

The rise and decline of communism in South Asia: a review essay

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Communism in South Asia as a field of inquiry

It may sound quite puzzling that although communism in Asia has engaged the attention of scholars at different points of time, the focal interest being China, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam and Korea, together with communism in the Arab world, the South Asian segment has somehow remained a neglected territory. There are two possible causes for this lack of attention. Firstly, the epicentre of the communist movement in the South Asian region (which comprises India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) has been India, and, most of the leading communist figures in this region, having Indian connections, have therefore been influenced by the context and experience of Indian communism. Secondly, compared to India, the communist movement in the remaining countries of South Asia has been of rather more recent origin. In Sri Lanka and Pakistan, for instance, communist parties were formed in the late 1930s and 1940s respectively, whereas in India the communist party was formed (as was the case in China or Indonesia) in the 1920s, as a component of the Comintern. A third possible explanation for the paucity of literature on communism in the South Asian region is, however, more difficult to accept. It is tempting to emphasise that, with the exception of India and Sri Lanka, communist parties in this region have been subjected to severe repression, often forced to work in clandestine ways throughout their existence (although communism in Nepal has become far more visible since the 1990s). This lack of visibility, it is argued, has thwarted an in depth study of communism in these countries. However, this argument is not really tenable when a comparison is made with the experience in the Arab world, where communist parties were also widely subjected to fierce persecution throughout their existence, but were able

to challenge their states' attempts to marginalise them. This, however, did not happen in the South Asian region.

Does this suggest that communism in South Asia was doomed from the very outset, for insurmountable historical reasons? Or is it more accurate to acknowledge that, despite the possibilities which existed there were other subjective factors in play which inhibited their growth?

It is incontestable that, with the exception of India and to a lesser extent Nepal, the existing literature on communism in South Asia is scant. Over the years very few books have been written covering the region. For an understanding of the rise and development of communism in this part of the world the books that primarily figure include: Helen Desfosses and Jacques Levesque (eds.), *Socialism in the Third World* (1975) (which includes two essays on socialism in Sri Lanka and Pakistan);¹ R A Scalapino (ed.), *The Communist Revolution in Asia*;² Saul Rose, *Socialism in Southern Asia* (1959);³ Colin Mackerras and Nick Knight, *Marxism in Asia* (1986);⁴ and Donald F Busky, *Communism in History and Theory: Asia, Africa and the Americas* (2002).⁵ In this limited historical assessment of communism in Asia, the discussion on South Asia has remained marginal.

While it is true that, historically speaking, India is the point of departure for an understanding of how communism evolved in South Asia (especially because the communist movement, centring on a number of communist parties, has been able to sustain itself on Indian soil since the 1920s) the India factor need not be overstated. Initially, of course, the shaping of the communist movement in India had an impact on the burgeoning communist parties in neighbouring countries, but eventually there was a parting of the ways. This is explained by the fact that, except for a brief period in the pre-independence era, the Indian communist movement has predominantly worked in conditions of legality. Following independence, it has been recognised as a legitimate constituent element of national political life, and has embraced parliamentary democracy.

Additionally, for around nine decades of its existence the Indian communist movement (and also the Sri Lankan) has been guided by considerations of anti-imperialism (in the period before independence), and by considerations of anti-capitalism and a quest for a transitional democracy which would set the conditions for socialism (in the post-independence era). In contrast, in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal,

communist parties were placed in an altogether different situation. Almost from the very beginning communist parties in these countries had to confront authoritarian regimes, ranging from military governments (in Pakistan and in Bangladesh after Mujib's assassination) to monarchy (in Nepal).

Consequently, unlike in India, two issues became the central concern for parties in these countries. Firstly, the fight for democracy against authoritarianism; and, secondly, the need to resist continuing repression. It was the experience of repression which prepared the ground for political extremism, which became an endemic feature of the communist movement in these countries. In India, the communist movement has witnessed spells of left extremism but they have not predominated; they have been offset by the absorption of the norms of parliamentary democracy and electoral politics by mainstream Indian communists. In Sri Lanka too, where the track record of democracy was marginally better, left extremism has been an important feature, existing in parallel with the mainstream communist movement.

It is evident, therefore, that it is the degree to which democracy and democratic institutions have developed that has been a decisive force in shaping the destiny of communism in South Asia. Understandably, this also provides an explanation for the strategic differences between the mainstream communists in India and Sri Lanka and the communists in the neighbouring region. While in India and Sri Lanka the strategy has been to preserve and expand democracy, in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, the fight to establish democratic rule has been pre-eminent.

Research on communism in South Asia (outside of India and Sri Lanka, in particular) has been made particularly difficult by the paucity of primary sources. With the exception of parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the websites and online archives of other parties are either rudimentary or non-existent. One explanation for this is that most of these parties have been forced to operate in clandestine conditions for long periods, with the result that party documents were often destroyed or disposed of for reasons of security. In addition, communist parties in South Asia have been marked by bitter factionalism and fragmentation (the impact of the Sino-Soviet split, for example, being quite severe in this region). This has acted as a further barrier to openness and disclosure.

Consequently, it is difficult to draw up a systematic history of the communist movement in South Asia. This stands in sharp contrast to the historiography of many other communist parties in Asia. In Indonesia, Japan, Iraq, Syria, Iran and the Lebanon, for instance, communist parties originated in the pre-war period, with a marked pro-Soviet stance (which led to the depositing of materials in the archives of the CPSU in Moscow) and a keen interest in recording their own party histories. As a result, the historians of communism in these Asian countries have faced a rather easier task. It has proved easier to access factual information on the Moscow-oriented communist parties of South Asia than on other parties or factions and groups which were (broadly speaking) guided by left extremism, ranging from Maoism to Trotskyism, with an accent on armed struggle.

Although information on the communist parties of South Asian countries other than India has not been systematically available, this has been compensated for to some extent by the articles written by the party leaders of South Asia in the pages of *Problems of Peace and Socialism* (produced out of Prague under the editorial control of the CPSU from the mid-1950s until the fall of the Soviet Union). Important figures representing the communist parties of India and Sri Lanka (and, later, Bangladesh) used to contribute to the magazine, although not all that frequently. A survey of personnel on the board of *Problems of Peace and Socialism* conducted in 1982 shows that the South Asian region was represented only by India (Sarada Mitra) and Sri Lanka (Raja Collure).⁶

Nevertheless, until the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was possible to identify certain patterns in the communist movement in this region – except India and Nepal (in Nepal communist parties have witnessed a resurgence after the fall of the monarchy) – but information on communist parties in the remaining countries of South Asia has been extremely scanty and fragmented. The present essay, therefore, will focus primarily on how communism emerged in South Asia, but will also address its decline – taking 1991 as an end-point.

To have a proper understanding of the peculiarities of the communist movement in South Asia, ranging from a kind of parliamentary communism (in India) to armed insurrection (in Nepal), it is appropriate to take into consideration the few commentaries and interpretations which have appeared in the writings of concerned scholars. Helen Desfosses and

Jacques Levesque offer an analysis relevant to an understanding of the popularity of the appeal of socialism in the third world, and thereby in South Asia too. While communist parties have always projected the vision of a developed and modern society, Desfosses and Levesque suggest, they have presented this understanding in a framework opposed to the capitalist road to modernity and its associated evils – namely, inequality, injustice and exploitation. To avoid iniquity, economic development has to involve the masses. This argument has remained central to the work of the communist movement in South Asia, and is reflected in a shared emphasis on mass mobilisation, especially of the peasant masses.⁷ Consequently, it is plausible, as some scholars contend, that it was the Leninist interpretation of marxism (with its focus on imperialism, seizure of power and the organisational principles of mass mobilisation) rather than the sophistications of marxist philosophy which informed the development of communist parties in Asia. In a region marked by the limited development of capitalism, Asian revolutionaries have thus been guided by an activist temper rather than by the philosophical concerns of theoretical marxism.⁸ This approach is particularly strongly reflected in the outlook of the communist parties of the less developed regions of South Asia (such as Nepal and Bangladesh), where the development of capitalism has been particularly limited.

In fact, Robert A Scalapino, in his pioneering work on Asian communism, goes to the length of suggesting that although communism in Asia originated with intellectuals like M N Roy and Ch'en Tu-hsiu in India and China, eventually they had to make way for activist leaders like Mao and Ho Chi Minh. This proposition, however, appears hardly tenable, since this intellectual-activist divide is hardly a convincing one for marxist revolutionaries of any genre. But his other observation, that although the Asian communist parties were guided by the outlook of proletarian internationalism it found little echo amongst the rural masses (its appeal being confined to the urban pockets), is much more persuasive.⁹

In Asia this brings into focus another related issue – namely, marxism's negotiation with the issues of nationalism, ethnicity, localism and religion. In South Asia, for instance, nationalism has been generally suspect in communist eyes, although in China, Vietnam and Korea tactical use has been made of the ideology of nationalism in efforts to promote the cause of anti-colonialism. Similarly, such sensitive issues as ethnicity and

religion have engaged the attention of communist parties in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India. The study of communism in South Asia is, therefore, a fascinating as well as a complex exercise.

Pakistan

The Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) was formed in 1948, the year following the formation of Pakistan. It had originally been a section of the Communist Party of India, with Sajjad Zaheer as the general secretary. From the very beginning the party was a victim of severe persecution, prompted by its promotion of a strategy of armed insurrection. In a backward agrarian country like Pakistan, the emphasis was on agrarian revolution against landlords and the appropriation of large landholdings, together with opposition to US economic and military control over Pakistan. In 1951 the ruling authorities of Pakistan arrested the top leadership of the CPP, including Zaheer, amidst claims that the party was involved in a conspiracy with a group of army officers (known as the Rawalpindi plot) to overthrow the government and set up a revolutionary order. Although eventually the CPP joined the parliamentary mainstream, parliamentary democracy was short-lived in Pakistan (as was the period of the CPP's legality). Even though the CPP returned four of its candidates to the East Pakistan segment of the legislative assembly, the party was banned in 1954 and operated clandestinely for a long period. Repeated spells of military rule in Pakistan's political life reinforced the party's underground position.

After the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, the CPP's erstwhile stronghold in East Pakistan was gone, and the party's activities became limited primarily to the Sind province of West Pakistan, amidst continued persecution. In an interview given by Jam Saqi, former secretary of the CPP central committee, to *Problems of Peace and Socialism* in 1990, it was disclosed that the party's main agenda was to fight against authoritarianism, manifest in the overwhelming presence of the army in the political life of Pakistan, and to wage a consistent fight for democracy. This strategy explains the CPP's support of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), formed in 1967 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; it was the only major political force with a mass base, and opposed to military rule, despite many of its other political weaknesses, such as its policies towards the landed gentry and the

vague slogan of 'Islamic socialism'. In 1986 the ban on the CPP was lifted, which allowed it a comparatively larger space, but repression continued unabated. In this interview it was also made clear that the CPP was sharply opposed to religious fundamentalism in Pakistan, although, significantly, Saqi also suggested that Islam contains certain progressive and democratic elements which can be harnessed in the party's fight for the cause of the toiling people.¹⁰

But in Pakistan today communists do not constitute a homogenous bloc, with the fragmentation process originating in the historic split in international communist movement. It is a conflict between those who adhere to maoism/stalinism on the one hand and those who are anti-stalinist and adherents of trotskyism on the other. While the first position is represented by the Communist Mazdoor Kisan Party (CMKP), the exponent of the second viewpoint is the Labour Party of Pakistan (LPP). Both parties have come out with their respective versions of the history of the Left in Pakistan, but with sharp differences of interpretation. In reply to an article 'The Left in Pakistan: A Brief History', by Farooq Sulheria in 1999, a supporter of the LPP criticised the CMKP, pointing to its failure to emerge as the spokesman of the toiling masses, because of its stalinist and maoist moorings.¹¹ In September 2001, the CMKP produced a lengthy rebuttal, authored by Taimur Rahman (secretary of the Punjab unit), refuting the allegations and accusing the LPP of reformist illusions about the PPP. In contrast, Rahman portrayed the CMKP (formed in 1995 following the union of the Mazdoor Kisan party [a Maoist current which emerged from the breakup of the CPP] and a group of CPP supporters) as the true inheritor of the once powerful CPP.¹²

On the basis of the available materials, both parties' formal adherence to marxism is incontestable. The CMKP proclaims that the party's idea of a revolution rests on four foundations, namely: Thought (*Sooch*); Solidarity (*Itihad*); Organisation (*Tanzim*); and the Workers and Peasants System (*Mazdoor Kissan Nizam*). Each of these elements has four components:

Thought:

- a) Capitalism creates Inequality;
- b) Revolution not Reform;
- c) Workers are the Vanguard;
- d) Inevitable Victory;

Solidarity:

- a) National Question;
- b) Religious Question;
- c) Worker Peasant Alliance;
- d) Internationalism;

Organization:

- a) Vanguard;
- b) Organized and Disciplined;
- c) Highest and Connected;
- d) Democratic Centralism;

Workers and Peasants System:

- a) Workers' and Peasants' Power;
- b) Elimination of Feudalism;
- c) Democratic Freedoms;
- d) Planned Economy.

While calling for an alliance of all democratic classes, the CMKP has identified the following as enemies and friends.

Enemies: civil military bureaucracy; big capitalists; feudal lords;

Friends: workers and poor peasants.

As regards the middle class, middle peasants, national capitalists and rich peasants, the party aims at neutralising them. Particularly significant is the CMKP's understanding of the religious question, especially its slogan for fighting religious fundamentalism and national chauvinism – the unity of workers of all religions to fight the rich – and its the proclamation that the idea of nation and nationalism is irrelevant for the workers and their struggle.

The LPP is a more recent political formation; its inaugural congress was held in 2001 where its main slogan was that of 'left unity' of all parties and groups in Pakistan in order to fight the military regime. Interestingly, although ideologically it is quite close to trotskyism, it appears that for the sake of left unity it is not an affiliate of the Fourth International.¹³ In early

2002, the LPP called for a socialist electoral alliance and warned against religious fundamentalism. In a significant development, in demonstrations organised against the Government in mid-2002 the LPP and the CMKP (together with other left groups and parties) formed a united bloc.¹⁴

Bangladesh

The history of communism in Bangladesh is of rather recent origin. The emergence of sovereign Bangladesh, following the revolt against Pakistan by the Bengali-speaking people living in East Pakistan in 1971, initially led to communist activity continuing under the auspices of the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP). The subsequently formed Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) invested significant political hopes in the country's first secular and nationalist government under Mujibur Rahman. While extending support to the new government, controlled by the Awami League (as the biggest nationalist party of Bangladesh with a true mass appeal), the CPB set out its own agenda, which called for agrarian reforms, a firm policy of non-alignment and anti-imperialism, and nationalisation of the major resources of the country.

The CPB's support for the Awami League government was endorsed in its second congress in 1973, but later became a matter of serious controversy. Although the party upheld and adhered to the Moscow line in the international communist movement (and the CPSU's view of the utility of the 'democratic road' to power), dissident voices on the left questioned whether it was politically correct for a communist party to extend support to a government which was predominantly petty bourgeois in character. Predictably, the pro-Beijing section of the communists in Bangladesh, represented by the National Awami Party (NAP), headed by Maulana Bhasani, spearheaded this opposition. Communism in Bangladesh was thus marked by fragmentation from the very beginning. That the CPB did indeed harbour a conciliatory position in regard to the nationalist government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was evident in an interview given by the top leadership of the party to *Problems of Peace and Socialism* in September 1972. In it the leaders stated that they did not rule out the possibility of Bangladesh moving towards a non-capitalist path of development, as the Mujib government had already undertaken a series of

progressive steps, including curbing the power of monopoly houses and the interests of the capitalist class.¹⁵

Two subsequent developments marked a turning point in the communist movement in Bangladesh. Firstly, at the beginning of 1975, through a constitutional amendment, all political parties were dissolved, and the Awami League and its allies were brought under one single umbrella called the Bangladesh Workers and Peasants Awami League (or BAKSAL), which led to the virtual dissolution of the CPB. Secondly: a few months later, in August 1975, Mujib, his family and a number of his close associates were brutally murdered by a group of army officers. The killings heralded the beginning of a period of unstable military rule and political uncertainty in Bangladesh. Later, despite the return of civilian rule, punctuated by intermittent spells of army control, the communist movement in Bangladesh suffered a severe jolt. The initial ideological divide between the CPB and the NAP now widened further, bringing in new parties and groups, which were by and large left-extremist in orientation, ranging from maoist to trotskyst.¹⁶

For the CPB the task now became particularly complex, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the rise of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which championed the cause of religious fundamentalism and extreme right-wing nationalism, allowed it to emerge as the major challenger to the Awami League. Secondly, over the years the reputation of the Awami League rapidly eroded, as it was hit by corruption scandals and apparent defence of vested interests, despite its opposition to the BNP. Consequently, for many ordinary voters in Bangladesh the inevitable choice is between the Awami League and the BNP, with the CPB facing the complex task of opposing them both, although the Awami League is considered the lesser evil of the two due to its secular and apparently democratic face. Thirdly, the CPB's main task is now to forge a united front of all left and democratic parties on a common agenda and future vision for the left. To be more exact, the CPB no longer calls itself a 'vanguard' party in the traditional leninist sense; rather it prefers to act as a catalyst of patriotic unity, a kind of 'motive force for positive change, but not a vanguard superior to everyone else', as the general secretary of the CPB proposed in 1989.¹⁷

On 24 February 2003 Manzurul Ahsan Khan, President of the CPB, while speaking at the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of Nepal

(United Marxist-Leninist), identified the following as the three main dangers threatening Bangladesh:

- US hegemony and their collaborators, namely, the reactionary and religious communal forces who opposed the independence struggle of Bangladesh in 1971;
- The danger of autocracy and disruption of the democratic process initiated after the victorious united mass movement in 1990;
- Poverty and extreme pauperisation due to the policy of ruthless exploitation and plunder pursued by the ruling class;

Responding to these challenges, however, is an uphill task, since extreme fragmentation and splits within the left in Bangladesh make it difficult to arrive at a consensus; the central divide being between mass politics and insurrectionary politics (the latter approach being espoused by a host of left-extremist parties, factions and groups).

While the gradual erosion of the CPB is certainly partly to be attributed to circumstantial factors, as outlined above, the party's own faulty subjective understanding of the situation after the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 provides the key explanation. In 1980, in a rare self-critical assessment of the party, CPB secretary Rahman pointed out quite candidly the mistakes made by the CPB in its assessment at an international scientific conference in Berlin, held under the auspices of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and *World Marxist Review (Problems of Peace and Socialism)*. Rahman conceded that when it was engaged in forging unity with the Awami League and other like minded parties, the CPB underestimated the importance of struggle against their negative aspects and petty bourgeois limitations. Mujibur Rahman's role was viewed from a non-class angle, as he was assessed as being above his class: he was considered a national hero, a leader of the liberation struggle of Bangladesh, without any consideration of his national bourgeois position and leanings. The CPB secretary also acknowledged that the party's struggle against the tendency to curb or restrict democratic rights and institutions had not been properly waged. In addition, the CPB's acceptance of the BAKSAL eroded the vital independent role of the party, which should have been afforded greater emphasis.¹⁸ Rahman's assessment of the CPB's shortcomings provides a credible assessment of

why, despite its initial promise, the party experienced erosion and retrenchment.

Nepal

The history of communism in Nepal, too, like that seen in Pakistan and Bangladesh, is marked by violence and repression. In Nepal, the main focus of the communists has been the struggle against autocracy (represented by Hindu monarchy), and the fight to establish democratic government. Nepalese communism has endured a similar experience of fragmentation, bitter factional feuds and major ideological schisms. But the striking difference is that, while in Pakistan and Bangladesh communism has remained a peripheral force, in Nepal it is the communist parties which have over the years emerged as the key players in the nation's political life, despite repeated splits. The study of communism in Nepal, therefore, illuminates a uniquely significant experience within the South Asian communist tradition.

The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) was formed in September 1949 in Calcutta by a small group led by Pushpa Lal, who headed a core group of anti-Rana (the Nepal monarch) activists operating from India. The party secured legal status in 1956 but eventually it was banned, after a move by a section within the party to adopt insurrectionary tactics. The fortunes of the communist movement changed, following the adoption of parliamentary democracy in Nepal in the 1990s, bringing to an end decades of the party-less *panchayat* system. This advance was the result of mass struggles conducted by as many as seven ideologically-divided communist parties and groups. Together they played a truly glorious role in mobilising the popular struggle for democracy; successfully overcoming their political differences and, in 1990, organising the Jana Andalan (People's Movement) under the rubric of a united front. By this time the communists were (in broad terms) divided into the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist) (CPN[M]) and the more militant Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) (CPN[M-L]). Following the establishment of the multi-party system, these two groups buried their differences and formed the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN[UML]) in January 1991, emerging as the country's main opposition party as distinct from the nationalist Nepali Congress. The

CPN(UML) subsequently came to political power on two occasions; first, in 1994, when Man Mohan Adhikari became the country's first communist prime minister at the head of a minority government, and again in 1997 when the CPN(UML), became a partner in a coalition government and the office of the deputy prime minister was secured by the party.

However, what is striking is the rapid growth of the CPN (Maoist) since its formation in 1994. The party has emerged as the key spokesman of the communist left in Nepal in recent times, posing a major challenge to the CPN(UML). This is explained in large part by the fact that the CPN(UML)'s participation in government compelled it to prioritise the demands of good governance ahead of those of ideology. Being in government, while operating within the constraints of a monarchical system, it proved difficult for the CPN(UML) to address the problems of the rural poor, especially the brutally exploited landless peasants – the key issue in Nepal's social and political life. This neglect posed particular problems for the party because it was this social group which rallied behind the CPN(M), constituting its major support base.¹⁹ Beginning in February 1996, agrarian violence began to rapidly spread all over the country; its roots reflecting the strong undercurrent of left extremism within the communist movement in Nepal, with its celebration of armed struggle and support for agrarian revolution, which drew its inspiration from Mao as well as the Naxalite movement in India in the 1970s. The repression of the maoists simply escalated the alienation of the rural poor and increased the isolation of the government, eroding any credibility from its talk of negotiation or dialogue with the rebels.²⁰ For the CPN(M) the turning point came in 2002, when King Gyanendra annulled upcoming mid-term elections, and, three years later, led a royal coup during which he dismissed the government and declared himself the country's supreme leader.

While the king claimed that continuing maoist violence justified the suspension of democracy, his actions increased support for his opponents, especially amongst poor peasants. Consequently, when a seven-party alliance (involving both the Nepali Congress and the CPN(UML)) was formed to oust the king, the CPN(M) joined the front for the restoration of democracy. The king finally succumbed to the people's verdict on 24 April 2006. While there is no question that the Nepalese masses constituted the driving force of this popular struggle, there is little doubt that

the country's maoists played a key role in leveraging the movement's political ambitions. As a result, the CPN(M) was thrust into the forefront of Nepal's politics.

The abdication of the monarchy was a defining moment in the modern political history of Nepal. Its significance is two-fold. On one level it was a political revolution effected through the form of a popular uprising against royal autocracy. This paved the way for the coming to power of a multi-party coalition, resolved to transform Nepal into a genuine republic, beginning with the election of a 601-seat constituent assembly. On another level, republican demands were voiced most vociferously and implacably by the maoists. Indeed, the CPN(M)'s refusal to compromise led to a kind of stand-off between the maoists and some of the partners of the coalition, leading to a delay in the inaugural election for the constituent assembly. However, this intransigence strengthened and deepened the support base of the maoists among the Nepalese masses. Evidence of the resilience of that support is found in the results of the constituent assembly elections of 2008, in which the maoists won 220 out of 575 seats. Since then, however, the political situation has remained extremely complex, as the maoists do not see eye to eye with the CPN(UML) or the Nepali Congress on a number of major policy issues. There have been repeated political conflicts within the ruling alliance and the CPN(M) has quit (albeit temporarily) the coalition on a number of occasions.

The meteoric rise of the CPN(M) in Nepal, with its entrenched base among the poor rural masses, is significant for more than one reason. Initially, in the early 1990s, the maoists had followed the path of a 'people's war', operating underground amidst the context of harsh repression, and expanding its popular base in the process. This in large part contributed to the resounding success of the party in the elections to the constituent assembly, and its recognition as a truly hegemonic force in the country. This confirms the famous Gramscian contention that the 'war of manoeuvre' and the 'war of position' are not, in the long run, mutually exclusive; and demonstrates that advance in the military and the political arenas can be complementary.

The documents of the CPN(M) suggest that the party, despite its 'maoist' label, is strongly critical of the 'cult of personality', in either its stalinist or maoist variants. Within the party there are sharp debates and

differences on a number of issues, but these are circulated and made public. Such a sense of openness is almost unprecedented for a militant and centralised party like the CPN(M), steeped in the traditions of underground struggle. Significantly, and in sharp contrast with its earlier 'revolutionary' aspirations, the CPN(M) recognises that it is a part of the national mainstream in Nepal's political life, and now values highly the importance of democracy and the multi-party system.²¹

India

Communism in South Asia began its journey from India – the only country in this region where communism was born during the Comintern period (as early as 1925, in fact; although prior to that, in 1920, on the initiative of M N Roy, a small communist party in the form of a group of exiled Indian revolutionaries had been formed in Tashkent). The shaping of the communist movement in India, however, has been quite different from the way it has developed in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Until 1947, when India became independent, the Communist Party of India (CPI) was rather small, and limited mainly to certain select urban and rural pockets. While in the pre-independence period the party was broadly guided by considerations of anti-imperialist struggle, it was sharply divided on the question of whether to ally with the Indian National Congress (INC), the most important nationalist force in the country. A 'right' trend favoured this alliance; while a 'left' tendency (which believed that the INC, representing the Indian national bourgeoisie, was counterrevolutionary) opposed it. The confusion and disagreement was, however, largely a consequence of the frequent shifts in the Comintern's strategy, which the CPI dutifully followed. The issue of how to orient the party to the INC has remained a continual problematic for the CPI. The split in the CPI in 1964, resulting in the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), followed by another split in 1969, when a breakaway group of the CPI(M) formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) or CPI(ML) can be explained by reference to this issue.

The complexity of the question, however, lies elsewhere. After independence the CPI accepted the legitimacy of parliamentary democracy, and has operated (unlike the equivalent parties of Pakistan, Bangladesh

and Nepal) as a recognised opposition party within a plural electoral system. Its opposition to the policies of the government has been expressed in parliament, and through agitational activities outside it, all broadly within the framework of legality. In other words, the CPI has never declared war against the Indian state. Left extremism has found it difficult to thrive as a major force in India, and the CPI's advance has confirmed Indian communism's commitment to the parliamentary road.

Within the CPI, until its first split in 1964, there was a trend within the party, influenced by contemporary Soviet thinking, which believed that there was a progressive section within the INC, which was opposed to monopoly capitalism and the representatives of 'right reaction' (meaning the advocates of imperialism and big business). This current argued that through an alliance with this section a national democratic alternative might be formed, able to project a non-capitalist path for the country. This position was contested by the 'left' section in the CPI. Rejecting the idea of alliance with any section of the bourgeoisie, this strand believed that there was no such 'progressive' current within the INC and that the alternative was to advocate a people's democratic revolution to be led by the working class, which would be directed against the INC.

This schism was largely responsible for the break-up of the CPI in 1964, and the 'left' breakaway by the CPI(M). By the late 1960s, as the economic condition of the country worsened, rural unrest and agrarian struggle emerged as a new phenomenon. This paved the way for a further split in 1969, when the more militant section of the CPI(M) opted for a path of armed agrarian struggle, eschewing the parliamentary path entirely. This led to the formation of the CPI(ML), which itself subsequently experienced further fragmentation.

While initially the split in the CPI in 1964 contributed to the growing distance between the CPI and the CPI(M), the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the rapid erosion of the INC thereafter created a new situation for the Indian communists, reducing the political distance between them. By 1989 it became clear that the monopoly rule of the INC was over and that India was heading for a non-Congress coalition government in which communists might be able to play a significant role. Ironically, it would prove to be the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party of Hindu nationalism, which would spearhead the opposition to the Congress rather than the communists. By 1999 it was

the BJP-led coalition which came to power, shattering the hopes of the two communist parties that a new secular and democratic majority might coalesce to pose an alternative to both the INC and the BJP. In 2004, the BJP-led coalition lost the parliamentary election, making way for a new INC-led coalition. This time both communist parties supported the new government, determined to back the INC rather than risk a recurrence of the 'rightist' BJP administration of 1999-2004. In particular, the communists believed that the secular fabric of the Indian state would be safe only under Congress rule.

The rise of the BJP and the advent of the coalition age in Indian politics have thus bridged the divide between the two communist parties to a significant degree. The remaining gap narrowed further when the INC-led coalition again returned to power in 2009, but began to adopt neoliberal and conservative policies in domestic and foreign policy. This led both communist parties to withdraw support from the second INC-led coalition in 2009. The irony, however, is that, while CPI and CPI(M) have almost closed their ranks on all major policy issues, they are not in a position to effectively negotiate solutions to disagreements over questions of religion, caste and ethnicity, which have become the markers of Indian politics today. As a large number of parties have emerged at the regional level proposing solutions to these contentious questions, the communist parties have been compelled to address them (leading ideology to take second place to more pressing tactical and electoral considerations). The threat of marginalisation now facing Indian communist parties may also help to explain why, since the mid-1980s, the study of communism in India has remained such a neglected area of scholarly research. This is a telling commentary on the state of the communist movement in India. When one takes into consideration the fact that Indian communist parties have only been able to (tenuously and temporarily) win elections in the three states West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, it is clear that their engagement with parliamentary democracy has not yet yielded the desired results.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka (previously known as Ceylon) the native communist movement has a long history. But from the very beginning communism in this island republic has been characterised by a deep ideological divide

between two different currents of marxism. Socialism originated in Sri Lanka with the formation of the Lanka Equal Society Party (LSSP) in 1935 under the leadership of Philip Gunawardena, who was a committed follower of Trotsky and thereby opposed to the Comintern line and stalinism in international communism.²² This position, however, was contested by a small minority group within the LSSP, resulting in their expulsion and the establishment of the pro-Moscow Communist Party of Sri Lanka (LKP) in 1943, with Peter Keuneman as chairman and Raja Collure as the general secretary. The split in the LSSP revealed two different perceptions of the world war. The LSSP opposed the prosecution of the war, urging in its place a struggle to secure the liberation of the country from British rule; a policy which resulted in the severe persecution of party activists. While many of the exiled leaders sought shelter in India, building up links with the followers of Trotsky, the LKP leadership extended support to the British war effort, as did the CPI in India, following the directives of the Comintern.

After India gained independence in 1948, the LSSP experienced growing internal conflicts over the question of whether to join the government of the social democratic Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which took power in 1951. In comparison the LKP fared marginally better, at least from an organisational point of view, although it underwent a split in 1964 between the pro-Moscow and the pro-Beijing factions. Just as in India, after the rise of the BJP, the communist parties have decided to lend support to the Congress. In Sri Lanka, as well, the strategies of the LSSP and the LKP have been guided by the presence of two major nationalist parties of the country; namely the centre-left and the moderate SLFP and the more conservative United National Party (UNP). For the LSSP and the LKP what has followed has been a cycle of building an alliance with the SLFP against the UNP and then of breaking them; and of joining the government and then withdrawing from it. The LKP, in particular, has systematically advocated the idea of a national democratic front to contain the UNP and its policies.²³

For the left in Sri Lanka the rise of the People's Liberation Front (JVP) in 1964 complicated the political terrain. Its main agenda was to drive out the Tamils from Sri Lanka, who had come to the island from India long ago in search of employment in the plantations. Around the slogan 'Sri Lanka for the Sinhalese only' the JVP launched an anti-government

campaign and encouraged anti-Tamil riots. The JVP was held responsible for a series of acts of violence, including acts of assassination, a number of attempted killings and an abortive army coup. After stirred up strong anti-Tamil feelings among the Sinhalese majority, the JVP was finally banned in 1971. It regained legal status in 1977, was banned again in 1983, and legalised for a second time in 1988. By 1989 most of its leaders had been detained or killed. Efforts to minimise the anti-Tamil sentiments amongst the Sinhalese majority remained a major concern for Sri Lankan communists. The LKP took the consistent and principled position that the Sinhalese majority must accept the rights and freedoms of the Tamil minority as an ethnic group.²⁴ In Sri Lanka, as in India, the course of mainstream communism has ultimately been shaped by the question of how best to negotiate the challenges posed by bourgeois nationalism, however moderately or conservatively such a politics has manifested itself.

The future of communism in South Asia, as the review has shown, is far from certain. In India and Sri Lanka, communism has reached something of an impasse on the road to parliamentary advance. In Pakistan and in Bangladesh bitter factionalism and splits have severely eroded the cause of communism. In most of the region, political spaces previously occupied by communists have been taken over by other parties, as the ability of class-based politics to explain the complex social realities of modern South Asia has sharply decreased. Communists continue to be divided on the question of how to deal with the nationalist bourgeoisie in countries like India and Sri Lanka. It seems all too likely that the inability to reach a consensus on the key political issues confronting the parties of this region will continue to hamper the evolution of communism in South Asia.

Notes

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5. Donald F Busky, *Communism in History and Theory: Asia, Africa and the Americas*, Westport: Praeger, 2002.
6. Wallace Spaulding, 'New Head, Old "Problems of Peace and Socialism"', *Problems of Communism*, 31(6), November-December, 1982, pp57-62.
7. 'Preface' in Desfosses and Levesque (eds.), *Socialism in the Third World*, ppv-ix.
8. Mackerras and Knight, *Marxism in Asia*, pp20, 273-78.
9. 'Communism in Asia: Towards a Comparative Analysis', in Scalapino, *The Communist Revolution in Asia*; also Robert A Scalapino, 'Patterns of Asian Communism', *Problems of Communism*, 20, Special Issue, January-April 1971, pp2-13.
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11. Farooq Sulheria, 'The Left in Pakistan: A Brief History', *Links*, 13, September-December, 1999; <<http://www.dsp.org.au/links/back/issue13/Sulheria2.htm>> Accessed 23 August 2010. This link was not currently accessible at the time of publication.
12. See Taimur Rahman, 'On the History of the Communist Movement in Pakistan' (I-II), available online at: <<http://www.archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2001/msg07024.htm>>; and <<http://www.archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2001/msg07023.htm>> Accessed 23 August 2010.
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14. For these reports see *Green Left Weekly*, 486 (2002): <<http://www.greenleft.org.au/back/2002/486/486p20c.htm>> and *Socialist Viewpoint*, 2, 7, Summer 2002; <http://www.socialistviewpoint.org/sum_02/sum_02_6.html> Accessed 23 August 2010.
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16. For a composite profile of the fragmentary left in Bangladesh and their ideological divisions (up to October 2003) see *Leftist Parties of the World*: <<http://www.broadleft.org/bd.htm>> Accessed 23 August 2010.
17. Safiuddin Ahmed Manik, 'Ours is a Struggle for Democracy', *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, 17, 6, June (1989), p29.
18. Speech of Matiur Rahman, in *The Joint Struggle of the working-class*

- movement and the national liberation movement against Imperialism and for Social Progress. International Scientific Conference Berlin, 20-24 October 1980*, Vol. II, Dresden: Verlag Zeit im Bild, 1981, pp832-33.
19. Krishna Hachhethu, *Party Building in Nepal. Organization, Leadership and People. A Comparative Study of the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)*, Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 2002.
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 21. Some of the examples are: 'Internal Debate within the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)', *Monthly Review*, July, 2005: <<http://www.monthlyreview.org/0705cpndebate.htm>> Accessed 23 August 2010; 'Maoists bare new political ideas', *Himalayan News Service* (Kathmandu), 8 March 2008; "'Note of Dissent" Presented by Comrade Laldhwaj', *Monthly Review*, July, 2005: <<http://www.monthlyreview.org/0705cpndissent.htm>> Accessed 23 August 2010; *The Red Star*, 1, 4, 16-29 February 2008. These are very significant, since upholding the cause of inner-party democracy is extremely rare in the communist parties of South Asia, one exception being the position of the CPB. For its express defence of *glasnost* and democracy in the communist party see: Manik, 'Ours is a Struggle for Democracy', pp 30-31. For a comprehensive understanding of the left in Nepal, especially the CPN(M)'s viewpoint, see Arjun Karki and David Seddon (eds.), *The People's War in Nepal: Left Perspectives*, Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2003.
 22. For a comprehensive study of trotskyism in Sri Lanka, see: Charles W Ervin, *Tomorrow is Ours: The Trotskyist Movement in India and Ceylon, 1935-48*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2006.
 23. See, for instance, P Keuneman, 'The Strength of Communist Principles', *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, 3, 12, December, 1975, pp19-24; 'Changes in Sri Lanka. Interview with K P Silva'. *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, 6, 1, January 1978, pp142-49; P Keuneman, 'Unity of the Fighting Masses', *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, 6, 8, August 1978, pp32-43; K P Silva, 'An Updated Strategy', *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, 15, 7, July 1987, pp73-79.
 24. K P Silva, 'Regardless of Bourgeois Chauvinism', *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, 14, 11, November 1986, pp85-93.