While analysing the role of these newspapers, periodicals and journals, SN Mazumdar points out some of the objective limitations that led to inadequate and incomplete analysis of the Marxian theory as well as the description of the Soviet revolution. Foremost of those was unavailability of authentic books on Russian Revolution during the early years of 20’s. In addition to that, the Marxian philosophy was known to very few among the revolutionaries and, therefore, majority of those writings lacked desirable clarity. However, the significance of those articles and writings lies in the fact that the Russian Revolution
showed a new dimension of revolutionary ideology and programme which the national revolutionaries started to pursue diligently. (Mazumdar, 1979: 124)

There were some articles written indeed which criticised Bolshevism due to lack of proper information. At the same, owing to lack of proper understanding a ‘peculiar confusion’ regarding Marxism socialism vis.-a-vis. other contemporary political trends and ideologies could be noticed in the political writings of the then national revolutionaries. (Bandyopadhyay, S, 1993:131)

In spite of this, huge number of articles was written in favour of Russian Revolution and socialism as well. These articles could be classified in five categories: (1) Initially, the writers tried to uphold the nobility of the Russian Revolution in the face of imperialist disinformation campaigns. (2) Later on, emphasis shifted to propagate the ideas on Bolshevism and Lenin. (3) The anti-imperialist role of Soviet Russia was highlighted. (4) Articles were published in support of the new social system that was being built up in post - revolution Russia. (5) Articles were written advocating the necessity of learning from the social revolution in Russia and guiding India’s national liberation movement incorporating these lessons. (Dasgupta, A, 1970: 10)

Without entering into a detailed analysis of these articles, we may mention some of the representative articles published during the period in Atma Sakti. Under the inspiring editorship of Upendranath, this very popular journal published a number of articles from which we can name a few: Leniner Jiban Katha by Amulya Charan Adhikari, Lenin by Biswasut, Samaj Samyabadir Sikshar Adarsha Russer Vidyayatan by Jiban Kumar Thakurta, Britain - O - Soviet Sasan by Sibnath Banerjee, Saman Adhikarbad by Hrishikesh Sen, Russiy Chhatra Biplaber Itihas by Gurudas Roy, Russian Sramik Raj by Promode Kumar Sen, Anantanander Patra, by Upendranath, Moscow Banam Pondicherry by Shibram Chakraborty etc.³

Upendranath was strongly influenced by the articles of Vanguard published by MN Roy and in his capacity as the editor he wrote many editorials in Atma Sakti which helped in the process of the orientation of the revolutionaries to the problems of the masses and mass - movement. (Mazumdar, 1979: 135) Side by side writing editorials and articles, Upendranath also published some pamphlets like Pather Sandhan, Swadhin Manush, Bartamaner Samasya etc. which influenced the national revolutionaries greatly. Pather Sandhan includes, inter alia, two very powerful articles – Dosh Kar and Amader Path.

Similarly, Sankha, the journal of the Anushilan revolutionaries, published a number of articles on the issue of Russian revolution and Marxism. Some of these are: Lenin O Samasamayik Russia by
Sachindranath Sanyal, *Amader Laksha Ki* by Dr Bhupendra Nath Dutta, *Berliner Ek Veranday* by Professor Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *Communist Appeal* (sent to the Gaya session of the Indian National Congress by M N Roy) etc. (Mazumdar, 1979: 124-126, 131-134) On the basis of an in depth analysis of a number of articles published in the newspapers/journals in the aftermath of October revolution, SN Mazumdar comes to the conclusion that one of the most immediate impact of the Russian revolution on the minds of the Indian national revolutionaries was that a good section of them began to orient their outlook to the toiling masses in the real sense of the term. They began to realise that ‘(a) it is the toiling masses who provide the real force for the success of the struggle for national emancipation; (b) their active, conscious and organised participation is necessary for the victory of that struggle; (c) that participation can be ensured only by linking the basic economic demands of the masses with the political demand for national independence; (d) and for that purpose a concrete programme must be placed before the people.’ This realisation had been in its initial stage during the period under discussion. But even then, it is to be acknowledged, from the early years of the 1920’s attempts were made by a section of the revolutionaries to overcome romantic revolutionism, emotionalism and amorphous dreams of social justice which believed in automatic achievement of those dreams with the attainment of independence from the British domination. (Mazumdar, 1979: 131)

The newspaper writings or pamphlets, at the same time, projected some kind of confusions which also require little elaboration. Sandip Bandyopadhyay cites a few examples. (Bandyopadhyay, S, 1993: 131-134) Hemanta Kumar Sarkar writes a book *Biplabler Pancha Rishi* in 1923 in which life sketches of Marx, Rousseau, Tolstoy, Bakunin and Mazzini have been discussed placing Marx and Mazzini in the same category of thinkers. Ananta Singha, the hero of Chittagong armed rebellion, also acknowledged that during the twenties of the last century the leaders of the revolutionary parties made no distinction at all among the ideas of Lenin, De Valera, Mussolini and Sun Yat-sen. A number of articles were also published eulogizing the policies and programmes of Mussolini. For some of the Indian intelligentsia, Mussolini has become a ‘*Hero– the Great Karmayogi of Bhagabadgita*’. This kind of confusion that prevailed in the minds of revolutionaries might have created obstructions in their transition to Marxism in the twenties. Even after acquaintance with Marxism since the beginning of the twenties, confusion and vacillations blocked the way to accept Marxism though a signal of transition was clearly discernible even in this state of confusion. (Bandyopadhyay, S, 1993: 133)

**B: National Revolutionaries and the Working Class & Peasants’ Movement- The Mutual Interactions:**

Above the interaction of the national revolutionaries with Marxism has been tried to be discussed. The
birth & growth of national revolutionism has also coincided with the spread of workers and peasants movement in India. However, as most of the revolutionaries were from middle-class background and believed in underground conspiratorial activities, they rather remained aloof initially about the growing class movements. With the passing of time, the revolutionaries gradually became attracted towards Marxism and along with this affinity for Marxist they also started showing interests in class movements. In this section, we would try to discuss the impact of the workers and peasants movement over the national revolutionaries. This can be discussed on the basis of following basic issues:

(a) What were the impact of the growing trade-union and peasants’ movements in remoulding and reshaping the ideas of the national revolutionaries?

(b) What were the causes behind this shift/change of ideology among the national revolutionaries? What was the process of introspection and self-assessment of the national revolutionaries regarding the strategies and tactics followed so long?

1. (a) Trade Union Movement in India- the Beginning: During the second half of the 19th century, the British industrialists who were busy in searching new areas of capital investment found in India one of the favourable places for the purpose. They started the process of industrialization in India only in areas where they could reap maximum profit. This was the time when public utility services like railways, trams or postal services began to develop. Such developments resulted in the growth of modern working class in the last decades of the 19th century. Bengal was then the top jute-growing province in India. So, in and around the river Hooghly the jute industries came into being under British ownership because of this strategic advantage. At the same time, the Indian emerging capitalists started investments in the cotton mills of Bombay & Gujarat due to close proximity of cotton grower areas.

Initially, the workers were unorganized and could not raise their voices against intolerable working conditions and meager wages paid to them. But, their wretched condition forced them to go for movements for demanding better facilities and better wages. The genesis of the trade union movements may be traced back to the sporadic strikes found in some railways and textile sectors in the second half of the 19th century. However, there is no unanimity amongst the scholars as to the exact date or event which might be accepted as the beginning of the labour movement in India. (Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2009: 342) For some it is the strike of the Bombay textile workers in 1882 or for some it is the calling of a meeting of the workers of the Clothe Mill in Bombay by K M Lokhande in 1890. In spite of disagreement among the researchers on the year of beginning of trade-union movements in India, the
first labour organisation in India may be said to have established by Lokhande in 1890 in the name of Bombay Mill Hands Association. After the beginning in 1890, a good number of labour associations were formed in various parts of the country to draw the attention of the owners for better wages and improved working conditions. However, Sumit Sarkar observed that Lokhande’s effort could not be termed as first trade union as it ‘merely involved Lokhande setting up of an office to give free advice to mill-hands who came to him’. (quoted in Chatterjee & Guha Ray, 2006: 618) Such philanthropic activities also could be found in the efforts of Dwarakanath Ganguly who in 1880s started a campaign against the inhuman treatment to the plantation labourers in Assam.

In the early days of the labour movement, working-class protests first broke out in the British owned industries and many of the Indian nationalist leaders of the time supported these movements. The signal workers of the Great Indian Railways organised a strike in May 1899. The two journals, Kesari & Marhatta edited by Tilak published articles in favor of the strikers. Nationalist leaders, like Pheroze Shah Mehta and Surendranath Tagore, raised funds for the striking railway men. Tilak and other extremist nationalist leaders who gained access to the industrial workers, attempted to imbue them with a nationalist, anti-colonial consciousness. The working class front was still then in an embryonic form and so the struggle was not yet waged for class demands. The thinking of the Indian workers was largely dominated then by ‘traditional, pre-capitalist forms of consciousness. (Lieten, 1984: 72)

1. (b) The Swadeshi Movement and the Workers’ Movement: ‘The Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1903-1908) was a landmark in the history of working-class movement in India.’ (Chatterjee & Guha Ray, 2006: 621) Growing price rise coupled with racial injustices led to a number of strikes in foreigners-dominated industries. Nationalist leaders like Bepin Chandra Pal, Chittaranjan Das and Liakat Hossain addressed the meetings of strikers. Side by side, a group of swadeshi leaders also played significant role in organising trade union movements during the time. Most prominent among them were Aswinicoomar Banerji, Prabhat Kusum Roychaudhuri, Apurba Kumar Ghosh and Premotosh Bose. They achieved great success in organising the workers government press, railways, jute mills and Tramways Company. The most important aspects were that the strikers had some organisational set up and the support of the political leaders. The date of formal partition of Bengal on 16 October 1905 was also greeted by all out strike including the industries of Bengal. This was a great deed of expressing solidarity on behalf of the workers. The labour movement was basically a movement for fulfilling economic demands but the workers, during the Swadeshi period, also associated themselves with broader political issues. Labour movements were organised as a of the Swadeshi movement. Journals of newly formed national
revolutionary parties like *Nabasakti* appealed to the workers to learn from the experiences of the Russian workers of the time. However, to speak the truth, the impact of the Swadeshi movement was felt only upon the workers of the vicinity of Kolkata & Howrah. Similar protest movements were also seen erupted in some areas of Madras and Punjab. However, during the period, the national revolutionary groups were in the making and we have not seen any of the revolutionaries taking interest in the trade-union movement then. After 1908, coinciding with the low ebb in the Swadeshi, the nationalists also lost their interest in organising the workers. (Chatterjee & Guha Ray, 2006: 623) Thus, the possibility of any alliance between nationalism and labour unrest as an alternative to individual terrorism failed to materialise. (Basu, N, 1992: 18)

1. (C) Labour Movement during the World War Times: The working class associations which came into existence in Bengal during the heydays Swadeshi movement disappeared with the scaling down of the movement. From then until the end of World War I (1918), no proper trade union movement could be seen to have existed in Bengal. (Basu, N, 1992: 18) The situation changed a lot with the advent of ‘charismatic all-India leader’ in the post-World War I period. The initiation of non-cooperation movement under Gandhi-led Indian National Congress provided the background to a militant working class movement. The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed in 1920 under the leadership of Lala Lajpat Rai. For Dange, it was Lajpat Rai who redefined the discourse of trade union movement by arguing for class consciousness amongst the workers. He also tried to inculcate the ideals of international proletarian outlook and the nationalism in the class consciousness of the workers. (Dange, 1973:10) Gradually, the AITUC emerged as the conglomerate having affiliations of approximately 200 trade unions.

The slow but steady growth of India’s working class movement also did not escape the notice of Lenin who hailed this development with joy and wrote a message titled as *To the Indian Revolutionary Association* published in Pravda on 20 May 1920:

> I am glad to hear that the principles of self-determination and the liberation of oppressed nations from exploitation by foreign and native capitalists, proclaimed by the Workers’ and Peasants’ Republic, have met with such a ready response among progressive Indians, who are waging a heroic fight for freedom. The working masses of Russia are following with unflagging attention the awakening of the Indian workers and peasants. The organisation and discipline of
the working people and their perseverance and solidarity with the working people of the world are an earnest of ultimate success. (Lenin, 1965:138)

The labour movement was not a conscious class struggle even then. Further, a necessity was there to develop a close bond between political mass movement and the working class movement. But, Gandhi was not in favour of this. In response of a letter from British Communist Party member, Sakhlatalva, written in 1927 Gandhiji replied:

Labour in India is extremely unorganised. The labourers have no mind of their own when it comes to national policy or welfare of labour itself.....It is highly provincial and even in the same city it is highly communal. (quoted in Chatterjee & Guha Ray, 2006: 627)

An examination of the Congress resolutions adopted from 1923 to 1930 shows that they include none in regard to labour except in 1926 Guwahati session. (Chatterjee, R, 1984: 135-136) This trend in the Congress policy continued even up to 1934. The Congress apathy of organising labour movements gave the Indian communists a free hand in labour affairs and with this view in aim the communists took the leading role in establishing Workers’ and Peasants’ Party (WPP) first in 1925 in Bengal and then in 1928 in an all India scale through holding a conference. (Lieten, 1984: 96-101; Chandra, 1992: 4-5) A series of workers movement could be seen in all the industrial sectors after that. However, the hangovers of ‘petty-bourgeois romantic revolutionism’ prevented the leaders of HRA or the Anushilan or the Jugantar from realising the importance of labour movements in the national liberation struggle, (Mazumdar, 1979: 178) Only those groups or parties like Young Comrades League, Jessore-Khulna Sangha, Indian Proletarian Revolutionary Party, Samyaj Party, Bengal Labour Party/Bolshevik Party who converted themselves from national revolutionism to Marxism took keen interest in building workers movement either alone or jointly along with CPI/WPP. A few years later, League of Radical Congressmen (LRC) under the leadership of M N Roy, a Jugantar revolutionary who converted to Marxism much earlier and worked with Lenin and other stalwarts of Comintern previously, started preaching Marxism among the workers and also tried to organise them under the banner of Indian Federation of Labour (IFl-1941). The national revolutionaries who were either in jail or busy preparing their armed activities could not find time to evaluate their methods of work being pursued so long and, thus, showed interests neither in workers movement nor in peasants’ movement.
We have given an account of the number of strikes, its severity and success during the period from 1921 to 1947 in a tabular form (Table-1). We have also shown graphical representation of a) Number of Strikes, b) Number of Strike Days and c) Number of Successful Strikes in Graph-1, Graph-2 and Graph-3 respectively. We have fitted the trend line in each series and shown in the graph. It is very clear that number of strikes shows a monotonically increasing linear trend starting from 1923. The number of successful strikes also shows increasing trend. However, when we consider strike days as a whole in each year, it shows a uniformly constant trend. It is easily noticeable that the number of strike in days in 1925, 1928 and 1929 are exceptionally high in comparison with other years. On the whole it gives us a comprehensive picture of the working class movement during this period where awakening of the class is amply clear. (Table & Graph next page)

1. (d) Working Class Movement during and after the Second World War prior to Indian Independence:
With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, a new phase started in the history of Indian national movement and the working class movement as well. Quit India movement started in 1942. The result was the unprecedented eruption of nationalism all over the country. But, the CPI adopted the policy of collaboration and cooperation with the British government because of its policy reversal and, hence, not supported the Quit India movement. The working class also participated wholeheartedly in this movement. But in areas where communists had strong holds over the workers like Bengal, the participation of workers were low.

Herein the converted revolutionaries tried to do some works. They already gave up their line of ‘terrorism’ and imbibed by the idea of Marxism planned to organise the workers and the peasants. So, particularly in Bengal, where the revolutionaries belonging to FB, CSP and Anushilan had a well-knit organisation, started working together with the Congress in the labour front. In 1943, all the leaders and active workers of the Congress on the labour front were under detention. During that time, Jnananjan Neogi, a leader of the Jugantar, set up in 1943 the Calcutta Sramik Sangha, as an alternative labour organisation. The Sramik Sangha adopted a plan of action to extend its organisation and, at the same time, to discredit pro-government organisations like the Communists, the Bolsheviks and the Radical Democrats. However, the Bengal Sangha could not take much progress. (Basu, N, 1992: 37) The Congress (INTUC) was formed in May 1947 as the labour organisation of the INC. The Indian National Trade Union branch of INTUC—the BPNTUC was by no means a homogeneous body. There were various trends working within it with divergent appeals. These groups were, mainly, former Bengal Labour
Table-1: Showing Intensity of Strikes during the Period 1921 to 1947

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>No of STRIKES</th>
<th>WORKER S (IN 1000)</th>
<th>STRIKE DAYS IN 1000</th>
<th>COTTON MILLS STRIKE (DAYS 1000)</th>
<th>STRIKE SEVERITY</th>
<th>NO OF SUCCESSFUL STRIKE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>6984</td>
<td>601</td>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>3973</td>
<td>482</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>5051</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>8730</td>
<td>9209</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>12578</td>
<td>11250</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>1097</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>31647</td>
<td>24035</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>12165</td>
<td>8114</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>2261</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>2408</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>1922</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>2168</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>4775</td>
<td>2803</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>973</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>2358</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>8982</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>9198</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>4900</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>7577</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>3330</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>5779</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>2342</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>658</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>3447</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>747</td>
<td>4054</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>1629</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>12717</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>1811</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>16562</td>
<td>2211</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Giri, 1958: 82-98; Karnik, 1967; Joshi, V P, 1966: 118-119 (as given in Lieten, 1984: 85) Note: Strike Severity is defined as percentage of striking days with respect to actual working days
Graph 1 to 3
Association (BLA); the Jugantar group; the group of Maitreyi Bose and Kali Mukherjee; Niharendu Dutt Majumdar’s group belonging to Bengal Labour Party. (Basu, N, 1992: 44) This factionalism worked as a stumbling block in the development of BPNTUC in Bengal.

As we have noted earlier, majority of the Anushilan members were converted to Marxism during the detention years in the thirties of the twentieth centuries. After their release, mostly in 1937-38, the national revolutionaries who were still active in politics were not in the mood to revert back to their old path of ‘terrorism’. Rather, they tried to involve themselves in organising the workers, peasants and the youths for the preparation of revolutions on Marxist lines. Among them, one of the important groups was the Anushilan Marxists who in 1940 formed the RSP. As East Bengal was the strong hold of former Anushilanites, they first build up workers’ union in the No 1 and No 2 Dhakeswari Cotton Mills in Dhaka even before the formation of the RSP. (Mukherjee, N, 2009: 9; Basu, N, 1992: 89) However, RSP, unlike the CPI and RDP, termed the World War II as an imperialist war and took active part in organising anti-British programmes during the Quit India movement. Consequently, the British government arrested most of the activists of Anushilan cum RSP and those who were not arrested went underground. So, their trade union activities could not advance much before their release in 1945-46.

Even then, as per IB report, some attempts were made by the RSP to organise labour unions in Howrah and Budge Budge. It was active during the tramways strike in 1942. Similarly, in the following years, the party formed its labour units in Kidderpore, Dum Dum, Howrah and Serampore. Dock workers of Metiabruz were also tried to be organised by Sourindranath Bhattacharyya, a RSP worker. In 1944, the East Bengal Textile Workers’ Union was formed.⁴ (Basu, N, 1992: 89-90)

1. (e) The Communist Party of India during the War Times:
In this connection, the CPI whose rank & file were strengthened by the joining of various communist organisations and the national revolutionaries of ‘Communist Consolidation’ needs to be examined briefly. After the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the CPI called for making the imperialist war into a war of national liberation. They started vigorously to build up militant trade union movement taking opportunity of the war. But, the position reversed totally in the wake of German attack on Soviet Union in June 1941. So, in January 1942, the party declared that the war has now turned into people’s war and the party would strive to work for national unity, for national defence and for national government. It
was further stated, in order to assure British Government, not to fear strikes as those would be
abandoned as of now. Minoo Masani commented on this reversal:

The party which had called for strikes, strikes and more strikes now demanded work, work and
no strikes. Even though the mounting inflation and shortage of food and consumer goods were
creating a great deal of dissatisfaction in labour ranks, they were asked to forget the class
struggle, not to strike but, on the other hand, to work for increased production. (Masani, 1954:
84)

By declaring the change of their policy, the CPI took full advantage from the British government. The ban
on the party was withdrawn in 1942. But, other political organisations were not allowed to work freely.
The CPI could work freely now among the workers without any hindrances from government
administration as well as political activities of rival organisations. In the absence of other trade union
workers, a large number of unions run by them came under the control of the CPI. Even after the end of
the war, the CPI declared:

That we successfully prevented the Indian working class from resorting to strikes even in a
period of their worsening material conditions is the measure not only of our influence over it,
but also of its capacity to understand national interest as its own. (quoted in Basu, N, 1992: 67)

The high hopes of the CPI proved to be a misnomer in the following days. The CPI’s labour policy came
for a severe criticism and public hostility. The people’s war has been won but the organisational network
built up during the war times could not withstand the peoples’ indignation and nationalist resentment.
In the face of attack from political rivals along with the national revolutionaries turned Marxists, in the
phase of anti-imperialist upsurge, the CPI or its labour leaders got alienated from the masses or the
labourers. Most of the communist candidates lost the Bengal provincial assembly elections, 1946 from
the labour constituencies miserably. Out of total eight seats in the election for labour constituencies,
the CPI only won two: one from Railway trade union and another from Tea Garden Labour (Darjeeling).
Further, none of the actual/proposed strikes during 1946-47 called by the CPI evoked good response.
Failing to satisfactorily solve the problem of relationship between class struggle and national struggle,
the CPI in spite of joining by group of national revolutionaries could not make much headway during
that time. (Basu, N, 1992: 75)
1. (f) The RSP and the SUCI in the labour front: Coming to the issue of RSP’s trade union activities again in the post-war period, it is observed that the party organised the Hindusthan Motor Transport Workers’ Union in Kolkata in 1946. The Dum Dum Labour Association, the Cossipore Labour Association, Tata Aircraft Union, Jessop & Co. Union, Bengal-Assam Railway Employees’ Association were either formed or strengthened. The East Bengal Textile Workers’ Union organised strikes in the cotton mills of East Bengal in Feb–March 1946. The RSP also spread its influence to the tea gardens of Dooars during the time which in the later days became a strong hold of the party’s trade union activities. (Conversation with Gobinda De; Chakraborty, Saroj, 1994: 32) The legendary tea union leader, Nani Bhattachayya, came on behalf of RSP to organise and work among the railway workers and tea workers of Dooars first in 1951. The other leaders who started work in Dooars tea belt for RSP before that were Sushil Deb and A H Besterwich, who himself worked as a labourer in tea garden. With the purpose of working together in the labour front, RSP trade union leaders and workers joined the BPTUC in the latter half of 1946. Meanwhile, some of the leaders of the AITUC including Mrinal Kanti Basu (BPTUC President), N M Joshi, Ruikar and others left AITUC in November amidst allegation of CPI’s labour leaders excessive efforts to control AITUC fully. (Ganadabi: 01/11/1948) These leaders called a meeting in Kolkata along with other like-minded leftist-Marxist parties like SP, RSP, FB-Ruikar, Bolshevik Party, Federation of Labour and individuals like Soumyendranath Tagore on December 22, 1948. They declared to form the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) in that gathering. However, in spite that RSP, Bolshevik Party and SN Tagore attended the meeting they remained out of HMS and decided to form a new labour organisation shortly. The SUCI remained outside that effort and party general secretary, Shibdas Ghosh, stated that there had been still possibility to turn AITUC into a real ‘democratic front of joint labour movement, and hence, the party labour front workers remained involved with the AITUC. (Ganadabi: 01/01/1949) It is obvious that even then (by the end of 1948) RSP or Bolshevik Party of India not yet formed the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) as stated in some of the literatures on Bengal’s labour politics. (Basu, N, 1992: 90-91, 95). In a resolution on labour politics adopted in its Second All National Party Convention held in Muzaffarpur in 1947, the RSP denounced ‘the attitude of the CPI in trying to monopolise the AITUC by fair and foul means’ but at the same time, urged the working class ‘to convert the AITUC to their own organisation, so that they may pay their historical role in the coming Revolution’. (Saha, 2001: 224-225) So, the formation of a separate workers’ union was a later day development. The UTUC was founded on May 1 1949. KT Shah, a reputed trade union leader of Bombay became the first president of UTUC and Mrinal Kanti Basu was elected the first secretary. The RSP, the Bolshevik party, the RCPI (Tagore), the
Workers & Peasants’ League founded by Nepal Bhattacharyya and the SUCI were united to form the UTUC to oppose the CPI’s habit of excessive authoritarianism vis. a vis. other constituents in the labour front in the AITUC. Some national revolutionaries who accepted Marxism but preferred to remain independent also joined the UTUC. Among them the most renowned trade union activist was Sudhindra Pramanik who, before the formation of UTUC, acted as the general secretary of BPTUC from 1940 to 1945. (Basu, N, 1992: 146-147) He was also the main advisor of Subhash Chandra in matters pertaining to trade union activities. (Mukherjee, N, personal interview: September 1996) Sudhindra Pramanik agreed to work as one of the secretaries of the newly formed UTUC. Soumyendranath Tagore also became a party to this new union.⁵ (Sinha, personal interview: 2018) In a joint meeting of UTUC, AITUC and HMS-FB held to celebrate May Day in 1950, Shibdas Ghosh (SUCI), Nepal Bhattacharyya (Workers League) and Sudarshan Chatterjee (RSP) spoke on behalf of UTUC.⁶ (Ganadab: 15/05/1950) However, UTUC also broke into two groups in its third conference held in 1958 and both the groups stuck to the name UTUC. Soumyendranath Tagore and Sudhin Pramanik were elected as president and secretary of the break-away group in which SUCI, RCPI (Tagore) & Bolshevik party took the leading role.

The SUCI was formed in May 1946 as a ‘platform of action with party content’ and then as a communist party from April 1948. So, the scope of involving themselves in workers or peasants’ movement was very limited. Even then, they tried to do some preliminary work with this aim in mind. After coming out of jail in 1945, Shibdas Ghosh, Nihar Mukherjee and Monoranjan Banerjee - all of whom, after being converted to Marxism, were members of RSPI since 1940, were against the then RSP leadership on the issue of holding a proposed all-India party conference, started to move in and around the Kidderpore Dock areas. Their plan was to assess the possibility of building up labour organisation. The undisputed leader of Port Trust Employees Union, Nepal Bhattacharyya allowed them to open night school there but barred them to open any new labour union. Shibdas Ghosh and his associates agreed to this limited opportunity of working with the labourers. In the process, they established link with the Bard Company workers and later on formed a union with them. (Mukherjee, N, personal interview: September 1996)⁷ However, after the party formation in 1948, the party opted to work under the umbrella of AITUC for the sake of ‘united trade union’ movement. The SUCI leaders and workers started working to organise labours in some areas of Bengal and Bihar at its initial phase. The central committee members of the party like Hiren Sarkar and Pritish Chanda started working in the tribal belts of Bihar like Chhotanagpur or Singbhum to form labour movements there. In Bengal party central committee members like Subodh Banerjee, Promod Singha Roy, Monoranjan Banerjee, Radheshyam Saha, Durga Mukherjee alias Sankar
Singh and other party members like Sanat Dutta, Ajit Sen, Durga Saha, Daroga Miah, Golam Mohammed etc. started working in the industrial areas of Howrah and Hooghly and also in some areas in Kolkata. (Ganadabi: 29/07/1948-the First Issue) The labour unions like Agarpura Jute Workers’ Union, TC workers’ Union, RCGC Workers’ Union, Indian Red Lead Factory Workers’ Union, and Eastern Potteries Mazdoor Union were formed in and around Kolkata under the initiative of the SUCI leaders. The members of these unions came and joined a workers’ meeting held on July 18, 1948 called by the BPTUC. Subodh Banerjee was elected as the vice-president of Bengal Provincial Bank Employees Association in August 1948. (Ganadabi: 15/08/1948) Another prominent trade union leader of the party during that time was Badsha Khan who organised the Royal Calcutta Golf Club Mazdoor Union. Subsequently, The SUCI trade union front workers played active role in organising movements in Sindhri Fertilizer Factory in Bihar since 1949. Further, they also took active role in forming trade union with the CPWD workers of Bihar. Amriteswar Chakraborty of Bihar tried to organise the rail workers there. (SUCI, 1954: 77-78)

2. (a) Peasants’ Movement in India: The Indian society is predominantly agrarian in nature. The peasantry was the most exploited and oppressed section of India from the time immemorial. They had neither any organisation nor any place to go for redressal of their grievances. They were used to bear all the inhuman treatment meted out to them silently. After, the advent of the colonial rulers, the scenario remained unchanged, rather, further deteriorated. However, some of the intellectuals of the then Bengal imbibed by the spirit of renaissance and humanist values started to ventilate their helplessness through various ways. Among them the most important were Harish Chandra Mukherjee, Dinbandhu Mitra, Kangal Harinath, Bankimchandra and Saratchandra etc. In fact, England ‘was actuated by vilest interest, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them’. (Marx, 1853) The peasants started revolting against the ‘move of the colonial government to alter the land use pattern in the country on the one hand, and experimentation with a number of anti-peasant land revenue systems in the country, on the other.’ (Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2009: 346) The Indigo Revolt of Bengal in 1860, the tribal movement led by Birsa Munda on the basis of the slogan-’Let the kingdom of the queen be ended and our kingdom be started’ in the vast areas of Chhotanagpur in 1890s etc. were of great significance in terms of vehemence and reach.

Dhanagare treated the years 1925-46 as the most important phase of the Indian peasants’ movement when the peasants were a fighting for their mere existence. (Dhanagare, 1983) Though the peasants’
movement started in India under the leadership of Gandhi or other Congress leaders in the 1920s as a political battle, actually the influence of November Revolution as well as the activities of the communists/leftists led to growth of number of associations for the peasantry. For Dhanagare, in the twenties of the Nineteenth century, the Workers’ and Peasants’ Party (1926) and in the thirties & forties, All India Kisan Sabha (1936) were the main instruments in organising peasants’ movement. The peasants’ movement in the three decades before the independence could be categorized into three trends: 1) The historic Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928 under the leadership of Gandhi along with Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 and Kheda Satyagraha of 1918 were illustrative of the changing character of peasants’ movement of the time. 2) The movements launched by WPP & 3) the peasants’ movement initiated by AIKS. (Chakrabarty, D, 2016: 238-251)

As our focus in the present discourse is mainly remained with the activities of the national revolutionaries, so we may now turn our attention to their activities in the peasants’ movement. As noted earlier in this chapter, the Young Comrades League was formed as a Marxist group in 1928 comprising some of the revolutionaries both from the Anushilan and Jugantar activists. Generally speaking, the national revolutionaries were not in the mood of organising peasants’ movement at the time. Here in lies the uniqueness of YCL. The ‘famous’ peasants’ insurrection in Kishoregunj in East Bengal in 1929-30 was the most significant movement undertaken by the YCL. (Chandra, 1992: 98-1030) Nagen Sarkar and Wali Nawaj of YCL formed one ‘militant peasant’s team’. The commander of that team was Hatem Ali and his deputy was, Khondokar Kalu Miah. That militant team comprised of almost 215 peasants. This rebellion against the zamindars and money-lenders in the rural area were brutally suppressed by the government. ‘Hindu and Muslim landlords as well as the local Congress and Hindu Mahasabha combined to combat the attempts of the League to organise the movement. (Nagen Sarkar as quoted in Mazumdar, 1979: 166) Even the left nationalists and the national revolutionaries were also opposed to this rebellion. (Chandra, 1992: 101-102) However, the younger elements that were inclining towards communism saw in it the first consciousness revolt of the peasants. The ‘temporary Kolkata Committee’ of the CPI supported the Kishoregunj rebellion fully. Though the rebellion failed ultimately but it had made a great impact in the process of transition from national revolutionism to Marxism. The consciousness peasants’ movement opened up a new vista to the national revolutionaries who were then frantically searching a path to fulfill their ideals. Apart from the above movement, the YCL also organised a peasants’ movement in Malda under Ramraghab Lahiri in 1931 which was also crushed brutally by the British police.
Similarly, another Marxist group formed out of national revolutionaries, Indian Proletarian Revolutionary Party (IPRP) also took active part in organising peasants’ movement in the district of Hooghly. They actively propagated among the peasants to stop payment of taxes. They even made an attempt to organise armed peasant rebellion. (Chandra, 1992: 137) However, the plan of armed struggle could not be materialised ultimately.

The national revolutionaries who accepted Marxism in late thirties and formed RSP could not find much time to organise peasants’ movement before 1945-46 as most of them were detained for participation in the Quit India Movement. They did not have the opportunity to be with the peasants like the CPI because of government’s leniency towards the CPI. The most important post-World War II agrarian movement in Bengal was the Tebhaga Movement. The CPI leaders and workers under the banner of AIKS played important role in organising Tebhaga Movement in the vast areas of Bengal. The RSP workers also participated in that movement particularly in the Sunderban Areas of South 24 Parganas. The followers of Shibdas Ghosh were then working in the SUCI as a platform of action and also were in the process of forming the party. The early leaders of the group like Sachin Banerjee, Subodh Banerjee, Yaqub Pailan, Probodh Purkait, Renupada Haldar, Rabin Mandal, Nalini Pramanik, Amir Ali Haldar, Aminuddin Akhand etc., all from 24 Parganas, build up mighty peasants’ movement for the demand of Tebhaga in the Sunderban areas braving all kinds of repression and resistance from the jotedars. (Roychoudhury, 1395 BS: 158, Pramanik, personal interview: 2018)

The onset of numerous peasants’ movement in Bengal, particularly, has been caused by a distinct set of issues taking prominence at a particular period of time. The peasants revolted against the exploitation and oppression when their economic conditions deteriorated in primarily three forms: deterioration of their economic condition due to price rise, famine and so on; structural changes which caused an increase in the exploitation of peasants, consequently deteriorating their condition; and rising aspirations of peasants to improve their condition. (Shah, 1990: 40) However, barring some stray cases the national revolutionaries’ participation in the organised peasants’ movement is very insignificant. Bipan Chandra commented in this context: ‘A very important failure of the left lay in the fact that, while emphasizing the independent class mobilization of the peasants as peasants outside the framework of the national movement, it failed to establish a strong link between the anti-feudal and ‘economic’ consciousness of the peasants and anti-imperialism’. (quoted in Chakrabarty, D, 2016: 251)
Some pertinent words need be stated here about the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NJBS) which was founded in March 1926 ‘to channelize the militant nationalist movement on ideological lines’ by Bhagat Singh. (Habib, 2017: 41) The Sabha had two fold objectives-social and political. In 1928, the Sabha decided to work in association with the Kirti group of Punjab among the peasants and workers. Only a month after this decision, the Sabha tried to stir up an agrarian agitation over the failure of the wheat harvest. Even before the collaboration with the Kirti group, the NJBS had emphasised the role of peasants and labourers in the freedom struggle but the association with the Kirti group bought this aspect into greater prominence. (Habib, 2017: 47) NJBS took up the class demands of the peasantry, fought for their agrarian and economic grievances and inculcated in them a passionate love for freedom. To infuse a spirit of struggle and to make the peasantry and workers conscious of their rights, the NJBS convened a workers’ and peasants’ conference at Lyallpur in late September 1928 in which communist leaders like Dange, Spratt and Bradley also were present. The NBJS and Kirti group celebrated the ‘Friends of Russia Week’ in August 1928. They also tried to spread its influence among the workers as well when it made an attempt to capture various unions in Amritsar in August 1928. The NJBS resisted almost all anti-working class policies of the Punjab government. (Habib, 2017: 49) The NJBS was declared illegal in June 1930. It was further revived though in a clandestine way by forming Bhagat Singh Appeal Committees throughout the state of Punjab. Finally, it can be said that the HSRA had as its public organisation the NJBS which openly preached the ideas of revolution and socialism. These young revolutionaries of NJBS started its work among the peasants and workers also. During its short existence, till 1931, the NJBS infused a revolutionary socialist spirit among the people of Western United Provinces and the Punjab.

EPILOGUE:

At the end of our discussion on the interaction of national revolutionaries with the labour and peasants’ movement, it may be stated that the national revolutionaries were unable to change their priorities before their large-scale detention by 1934. Their ‘petty-bourgeois romanticism’ coupled with their ‘conspiratorial bent of mind’ that restricted participation in the movements involving the masses. Most of them had to go for actions regularly and consequently, they were always under police surveillance. They had to search for safe shelter or else to go to the jails. In such a position, most of them had no time to sit together for reconsidering their strategies and tactics being pursued from last few decades. Though there had been some intermittent transitions among a number of national revolutionaries from the twenties, these had never become a general phenomenon. Therefore, it appears to us that before their
detention in and around 1934, the national revolutionaries could not initiate any activity involving the general masses including the peasants and workers. After their release in 1938 except most of the Andaman detunes, many of them accepted Marxism and joined or formed new Marxist parties. After that they started working with the masses and took active part in organising Quit India Movement 1942. Because of this, they were arrested again and released only in late 1945 or early 1946. Upon their release from jail they started organising both workers and peasants’ movement as per their might and capability. However, their activity after the independence was not under the purview of this work though that has been glossed over a bit for the sake of keeping continuity in our present discourse.

But, another point need be stressed here. The nationalist idea that has been reflected among the national revolutionary parties was that of ‘Hindu-religion oriented nationalism’ (Mukherjee, N, personal interview: September 1996); Gopal Halder, 1958: 257; Habib, 2017: 28) Hindu mentality, specially, higher-caste Hindu sentiment was very much prevalent in the thoughts of national revolutionaries. This has created a great problem at the time of forming communist parties. (Mukherjee, N, personal interview: September 1996) The national revolutionary movement could not, therefore, ‘enlist active Muslim support’. (Halder, 1958: 257) Many believed that this trend even continued in the late forties and fifties. Some researchers even tried to show by collecting district-wise data that the Tebhaga movement in the late forties in Bengal failed to involve significant Muslim peasantry. (Chandra, 2003: 481) But, this may be half-truth. We observed above that the left trade unions as well as peasants’ organisations where the former national revolutionaries were working involved a good number of Muslim leaders and workers with their efforts. For SUCI, in the Tebhaga movement in the Sunderban areas of 24 Parganas had a sizeable number of Muslim participation. Yakub Pailan, Amir Ali Halder, Aminuddin Akhand, Hasem Khan, Mansoor Ali Mandal, Rashid Gayen and others involved Muslim peasantry in the movement who solidly stood behind them even in the face of severe police repression.

Similar examples may also be given from RSP or other Marxist parties. Hence, the activities of the national revolutionaries turned Marxists opened a new vista in the history of mass movements by involving both the communities and, thereby, breaking a ‘jinx’ continued since the beginning of the British rule in India.