

**The Communists in post-colonial Bengal, 1948-52:  
The untold story of ‘second’ Tebhaga.<sup>1</sup>**

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**I**

West Bengal is a province of India where a communist party - the Communist Party of India (Marxist) - in coalition with some other leftist parties, has been continuously in power for nearly three decades now. It has been elected to and has held on to power within a democratic constitutional framework. But in the past the communists in Bengal have also used violent revolutionary methods to secure power. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s this part of the communist movement became known as the Naxalite movement and a significant literature already exists on this.<sup>2</sup> But what is less known is that the events of the 1960s-70s had a historical precedent in 1948-49 in the early days of independence. It is this less known aspect of the long and chequered history of the communist movement in Bengal that this paper seeks to unravel. This story has remained untold for various reasons – the first being the problem of sources. During the period there were regular newspaper reports of unrest, but the newspapers did not either know or did not report everything that was happening, or in other words, the real extent of the communist insurgency that started in West Bengal from the middle of 1948 remained unknown to the general public. The communists themselves have not told this story until recently, because this was another failed attempt at what later came to be condemned as ‘left adventurism’. The government knew through its intelligence network what was actually happening, but kept a veil of secrecy. The professional historians have not written about it because the archives were closed and there were no other sources. The recent release of the IB (Intelligence Branch) records at the West Bengal State Archives has broken that impasse, and these records can now help us reconstruct this story in some details, for the first time, albeit remain the dangers of trying to write the history of insurgency from the texts of counter-insurgency.

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<sup>2</sup> See Ashish K. Roy, *Spring Thunder and After*, Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1975; Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising*, London: Zed Books, 1984; Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and their Ideology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

The beginning of the communist movement in Bengal can be dated back to the 1920s when the CPI was formed in 1925. As the Gandhian non-violent mass movement took over Indian politics, the ex-terrorist detainees in prison, who allegedly also detested the anti-modernist stance of Gandhism, were converted to Marxism. And thus Bengal communism started with a pre-dominantly educated middle class or *bhadralok* base. Marcus Franda has described it as the most elitist movement, at least in terms of its leadership.<sup>3</sup> This constituted a major dilemma for the Bengal communists, argues a recent Oxford thesis and they tried to resolve it by looking at their role as primarily pedagogic, i.e., educating the peasants and the workers.<sup>4</sup>

The Communist party remained banned in India, while the communists used other front organisations to work, like the Congress Socialist Party, but more importantly the Kisan Sabhas. In Bengal the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha or BPKS came to be dominated by the communists. Under its initiative significant peasant mobilisation took place in northern and eastern Bengal, particularly in the wake of the decline of the Civil Disobedience movement (1929-34). Their relationship with the Congress remained ambivalent, but never openly antagonistic.<sup>5</sup> But the situation changed in 1942, as the 'People's War' campaign began. The communists proposed to support the war efforts; the ban on the Communist party was lifted, and as a *quid pro quo* the CPI agreed to oppose the Quit India movement. It never questioned the patriotism of the Congress, and some recent researches show that some individual communists in Bengal could not resist the patriotic fervour of the day and participated in the movement defying the party whip.<sup>6</sup> But the communists in general were condemned for their 'treachery' and became branded as 'enemies of freedom'. As Manikuntala Sen, a prominent leader of the CPI in the 1940s, recalls in her autobiography, from here began the social and later political repression of the communists.<sup>7</sup>

This began to change again after the Quit India movement subsided and the communists began to return to the political mainstream. They came back initially through relief work in the wake of the Bengal famine of 1943 and then through heightened activities at the trade

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, Cambridge and London: The M.I.T.Press, 1971, pp. 13-14 and passim.

<sup>4</sup> Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'Marxism and the Middle Class Intelligentsia: Culture and Politics in Bengal 1920s-1950s', Unpublished D.Phil Thesis: Oxford University, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> For details see, Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'The Quit India Movement in Medinipur District', in *The Indian Nation in 1942*, ed. Gyanendra Pandey, Calcutta, K.P.Bagchi & Co., 1988, pp. 44, 68.

<sup>7</sup> Manikuntala Sen, *Sediner Katha*, Calcutta: Nabapatra, 1982, pp.59-66

union front and also peasant mobilisation. There were also attempts to ensure communal harmony, but this happened more at the picket lines. The effectiveness of its mobilisation among the urban working class and the students and youth was demonstrated in the anti-INA trial riots in Calcutta between 21 and 24 November 1945, where demonstrators were simultaneously flying the Congress, League and Communist flags.<sup>8</sup> Another explosion sparked off in Calcutta between 11 and 13 February 1946 to protest against the imprisonment of Captain Rashid Ali, an INA prisoner. It was called initially by the student wing of the Muslim League, but was later joined by the members of the communist led Student Federation and industrial workers. Once again demonstrations followed, with Congress, League and Red flags flying simultaneously, and large meetings were organised, where League, Communist and Congress leaders addressed the crowd. A general anti-British sentiment pervaded the city, which was paralysed by transport strikes, industrial action and pitched street battles with British troops. Another major success was the Post and Telegraph strike on 29 July 1946, supported by the communist student organisation and all other trade unions. The whole city of Calcutta came to a halt, as a mammoth meeting at Calcutta maidan indicated the imminent arrival of freedom.<sup>9</sup>

The Communist Party now moved towards a more belligerent line. In a resolution adopted on 5 August 1946 it declared that the 'Indian freedom movement has entered its final phase'. So what was needed was a 'joint front of all patriotic parties' to stage a 'national democratic revolution' that would ensure 'all power to the people'. Against this backdrop, in September 1946 the BPKS decided to launch the Tebhaga movement and soon it spread to a wide region where peasants harvested the paddy and took it to their own *khamar* (storehouse) and then invited the landlords to come and take their one-third share. Although north Bengal districts were the worst affected by this sharecroppers' agitation, contrary to popular notion, as Adrienne Cooper has shown, Tebhaga movement touched a much wider region, covering almost every district in eastern, central and western Bengal. But the movement did not ultimately achieve much, as the Muslim League government came down heavily with repressive measures, and the BPKS ultimately decided to abandon this uneven battle. It achieved nothing, as pro-sharecropper bill proposed by the government was later abandoned under the pressure of the landlord lobby belonging to both Muslim League and Congress.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See for details, Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition: The Erosion of Colonial Power in India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000, pp.100-115.

<sup>9</sup> Gautam Chattopadhyay, 'The Almost Revolutions: A Case Study of India in February 1946' in *Essays in Honour of S.C.Sarkar*, ed. B. De, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1976, pp. 427-50; 'Bengal Students in Revolt Against the Raj, 1945-46', in *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47*, ed. A.K.Gupta, New Delhi: Manohar, 1987, pp. 152-71.

<sup>10</sup> For details of the Tebhaga movement, see Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47*; Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggle in Bengal 1930-1950*, Calcutta: K.P.Bagchi & Co, 1988.

The communists faced a deep moral quandary as the country plunged into communal violence initiated by the Great Calcutta killings starting from 16 August 1946. Their existing political aim to unite the Congress and the League in a united struggle against the British Empire was defeated. They could not do anything to arrest the violence and when the Hindu Mahasabha in early 1947 started a campaign for the partition of the province, they opposed it, but could not actively resist it. The two communist leaders in the Bengal Legislative Assembly voted against the partition resolution, but that did not count for anything. When ‘freedom’ came with partition, the communists were hardly in a mood to rejoice, as the veteran communist leader Abani Lahiri tells us in a recent interview with the historian Ranajit Dasgupta.<sup>11</sup>

## II

The Partition riots put the CPI in a political crisis that forced upon it a policy of co-operation with the Congress and the Congress governments at the Centre as well as in the provinces. The Calcutta session of the party in September 1947 advocated the formation of an All Party Committee for the protection of the minorities. For this purpose, it also gave a call to all Leftists to unite after sinking their past differences and bitterness over the ‘People’s War’ slogan and rally behind the Dominion Government to stop the riots across the country. And not just that, the CPI through its leaders and volunteers also participated in the West Bengal government’s food procurement drives and actions against black marketing.<sup>12</sup> The provincial committee decided not to resort to any radical action, such as launching the Tebhaga movement in the coming harvesting season, and instructed its local units, particularly in the kisan front, not to incite the peasants into any such direct action and to take recourse to such legitimate methods as arbitration and amicable settlements in guarding the peasants’ rights.<sup>13</sup> Even in some CPI meetings in the interior Congress flag was hoisted side by side with the red flag.<sup>14</sup>

However, this spirit of co-operation was short lived, as by the end of the year, when the riots stopped and the general law and order situation evidently improved, the CPI leadership began to feel that they were losing the political initiative to organise a mass movement in order to seize power in independent India. They began to withdraw their support for the Congress governments both at the centre and the provinces and thought of steps to replace it

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<sup>11</sup> Abani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist Activist*, Calcutta: Seagull, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Extract from monthly review on Communist affairs in Bengal dated 10<sup>th</sup> October 1947 (No.13)’, IB Records, S.No.7/1926, F.No. 35/26(M.F.) Part XIII, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata [hereafter WBSA].

<sup>13</sup> ‘Extract from Monthly Review on communist Affairs in West Bengal dated the 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1947 (No.14)’, IB Records, S.No. 7/1926, F.No. 35/26(M.F.) Part XIII, WBSA.

<sup>14</sup> Copy of a DIB officer’s report dated 21.11.47, IB Records, S.No.285/1926, F.No. 35/26(Midnapore), WBSA.

with a 'progressive people's government'.<sup>15</sup> From late November - early December they began to organise meetings in villages where they raised the demands for abolition of the *zamindari* system without compensation, redistribution of land, fair wages for agricultural labourers and of course the demand for tebhaga for the sharecroppers.<sup>16</sup> To many of their middle class and intellectual leaders the Telengana movement at this stage provided a model to seize the initiative – a violent revolutionary movement could help them surmount the timidity of middle class intellectualism.<sup>17</sup> This activism could shift the focus of attention away from community to class – in other words, this could be their answer to politics of communal conflict.

This change of policy received further endorsement from Moscow, which sought to revive the Cominform and declared in September 1947 (in a conference in Poland) it's 'A.Zhadanov thesis' of encouraging more activism on the part of the international communist parties – Moscow's answer to Marshall plan.<sup>18</sup> The news of the Communist movement in eastern and central Europe, but more importantly in Asia - in China, Malaya, Indonesia and closer at hand in Burma grabbed the headlines in every day's newspapers in India and inspired the Indian communists. In this context, the CPI held its Second Congress in Calcutta between 28 February and 6 March 1948, where it adopted its 'Political Thesis', which argued that the national government established on 15 August 1947 was indeed the major enemy of freedom for the Indian people and therefore needed to be replaced.

Its [Congress government's] establishment does not mean that the Indian people have won either freedom or independence, nor does it ensure that they will be moving in the direction of democracy and freedom for the people.

On the contrary, the government has already made a big move in the opposite direction - against the interests of the freedom of the people. It is linking itself with the Anglo-American bloc of imperialist powers - a bloc which seeks to crush all democratic revolutions and to create satellite states. It is manoeuvring to find an advantageous position for itself in the Anglo-American bloc.<sup>19</sup>

So to prevent this situation the party decided to follow which popularly came to be known as the 'B.T.Randive line', or the path of promoting in India a 'People's Democratic Revolution'. Within the specific political context of India, its aim would be 'to bring about those fundamental changes in our political and social structure without which there can be

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<sup>15</sup> 'Draft Annual Administrative Report 1948 – Section VII', IB Records, S.No. 205/1928, F.No.32/28(1949), WBSA.

<sup>16</sup> 'Extracts from West Bengal Police Abstracts [hereafter WBPA] dated 15.11. 47, 6.12.47, 13.12.47, IB Records, S.No. 285/1926, F.No. 35/26 (Midnapore), WBSA.

<sup>17</sup> See, Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'Rhythmic Revolution: Marxism and Culture in Colonial Bengal', *Studies in History*, 21, 1. n.s., 2005, pp.96-97.

<sup>18</sup> M.R.Masani, *The Communist Party of India: A Short History*, London: Derek Verschoyle, 1954, p.89.

<sup>19</sup> *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol. V, Calcutta: National Book Agency Ltd., 1997, pp.600-601.

no freedom and no prosperity for our people. The present state will be replaced by a people's democratic republic - a republic of workers, peasants and oppressed middle classes.<sup>20</sup>

Revolutionary activities through communist initiative were already visible in the urban industrial areas of Calcutta and Howrah, where the most immediate result of the unsettled political and economic conditions since August 1947, fuelled by retrenchment and unemployment, was increasing industrial strife, which continued well into 1949. Almost every group of worker, under leftist leadership, went into industrial action during this period. On an average six to ten industrial establishments remained closed every week due to strike action. Six million man-days were lost in 1947, and it came down to 330,000 in the first quarter of 1948 – but this statistical fall was largely because of partition.<sup>21</sup> According to another report, in 1948, there were 200 labour strikes in various mills and factories in West Bengal, involving 278,858 labourers.<sup>22</sup> Particularly hard-hit were the European owned concerns, like the ICI, Britannia Engineering, Jessop & Co., Martin Burn, Lipton, Jenson & Nicholson and others. Apart from that, teachers, bank employees, government employees struck for better pay and working conditions. One new feature of this industrial unrest of this period was that in a number of cases European engineers and supervisors became targets of physical assault,<sup>23</sup> the worst case being the attack orchestrated by a rebel group of the Revolutionary Communist Party on Jessop in February 1949, where three foreign engineers were thrown into the blazing furnace.<sup>24</sup>

The Jessop incident was discussed even at the House of Commons and therefore became a major problem for the government and the police, who were intent on preventing any recurrence of such attacks on Europeans as this would have serious adverse effects on the country's economy and foreign relations. But information was continually coming in that industrial labour in western Bengal and the plantation labour in the north, under the instigation of the Communists, were planning more of such attacks.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to imagine with any amount of certainty what the mentality was behind such physical attacks. The government believed that this was because of the widespread rumours that recent retrenchments were because of the European staff, and if they could be threatened or

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.643.

<sup>21</sup> Acting Dy HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 15 June 1948, India Office Records, London [hereafter IOR]: L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>22</sup> 'Annual Administration Report 1948 – Section VII', IB Records, S. No. 205/28, F. No. 32/28(1948), WBSA.

<sup>23</sup> Dy HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 8 April 1949; Dy HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 22 April 1949, IOR: L/P&J/5/320.

<sup>24</sup> Saroj Chakrabarty, *With Dr. B.C.Roy and other Chief Ministers*, Calcutta: Benson's, 1974, p.115.

<sup>25</sup> Extract from D.O.No.3265/31-49 dated 8<sup>th</sup> July 1949, from superintendent of Police Darjeeling', IB Records, S.No. 9/1926, F.No. 35/26, Part XI, WBSA.

coerced, the proposed retrenchments would not take place.<sup>26</sup> But perhaps a more cogent motive behind such attacks was an attempt to reclaim the right of citizenship as the workers interpreted it. At a meeting of the Post and Telegraph workers' union in November 1951 a speaker referred to the 'tyranny' of one European supervisor named 'David'. The speaker urged the workers 'not to tolerate the torture and abuse of David as we are the citizens of free country. We have every right to live like David.'<sup>27</sup> The old ways of controlling labour would not work any more in the new days of freedom. It also seemed that in independent India the European body was no longer sacrosanct, a sentiment which could be seen in other spheres of life as well. As the British Deputy High Commissioner reported from Calcutta, for the first time in 1948 the European and Anglo-Indian ladies became targets for throwing coloured water during the *holi* festival, something that never happened during the days of the Raj.<sup>28</sup>

If the city was reeling under pressure, the countryside was no better either. Peasants came to the city of Calcutta and demonstrated demanding food.<sup>29</sup> In November 1947 there was a major peasant rally in Calcutta organised by the Kisan Sabha. The march ended at the Assembly House, despite the police trying to stop them near the Curzon Park with *lathi*-charge and tear gas. The Chief Minister refused to address the rally, although previously he had promised to do so.<sup>30</sup> After the Second Congress in pursuance of the Randive policy the local branch of the CPI began to organise regular terrorist attacks on various representations of the state, the major targets being the police and the public transport system. The newspapers of this period show that every week one or two and sometimes more violent incidents occurred either in Calcutta or in the villages, the worst affected districts being those in western and central Bengal and the tea garden areas of north Bengal.

The Congress government, the main target of this civil unrest that was gradually gathering momentum, chose to follow the familiar and well-trodden path of its predecessor, the British Raj, i.e., disciplining those who were creating the unrest. In November 1947 in a notification it banned all 'sit-in' strikes or *satyagraha*. And then in December it introduced what became notorious as the West Bengal Security Bill, proposing detention without trial up to six months. It actually intended to legitimise an ordinance issued by the previous Muslim League government, under which between June and December 1947, 1,486 people were been arrested.<sup>31</sup> The Legislative Assembly proceedings of this period provides

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<sup>26</sup> From Commissioner, Burdwan division to District Magistrate, Burdwan, 8 June 1949, IB Records, S.No. 9/1926, F.No. 35/26, Part XI, WBSA.

<sup>27</sup> 'Confidential report dated 30.11.51 regarding the meeting held at Chittaranjan Avenue in front of "Jabakusum House" under the auspices of the P & T workers Union', IB Records, F.No.1554/32, WBSA.

<sup>28</sup> Acting Dy HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 30 March 1948, IOR: L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>29</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 1 October 1947.

<sup>30</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 23 Novemebr 1947.

<sup>31</sup> Dy HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 30 December 1947, IOR: L/P&J/5/315.

interesting reading, as the Gandhiite Chief Minister P.C.Ghosh introduced and defended the bill, a Communist Jyoti Basu opposed it clause by clause, arguing that the bill went against 'the proclaimed policy of the Congress for last 40 years'. The Chief Minister's cryptic reply was that the point was 'irrelevant here'.<sup>32</sup> Outside the Assembly, the main opposition to the bill came from Sarat Bose, who had lately resigned from Congress and was about to form his own Socialist Republican Party.<sup>33</sup> There were violent student protests against the bill in front of the Assembly on 8 December and then again on the 10th, when police opened fire, killing one person and injuring 30 others.<sup>34</sup>

On 11 December, in view of the mounting public protest, the Assembly was adjourned till early January. In the meanwhile, the Congress launched a vigorous campaign to generate public support for the bill. Nehru in a press conference at the Calcutta Governor House on 17 December and Sardar Patel at a mass rally at Calcutta Maidan on 3 January lent their support to the bill, arguing that this one was in fact much milder than the ones proposed in other provinces. Then on 17 December Suresh Banerjee, the deputy leader of the Congress in West Bengal claimed that he had an interview with Gandhi in New Delhi and that he had given his blessings to the bill. In spite of all opposition the bill was passed on 15 January, with the only concession of a reduction of the period of detention without trial from six to three months.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, on the same day P.C.Ghosh resigned from Chief Ministership, to be succeeded sometime later by B.C.Roy, known to be a staunch anti-communist ideologue.<sup>36</sup>

Then, within weeks after the Second Congress of the CPI, in a dramatic move on 25 March 1948 the West Bengal Government decided to ban the Communist Party of India in this province, against the expressed wishes of Prime Minister Nehru.<sup>37</sup> Immediately after that the police arrested all the major CPI leaders and pre-censorship orders were passed against its organ *Swadhinata*. In a statement to justify the ban the Home Minister Kiran Shankar Ray announced in the Assembly that the government had evidence that the CPI's 'object' was 'to create a state of chaos and to take advantage of that situation in order ultimately to seize power by violent means'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, [hereafter WBLAP], Vol.1, 8 December 1947, p.69.

<sup>33</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 6, 9 December 1947.

<sup>34</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 12 December 1947.

<sup>35</sup> Government of West Bengal, Judicial and Legislative (Legislative) Department, *The West Bengal Security Act 1948*, Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1948.

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed analysis of the controversy over the Security Bill, see my article, 'Freedom and its Enemies: The Politics of Transition in West Bengal, 1947-49', *South Asia*, n.s., vol.XXIX, no.1, April 2006, pp.43-68.

<sup>37</sup> Saroj Chakrabarty, *With Dr. B.C.Roy and other Chief Ministers*, pp.92-94.

<sup>38</sup> WBLAP, Vol.II, No.2, 8-30 March 1948, p.346.



## III

What started in West Bengal after the banning of the CPI was a regime of repression and anti-Communist witch-hunting. The government reacted with repressive measures reminiscent of the colonial days, the worst incident of high handedness being that of 27 April 1949, when the police opened fire on a Communist procession in Calcutta, killing 7 people, including 5 women volunteers.<sup>39</sup> Calcutta hereafter burst into flames, recording 57 incidents – described in Police Intelligence Reports as ‘C.P.I. outrages’ – in eight months between 1 May and 31 December 1949. These included peaceful demonstrations, marches and meetings; as well as throwing bombs, acid bulbs, soda water bottles and crackers at public transport vehicles, police parties, and alleged collaborators.<sup>40</sup> But it was in the countryside that the Communist activities increased manifold between 1948 and 1949, i.e., after the banning of the party. Although this movement came to be known in official parlance as an attempt to re-launch the Tebhaga movement, the demands of this communist upsurge were much broader and included such other demands as abolition of the zamindari system without compensation and land to the tillers, which appealed to a large section of poor peasants and landless *bhagchasees* or sharecroppers. The movement became more effective in some inaccessible areas of rural West Bengal, like the Kakdwip police station of the 24-Parganas, Domjur and Jagatballavpur in Howrah, Borakamalpur and Chanditala areas in Hooghly, Jaypur and Vishnupur police stations in Bankura, Agradwip and Raina areas in Burdwan and the Tamluk, Ghatal and Sadar sub-divisions in Midnapore district. Some incidents like those in Borakamalpur, Duberbheri, and Kakdwip became more prominent than others in communist legends. But apart from these more well-known cases, in general, extensive areas of rural West Bengal were reeling under extreme forms of peasant agitation during this time.

In Hooghly the movement started in March-April 1948 when the CPI volunteers in Borakamalpur clashed with the local zamindar and the Congressmen who supported him. The violent incidents that were reported included ‘dacoities, house breaking and rioting with deadly weapons’. The police intervened and opened fire, killing two people.<sup>41</sup> In Duberbheri on 22 January 1949 a local watch and ward staff was attacked and when a wealthy villager came to his rescue, his gun was snatched. When the police arrived, they had to face an irate crowd of women volunteers armed with ‘all kinds of deadly weapons’. When the mob injured three constables, the police opened fire, killing two women and injuring several others. If these two incidents in Hooghly got more publicity, there were

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<sup>39</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 28 April 1949.

<sup>40</sup> Details in IB Records, S. No. 206/1928, F. No. 32/28 (1949) K.W.folder, WBSA.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Draft Annual Administrative Report 1948- Section VII’, IB Records, S. No.205/28, F. No. 32/28 (1948), WBSA.

other similar incidents that remained unreported in the media.<sup>42</sup> In the 24-Parganas too, the Communists built strong bases in several police stations mainly in the south, such as Sonarpur, Bhangor, Haroa, Sandeshkhali, Baduria, Jaynagar, Canning and of course, Kakdwip. In these areas the grievances of the poorer peasantry against the government procurement system and demands for tebhaga and possession of land were mobilised for armed conflicts with the local jotdars and the police.<sup>43</sup> In Kakdwip troubles began in early June of 1949, when the local Kisan Sabha members attacked the *kutcheribari* and the residence of a zamindar and kidnapped a member of his family whose body was never found. This brought in harsh police action, followed by more atrocities against those villagers who collaborated with the police and this situation went on until the beginning of 1950. The tension reached its height in December involving attacks against the local jotdars, looting their granaries, setting their houses and persons on fire, attacks on the local police outposts with bows, arrows, bombs and in one case with stengun.<sup>44</sup>

In Midnapore the peasants organised by the CPI were responsible for at least 17 major violent incidents between April 1949 and January 1950 in five police stations of Garbeta, Kespur, Panskura, Daspur, Tamruk and Chandrokona. These included attacks and looting of houses and granaries of zamindars, attacks and murdering of local Congress workers and village watchmen allegedly collaborating with the police; groups numbering up to one thousand attacking police parties and outposts and snatching away prisoners. No less than 21 temporary police camps were to be opened in the district to handle such 'lawlessness and subversive activities'.<sup>45</sup> In Bankura, the communists mobilised the Santhal and other low caste peasants, such as the Bauris, Layeks, Khairas etc in the villages of Patrasayer, Sonamukhi, Salotra, Jaypur, Vishnupur and Bankura police stations. Here, along with the abolition of zamindari and tebhaga, the additional demand was for raising the daily wages and fixing the maximum hours of work for the agricultural labourers. The villagers were organised into large groups which raided and looted the houses of their jotdars, attacked those who were suspected of collaborating with the police, marched to nearby Vishnupur town in support of their demands, and pulled down national flags on the anniversary of the independence day on 15 August 1949. The situation came to a head on 18 August in a village called Bandgaba near Vishnupur town, where a crowd of about 2000 Santhal men and women clashed with the raiding police party, leading to firing and death of three

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<sup>42</sup> 'Annual Administration Report, 1949 – Section VII', IB Records, S. No.206/1928, F. No.32/28(1949), K.W.Folder, WBSA.

<sup>43</sup> A short note on the political situation in 24-Parganas and suggestion to tackle it', IB Records, S. No. 190/1926, F. No.35/26, WBSA.

<sup>44</sup> 'Annual Administration Report, 1949 – Section VII', IB Records, S. No.206/1928, F. No.32/28(1949), K.W.Folder, WBSA.

<sup>45</sup> From SP, DIB, Midnapore to Special SP, Intelligence Branch, CID, West Bengal, dated 1<sup>st</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> December 1950, IB Records, S. No.7/1926, F. No.35/26(MF) Part XIII, WBSA.

volunteers, one female and two males.<sup>46</sup> If the situation in these five districts was most critical, other districts like Howrah and Burdwan also witnessed sporadic outbursts of rural agitation, instigated by the communists. A police intelligence report listed 170 incidents, described as 'C.P.I. Outrages', in the districts of West Bengal except Calcutta, in the span of nine months from the beginning of May 1949 to the end of January 1950.<sup>47</sup>

Without going into details, we may mention here some of the noticeable features of this rural insurgency of 1948-49. First of all, as mentioned above, apart from some sporadic incidents, such activities were most intense in some localised areas of four to five districts. And here, unlike the Tebhaga movement of 1946, this insurgency, with its various demands, had no specific focal point. The grand communist scheme of bringing about a 'People's Democratic Revolution' had little meaning for the peasant volunteers, who were motivated mostly by local grievances. The initial leadership and the initiative for mobilisation of course came from the educated *bhadrolok* leaders coming from outside and performing their supposed 'pedagogic' role; but this was not a movement entirely mobilised from above, as in every area the local leadership from among the peasantry emerged and seized the initiative. Also there is no reason to believe that these peasants were entirely untouched by the ideologies of the literate world of their middle class leaders. Evidence from Bankura suggests that extensive pamphleteering was resorted to for mobilising the Santhal peasants. Bhupati Ghorui, a *bhagchasee*, confessed to police that he knew 'something of reading and writing in Bengali' and that he came to be aware of the whole movement from a 'Bengali leaflet'.<sup>48</sup> Yet, there were also elements of ambiguity, as another report suggests that the Santhals used to call the communists 'Coma Congress', suggesting some amount of haziness in their understanding of the distinctive ideologies of organised politics. And they agreed to participate in the movement only when Bimal Sarkar, an urban leader from outside, managed to convince them that they had driven out the police and the magistrate and had established their supremacy in the area.<sup>49</sup> The other interesting aspect of this rural insurgency was the active participation of women, which was also a hallmark of the first Tebhaga. The evidence from Bankura again suggests that the CPI leadership actively solicited this participation; but they wanted women only in auxiliary and supportive roles, such as blowing the conch shells to signal the arrival of the searching police party.<sup>50</sup> But almost everywhere they took a far more active role, engaging in open encounters with

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<sup>46</sup> 'Short note on communist activities and outrages in the district of Bankura', IB Records, S. No.171/26, F.No.35/26 (Bankura), K.W., WBSA.

<sup>47</sup> See, IB Records, S. No.206/1928, F. No.32/28(1949), K.W.Folder, WBSA.

<sup>48</sup> 'Statement of Bhupati Ghorui @ Mete s/o late Rajaram Ghorui of Magurasini, P.S. Joypur, Bankura', IB Records, S. No.171/26, F. No.35/26 (Bankura), Part I, WBSA.

<sup>49</sup> 'C.P.I. Activities in the district of Bankura', IB Records, S. No.171/1926, F. No.35/26 (Bankura), Part I, WBSA.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

the police and jotdars' men, their kitchen utensils often becoming their weapons of resistance.<sup>51</sup>

As bomb-throwing and police firing gradually became regular features of Calcutta's public life, this caused loss of innocent lives and major disruptions in the normal day-to-day life of the average office-going newspaper-reading middle class and lower middle class Bengalis. After sometime, many of them began to feel that they had enough of it.<sup>52</sup> Even the working classes became disinterested in violent movements. The proposed railway strike on 9 March 1949 became a failure when the Socialists withdrew their support.<sup>53</sup> The government also came up with further repressive measures, as seven of the allied organisations of the C.P.I. were banned on 4 January 1950.<sup>54</sup> By February 1950, 683 persons had been arrested and detained without trial under the Preventive Detention Act of 1950, passed in this month. More arrests were made during the year and a few were released, so that by the end of the year there were 450 political detainees, of them 398 belonged to the CPI and 52 to RCPI.<sup>55</sup> By this time the CPI leadership realised that the movement had remained localised and was not going anywhere. Abani Lahiri, one of the top leaders of this time, reflected in 2001 with the wisdom of hindsight: 'We called for the overthrow of the Congress government without waiting for the people to come to that conclusion.' As a result, 'the strategy adopted was beyond the consciousness of the mass of the peasantry.'<sup>56</sup> By the beginning of 1950 there were clear signs of disquiet among the rank and file of the C.P.I. Between 1948 and 1950 its membership declined from 90,000 to 20,000.<sup>57</sup> Those who remained in the party were frustrated by the lack of direction and progress of the movement and felt exasperated by the intolerance of the top leadership, which allegedly expelled members on flimsy grounds of indiscipline. The Cominform in January 1950 stressed the futility of conducting a violent struggle without mass support. This made the rift even sharper, with demands for a third party congress for the reorganisation of the leadership.<sup>58</sup> A booklet intercepted by the IB openly acknowledged that 'it would be gross exaggeration to say that the country is already on the eve of armed insurrection or revolution, or that civil war is already raging in the

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<sup>51</sup> See details in 'List of C.P.I. Outrages in the districts of West Bengal (except Calcutta) from 1.5.49 to 31.12.49', IB Records, S. No. 206/1928, F. No. 32/28 (1949), K.W. Folder, WBSA.

<sup>52</sup> Both *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Anandabazar Patrika* of this period are full of such reports.

<sup>53</sup> 'Annual Administration Report, 1949 – Section VII', IB Records, S. No.206/1928, F. No.32/28(1949), K.W.Folder, WBSA.

<sup>54</sup> These were Bengal Provincial Students' Federation, Mahila Atma Raksha Samity, Peoples' Relief Committee, Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha, Kshet Majdoor Samity and Majdoor Naojoan League. 'Draft Annual Police Administration Report, 1950', IB Records, S. No. 210/1928, F. No. 32/28 (1950), WBSA.

<sup>55</sup> 'Action under the B.C.L.A. Act 1930 and the P.D. Act 1950 during the year 1950', IB Records, S. No.218/28, F. No. 32/28 (1950), WBSA

<sup>56</sup> Abani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist Activist*, pp. 101, 128.

<sup>57</sup> M.R.Masani, *The Communist Party of India: A Short History*, p.100.

<sup>58</sup> 'Draft Annual Police Administration Report, 1950', IB Records, S. No. 210/1928, F. No. 32/28 (1950), WBSA

country.<sup>59</sup> By January 1950 leaders like Nripen Banerji were conceding in open meetings that the West Bengal Party followed a ‘wrong track for the last three years’.<sup>60</sup> A change in communist strategy was clearly in the offing.

#### IV

The communists around 1950 had clearly become unpopular and faced resistance from the public, particularly when they tried to disrupt the Republic Day celebrations on 26 January.<sup>61</sup> This unpopularity, it needs to be mentioned here, was not just because of uncertainties created by futile violent guerrilla warfare. This was also the result of a well-orchestrated anti-Communist propaganda launched by the government and the press. It needs to be noted here that it was not a political campaign led by a political party, because in the Bengal countryside around this time, the Congress Party, which was the only major political party in the country, had practically no organisational presence. It was therefore a campaign initiated by the government with the help of the state bureaucracy. Local level meetings were organised by local officials like the Sub-divisional Officers, where ministers came and spoke against the communists and announced local developmental projects that could provide temporary escape from poverty for the local people.<sup>62</sup> This was complemented by what a government memo described as a ‘vigorous pamphleteering campaign denouncing Communist ideology and methods’. ‘Small photographs of national leaders and small national flags that could be pinned to the chest’ were distributed free to villagers. Along with that, information was regularly and carefully fed to the local media about the measures being taken against the communists and the arrest of important communist leaders.<sup>63</sup> It is not surprising therefore that the media reports around this time contained little information and analyses about the communist insurgency of 1948-49, but provided details of counter-insurgency measures.

It is important to note that the major feature of this propaganda campaign was the issue of freedom, more precisely, national sovereignty, and not any fear of a social revolution. The Communists appeared now to be the greatest enemies of freedom for which lot of sufferings and sacrifices have been made in not so distant past. In other words, if the middle classes were concerned with the rights of citizenship, the issue of sovereignty was no less important to them either, as it was the nation-state and its cultural heritage that defined their national

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Copy of an intercepted Book-let. “Statement of Policy of the Communist Party of India”’, IB Records, S. No. 7/1926, F. No. 35/26 (M.F.), Part XIII, WBSA

<sup>60</sup> ‘Extract from C.P.’s report for week ending 13/1/51’, IB Records, S. No.nil, F. No. 1554/32, WBSA

<sup>61</sup> Fortnightly Report No.2 for period ending 28<sup>th</sup> January 1950, IOR: L/P&J/5/320.

<sup>62</sup> Report by B.B.Sarkar, Commissioner, Burdwan division, dated 20.9.49, IB Records, S. No.171/1926, F. No.35/26 (Bankura), WBSA.

<sup>63</sup> Copy of an extract from letter No. 7/Com/57, dated 12/13<sup>th</sup> May 1949, IB Records, S. No.9/26, F. No.35/26, Part XI, WBSA

identity. The Communist slogan, '*Ye azadi jhuia hai*' (this freedom is hollow) did not go well with the patriotic feelings of many Bengalis. The other arrogant action of the Communists, i.e., the burning of national flags in a number of public meetings, seemed totally unacceptable, as the flag was the most sacred symbol of freedom and national identity. And in this case, it fitted well into a widely shared conspiracy theory that the communists were actually trying to bring in the Russians as the new masters of this country. The past histories of betrayal began to reappear with vengeance in the public space: didn't they betray the nation in 1942? So how can you trust them now? It is significant to note that this was a concern that resonated again and again in the public speeches of Congress leaders and also of those in the opposition, like Sarat Bose, and Jai Prakash Narain who would not accept the Communists in any proposed leftist union. In other words, in the public discourse of 1949-50 the idea had been firmly planted that the Communists were the major enemies of our freedom. And this was not just a concern of the middle class, which had been historically the main support base of the communist movement in Bengal. Even among the workers and peasants there was a growing feeling that some more time should be given to the Congress government in order to fulfil its promises.<sup>64</sup>

The apparent loss of public support and the adverse propaganda campaign prompted a lot of soul searching and internal dissent among the Communists. The moderate and expelled leader P.C.Joshi openly criticised left adventurism of the party in a press statement<sup>65</sup> and this was followed by several resignations from the West Bengal Party. The outbreak of communal violence around this time also muddied the political water and once again the communist leadership had no viable policy to handle the communal question.<sup>66</sup> Within the party also there was a lot of scepticism, particularly about the loss of support among the middle classes, who constituted the traditional intellectual support base for the communist movement in Bengal.<sup>67</sup> Possibly there were also some international factors involved as well. Nehru very carefully maintained the separation between the repressive measures followed at home against the communists and his government's non-aligned foreign policy in a cold war afflicted world. The Soviet Union and the CPSU began to appreciate the 'neutrality' of the Nehruvian foreign policy and the Zhdanov line soon came to be abandoned, so far as India was concerned. The Indian Communists were advised to co-operate with the Congress and to form 'a bloc or even an alliance' with it against the Anglo-American imperialism.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>This aspect of leftist politics of this period has been discussed in details in my previous article, 'Freedom and its Enemies: The Politics of Transition in West Bengal, 1947-49'.

<sup>65</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 13 June 1950.

<sup>66</sup> Fortnightly Report No.5 for period ending 9<sup>th</sup> March 1950, IOR: L/P&J/5/320.

<sup>67</sup> *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol. VI, pp.213-538.

<sup>68</sup> Marcus Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, p.55

All these factors led to a significant shift in Communist strategy to refrain from terrorist attacks and focus more on propaganda against communalism and on winning the confidence of the middle class by working within the parameters of parliamentary democracy. The East Bengal refugees, concentrated in government refugee camps, appeared to be a new constituency to focus on.<sup>69</sup> B.T.Randive was ousted and Rajeswar Rao became the new General Secretary in June 1950; the CPI came to terms with the government and prepared for the general election to be held in January 1952, with a clear possibility of an open rift within the party.

Were the Communists really branded as ‘enemies’ of freedom by the people of West Bengal? As we did not know the history of insurgency, similarly we did not know the history of the transformation of the C.P.I into a constitutional party in 1951-52. Because, the anti-communist popular press almost blacked them out! But the texts of counter-insurgency, the IB records, also chart this history of transformation, showing details of the political campaign that the local branches of the CPI launched during this period, with details of series of meetings, ranging from large election rallies to small street corner meetings in cities as well as in the countryside, particularly where they had recently built their peasant support base. At a large meeting at Calcutta maidan on 3 January 1951 Jyoti Basu gave a call for all the leftist parties to unite in order to overthrow the present government, which in spite of a High Court order had been refusing to release the political prisoners.<sup>70</sup> This was preceded and followed by scores of other meetings for similar demands, as well as demands that were both constitutional as well as popular. The Central Committee of the C.P.I formed in June 1951 a Central Election Board, with Muzaffar Alam as the President and Jyoti Basu as the Secretary. It drafted an election manifesto that talked of abolition of zamindari and redistribution of land on the one hand, and full employment, living wages and social security for the workers on the other. It also spoke of democratic rights and civil liberties, protection of national industries, creation of linguistic states and autonomy of tribal areas, elimination of black market and corruption, free health care and rehabilitation of refugees.<sup>71</sup> In other words, the election manifesto tried to appeal to a large cross section of the Bengali population. The results were reflected in the outcome of the election of January 1952.

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<sup>69</sup> This has been discussed in details in Prafulla K. Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, Naya Uddog, 1999; Joya Chatterji, ‘Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50’, in *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, ed. Suvir Kaul, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.

<sup>70</sup> Copy of a telephone message dated 3.1.51 from o/c Watch I.B. Calcutta to D.S.(V) I.B. Calcutta, IB Records, S. No.nil, F. No.1554/32, WBSA

<sup>71</sup> Copy of a circular issued by the Central Election Board of the Communist Party of India regarding the ensuing elections, IB Records, S. No.7/1926, F. No.35/26 (M.F.), Part XIII, WBSA

**Election results: West Bengal Legislative Assembly 1952**

<u>Party</u>	<u>Seats</u>	<u>% of votes</u>
Congress	150	38.93
CPI	28	10.76
Forward Block	11	5.30
RSP	0	0.86
<u>Independent</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>44.15</u>
Total	238	

What do these results of the first general election of free India in January 1952 tell us? Indeed, the results surprised even the Communists; CPI got 28 seats in a house of 238, emerging as the largest opposition party. Congress was the majority party, getting 150 seats. However, in terms of the proportion of votes, CPI got 10.76% of votes, as opposed to 38.93% for Congress. Significantly, the largest proportion of votes, 44.15% went to Independents, who got only 49 seats. The other leftist party represented in the Assembly was the Forward Block, with 11 seats and just 5.30% of votes.<sup>72</sup> The seats that went to CPI were mostly located in the urban industrial constituencies of Calcutta and Howrah and in the southern districts of Burdwan, 24-Parganas, Hooghly and Midnapore, where the recent insurrectionary activities were most effective. For some leaders in the party this electoral result indicated that parliamentary democracy was a political method worth trying; others took this verdict as a public endorsement of the insurrectionist strategy. The rift within the Communist Party increased further as a result.<sup>73</sup>

But was this election result a positive verdict in support of the Communists or an expression of disapproval of the Congress regime? How do we interpret the 44% Independent vote? Marcus Franda sought to explain this communist victory in terms of a 'halo of martyrdom' created by the rough handling of the political prisoners in jails and the fact that 5 of the 28 victorious communist candidates were still under detention when they won the election.<sup>74</sup> It is true that the Government's repressive measures had become counterproductive to some extent, but these consequences were more complex than just a sympathy wave for the Communists. We may look at the public opinion of this period by analysing some of the letters to the editor that appeared in local newspapers. We may take here as a case study a particular series of letters that appeared in *The Statesman* in January 1950 in response to an

<sup>72</sup> Prasanta Sen Gupta, *The Congress Party in West Bengal: A Study of Factionalism 1947-86*, Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1988, p.68.

<sup>73</sup> Marcus Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, p.53

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p.38



anti-Communist editorial, remembering the fact that similar letters were appearing in other newspapers as well. Letters about communist movement and the terrorist activities were appearing in local newspapers throughout the period. But by 1950 their tone changed decisively. As one correspondent wrote on 12 January 1950:

The terms “Communists” and “Communism” were till only the other day repulsive to most people. Why not now to the same extent? When ordinary people are constantly told (by the subversive group) that the Government are not seriously concerned about removing the causes of their discontents, evidently some find it rather difficult not to believe what they are told – an ideal condition for the spread of Communism.<sup>75</sup>

In other words, Communism was being seen not as a disease in itself, but rather as a symptom of more deep-rooted social and economic malaises. “Disturbances in Calcutta”, wrote another correspondent, ‘are manifestations of widespread discontent... I feel that the Government’s economic policy, which has failed to satisfy many people, is a cause of present discontents...’<sup>76</sup> However, this did not necessarily mean a sympathy wave for the communists, particularly of their insurrectionist strategy. ‘A political party is tabooed not because of its ideology, but because of its disruptive activities, such as throwing acid bulbs and bombs...’<sup>77</sup> But an answer to the communist menace was not ‘strong precautionary measures’; for ‘if the price of containing Communism ...[is] denial of fundamental rights,’ then the people were in ‘more danger ...[than] in a totalitarian State such as the Communist ones...’<sup>78</sup> There was, in other words, a growing concern for what another correspondent described as ‘the present regime’s increasing encroachment on civil liberties. Taking advantage of this mood, the Communists are playing havoc.’<sup>79</sup>

To conclude our story, in 1950-51 the people of West Bengal were not simply dismissing the Communists, but were worried about the issues they had brought to the political forefront, including the current economic situation and the threats to civil liberties. And these concerns were reflected in the election results of 1952, which did not completely reject the communists, but signified a disapproval of their insurrectionist methods. The Congress continued to rule, but only with the support of less than 40 percent of the voters, to be finally voted out of power fifteen years later. In these fifteen years the CPI underwent several splits between those who believed in constitutional methods and those who preferred violent revolutionary ways. Ultimately, the constitutionalists learnt the lessons of history that began to unfold since the early days of freedom and managed to establish their political hegemony in this province for nearly three decades now.

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<sup>75</sup> *The Statesman* 12 January 1950.

<sup>76</sup> *The Statesman*, 22 January 1950.

<sup>77</sup> *The Statesman*, 26 January 1950

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<sup>79</sup> *The Statesman*, 16 January 1950