



## Suprakash Ray on the issues of Gandhi and Nehru in the late 1960s

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If the historiography of Communism in India is in itself an underdeveloped sub-discipline, then the phase of Naxalite politics and thought within the history of Communism has received even lesser attention. There are many descriptions of the Naxalbari movement but not much on the intricate intellectuality of many of its partisans. In this article we provide some material for political theorists, sociologists, intellectual historians to analyse this Naxalite intellectuality. A schoolmaster called Sudhir Bhattacharya (1915-1990) lived in Calcutta and wrote on historical and political issues from his own Communist partisan location. His statements on Gandhi and Nehru deserve patient reading.

Gandhi was not merely an object of study for him. Gandhi's growing popularity amongst the Communist leadership in 1950s and 1960s was a cause of concern, for it signalled a shift from class struggle to class reconciliation, and a complete statist subjugation of politics. He wrote with the pseudonym Bijan Sen in an article: "The erstwhile general secretary of the Communist Party, P.C. Joshi christened Gandhi as the 'father of the nation' during the Second World War, Gandhi reciprocated by certifying Joshi as 'honest' – which the latter needed to amass funds unhindered, and which was indeed made possible later by the Bhulabhai Commission in the wake of Gandhi's praise." Much later, in 1958, Communist professor, barrister, parliamentarian and intellectual Hiren Mukhopadhyay decorated Gandhi with the epithet gentle colossus. About the shift in the international Communist scenario Sen informed that when Gandhi was alive – 'in Stalin's time' – the Soviet Encyclopedia interpreted Gandhi as a traitor to the liberation movement, an enemy of the revolutionary struggle of the workers and peasants and an ally of imperialism. After Stalin, Khrushchev became the new leader of Soviet Russia. By that time the English had left and 'Gandhi's stooges ruled the land'. To 'please his friends in the Indian ruling elite' Khrushchev edited out the few pages on Gandhi, and added a few new ones. Here Gandhi was portrayed as an unwavering anti-imperialist and a beacon of world peace. There remained no obstacle to Indo-Soviet friendship. Sen informed that "last year the British Government spent Rs. 48,000 for a statue of Gandhi in the city of London: British capital represents the majority of foreign investment in India; how can it forget a friend like Gandhi?"<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi was collaborative towards the expansion of capital, despite his critique of modernity. Just like Lenin saw in Tolstoy an obscurantist politics of populism, in Gandhi, Sen located the organic aspect of populist mobilisation which mutilated the possibility of revolutionary break in exchange of amorphous crowds, moralistic noise and the false elixir of traditional cohesion. This mode was encapsulated in the formation of post-1947 political democracy in colonial/national India which formally enfranchised yet substantially exploited and oppressed the people as an organ of the big bourgeoisie and feudalism.<sup>2</sup> Gandhi's ideology was not attributed to a wicked mind or a wicked individual, but a reactive philosophy: Gandhi edited out class struggle and scission from the thought of history and politics. He was against any manner of abstraction and followed the immanent vitality of life to decipher the course of politics (which, however, was not a mawkish view of individual human life, as Faisal Devji elucidates<sup>3</sup>). This critique on Gandhi was at its core an attempt to rescue Communism and revolutionary violence from the Communist leadership.

Ray translated and paraphrased a number of Communist documents on Gandhi that went against claims made by Hiren Mukhopadhyay (a leading parliamentarian of CPI) that there was no concrete stand on Gandhi within Communists in colonial/national India and internationally. a. A programme in the third Communist International of 1929 stated: Gandhi's ideas and his concepts were based on religion; they were regressive to the core, and in socio-economic questions reinstated reactionary life-ways. His ideas failed to locate any redemptive aspect in socialism, and tried to find solace in tradition. It basked in apparent and complete passivity and rejected class struggle; and when revolution was imminent such ideas renounced the veil of passivity and emerged as an openly reactionary force. Communist politics should wage relentless struggle against Gandhi's ideology.<sup>4342</sup> b. In 1930, another document of the CPI declared: The task was to attain freedom from colonialism while keeping the flag of agrarian revolution high. That would have put an end to the servitude of the masses and the immiseration of the workers-peasants. The basis of the colony's revolutionary freedom was agrarian revolt against British capital and collaborative feudalism. The Indian capitalists – tied as they were to feudalism and moneylenders – subjugated anti-colonial politics and the revolutionary resolution of the agrarian situation. Congress politics was a negotiation with British Imperialism in order to betray the interests of the people. And the foundation of Congress politics was Gandhi's ideology. It was based ostensibly on love, gentleness, humility, extremely hardworking approach to livelihood, national unity and the historic role of Hinduism. It projected an eternal co-existence of the rich and the poor and valorised ancient wisdom (the wisdom of an exploitative and hierarchical society). With explicit support from the imperialist powers, his ideology strived to organize and stabilise the collaborating indigenous exploiters on the debris of the masses....<sup>5343</sup> c. A report in the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the Soviet Communist Party (1930) thought: Bourgeois masters took recourse to murderous violence. But they also depended on men like Gandhi. Police and bayonet were not invariably effective. Tsardom at one time tried to thrive solely through coercion, but it needed liberal apologists like Gandhi. Such figures perpetuated confusion and chaos, they were incapable of novelty.<sup>6</sup>

Sen pointed out that the statement of Communist leader-prisoners in Meerut case or British Communist R.P. Dutt's texts had interpreted Gandhi similarly.<sup>7</sup> For Ray, there was something rotten in the state of Communist parties if all these strands had indeed been erased. That state had to be addressed. In Hiren Mukhopadhyay's

portrayal of Gandhi – which included uncritical usage of Hindu mythological figures to institute messianic proportions on the latter<sup>8</sup> – an India was insinuated where there were no antagonistic classes, no contradiction between capitalists and working class, landlords and peasants, there was no anti-imperialist struggle; “above this classless human society of this India exists the colossal and gentle overarch of ‘Mahatma’ Gandhi.”<sup>9</sup> In the late 1960s, Sen read intense local revolutionary struggles as flying in the face of Mukhopadhyay’s statist and conservative propaganda. He wagered in favour of an imminent people’s democratic revolution.<sup>10</sup> Mukhopadhyay (and by extension the entire Communist leadership) was identified as – following-Lenin – ‘yellow or pink Communists’<sup>11</sup>. Mukhopadhyay proudly addressed himself as the ‘leader of the (Indian) president’s most loyal opposition’. Sen reckoned: “It is precisely the intrusion of such leaders in the higher echelons of the Communist party that limited it to being a subservient opposition-party of the Indian state and parliament.”<sup>12</sup>

This stasis and servitude was nowhere more explicit than the relationship that the Communist leadership struck with Jawaharlal Nehru. Another article by Bijan Sen began with pungent and satirical force: "On May 27, 1964, ‘Modern India’ lost its father. On that day Nehru left the world. His departure left restless seas of sorrow in the minds of his ardent followers. That restlessness resulted in a nationwide, frenzied dispersal of his mortal remains, which was his wish and will. That frenzy did empty the public treasury of a few million rupees. This drain of wealth could bring calm to the minds of his followers, but unfortunately enough, failed to achieve its goal. The oceanic groundswell of mass discontent against Nehruvian Indian state could not be harnessed. The festival of ashes failed to douse the rebellion that Nehruvian regime made necessary. The war against China gave Nehru an opportunity to remove the burden of taxes on the big bourgeoisie and the landowning elite and place the responsibility of war economy on the workers and peasants, which included compulsory savings plan. The latter was rejected through working class militancy and Nehruvian regime became precarious. Hence his valuable mortal remains were turned into a consolation prize for the rebellious masses. But ashes can hardly calm seas of mass upheaval. That, as we know from an old Bengali historical fantasy, needs huge amount of oil. The wise sailors from Saptagram while returning from a commercial voyage with their fleet poured 55 barrels of oil to calm the Bay of Bengal during a storm and coasted safely. Similarly, wise sailors are appointed today to pour oil and tame the sea of mass rebellion – the so-called Communists like P.C. Joshi, S.G. Sardesai, Mohit Sen, Mohan Kumar Mangalam and Nikhil Chakraborty. These were the very people who drove the Communist party into the quick-sand of revisionism and have written exaggerated hagiographies of Gandhi and Nehru. Nehru needed them because as ‘Communists’ they had the image of being close to the pulse of the masses and could effectively hide the pro-imperialist capitulations of Nehru.”<sup>13</sup> This essay took polemical strikes at the fulfilment of self-interest by the Communist agents of the Nehru regime. Sen made fun of the enormity that Hiren Mukhopadhyay ascribed to his first meeting with Nehru in 1952; Mukhopadhyay gloated that Nehru was a resident of Olympia who could descend to meet the common men of the world, because Nehru, kindly enough, considered them his own. Sen wrote: "The juncture where Hiren Mukhopadhyay submits himself to god's kingdom is crucial." The paradise of British and U.S. capital, the haven of feudalism – Hyderabad’s Telangana – was under grave threat as the peasants rebelled and escalated a revolutionary war. Nehru sent his army in to crush the initially victorious peasant-rebels. In 1951, Nehru's armed forces, along

with 100,000 personnel of Nizam's army were successful in reclaiming this utopia of feudalism and foreign capital. The Nizam – right after the partition, or 'freedom' in 1947 – took a loan of £60 million from British capitalists, around this time U.S capitalists were building three large factories for the manufacture of arms and ammunition in the region. Imperialism was a local enemy of the Communist revolutionaries. Telangana was inspiring peasants from various regions of colonial/national India to eradicate feudalism. Nehru, by defending the Nizam and crushing the Telangana revolutionary movement clearly exhibited his reactionary orientation. “And in 1952, Hiren Mukhopadhyay (right after entering the parliament as a Communist representative) became a loyal devotee of the god of counter-revolution.”<sup>14</sup>

Working through the ornate and fuzzy praise that these 'Communists' showered on both Nehru and Gandhi – wherein Nehru was compared with Gautama Buddha umpteen times – Sen pointed out that there were a few core ideas that underpinned this celebration. These intellectuals claimed that the two *knew* and *understood* 'Indian' history, society, tradition with an insight and breadth that was exclusive to them. It was also declared that Gandhi and Nehru were aware of the perils of a structural and social revolution. They were traumatised by its enormous human cost (disclosed by their knowledge of modern revolutions). Nehru and Gandhi shunned that path and adopted the path of slow, peaceful transformation and co-existence of social groups and classes (which was – Sen pointed out – in sync with the revisionist Soviet party's propaganda that the existence of a powerful socialist bloc in the world guaranteed that empathisers like Nehru would deepen a socialist pattern in countries like colonial/national India through state machinations without tumult and local struggles<sup>15</sup>). It was argued that Nehru lacked the *crass bluntness* that was required from someone acting to create history. He was compelled to conserve in order to retain sophistication and modesty. The Communist leadership – like in their eulogy of Gandhi – also placed an allegation: despite the organically peaceful, prosperous and conflictless socio-political environment created by Nehru, the people did not want to bear the pain and suffering that would accompany socialist transformation planned by Indian state. This condescending stand of the Communist leadership towards 'people' was scandalous for Sen. P.C. Joshi was the most aggressive in this espousal of Nehru's and Congress' commitment to socialism/progress and dismissed criticism from other Communist positions as 'psychological disease' and 'insanity'.<sup>16</sup> It was this allegation of 'excess' and 'abnormality' that insurgent Communist partisans like Sen wore like a second skin.

Sen consistently enumerated the instances wherein when revolutionary change was imminent, Gandhi and Nehru helped quell it by collaborating with the colonial state. But Ray's primary concern was not that the 'Communist' apologists of Gandhi and Nehru must come clear on the politics of the two leaders; the demand was rather of having the apologists' own theory and practice of Communism and Marxism on the table. Sen wrote, "These intellectuals, once drawn to the indomitable spirit of proletarian revolutionary movement and Communism, made these their medium of self-expression and like washed-away moss entered the flood called Communist Party. Exploiting the weak moments of the party, they used their high degrees, polished English and proximity to imperialist culture and education to hide their true nature and attain a commanding position within the Party." They were propounding revisionist theories of peaceful transition to socialism and collaboration with bourgeois state to confuse the working class and deflect the party from the Communist programme. The party leaders became a tailpiece of Congress – a party of the bourgeoisie and the landlords. After 1947 – 'when the bourgeoisie acquired power' – they expressed themselves explicitly from the safe shell of Nehruvian regime.<sup>17</sup> Sen pointed out and condemned the fact that Hiren Mukhopadhyay called Nehru the hope and hero of an awakening Asia, without mentioning Mao Tse-tung or Ho Chi Minh: “Which Asia was Nehru a hero of? Contemporary Asia is a new and revolutionary Asia – in half of which workers and peasants have exterminated

imperialist exploitation through revolutionary struggle and are building socialism; the other half is resolutely following the path of revolutionary struggle. Is Nehru a partisan of these revolutionary places and people?"<sup>18</sup> Sen stated that China, by making a revolution and by an intense struggle to continue that revolution, had amplified the scope and legitimacy of Communism unprecedentedly. To sustain the incendiary spirit of the revolution and to think revolutionary thought, the party and the proletariat in China were alert on treacherous elements encroaching into Communist space – the party was a revolutionary guard on duty. On the other hand, in colonial/national India, 'a country as big as China', Communism 'is down and out'. But the powerful revisionist clique was not the sole contributive factor for Sen. "All Marxists and all radicals have to take responsibility for this. How was Communist space surrendered to revisionism and the revisionists? The only way out is for all Marxists to understand and reverse this cruel collective fate by implementing revolutionary methodology and patterning a great movement of thought and self-criticism."<sup>19</sup> This great movement of thought was welcomed not only by a schoolmaster of Calcutta in perfect internationalist vein, but in various Communist bastions across the world of 1960s.

- 1Bijan Sen, "Hiren Mukhopadhyayer Prothom 'Gentle Colossus': Gandhi" (Hiren Mukhopadhyay's First 'Gentle Colossus': Gandhi), *Kalpurush, Volume 1, 1967; Nirbachito Kalpurush (1967-1969): Sangshodhanbaad-Birodhi Sangram o Naxalbari (Selected articles from the journal Kalpurush, 1967-69: Naxalbari and the Struggle against Revisionism)*, Edited by Dipankar Chakraborty, *Radical Impression, 2011*. Hereafter PGC, P-239.
- 2Suprakash Ray, *Gandhibaader Swaroop* (The True Face of Gandhi's Ideology), 1987 (1967) P-52-53.
- 3See Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence*, Hurst and Company, London, 2012.
- 4PGC, P-243.
- 5 PGC, P-243.
- 6 *Ibid*, P-244.
- 7Also see Bibliography I.B.1-3, 5-8, 13-18, in Agnibho Gangopadhyay, *Biography of a Pseudonym: Suprakash Ray, Bengal, 1915-1990*, A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of History, University of Oxford In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, September 2018.
- 8The sharp contrast with the rational and secular disposition of Ray's eulogy of Mao Tse-tung is instructive. See Suprakash Ray, *Mao Tse-tung*, *Radical Impression, Calcutta, 1998*, first published in 1970.
- 9 PGC, P-242.
- 10*Ibid*, P-242.
- 11*Ibid*, P-242.
- 12*Ibid*, P-245.
- 13Bijan Sen, "Dwitiyo 'Gentle Colossus': Nehru", (*Second 'Gentle Colossus': Nehru*) *Kalpurush, Volume 2, 1967*, P-246-247, 256. Hereafter DGC.
- 14*Ibid*, P-256.
- 15*Ibid*, P-263. Also see E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *The Mahatma and the Ism*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1959.
- 16*Ibid*, P-250.
- 17*Ibid*, P-265.
- 18*Ibid*, P-261.
- 19*Ibid*, P-265.