CHAPTER VII
CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

I

The study, which has been attempted in the previous five chapters, casts light on the uneven development of the Communist Party and movement in different districts of Bengal. Uneven development of economy not only creates regional variations, it also results in uneven development of the Communist Party and movement in different regions — in the present case, different districts of Bengal.

II

The Communist Party and movement in Bengal took its birth and shape in Calcutta, which was also the strongest base of the communist activities. The strong working-class movements provided the breeding ground. The existence of the organized working class, which was the product of the industrial expansion, made the regular flow of members for the CPI. The communists participated in the working-class struggles, which often assumed the form of strikes, led many of such struggles and strikes of the workers, imparted militancy to such struggles and strikes and also imparted trade union consciousness, and augmented the spirit of the workers, who, in turn, were the main support base of the CPI. The CPI in Bengal in general and in Calcutta in particular consisted of a good number of workers as its members. Thus the working class, which was the main support base of the CPI in Calcutta, also constituted one of its major membership forces. Even some leading members of the CPI in Bengal in general and in Calcutta in particular came from the working class. The top leadership of the CPI in Bengal, with only a few prominent exceptions like Muhammad Ismail both during the thirties and forties, i.e., during the entire
period under review, or Manmatha Chatterjee only during the thirties, was, however, of essentially middle-class origins. It is true that the 'declassed' middle class does not have any material difference with the working class and the communists of the early period, who organized the party and movement in Bengal in the thirties, became undoubtedly 'declassed', but it is equally true that barring Muhammad Ismail and only a few others like him, the top leadership of the CPI in Bengal did not consist of the persons of working-class origins in general. This was not at all done intentionally, but it was the reality. The Calcutta district party also exhibited the same feature. Although the Calcutta district party consisted of a good many workers as its members, some of whom were even its leading members, its top leadership, however, included only a few persons of working-class origins. Once again it was not intentional, but in any case the reality.

During the 'left' period of the CPI that continued from 1948 to 1950 an attempt was made to give the real working-class character to the party. The whole thing was, however, done quite mechanistically as in order to make the party really the working-class party, the working-class origin was considered to be the essential, and almost only, criterion for the party leadership, and before making the workers party leaders, no attempt was made to make them politically educated and conscious in the proper way.

During the period from 1930 to 1947, i.e., during the period under discussion in the present work, the communists could exert considerable influence on the workers in Bengal in general and in Calcutta in particular. In Calcutta the communists controlled many workers' unions and played a key role in the strike-struggles of the workers. At the call of the communists and as a result of the initiative taken by them the workers often went on strike in Calcutta during the period under review, on most occasions for realizing their economic demands, but even sometimes on purely political issues, as could be seen during the heyday of the post-war anti-imperialist struggles, in November 1945, February 1946, July 1946 and February 1947. In the Calcutta Municipal
Corporation election held in March 1944 two communists were elected to the Calcutta Corporation from the labour constituencies. Although the Congress did not contest the labour seats in the Calcutta Corporation election, the communists, who had to face the frontal opposition offered by Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy, one of the top leaders of the Muslim League in Bengal, and his followers, defeated his personal candidates and also other candidates. All these only indicate the hold of the communists on the workers in Calcutta during that period.

But in the Bengal Legislative Assembly (then called Bengal Legislative Council) election held in March 1946 the communist candidates were defeated in five of the seven labour seats in this province. Although the communists could exert considerable influence on the workers in Calcutta and Howrah districts, both in Calcutta and Howrah labour seats two prominent communist leaders of Bengal, who were the veterans of the trade union movement, were defeated. Even the prominent communist leaders of working-class origins including Muhammad Ismail were defeated in other labour seats in Bengal. These electoral results came as a fatal shock to the communists. The communists undoubtedly organized the workers, led their unions, encouraged them to launch agitation and strikes for the realization of their own economic demands and provided the required leadership to such agitation and strikes. As a result the workers also found the communists good allies and good leaders in their trade union movement, which was essentially economic in nature, and belonged to the trade unions controlled and led by the communists for the realization of their own economic demands, but they did not consider the CPI to be any real alternative to the Congress in the political field, especially in the struggle for independence, and hence voted for the Congress, not for the communists. Thus even a good number of workers belonging to the communist unions voted for the Congress. This 'Red flag for bread and tri-colour for independence (Roti ke liye jal jhanda aur azadi ke liye teranga) syndrome, which summed up the attitudes of the workers prevailing then, however, often confounded the communists who were especially baffled by the results of the Bengal Legislative
Assembly (then called Bengal Legislative Council) election held in March 1946, but the communists should themselves be held responsible for this debacle in the election to a large extent as they could not properly generate political consciousness among the workers and establish themselves as any genuine alternative to the Congress in the political field and they did not give any serious look at the vital issue of 'alternative leadership'.

Although the communist candidates were defeated in the Calcutta labour seat and four other labour seats in Bengal in the March 1946 election, still it cannot be denied that the communists could wield substantial influence on the workers, at least in their struggles for realizing their own economic demands, and a good number of workers became members of the CPI and the workers in general were the main support base of the CPI in Calcutta. Moreover, it is no denying the fact that communism thrived best in a situation characterized by the industrial expansion and the existence of the strong working class, of which Calcutta was the best example. Thus Calcutta stands as the unique model of the strong urban communist movement.

The district of Howrah was characterized by the existence of both industry and agriculture side by side. The communists in that district were strong in both trade union and peasant fronts and were active in both working-class and peasant movements, which, in turn, provided strength to the party in terms of membership. Thus while the leadership of the CPI in that district was essentially middle class, both the working class and peasant elements, in addition to the middle class elements, constituted the membership force. Moreover, the striking feature was that the working class in that district could acquire not only trade union consciousness, but also a section of the working class could even transcend that level and attain sufficient political consciousness and maturity even at the early stage of the communist movement in the district in the early thirties and took an active part in the process of party-building in the district.
Some of them even had enough leadership potential.

Although the workers themselves started the process of party formation in the district of Howrah in the early thirties, with the passage of time the middle-class youth predominated in the party and provided the required leadership. In this district the Communist Party recruited a good many members from the workers and peasants, who, however, constituted the party ranks. The communists trained the workers and created the working-class leaders, but did not make any conscious attempt to bring them to the party leadership. There were only few exceptions, the most prominent among whom was Muhammad Ilias. During the period under study the top leadership of the Howrah district party consisted of those communists, who were involved in the working-class and peasant movements for a long period, and some of them, as a result of their long involvement in the working-class movement and long association with the workers, became virtually workers, but all of them, with the only exception of Muhammad Ilias, who was really of the working-class origin, were, however, of essentially middle-class origins. Muhammad Ilias became a member of the Howrah District Committee of the CPI, i.e., he became a part of the top leadership of the Howrah district party, at its second Conference held by the end of November 1947. The communists participated in and led the working-class and peasant movements for a long time in this district and the party included a good number of workers and peasants as its members, but the membership force of the party mainly came from the middle class.

Although the communists had a good hold on the workers, in the Bengal Legislative Assembly (then called Bengal Legislative Council) election held in March 1946 the communist candidate, who was a prominent leader of the CPI in Bengal and a veteran of the trade union movement, was defeated in the Howrah labour seat as the communists, who led the workers in their movements for realizing their own economic demands, could not properly generate political consciousness among the workers and establish themselves as any genuine alternative to the Congress in the political field. In spite of this defeat of the CPI candidate, it cannot be denied that during the period under review the
communists could exert considerable influence on the workers, at least in their struggles centring around economic demands, in the district of Howrah.

In the peasant movement in this district the communists played the most active and prominent role and their command over the peasant movement even appeared to be greater than their command over the trade union movement. A further peculiarity of the working-class and peasant movements in Howrah district was that the workers, especially the jute mill workers, who has a long history of struggle and were the most conscious elements, took the main initiative in organizing the Krishak Samitis in the villages and led the peasant movements, especially during the early period. The initiative was subsequently taken by the peasants themselves. This implies that the working-class and peasant movements were intimately connected with and complementary to each other and both of them gave an added fillip to the communist movement in the district. Thus Howrah stands as the peculiar model of both the urban and rural communist movement, which can be considered to be more or less strong.

IV

Murshidabad, by contrast, during the pre-independence period, was characterized by a predominantly pre-capitalist mode of production, the result of which was the near absence of industry and the industrial working class in the district. This near absence of industry and the industrial working class, which was supposed to be the main support base of the Communist Party in general, adversely affected the party and was a real stumbling block in the path of the development of the Communist Party and movement in the district. The pre-capitalist background of the district resulted in a low level of consciousness, which prevented the CPI from making adequate inroads and robbed the communist movement of much of its vitality. As a result the support base of the party was very restricted. The leadership of the Murshidabad district party was absolutely middle-class and most of the members of the party came from the middle class. The CPI undoubtedly recruited some members from the
peasants, fishermen, rickshaw-pullers, bidi workers, municipal workers, scavengers, Harijans and such other non-industrial workers, but their numbers were not sufficient. Moreover, although there was a steady increase in party membership during 1938-47, the party itself did not have sufficient members even in 1947. The party was predominantly a middle-class party as 68 out of 100 party members in March 1947 belonged to the middle class, but still it could not bring adequate numbers of middle-class youth within its fold. Furthermore, although the communists of Murshidabad could spread their influence among the peasants, fishermen, rickshaw-pullers, bidi workers, municipal workers, scavengers, Harijans and some other downtrodden sections of the society, organized them, led their unions and organizations and organized them in a series of movements for the realization of their own demands, they could not bring them within the organizational fold of the party in sufficient numbers. They also found the communists good allies and good leaders in their movements for the realization of their economic demands, but did not feel that urge to join the CPI. This was undoubtedly the weakness of the communists as they did not impart proper political education to them and did not make any serious attempt to make them conscious politically. If the communists could generate proper political consciousness among them, they would have joined the party in sufficient numbers and could become leading party members and even party leaders. Moreover, the shortage of whole-time party workers and the near absence of industrial workers within the fold of the party prevented it from widening its support base and the membership force of the CPI also remained restricted. In addition, in spite of the increasing influence of the CPI on the peasants, its support base among the Muslim peasants, who constituted the majority of the population in the district, was comparatively weak. It could rather draw greater support from the poor Santhals and other poor adivasi peasants. Thus the CPI could not spread the Tebhaga struggle among the Muslim peasants to any significant extent, which, however, accounted for the limited success of this struggle in the district. This failure to attract the Muslim peasants of the district on the basis of the Tebhaga demands and to draw them
within the organizational fold of the party to any remarkable extent acted as the further impediment and also accounted for the restricted membership force of the CPI in Murshidabad. If the party could adequately widen its support base among the Muslim peasants, it would have become comparatively more powerful in spite of the near absence of its main support base, i.e., the industrial working class. Thus although the communists provided the required leadership to the movements of different sections of the society for the realization of their own economic demands and could expand their influence, the support base of the CPI still remained restricted and the CPI continued to be an overall weak party in the district during the period under review. So Murshidabad stands as a model of a weak communist movement on the whole, which was essentially rural.

V

It is thus clear from the foregoing discussion that the leadership of the Communist Party in Bengal including Calcutta and other districts remained essentially middle-class in character. Almost all the leaders of the CPI in Bengal, with very few exceptions, the most prominent among whom was Muhammad Ismail, who had the working-class background, came from the middle class. The name of Muhammad Ilias is also to be mentioned in this context as he belonged to the working-class background and was himself an iron worker when he joined the CPI in the district of Howrah. This middle-class character of the leadership of the CPI in Bengal including Calcutta and other districts was no exception as the leadership of the CPI in all other parts of India and also the all-India leadership of the party always remained middle-class in character during the colonial period and also the post-colonial period. As already stated, it is no doubt true that the persons belonging to middle class, if they can become properly 'declassed', do not have any material difference with the persons belonging to the working class, and those, who organized and built up the Communist Party and movement in Bengal during the period under
consideration, could undoubtedly make themselves 'declassed'; but it is equally true that with only the exceptions of those, whose names have already been mentioned above, and very few others like them, the top leadership of the CPI in Bengal, including Calcutta and other districts, did not consist of the persons of working-class origins in general. This reality was not deliberately intended, but in any case it was the reality.

This was, however, in complete accord with the Leninist concept of the party as Lenin himself held the view that the 'class political consciousness' could be brought to the workers only from outside this class. In this context we may refer to the relevant extract from a representative writing of Lenin:

> Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationship of all classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between all classes.... To bring political knowledge to the workers the Social-Democrats (meaning thereby the communists — AC) must go among all classes of the population; they must dispatch units of their army in all directions.¹

(Emphasis in original.)

VI

Now attention may be focused on the vital issue of 'alternative leadership'.

Following the Leninist dictum, the Indian communists during the twenties participated in the anti-imperialist national liberation movement led by the Congress with the ultimate object of providing an 'alternative leadership' to this movement. Then the communists were only a handful in number, but their attempt was quite sincere. They were absolutely dedicated to their cause. The perspective
of 'alternative leadership' was gradually lost in practice and in reality, although not in theory or in principle. The CPI all along stuck to the concept of 'alternative leadership' theoretically, but the way they were applying their political line in this country gradually eroded the possibility of providing this 'alternative leadership' to which the party was committed in principle. Moreover, no proper attempt was made by the CPI to provide this 'alternative leadership' to the national liberation movement.

The communists during the pre-independence period could acquire considerable strength in different class and mass fronts and successfully led many struggles of the masses for the realization of their different economic demands. By means of their participation in such movements and their leadership, they could increase their support base and further strengthen their position. The communists also quite enthusiastically and sincerely participated in the national liberation struggle against the alien rule, often trying to leave a 'proletarian impress' upon this struggle, especially in 1940-41, when they began a serious endeavour to emerge as an authentic Indocentric communism. But the communists were never able, or to put it more specifically, they did not make any serious attempt on most occasions, to provide any 'alternative leadership' to the national liberation movement and thus failed to wrest the leadership of this movement from the hands of the Congress High Command, which continued to maintain its hegemonic control over this movement.

The regular zigzags in the policies of the Communist International (Comintern) during the period under review were always reflected in the policies of the CPI, thus resulting in occasional swings in the political line of the party from one extreme to the other, although often these swings were the result of the overzealous, and hence mechanistic, interpretation of the Comintern line. As a result, the CPI sometimes resorted to staunch and blind anti-Congressism, which gave expression to extreme 'left-sectarianism' of the CPI, and when the CPI corrected this self-defeating line and replaced it with its new 'United Front' line, as a sequel to the 'United Front' line of the Comintern, it went to the opposite extreme and adopted the policy of over-reliance upon the
Congress, which ultimately resulted in the 'right-reformist' deviations. The correct CPI line of offering active resistance to the imperialist war and the revolutionary utilization of the war crisis for the achievement of national freedom during the 'imperialist war' period was replaced by its 'people's war' line, and during the 'people's war' period their mechanical application of this 'people's war' line in India and blind opposition to the 'Quit India' struggle culminated in the alienation of the CPI from the national mainstream. The CPI had to suffer much for its serious 'right-reformist' mistakes committed during this period. Even in the heyday of the post-war anti-imperialist struggles, in which the CPI energetically and dedicatedly participated, by means of which it gradually came to the forefront of such struggles, the CPI did not make any attempt to wrest the initiative from the hands of the Congress and the Muslim League, which reflected the Congress-League-fixation of the CPI.

As a result of all such swings from the one extreme to the other, which became a regular feature of the CPI line during the colonial period, the CPI could not acquire the position of providing the much required 'alternative leadership' to the national liberation struggle. Thus the CPI could not emerge as an authentic hegemonic force in the national liberation struggle during the colonial period and continued to play only the second fiddle to the bourgeois leadership of the Congress.

VII

In this context we may refer to the theoretical analyses of Antonio Gramsci, the famous Italian Marxist, and Louis Althusser, the well-known French Marxist.

Following the Marxist theoretical analysis, Louis Althusser has drawn a distinction between State Power and State Apparatus. It is comparatively easier to capture the State Power, but it is far more difficult to capture the State Apparatus and to establish its control over it. The capture of the State Power
does not necessarily imply the capture of the State Apparatus. It has also been recognized in the writings of Lenin. After the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917, Lenin had to face the same problem. Lenin addressed this issue in one of his famous writings, *Can The Bolsheviks Retain State Power?* Thus, after the capture of the State Power, the communists should continue, through conscious efforts, the fight to capture the State Apparatus and to eliminate the bourgeoisie completely from the control of the State Apparatus. Althusser has once again referred to two types of State Apparatus — (1) Repressive State Apparatus and (2) Ideological State Apparatus. It means that it is not sufficient to capture the Repressive State Apparatus alone, as at the same time the Ideological State Apparatus should also be captured. The second task is, however, far more difficult. In order to capture the Ideological State Apparatus, it is required to expand ideology in the civil society, that is to say, it is required to establish and expand hegemony in the civil society. Herein lies the relevance of the theory of Antonio Gramsci.

Antonio Gramsci has made a distinction between Russia under the control of the Tsar on the one hand and Italy, which was his own country, and countries like Italy on the other, and has held the view that in countries like Italy the state is not everything, and a strong civil society, which is the outcome of the democratic traditions inherent in those countries, exists there. In the opinion of Gramsci, in the western capitalist countries like Italy the ruling class rules not only with the help of force, but also with the help of the expansion of hegemony. As a result, only the struggle against force exercised by the ruling class is not enough. What is additionally required is to fight against the hegemony of the ruling class and also to liquidate it, for which it is essential to expand and establish counter hegemony in the civil society. Following the theory of Gramsci, the nature of the revolution in the western capitalist countries like Italy will be different from the nature of the Bolshevik Revolution of Russia. Revolution will take place in such countries through the establishment and expansion of counter hegemony in the civil society. By nature it will be a prolonged struggle. Antonio Gramsci has characterized such a struggle as the ‘War of Position’. On the contrary the Bolshevik Revolution was considered by Gramsci to be the
'War of Manoeuvre', which would be applicable to countries like Russia, where
the state was everything and all-pervasive and the civil society did not exist
separately. In the opinion of Antonio Gramsci, this 'War and Position' implies
the prolonged 'reciprocal siege', for which the 'unprecedented concentration
of hegemony' is essential.3

VIII

Following the theory of Antonio Gramsci, in colonial India the CPI, which
was supposed to become the symbol and institutional form of the 'national
popular collective will' of the civil society, which every Communist Party of the
world should be, was essentially required to carry on the 'War of Position', in
the Gramscian sense of the term, meaning thereby that the CPI should engage
itself in a protracted straggle for the establishment and expansion of counter
hegemony in the civil society. It was thus expected that the CPI would emerge
as an authentic hegemonic force within the national liberation struggle so that it
could offer counter hegemony not only to colonialism, but also to nationalism,
which was bourgeois nationalism, so to say. But the CPI failed to emerge as
such as an authentic hegemonic force in colonial India.

Nationalism, meaning thereby bourgeois nationalism, emerged as the
counter hegemonic force in colonial India and the CPI failed to understand
properly the potentialities of nationalism as a counter hegemonic force. Thus
the CPI was always confused as to how it would convincingly address the
issue of nationalism in colonial India. Furthermore, the CPI could not also
properly understand and address the Gandhi phenomenon, that is to say, the
role of Gandhi as a major hegemonic force in colonial India. This hegemonic
potentiality and prowess of Gandhi remained beyond the reach of the
understanding of the CPI. Thus the CPI could not properly counter the
hegemonic influence of Gandhi, which was expected from it.

The failure to make an authentic, innovative and serious understanding of
the objective socio-political reality of India with all the intricacies, complexities
and complications of this land, which was intimately associated with the mechanical application of the Comintern line in India, prevented the CPI from emerging as the proper hegemonic force and also from providing the 'alternative leadership' to the national liberation movement. Overemphasis upon only the class struggle and class issues and negligence of the non-class issues like the communal issues or caste issues or gender issues and so on as having their own autonomy and independence, also further blurred the vision of the CPI. As a result of this blurred vision, the CPI and the communist movement in India had to suffer. A mechanical understanding of the relationship of the non-class issues vis-a-vis the class issues, implying thereby the consideration of all the non-class issues as the direct derivative of the class issues without having their autonomy and independence, and also a mechanical understanding of the objective socio-economic-political reality of India undoubtedly weakened the communist movement in India during the period under consideration and adversely affected the CPI, which could never acquire the position wherefrom it could provide the 'alternative leadership' to the national liberation struggle against the British colonial rule.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


4. Antonio Gramsci, 'State and Civil Society', in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci, Edited and Translated by Quintin Hoare
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