

# Socialism in India: Conflicting International Outlooks?

Written by Saneet Chakradeo

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Among the various strands of India's rich and diverse political thought, socialist and Marxist ideas have found peculiar prominence over the years. India is one of the few liberal, capitalist democracies in the world to have semi-autonomous regions governed by political parties with an officially socialist ideology. Because of its historical importance in world politics, socialism does have a coherent set of ideas on world order and how human societies ought to be structured. In line with the dominant political ideologies in India that have a well-established international outlook, socialist ideas have generally been categorized as having a singular conception of India's outward approach. But this notion seems to reduce the intricate conflicts within the various socialist paradigms and ignores ideological nuances which have been historically prevalent across the world.

This essay aims to delineate the distinctions within the broader socialist ideologies in India's international thought by initially analysing conflicting currents in the Indian Leftist movement through a historical survey spanning across the twentieth and early twenty-first century. The major communist parties of India – the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (CPIM, Marxist) dominate the leftist political establishment in the country. But India has historically seen a variety of socialist ideas gain influence, even though they seem to be non-existent in today's political landscape. An example of the same is a more libertarian form of socialism as espoused by Indian freedom fighters MPT Acharya and Har Dayal, whose ideas have been unearthed by historians in recent times. The essay attempts to also use the framework laid out by Johnston (1995) for assessing international outlooks of the two diverging socialist schools by looking at their perceptions on three aspects – the nature of international life, the nature of the adversary, and the role of force.

### Diverging Socialist Conceptions in India

A cursory glance at the current political discourse in India would make anyone question the eminence of socialist thought in the country. However, worker unions and activist movements across regions have ensured that socialist ideas hold considerable clout in Indian politics. But the history of socialism in India has been dominated by the communist parties, which were born out of the struggle against the British in the 1920s.

The CPI was the first communist party that was formed in India. Although the exact year of the conception of the party is contested, the official date of establishment maintained by the party is 26<sup>th</sup> December 1925. Among the multiple founding members of the party were the well-known intellectual MN Roy and the largely unknown revolutionary MPT Acharya. The foundations of the communist movement in India were rooted in revolutionary nationalism that began to hold ground among the educated classes in Bengal in the late nineteenth century. Mainly influenced by the writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda, some of the key influencers of the communist movement began their revolutionary activities working with the members of the Anushilan Samiti, a Bengal based voluntary organization that advocated revolutionary violence as the sole means of overturning British rule in India (Ray, 2002).

While it is obvious that the Russian Revolution led by the Bolsheviks, which was considered to be highly revisionist by many Marxists at the time, had a massive influence on the ideological underpinnings of CPI's agenda, many believe that the Party took an even more right-ward turn by renouncing attempts to galvanize independent and grassroots level worker movements and aligning with the 'elite' leadership of the Congress, described by many on the

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left as the 'progressive bourgeoisie' (Vanaik, 1986). The story of the mainstream 'Left' in India from then on is that of continuous devolvement of traditional Marxist ideals and major revisionism in terms of strategy. It would have been inconceivable for Marx to approve of the policies carried out in his name by contemporary Marxists the world over, India being no exception. As notable scholar Praful Bidwai remarks about the Indian Left:

Indeed, it is hard to come across even a serious reference to Marx's *Capital*, not to speak of a commentary on it, in the writings of Communist Party intellectuals, however voluminous. Most first-generation communist party leaders I have known have never read *Capital* or other serious theoretical works by Marx such as the 'Grundrisse', nor, to take random examples, Marxists like Rosa Luxemburg or Antonio Gramsci."

Bidwai, 2015.

Having said that, there have been examples of more radical socialists participating in the independence struggle, MPT Acharya being a good example of the same. He initially gained notoriety within the British ruling class as the editor of a publication called *India* that came out with literature highly critical of the Raj and was steadfastly pursued by the British for his revolutionary work. This prompted him to flee to Europe, where he got involved with the India House, and further built on his anti-British credentials through collaborations with other activists. A string of events led him to meet Lenin in 1919, after which he got involved with the Communist International and later joined MN Roy in founding the CPI (Yadav, 1992).

But soon, major differences emerged between him and Roy over ideology and the happenings in Russia, which led to Acharya becoming increasingly critical of the international communist movement over the following years. Apart from a staunch opposition to Roy's tight control over the CPI, he progressively adopted a more libertarian socialist approach and was influenced by the ideas of prominent anarchist thinkers of the time, mainly active in Europe (Radhan, 2002). Acharya managed to galvanise support from fellow revolutionaries such as Ranchoddas Lotvala, who established the Institute of Indian Sociology, later renamed as the Libertarian Socialist Institute, and led the counter-communist revolutionary movement from then on. Acharya's differences with the communist movement are summed up in his quote:

We are not against Communism and we do not make a distinction between a Communist revolutionary or just a revolutionary. All we object to is forcible conversion to Communism; at least in the form dictated by Roy and the Comintern."

Barker et al. 2017

This ideological rift between authoritarian and libertarian socialism is representative of the historical global movements which have been at conflict ever since Marx's conception of socialism was challenged by thinkers such as Proudhon and Bakunin, who proposed a more direct democratic approach towards achieving social and economic equality. Libertarians believed the working class revolution could never achieve its ultimate goal by usurping state powers and forming vanguard political parties, which would give rise to a distinctly oppressive regime. The later failures of the Bolshevik revolution, wherein the worker councils or Soviets were dismantled as soon as Lenin seized control, is precisely what Bakunin had predicted and termed the "Red Bureaucracy" (Chomsky, 1994). It is only understandable that similar conceptions of socialist ideologies were lapped up by sections of Indian revolutionaries, as many of them drew inspiration from European radicals of the time. It is important to note that Acharya was not alone in his alignment with the libertarian socialist movement in India, with figures such as Har Dayal and Bhagat Singh also espousing similar ideas through their writings. The Tamil social activist Periyar Ramaswamy shows inclinations towards libertarian thinking in his work. In contemporary times, thinkers such as K Balagopal, Arundhati Roy, and Jean Dreze have written on similar ideas of social organization.

Having made the case for the existence of diverging socialist philosophies in the Indian independence struggle, I will now attempt to analyse how these differing notions of socialist thought could have different visions for India's international outlook.

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## The Nature of International Life

While all socialists broadly agree on several important fundamentals of how a society ought to be structured, there are important differences in the strategies adopted by libertarian and authoritarian socialists. While both camps agree on the necessity of looking beyond the nation-state as the ultimate system of organization, the communists insist on a temporary or 'practical' approach of seizing state powers to achieve economic and social equality, before the state 'withers' away into full-fledged communism. This falls directly in contrast to the fundamentals of libertarian socialism, whose adherents reject centralized ownership and control of the economy by the state, while advocating for a completely anarchical distribution of resources.

This extreme contempt for the state is derived from the central principle of libertarian socialism of rejection of all illegitimate hierarchies. But, this notion of a state-less society is not where libertarian socialist thought begins. Rather, a deep suspicion towards all authority and concentration of power is where this anarchist tendency is derived from (Dreze, 2016). Although communism as envisaged by Marx is ultimately stateless, Marxists-Leninists adopted a pragmatic approach to communism and called it 'socialism.' Bakunin, who was a major influence on Indian revolutionaries such as Har Dayal, prophesied in his work *Statism and Anarchy*:

The differences between revolutionary dictatorship and statism are superficial. Fundamentally they both represent the same principle of minority rule over the majority in the name of the alleged "stupidity" of the latter and the alleged "intelligence" of the former. Therefore, they are both equally reactionary since both directly and inevitably must preserve and perpetuate the political and economic privileges of the ruling minority and the political and economic subjugation of the masses of the people."

Bakunin, 1873.

Like all Marxists around the world, Indian communists also pledged allegiance to the USSR, Lenin, and later Stalin, which meant the adoption of a highly statist stance towards revolution. MPT Acharya renounced this autocratic form of revolution and advocated for a truly democratic structure of organization:

In the Marxian so-called class-state, the Bureaucracy and Party come before all workers, for they are the mainstay of the State and Government. There cannot be even a class state, for all the class cannot conduct the state-after delegation of its powers. Especially as every state is centralist, i.e. despotic."

The Anarchist Library, 2018.

While Marxists promote the use of class as the fundamental unit of human organization, libertarian socialists argue that a further distinction of society can be achieved by considering individual sovereignty as a viable unit of the same. Statists argue that emergent nation-state associations overturn lower units at ethical and political levels, counter to which, anarchists point out the greater normative significance of the individual. Some libertarians go beyond this individualist conception and advocate small groups or communities to have self-autonomy while conceiving a self-sustainable society (Prichard, 2012). Hence, a federalist structuring of international society is the ultimate goal of libertarian socialists, without 'compromising' on strategies to achieve this condition.

Indian Marxists approved of the Stalinist approach that advocated for the spread of state socialism to the rest of the world, and the interim need of the nation-state (Bajpai, 2014). This consequently meant the existence of international relations between states, adherence to state sovereignty, war, and thus, national armies. But, for libertarian socialists, only relentless activism can lead to the conditions where the foundations of the nation-state can be toppled and appeals for support from the wider global community can be extracted to achieve further recognition of their federalist existence. Noted activist K Balagopal wrote in his critique of communist theory and its applications to the Indian context:

In such an effort (a Leninist vanguard party), the suppressed masses would not even be half awakened to their potential. Even if such a party were to claim that it learns from the people, and even if [it] were to honestly try to do so,

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the very strategy would be inadequate. If there can at all be a single 'party' which would lead a movement for social transformation, it can only be a federally structured organisation, whose free and equal units would be the political units, centred on the self-directed struggles of various sections of the deprived."

Balagopal, 2011.

The First International, founded by Karl Marx and other European radicals of the time, defined socialism as the abolition of the wage system (The Anarchist Library, 2018). This was the central tenet on which a socialist economy was supposed to have been established. Having overseen the failures of the Bolsheviks in eradicating wage slavery, Acharya turned to Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Peter Kropotkin to formulate a truly socialist economic model. This 'liberal' kind of communism began with the establishment of local councils, owned by workers, that could drive industry and production to meet the needs of these federations. Kropotkin differed from Marx in attributing the fruits of labour to the entire community, instead of the worker solely, as he foresaw the conditions that led to the worker being able to produce this labour. Similarly, Acharya believed that all things wherever found were the common property of all local councils, and that they arrange production and distribution of all things produced everywhere for the greatest benefit of everyone. He echoed Kropotkin's demand of 'well-being for all.'

Thus, libertarian socialists of today would envision a global society evocative of the Spanish territories of Catalonia and Aragon post the Spanish workers' revolution of 1936, which witnessed the widespread implementation of libertarian socialist principles through worker run communes for a period of three years. Although there have been multiple experiments of establishing stateless societies, the worker-controlled Spanish regions led by the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) and Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) have been the most prominent examples of how anarchical societies could be envisioned. It is extremely pertinent to point out that the demise of these worker-controlled economies was facilitated by the stifling of support by Stalin's Soviet Union before Franco's forces took over in 1939. Contemporary libertarian socialists in India, while sympathetic towards this ideology, vehemently oppose Marxist dominance of Leftist politics, and focus on achieving emancipation for the oppressed minorities within the country while harbouring sympathies for their counterparts across the world. Leading libertarian socialists today understand the utopianism of aiming for an ideal society, and define their goals as defending some state institutions from attack, while trying to pry them open to more meaningful public participation (Chomsky, 1996).

### **The Nature of the Adversary**

Because of the statist inclinations of Marxists, 'national' level threats for communist states can be envisioned. Lenin's theory of imperialism posits that capitalist countries go to war with other countries over the need for sustaining their economies and market dominance. Because capitalism is the principal ideological adversary for communists, leading capitalist states like the United States are the primary threat to national security for Marxists. In order to achieve Marxist socialism, the global influence of the capitalist states needs to be reined in, and attempts to spread this totalitarian form of government to other nations should be pursued. Marxists more or less share the contempt for global capitalism and capitalist states with libertarian socialists. They have concurrent views on issues such as the use of nuclear weapons, imperialist foreign policy, global environmental activism, and economic globalization. Also, any form of fascistic organization is strongly condemned by both camps.

Internally, the Indian bourgeoisie along with the dominant political parties form the oppressive class that needs to be toppled, according to the Marxists. Again, greater emphasis is laid out on class distinctions than any other categorization, leading to a narrow-minded approach to achieving equality. With little to no consideration for concepts such as identity and related structural oppression, Indian Marxists rely on a strictly economic perception of social justice. When the primary vehicle of social change is moved from class to the individual, identity begins to have greater relevance in facilitating revolution. A society under state control can have distinctions on the basis of religion, sexual orientation, gender, race, and caste, which systemically ingrain the oppression of minority identities. We can see the prevalent ignorance regarding issues such as women's rights and backward castes' rights among Indian Marxists by looking at the representation of these identities within the party leadership. Indeed, the politburo membership of some of the biggest communist parties in the world also alludes to this point. It validates the notion of Indian Marxists having a rather blindsided view of liberation with their over-emphasis on using class as a tool for

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emancipation.

If the dismantling of all illegitimate hierarchies is the key objective of libertarian socialism, the recognition of systemic oppression on the lines of gender, race, religion, and caste assumes primary importance. Along with identifying struggles based on class distinctions, libertarian socialists evaluate the imbalances caused by the state capitalist apparatus and work towards empowering oppressed sections of the population such as women, Dalits, religious minorities, persons with disabilities, and the poor. Activists such as Arundhati Roy and K Balagopal have been leading efforts towards rehabilitation of indigenous populations displaced due to industrialization and minority rights in India. Again, Balagopal has pertinent words on the matter:

What seems to be required are 'localised' (both spatially and socially) movements that are specific enough to bring out the full potential and engender the full self-realisation of various oppressed groups, subsequently federated into a wider movement that can (in a free and democratic way) channelise the aroused energies into a broad movement."

Balagopal, 2011.

Thus, due to ideological oppositions to the capitalist status quo, adherents of both forms of socialist thought have several overlapping views on what the nature of the adversary is. But there are important differences in the strategy to be adopted towards change between both schools. The pre-eminence of class in the analysis of societal failures within Marxists makes for a myopic interpretation of struggle in the eyes of libertarians, who encourage looking beyond economic distinctions within society. This difference of opinion also lends to a divergent view of what the international nature of the adversary is for both schools. While for Marxists, working class solidarity extends across borders, libertarians refer to the systemic oppression of certain sections of the society across every state-capitalist entity, such as women, the LGBT community, religious and ethnic minorities, and indigenous peoples.

### **The Role of Force**

Having different views on what the nature of the adversary is makes for a unique conception of the use of force in both socialist ideologies. Marxists and communists have never had an aversion to the use of violence to achieve their goals. Indeed, as per Marxists, the social fabric within a capitalist system imposes violence on to the working classes due to its inherent oppression, and only an armed struggle against the bourgeoisie is a viable strategy. The Leninists, thus, argue for the existence of organized armies within the state apparatus to help tackle and resist global imperialism. Although contemporary Indian Marxists would dislike the diversion of resources from developmental measures towards the strengthening of the military, they would treat it as a practical and necessary compromise (Bajpai, 2014). Internationally, along with condemning the use of force by capitalist regimes, Indian Marxists ignore the aggressive overtures of so-called communist forces, including China. This aligns with the historical support provided to Stalin, Mao, and a few other Marxist-Leninist regimes by Indian communists of the time.

This is a major point of deflection regarding the use of force for libertarians, who treat most state-affiliated violence as abhorrent and unjust. While treating every human life as sacrosanct, they recognize the right to self-determination of oppressed ethnicities, and its expression in the form of a nation-state. This, according to some of them, does not particularly make them inherently 'violent'. Traditionally, libertarians have been of the opinion that the use of violence against an unjust authority can be a legitimate tool for gaining justice. Indian revolutionary and the founder of the Ghadar Party in the US, Lala Har Dayal, was involved in extensive anti-British activities around the turn of the twentieth century, and celebrated the assassination attempts on the then Indian Viceroy. Having established the Bakunin Institute of California, which he described as the 'first monastery of anarchism,' he advocated for a social revolution in India against the British as per the ideas of Bakunin (Puri, 1983).

MPT Acharya, on the other hand, believed that libertarians are "absolute pacifists and humanists" and that arms "corrupt and blunt the mind." They do not want to see a truly libertarian society established with the help of arms and soldiers but through social solidarity. He believed that every armed revolution will fail to emancipate mankind as a worse government will take over from a bad one with the help of armed men (The Anarchist Library, 2018). Although this notion may seem contradictory to the imagery of a revolutionary, it is not entirely uncommon within libertarian

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socialist thought. There have been pacifist socialists such as Leo Tolstoy and Henry David Thoreau, who could be termed 'anarcho-pacifists' in their approach towards challenging the status quo (Woodcock, 1962).

Hence, whereas Marxists have had a consistent attitude towards the role of force and violence in their struggle against capitalism, there have been conflicting views among libertarians on whether a violent grassroots revolution is justified in achieving their objectives.

## Concluding Remarks

The historical conflict between authoritarian and libertarian socialists since the emergence of the two philosophies in Europe has had echoes in India also. Principled differences regarding the nature of the revolution and the struggle against the British led to the formation of two separate factions within the communist movement in India. Although the roots of the struggle were based in the era of colonial oppression, the ultimate aims of both the movements can be said to be too idealistic for the world even today. However, that does not stop contemporary adherents of these ideologies to conceive of ideas to effect change. This essay is an attempt to provide a definitive distinction between these conceptions within the two socialist schools of thought.

The primary conflict between the two schools is regarding the need of a 'temporary' state before a fully autonomous and stateless society is reached. The ideological roots of this conflict are based on differing notions with respect to systemic oppression and the unit of societal characterization on which the struggle for liberation should be based on. While Marxists prefer using class as the primary instrument for achieving communism, libertarians advocate for a deeper look at society to identify structural subjugation based on identity.

Although the history of Leftist thought in India is widely associated with the communist parties, there have been differing currents that have not received as much attention as they probably deserve. The ideas of revolutionaries such as MPT Acharya and Har Dayal have not yet managed to carve out a niche within India's broader political spectrum, but they surely offer unique insights into approaches for carrying out large scale social movements. While it can be safe to say that the current political climate in India does not warrant an immediate and widespread adoption of such ideas, but as contemporary libertarians would say, they are the ones currently effecting social change on multiple fronts. Moreover, libertarian socialist thought can help us with closely evaluating the relationship between class and identity, be wary of all forms of authoritarianism, and expand our knowledge of democracy.

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