Chapter-IV

'POPULAR MOVEMENTS'

In this chapter our focus shall be on the three upsurges around the INA trials and the R.I.N. revolt and the workers', peasants', and tribals' movements. What was their nature, significance and impact? These are some of the questions we shall try and answer. Since some historians, especially on the left, see only these upsurges as constituting popular activity, and make certain contentions about their effect on the Congress stance and the British policy (a view with which we shall take issue later), it will be worthwhile to treat them as a distinct analytical category. The argument about their impact on British policy flows into the next chapter, which focusses on colonial state and policy.

Popular Upsurges in the Winter of 1945-46

In this section we shall analyse three agitations—the demonstration in Calcutta from 21 to 23 November 1945 over the INA issue, the Rashid Ali Day students' demonstration in Calcutta from 11 to 13 February 1946 and the Royal Indian Navy strike which began on 18 February 1946 in Bombay and spread to Karachi, Madras, Visakhapatnam etc. We discuss them separately from the popular nationalist activity taken up earlier, for their common characteristic was a direct, violent confrontation
with the authorities in sharp contrast to the general trend of peaceful nationalist activity in this period.

Rather than giving a blow-by-blow account of each one of these 3 upsurges, we shall deal with them together under some broad heads—the pattern of the agitation, its features and its inherent limitations. We shall also try to compare and contrast these upsurges with the trend of general politicisation as delineated in the preceding chapter.

The broad pattern of these agitations followed three phases. First, a sectional protest posing a challenge to authority was met by official repression. This was followed by involvement of various sections of the public in the city, who were indignant at the severity of the repression unleashed. The third stage saw the solidarity actions by people in other parts of the country.

The first stage, i.e. the protest action of a section, was the students' clash with the police in the Calcutta demonstrations of November and February and the ratings' revolt and their subsequent refusal to surrender to the Government. On 21 November 1945, a procession of students, mainly from the Forward Bloc, but also joined by the Student Federation and the Islamia College students, shouting slogans like "Jai Hind" and "Marshal Bose Zindabad", was prevented by the police from passing through Dalhousie Square, the seat of authority in Calcutta.
When the students refused to disperse, they were lathi-charged by the police. The students retaliated by hurling stones and brickbats. This in turn invited firing by the police, resulting in the death of 2 and injury to 52. On 11 February 1946 the students had once again taken up the INA prisoners' issue, more specifically, the 7 year sentence passed on Abdul Rashid. The Muslim League students led the procession, the Congress and the Communist students joined them. The arrest of some students on Dharamtolla Street provoked the main body of students to defy Section 144 imposed in the Dalhousie Square area, and they were lathi-charged and many were arrested.

The first stage in the RIN revolt was marked by the ratings' strikes in Bombay and Karachi and the sympathetic strikes by ratings in Madras, Vishakhapatnam, Calcutta, Delhi, the Andamans and Bahrein and by some RIAF and Indian Army units. On 18 February, 1100 naval ratings on the HMIS Talwar went on strike in protest against racial discrimination, abuse and the unpalatable food served to them. The release of a fellow rating, arrested for writing "Quit India" on the walls of the Talwar, was

1. HT, 22 November 1945 and Pethick-Lawrence to Wavell, 2 January 1946, TP, Vol.6, p.552 and 724. Also see Sumit Sarkar, op.cit., p.682.

2. Wavell wrote to Pethick-Lawrence that Abdul Rashid "had one man hung up and beaten in his presence until he lost consciousness". 13 February 1946, TP, Vol. 6, p. 969.

3. HT, 12 February 1946; Bengal FR for the first half of February 1946. Home Poll 18/2/46.
also demanded. By 19 February the number of striking ratings was 7,000 and ratings on shore, in the Castle and Fort Barracks, joined the ship's ratings, many of whom went around Bombay city in lorries flying the Congress flag, threatening Englishmen and policemen, breaking shop windows and shouting slogans. Pitched battles between the ratings and the troops took place at Castle Barracks on 24 February. The Karachi ratings struck when the news of the Bombay strike reached on the 19th. The HMIS Hindustan, another ship, and 3 shore establishments were involved. There was a gruesome end to the episode since troops encircled the ships, and though the ratings fired the ship's guns, they were clearly outmatched and 6 ratings were killed and 7 others arrested.

The other ratings' strikes were token, sympathetic strikes. About 85 ratings struck work in Madras on 21 February and 600 in Visakhapatnam. There was a 7 day strike in Calcutta, where


5. HT, 20 February 1946; Colville, Governor, Bombay to Wavell. Extract, 27 February 1946, TP, Vol. 6, pp. 1079-80; Bombay FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46.

6. HT, 21 and 22 February 1946.

7. HT, 22 and 23 February 1946; Subrata Banerjee, op.cit., p 83.
surrender was forced by a prolonged military siege. Some 80 ratings struck work in Delhi, and there were strikes in Cochin, Jamnagar, the Andamans, Bahrein and Aden. Altogether 78 ships and 20 shore establishments, involving 20,000 ratings, were affected. However, the naval strike did not spark off a revolt in the armed forces and contrary to popular opinion, Indian police and troops were successfully used by the authorities to suppress the revolt. Nevertheless, sepoys at Jabalpur observed a sympathetic strike, and Colaba cantonment showed some "restlessness". The RIAF men, discontented with their own lot, were more enthusiastic in their support and the Marine Drive, Andheri, Sion, Poona, Calcutta, Jessore and Ambala units observed sympathetic strikes.

In the second stage the public in Calcutta and in the centres of the revolt became involved in the conflict and rendered the confrontation with the Government more broadbased. There were two significant features of this phase—the violence


and high pitch of the anti-British sentiment expressed and the ability of this popular action to bring the cities to a temporary standstill. Protest meetings and rallies were held, barricades set up, Europeans assaulted, strikes observed by students and workers and hartals organised. In the November demonstration, the public protested in Calcutta on 22 and 23 November 1945 and a mammoth meeting was held at Wellington Square. In February 1946 traffic was stopped and shops were closed within an hour of the arrests. People in Bombay initially gave food to the ratings, later they joined the ratings in attacking the Government buildings and the European shops and even prevented troops from arresting the ratings. In Karachi and Madras, too, there were large meetings, hartals, strikes and attacks on the Government institutions and the police. In November the "strong anti-British feeling" manifested itself in the attacks on the army and police personnel, police and military vehicles and Indians wearing European dress. In February 1946 the public action was


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characterised by a greater intensity and, besides attacks on European officials, civilians, trams and buses, the Government institutions became special targets. Police stations, post offices, shops and even a YMCA centre was attacked and burnt down. Besides, the erection of barricades was widespread and street battles with the police were common. This pattern was repeated in Bombay where military lorries, trams, buses, railway stations, banks, grain shops, as well as British soldiers, were targets of popular fury. Official figures of destruction of property in Bombay were 30 shops, 10 post offices, 10 police chowkies, 64 food grain shops and 1,200 street lamps.

Anti-British violence apart, a noteworthy feature of popular action was the complete paralysis of the cities. The transport system, business and industry, the educational institutions and the administration were brought to a halt for a few days. In November 1945 the Governor of Bengal spoke of the virtual "paralysing" of the "life of the community". The entire

15. HT, 13 February 1946; Bengal FR for the first half of February 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46 and Gautam Chattopadhyaya, op.cit., p. 427.


transport system was affected, private cars were stopped by students, military and official vehicles by barricades, railways by crowds squatting on the lines, and trams by the decision of the CPI-controlled union. Other sectors affected by strikes and hartals were the Calcutta Corporation, the schools and colleges and most of the markets.

In February 1946 the same pattern was more or less repeated. This time, however, the burning of military lorries, cars and trams was fairly common and the Tollygunge Tram Depot was set on fire. During the RIN revolt in Bombay, transport services were at a standstill on 22 and 23 February, road blocks were common and two trains were burnt down. In response to the Communists' call, 3 lakh workers struck work and thousands paraded through the city. Banks and shops were generally closed. Karachi was stilled on 23 February by a widespread hartal and students' strike and both British and American

19. HT, 23-26 November 1945; Bengal FR for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll. 18/11/45; Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 27 November 1945 and Casey to Wavell, 2 January 1946, TP, Vol. 6, pp. 552 and 724.


army vehicles attacked. Hotels, restaurants and shops were closed in Madras on 25 February. There were strikes by students and workers, stopping of public transport and stoning of official vehicles.

The third phase of these three upsurges saw the solidarity action of people in other parts of the country - strikes by students, hartals, demonstrations and meetings to express sympathy with the students and ratings, as well as to voice condemnation of official repression. In November 1945 students were in the forefront, organising demonstrations to protest against repression of their Calcutta brethren and boycotting classes and even convocations (in Agra and Patna). There were protest rallies and hartals by the public in big cities and in some small towns and various political parties condemned the

24. HT, 23 February 1946; Sind FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46 and Subrata Banerjee, op. cit, p. 131.


26. HT 24, 25, 26 and 30 November 1945; Assam, Orissa, Sind and UP FRs for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll. 18/11/45 and Note by WPN Jenkins, Deputy Director (C), Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, 23 November 1945, Home Poll 21/6/45.
firing. Wavell's effigy was burnt in Allahabad. In February 1946 people in other parts of the country had protested against the sentence passed on Rashid Ali - even before the Calcutta students' demonstration of 11 February - by holding meetings and observing hartals. This pattern was renewed when the news of the Calcutta firing reached various places and processions, and meetings and hartals were common. A large public meeting was held at Jallianwala Bagh, the scene of an earlier infamous episode of repression. Students' strikes were fairly widespread, and the Muslim students participated in these in considerable numbers, especially in Punjab. On the issue of the RIN revolt, strikes, and hartals were reported in some Madras districts. Linked up with the general discontent over food

27. HT, 24-27 November 1945; Assam and Delhi FRs for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll. 18/11/45.


29. HT, 12 and 17 February 1946; Bombay, UP, Assam, NWFP, Baluchistan, Delhi and Madras FRs for the first half of February 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46.

30. HT, 20 February 1946; Orissa FR for the first half and Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Delhi and Ajmer FRs for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46; and Gautam Chattopadhyaya, op.cit, p. 427.

31. HT, 19 February 1946.

32. HT 17 and 18 February 1946; Madras, Punjab and Orissa FRs for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46.
rationing, these incidents led to attacks on grain shops and to police firing, killing 4 persons. Trichinopoly and Madurai witnessed a one-day general strike and hartal and Ahmedabad and Kanpur reported workers' strikes. Interestingly, Calcutta, the city of "the almost revolution", was relatively quiet during the RIN revolt, despite a 7-day ratings' strike there, and it observed only a one-day general strike involving one lakh workers.

Nature and Significance

What was the significance of these events? There is no doubt that these upsurges were significant in as much as they gave expression to the militancy in the popular mind. Action, however reckless, was fearless and the crowds which faced police firing by temporarily retreating, only to return to their posts, won the Bengal Governor's grudging admiration. The RIN revolt remains a legend to this day. When it took place, it had a dramatic impact on popular consciousness. A revolt in the armed forces, even if soon suppressed, had a great liberating effect on

33. Madras FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46; HT, 26 and 27 February 1946.
34. Subrata Banerjee, op.cit., pp.131, 133-134.
35. Ibid.
36. HT, 24 February 1946 and Bengal FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46.
the minds of people. The RIN revolt was seen as an event which marked the end of British rule almost as finally as Independence Day, 1947.

The three agitations were localised, confined to big cities, to Calcutta, Bombay, Karachi and Madras as far as their actual occurrence goes. The confrontation with the police, the defiance of authority, the paralysis of administration, which were the main features, thus remained restricted to these cities. Even the sympathetic strikes and hartals were less widespread than was the general INA agitation. Besides, as they precipitated a violent conflict with the authorities, they could involve only the students and the more militant sections of society. The loyalists and the liberals obviously had no place in such a scenario. And though the firing was condemned by all, the ability of the crowds to hold a city to ransom must have been disturbing for the propertied classes.

Further, these upsurges were short-lived for obvious reasons. One reason was the violent and extreme form they took. Popular fury, having vented itself, usually subsides after a while. There was no programme of action for sustaining the agitation and keeping the issues alive among broad sections of society. These upsurges took place in the cities. This urban concentration made it easy for the authorities to deploy troops
and effectively suppress the upsurge.

An important fact which was demonstrated by these outbursts was that the Government retained its repressive machine intact, and was determined to use it harshly and effectively. Police controlled the situation in Calcutta in November 1945. In February 1946 troops were called in on the second day, patrolling was extensive and one army officer and 38 civilians were killed. In the RIN revolt in Bombay, troops were called in on the 19th when police firing could not restrain the ratings. A Maratha battalion rounded up ratings from the streets while troops besieged the ships and forced surrender. That the Government was bent upon repression was clear from Attlee's announcement in the House of Commons that Royal Navy ships were proceeding to Bombay. It was confirmed by Admiral Godfrey's stern ultimatum to the ratings, the troops' encirclement of ships and the bombers flying over them. Peace was restored by the 25th.

37. In the 1942 movement Satara, a district with difficult terrain and thereby affording cover to the underground workers, which stood out against the authorities for 2-3 years.

38. Troops had been asked to stand by, but were not called in.

39. Bengal FR for the first half of February 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46; The Hindustan Times put it as 53 dead and 500 injured, HT, 17 February 1946.


41. HT, 22 February 1946.
following heavy casualties among the civilians—228 dead and 1,046 injured. In Karachi 8 ratings were killed when troops forced ships to surrender. Police firing in the city left 8 dead and 18 injured, all civilians. In Madras district, 4 died and many were injured.

The Congress leaders quickly realised the British determination to repress. They had seen the forced surrender at Karachi and knew that many ratings on the streets had been rounded up, and that, too, by Indian troops, and so they advised the ratings' leaders to end their strike. Communists, too, realised that the Government was out to repress these agitations, and advised people in Calcutta in November 1945 and February 1946 to keep peace.

42. Colville to Wavell, 27 February 1946, TP, Vol. 6, p. 1079. The Bombay FR for the second half of February 1946 listed 236 dead and 1,156 injured, including 25 officers and 75 policemen, Home Poll. 18/2/46.

43. HT 22 and 23 February 1946; Subrat Banerjee, op. cit., p. 90.

44. Mudie, Governor of Sind, to Wavell, 27 February 1946, TP, Vol. 6, p. 1071.

45. Madras FR for the second half of February and the first half of March 1946, Home Poll. 18/2/46 and 18/3/46.

46. Patel wrote to Nehru on 22 February 1946: "The overpowering forces of both naval and military personnel gathered here is so strong that they [the rebels] can be exterminated altogether and they have been also threatened with such a contingency", J.N. Correspondence, Part I, Vol. 81.
Reality and how people perceive that reality often prove to be different, and this was true of these dramatic moments in 1945-46. Contemporary perceptions and later radical scholarship has infused these historical events with more than a symbolic significance. These events are imbued with an unrealised potential and a realised impact which is quite out of touch with reality. A larger than life picture is drawn of their militancy, reach and effectiveness. India is seen to be on the brink of a revolution. The argument goes that the communal unity witnessed during these events could, if built upon, have offered a way out of the communal deadlock.

The communal unity witnessed was more organisational unity than unity of the people. Moreover, the organisations came together only for a specific agitation that lasted a few days, as was the case in Calcutta on the issue of Rashid Ali's trial. Calcutta, the scene of "the almost revolution" in February 1946, became the battle ground of communal frenzy only six months later, on 16 August 1946. The communal unity evident in the RIN revolt was limited, despite the Congress, League and Red flags being jointly hoisted on the ships' masts. Muslim ratings


went to the League to seek advice on future action, while the rest went to the Congress and Socialists; Jinnah’s advice to surrender was addressed to Muslim ratings alone, who duly heeded it. The view that communal unity forged in the struggles of 1945-6 could, if taken further, have averted partition, seems to be based on wishful thinking rather than concrete historical possibility. The "unity at the barricades" did not show this promise.

Impact On British Policy

Popular perceptions differ from reality when it comes to the response these upsurges, especially the RIN revolt, evoked from the colonial authorities. It is believed that "the RIN revolt shook the mighty British Empire to its foundations". In fact these upsurges demonstrated that despite considerable erosion of the morale of the bureaucracy and the steadfastness of the armed forces by this time, the British wherewithal to repress was intact. The soldier-Viceroy, Wavell, gave a clean chit to the army a few days after the naval strikes: "On the whole, the Indian army has been most commendably steady". Those who believed that the British would succumb to popular pressure if only it was exerted forcefully were proved wrong. It was one

50. Viceroy to Secretary of State, 27 February 1946, TP, Vol.6, p.1076.
thing for the British Government to question its own stand on holding INA trials when faced with opposition from the army and the people. It was quite another matter when they faced challenges to their authority. Challenges to law and order and peace, the British were clear, had to be repressed.

The corollary to the above argument is the attribution of the sending of the Cabinet Mission to the impact of the RIN revolt. R.P. Dutt had yoked the two together many years ago:

"On February 18, the Bombay Naval strike began. On February 19, Attlee, in the House of Commons, announced the decision to despatch the Cabinet Mission". This is obviously untenable. The decision to send out the Mission was taken by the British Cabinet on 22 January 1946 and even its announcement on 19 February 1946 had been slated a week earlier. Others have explained the willingness of the British to make substantial political concessions at this point of time to the combined impact of the popular, militant struggles. However, as we shall see in chapter 5, the British decision to transfer power was not


53. See Sumit Sarkar, op. cit and Balabushevich and Dyakov, A Contemporary History of India, New Delhi, 1964, p. 417.
merely a response to the immediate situation prevailing in the winter of 1945-6, but a result of the realisation that their legitimacy to rule had been irrevocably eroded over the years.

Relationship between the Congress, Communists and those Uprising

The notion that these violent upsurges posed a threat to the Congress, either in terms of its position at the head of the nationalist forces being challenged by other more radical parties, or in terms of its strategy of struggle being replaced by an alternative, more "revolutionary" strategy, cannot be sustained. These agitations are believed to have been led by the Communists, the Socialists or Forward Blocists, or all of them together. The Congress role is seen as one of defusing the revolutionary situation, prompted by the fear that they would lose their position of leadership or by the concern that disciplined armed forces were vital in the free India that the party would rule soon. The Congress is seen to be immersed in negotiation and ministry-making and hankering for power.

In our view the three upsurges were an extension of the earlier nationalist activity with which the Congress was integrally associated. It was not only in the forefront of the widespread activity, but its leaders and the rank and file in

54. Apart from the toning down of Congress speeches, Sumit Sarkar, op.cit., specifically mentions Gandhi's talks with Casey.
fact inspired even the three major outbreaks under discussion. The Home Department came to the conclusion that they were the outcome of the "inflammatory atmosphere created by the intemperate speeches of the Congress leaders in the last three months". The Viceroy had no doubt that the primary cause of the RIN "mutiny" was the "speeches of Congress leaders since September last". In fact, the Punjab CID authorities warned the Director of the Intelligence Bureau of the "considerable danger", while dealing with the Communists, "of putting the cart before the horse and of failing to recognise Congress as the main enemy".

Further, the Communist Party of India did not even seek to challenge the position of the Congress in the nationalist firmament. Rather, it looked up to the Congress as the leader, along with the League, of the anti-imperialist forces and raised the slogan of Congress-League-Communist unity.

These three major upsurges were distinguishable from the activity preceding them because the form of articulation of protest was different. They took the form of a violent, flagrant

56. Viceroy to Prime Minister, 24 February 1946, TP, Vol. 6, p 1055.
57. Home Poll, 7/1/46.
58. People's War, 14 October and 18 November 1945.
challenge to authority. The earlier activity was a peaceful demonstration of nationalist solidarity. One was an explosion, the other a groundswell.

The Congress did not give the call for these upsurges; in fact no political organisation did. People rallied in sympathy with the students and the ratings as well as voiced their anger at the repression that was let loose. Individual Congressmen participated actively as did individual Communists and others. Student sympathisers of the Congress, the Congress Socialist Party, the Forward Bloc and the Communist Party of India jointly organised the 21 November 1945 demonstration in Calcutta. The Congress lauded the spirit of the people and condemned the repression by the Government. It did not officially support these struggles as it felt their tactics and timing were wrong. It was evident to Congress leaders that the Government was able and determined to repress. Vallabhbhai Patel asked the ratings to surrender because he saw the British mobilisation for repression in Bombay. Congress leaders were not the only ones who felt the need to restore peace. Communists joined hands with Congress in advising the people of Calcutta in November 1945 and February 1946 to return to their homes. Communist and Congress peace vans did the rounds of Karachi during the RIN revolt.

59. See footnote no. 46.

60. Subrata Banerjee, op.cit., p.131; Home Poll. 21/16/45 and TP, Vol. 6, p. 724.
Again, these outbursts were not integrated into any alternate strategy of insurrectionary struggle or seizure of power evolved by a leadership or party other than the Congress, seeking to lead the anti-imperialist struggle along a different path. It would be revealing to look at the stance adopted by the "revolutionary" (as opposed to the "compromising" Congress) party, i.e. the CPI. In this period the CPI was contesting elections, for the first time as a legal party, and sought to translate the steady accretion to their strength after 1942, into electoral victories. The party actively contested 108 seats, expected to win 25, but finally won only 8, 7 of which were in the labour constituencies. It was only the August 1946 resolution of the Communist Party which officially sanctioned, though still ambiguously, its local leaders to actively develop "revolutionary" situations towards a final struggle. Though local Communists participated in these upsurges, as did individual

61. As A.R. Desai puts it, the "Communist party during the war and the post-war period had no clear policy of an alternative strategy for securing independence", op. cit., p.426. see "The New Situation and our Tasks", Central Committee of C.P.I. resolution, December 1945, Archives of Contemporary History, J.N.U.

62. Overstreet and Windmiller, op.cit., p.242. "The CPI national office did not support these revolts for its leadership was divided and its official policy was now of cooperation with the Congress in the transitions to independence. Rural Communist leaders were, however, active in the revolts". Kathleen Gough, "Peasant Resistance and Revolt in South India" in A.R. Desai ed., op. cit. "For the Final Assault" - Tasks of the Indian People in the Present Phase of the Indian Revolution, Central Committee of C.P.I. August, 1946, Archives of Contemporary History, J.N.U.
Congressmen and CSP leaders, such as Aruna Asaf Ali, the CPI officially denied any share in the RIN revolt before the enquiry commission. This was much the same as the Congress denial of any share in the February outbursts over the Rashid Ali Day, which has been presented as a proof of Congress moderation. Interestingly, the attempts by the Congress to keep the peace and their denial of official involvement in the outbursts are seen as the classic proofs of their "moderation" or of "bourgeois" fear, while the Communists doing the same is perhaps sought to be justified on grounds of strategy or tactics.

Workers', Peasants' and Tribals' Movements

Our spotlight now shifts to another distinct group of movements, notably the strike wave, the Warlis revolt, the Tebhaga movement, the Telengana struggle, the Punnapra-Vayalar upsurge and the Punjab kisan morchas. These movements form


64. The Congress denial of any share in the Rashid Ali Day outbursts is one of the six instances that Sumit Sarkar cites as evidence of Congress moderation. op.cit., pp.679 and 682.

the basis of the left argument that the potential for anti-imperialist 'unity in struggle' existed even in 1946-47, but the Congress preferred the path of a negotiated transfer of power, even though the country had to pay the price of partition. We shall take a look at the broad features and contours of these movements to see whether, in fact, they held out this revolutionary promise.

Though their time span varied, the climactic point in at least three of these struggles, was reached in late 1946, after the process of transfer power was under way. They were not a continuation of the militant anti-imperialist wave of 1945-46. They were not overtly anti-imperialist in that they did not seek to challenge the legitimacy or the might of the Raj. Unlike February 1946, when the workers took to the streets on political issues, the strikes and peasant movements of 1946 were primarily over economic issues, such as wages, working conditions and economic grievances. The fight often was against landlords and princes, and not the Raj itself. It is true that in a situation of rapid political developments and a national mood of excitement at impending freedom, no action can remain purely economic. Sometimes, the very anticipation of freedom could give workers the confidence to demand better conditions. Ranajit Dasgupta stresses this constantly in his study of Jalpaiguri during 1945-
7, both for the Tebhaga movement and the Duars labour struggle. Yet a distinction between conscious, direct, political action and economic struggle with a political dimension continues to be relevant.

Another unifying thread was Communist initiative. Some of the issues of the 1946 struggles were of long standing, but had not been taken up earlier because of the People's War line during which struggle was at a discount. For example, the injustice of a half-share in the produce of the adhiar (or share cropper of Bengal) had been recognised by the Kisan Sabha in 1940 and the Floud Commission had recommended two-thirds share the same year— the Kisan Sabha took up the issue only after the war. Similarly, despite severe economic privations suffered by industrial workers because of inflation and food scarcity during the War, Communist labour leaders exhorted the workers to increase production, and refrain from strikes, even during the initial stormy weeks of the 1942 movement. Other reasons for less strikes were prosperity, Defence of India Rules and sympathetic handling by the Government, a legacy of the Congress ministries.


67. See Home Poll. 7/1/43 and 7/1/45 for extensive accounts of communist activities in the "legal" phase.
Support for the War effort brought the Communist Party its first spell of legality. The authorities were pleased that the romantic aura of an illegal party was gone, and with it many a young man or woman attracted to the party precisely because of this aura. While the party did lose many a cadre because of its unpopular People's War line, and perhaps some because of its legality, the ability to organise and recruit openly, raise funds, build kisan and trade union bases, strengthened the organisation of the party. Drives against hoarding and blackmarketing, famine relief work in Bengal, and attention to people's needs, all done in the best spirit and tradition of Gandhian constructive work, widened the influence of the party and rooted it in the people.

Godavari Parulekar and Kisan Sabha activists acquainted themselves with the problems of the tribals of Maharashtra from 1944 onwards, Punjab kisan leaders nurtured their peasant bases, Bengal kisan cadres took up famine relief work, Telengana communists came to dominate the Andhra Mahasabha, proving, like their Travancore comrades, that they were the most uncompromising fighters against feudal oppression. The AITUC expanded its influence to achieve a strength of 700,000 members by 1945. Thus, by 1946, simmering discontent was fast reaching boiling point aided by a lid kept firmly pressed down.
The strengthened Communist Party provided the conduit. Local cadres were emboldened by the Central Committee resolution of August 1946 which spoke of partial struggles of workers and peasants coalescing into a revolutionary alternative. They were somewhat confused as the resolution retained the old line of Congress-League-Communist unity. How would these struggles coalesce? What precisely did a revolutionary alternative mean? No strategy of seizure of power different from negotiations was formulated, except for some general statements about popular struggles showing the way out of compromise and partition.

It is impossible to paint the detailed picture of all or some of the these struggles here. The basic issues taken up in these struggles, though specific and varied, were illegal or patently exploitative and unjust exactions, practices and wages. Those interested in the fuller picture could see Godavari Parulekar's moving account of her life when it interwove with that of the Warlis, Sunil Sen's honest and in-depth study of the Tebhaga movement, supplemented by Ranajit Dasgupta's work on Jalpaiguri, K.C. George's saga of Punnapra-Vayalar and

70. Ranjit Dasgupta, *op. cit.*
P. Sundarayya and Raj Bahadur Gaur's accounts of the Telengana struggle. The strike wave of 1946-7 has not found a participant-historian as the other movements have, and only details about participation, intensity, etc., can be got from Sukomal Sen's general study of the Indian working class or from V.B. Karnik's account of strikes in India.

The Warlis, caught in the landlord-moneylender-official nexus, first opposed the practice of forced labour (vethi or vethbigar), then the institution of debt slavery (or marriage slaves), by which a married couple ended up working gratis for their whole lives to repay a debt of Rs. 100 or 200 incurred for marriage expenses. The Warli woman was often sexually exploited by the landlord and contractor, the separate name given to Adivasi-landlord offspring, Watlas, indicating how pervasive this exploitation must have been. Implicit faith in their leaders and in the magic of the Red Flag, and incredulous amazement at their invincible strength when united, created a form of struggle which


74. V. B Karnik, *Strikes in India*, Bombay, 1967. Also see Files L-D/1946-47 and 26/1946, AICC Papers.

was disarmingly simple but singularly effective. 10,000 Warlis marched together and freed marriage slaves by asking them to leave their master's houses or often asking the landlord to send them out. The landlords meekly asked their slaves to leave. Similarly, vethi and extortion of non-existent rent arrears was resisted by individual refusal backed by the strength of Warli unity. The kisan sabha was more in evidence in the struggle to get fairer wages for grass cutting and felling of trees. The wages for grass cutting were a couple of annas in cash or toddy for 500 lbs. The kisan sabha demanded Rs. 2-8. For felling trees the wage was 4 annas daily and the kisan sabha demand was Rs. 1-4. These wage disputes, which involved the Government too, led to conflict, repression and finally to success.

The adhiars or bargadars in Bengal demanded two-thirds of the produce where they supplied the plough, cattle, manure and seeds, as against the half share they got, which was clearly unjust. Initially they stacked the paddy in their own houses after the harvest and asked the jotedar to collect his one-third share. The Bargadars Bill introduced by the Suhrawardy Ministry in January 1947 gave impetus to the movement as the demand was no longer illegal. Bargadars began to remove paddy from the jotedars' khamars (or kholas) and often came into conflict with the police as jotedars levied charges of dacoity. Hajong tribals of North Mymensingh began an agitation to commute tanka into
money rent. Labour in the Duars, plagued by food and cloth scarcity and low wages, launched a struggle. Both these struggles got interwoven with the bargadars' demand-tebhaga chai.

The remarkable intensity of the strike wave in 1946 is indisputably established by all criteria - number of stoppages, number of workers involved, the amount of man-days lost. Workers were badly hit by inflation and retrenchment. 5-7 million Indians were retrenched from industry, administration and the army. The main issue was wages, followed by hours of work, bonus and food rations. This demand for wages arose because of the sharp decline in the living standards of workers. Though earnings went up to 208 in 1946, real earnings fell to 73.2 as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Stoppages involved</th>
<th>No. of Workers involved</th>
<th>Amount of man days lost</th>
<th>Index of Earnings</th>
<th>All India Consumer Price Index</th>
<th>Index of Real Earnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>105.03</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>108.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>291,054</td>
<td>3,330,503</td>
<td>111.0</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>103.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>772,653</td>
<td>5,779,965</td>
<td>129.1</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>89.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>525,088</td>
<td>2,342,287</td>
<td>179.6</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>67.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>658</td>
<td>550,015</td>
<td>3,447,306</td>
<td>202.1</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>75.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>747,530</td>
<td>4,054,499</td>
<td>210.5</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>74.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>1,629</td>
<td>1,961</td>
<td>12,717,762</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: V.B. Karnik, *Strikes in India*, p. 308.
the price index had shot up to 285 (taking 1939 as 100). Industry apart, strikes took place in the Post and Telegraphs Department, in the South Indian Railway and North Western Railway (a complete Railways strike was prevented by negotiations) in police units in Delhi and Bihar, in ordnance depots etc. The issue was working conditions, including better wages. The Post and Telegraph strike begun on 11 July 46 over wages and working conditions and was settled on 3 August after Patel intervened.

Punjab kisans waged no-rent struggles in Patiala, Una, Kangra, Pathankot and Ferozepur. There were tenant struggles for non-payment of illegal levies in Nili-Bar. Peasant proprietors protested against the remodelling of canal outlets (moghas) as they reduced water supply while water rates remained the same. The Harsa Chhina Mogha Morcha was formed, led by the Communists and comprised of Congressmen and Akalis too.

In Travancore the fish workers, coir factory workers, toddy tappers and agricultural workers unionised by the Communist Party rallied behind its call to 'sink the American model constitution in the Arabian Sea!' The issue was clearly political

77. See Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, New Delhi, 1984.

the irremovable executive to be nominated by the Maharaja negated the concession of a Legislative Assembly elected by adult franchise. Economic aspects were interwoven as there was jenmi (landlord) domination and oppression in the area. Besides, the communists had led a successful strike for higher wages in August 1946 and had the workers solidly behind them.

Extent and Intensity - The areas these movements engulfed and the large number of strikes that took place indicate their extent and reach. The Warlis comprised 50% of adivasis of Umbergaon, Dahanu, Palghar and Jawahar taluks of Thana district. Tebhaga was centred in the North Bengal districts, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, with pockets of Mymensingh, Midnapur, 24 Parganas, Jessore and Khulna affected. Hajong tribals of North Mymensingh and tea garden and railway labour in the duars joined in. There were many strikes in 1945 and 1947, but 1946 marked the high point of the strike wave. 1629 strikes, involving 1,961,948 men and a loss of 12,717,762 man-days were reported as compared to 820 strikes, 747,530 men and 5,054,459 man-days in 1945. The Travancore revolt, better known by the names of the two principal centres, Punnapra and Vayalar, also included Kattoor, Olathala, Mararikulam and Menassery in its spread, all being part of Shertallay and Ambalapuzha taluks of Travancore.

79. K.C. George, op. cit. Also see Govt. of Travancore, Confidential Department, 774/46/CS, Bundle 4/ and 731/46, Bundle 40, Cellar Library, Secretariat, Trivandrum.
The fearlessness displayed by the Warlis, the Bengal *kisans* and the Travancore workers in confrontations with the police, army or landlords' *lathials* as the case may be, was a reflection not only of their own anger and enthusiasm, but of their total faith in the party, *kisan sabha* or union, and especially in their leaders. The Warlis came to love Godavari Parulekar over the long days and nights she spent with them, listening to their woes, urging them to resist oppression, eating their sparse food and sleeping in their huts. Knowing the Warlis love for the *bai* (as Godavari came to be called), the landlords spread the canard that the *bai* was in danger and wanted the Red Flag people to save her. Warlis in their thousands, only stopping to pick up an axe or a bow and arrow, rushed to the town. Landlords had duly informed the police that armed Warlis were marching in large numbers and the police soon appeared, asked the Warlis to disperse, fired upon them when they refused to do so and killed 5 Warlis. This did not deter the Warlis, and they sat at the place where *kisan sabha* meetings were held until someone went to Kalyan and returned with the news that the *Bai* was safe in her house but too ill to travel. Then the Warlis quietly went home, but with the news went deep resentment at the deception practised by the landlords. It was a tough test of their faith but they passed it, bravely and tragically.

In Punnapra, 1000 workers armed with arecanut *lathis* marched
on to a police camp with 20 armed policemen to seize rifles. Caught by surprise, the Inspector, Velayadhan Nair, was collectively speared to death, and 8 policemen died. But some of then were able to rush in and arm themselves and after that countless workers died and the rest had to retreat, with some rifles in tow.

Martial law was imposed the next day, 25th October, but the camps where people had lived together to prevent goondas' repression were not disbanded. On 27th October 400 armymen surrounded the Vayalar camp and the 200 volunteers there marched out with lathis to face bullets. 150 died.

These two tragic stories raise questions about the attitude of the Communist leaders in Thana and Travancore. Where followers are so blindly devoted, more responsibility devolves on the leaders who accept and kindle such unthinking loyalty. It must be said for Godavari Parulekar that she was at pains to stress to the Warlis the necessity of keeping non-violent, even under provocation, as the landlords and police would then use violence as an excuse to smash the movement and torture the Warlis. Responsibility for clashes and conflict in Thana must rest squarely with the landlords and the Government.

The Travancore communists cannot be accused of following Gandhian methods. Impatient with the State Congress which wanted to give the new constitution a trial, confident that the workers would follow them because they had just secured better wages for them through a strike, the Travancore leaders, rushed into a political confrontation which soon developed into an armed struggle—or rather an unarmed struggle—for arecanut. lathis are not arms.

Travancore Communists, backed by the August Resolution, threw the agricultural workers of Shertallay and Alleppey into direct struggle with the Travancore ruling order, which the workers waged fearlessly and in which many fell martyrs, but which was simply smashed by the Dewan.

The march on Punnapra police camp left many dead and yielded 9 rifles which were dumped in a river and recovered by the police as those who had them did not know what to do with them. The decision not to disband the camps after martial law imposition on the ground that people could face repression better unitedly than alone, ignored the fact that unarmed men herded in one place were an invitation to large-scale butchery, as Vayalar showed.

Did these movements light a path which could have brought freedom 'from below' instead of the freedom 'from above' that we got. It does not seem so. The movements were often primarily
economic in motivation, or against feudal and class oppression i.e., they were not directly anti-imperialist. In fact they could be seen as the first wave of post-independence class struggles, rather than the final assault on colonialism. With the conflict with imperialism resolved in principle (i.e., freedom was a matter of time), groups and classes moved on to resolve the class and social questions, which had often taken a back seat during the days of the anti-imperialist struggle.

**Popular Movements and Nationalist Strategy**

The contention that "fear of [the Left] made Congress leaders cling to the path of negotiation and compromise, and eventually even accept Partition as a necessary price", 81 has little validity. Negotiations were an integral part of Congress strategy, a possibility which had to be exhausted before a mass movement was launched. As late as 22 September 1945 this had been reiterated in a resolution on Congress policy 82 passed by the AICC, referred to in the last chapter.

As regards the question of Congress "moderation", the views

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82. *Indian National Congress, March 1940 to September 1946: Resolutions passed by the Congress, the AICC and the Working Committee*, NMML.
of its chief adversary, the British, are revealing. The British clearly saw that the basic Congress intentions remained the same and that no real change of policy was involved in the Congress inclination towards more moderate speech. The present policy of the Congress was to "avoid conflict at any rate until after the elections, while taking full advantage of the licence they are being allowed during the elections, to increase their influence and prestige, to stir up racial hatred against the British". There was "no real change of heart" on the part of the Congress, only the tactics had been changed till elections.

One specific instance of "moderation" cited was Gandhi's "friendly talks" with Casey. Far from being interpreted as a gesture, or even an indication of "moderation", the talks were seen by Casey himself as Gandhi's way of finding out how far the Congress could go with safety. "Running "true to form, he [Gandhi] has not changed his distrust and dislike of the British as a whole, and he never will." The "detente"

83. Viceroy to Secretary of State, 27 December 1945 and Viceroy to King George VI, 31 December 1945, TP, Vol.6, pp.688 and 713.

84. Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., p. 682. Bengal Governor to Viceroy, 4 December 1945, TP, Vol.6, p. 598.

85. Viceroy to Secretary of State, 5 December 1945, ibid., pp. 604.
was seen to be merely temporary, no shift was believed to have occurred, and the dangers of a mass movement after the elections or the predicaments in the shape of the Congress provincial ministries remained as real as before.

In 1946, this strategy of exploring the option of negotiation before launching a movement was seen to be crucial. The British were likely to leave India within two to five years, according to Nehru. The Secretary of State's New Year statement on 1st January 1946 and the British Prime Minister's announcement of the Cabinet Mission on 19 February 1946 spoke of Indian independence coming soon. However, pressure had to be kept up on the British to reach a settlement and to this end preparedness for a movement (built steadily through 1945 by refurbishing the organisation, electioneering and spearheading the INA agitation) was sought to be maintained. But the card of negotiation was to be played first, that of the mass movement to be held in reserve.

It was not the fear of the left or the popular outbreaks which led the Congress to negotiate for the transfer of power.

86. The Government saw clearly that the "temporary detente" had come about because the November disturbances "made Congress leaders realise that the violent language that was being used for electioneering purposes might cause premature demonstrations and riots and harm the Congress cause". Viceroy to Secretary of State, 5 December 1945, and 27 February 1946, ibid., pp. 603 and 1076.
The negotiations prior to independence, to our mind, are to be seen differently. They reflected not only the pressure of immediate Congress activity, but decades of their spearheading the anti-imperialist struggle, which had seriously eroded the British capacity for continuing their rule. Having already undermined the basis of British rule, the Congress was willing to go in for negotiations for the actual handing over of the state machinery.

In a similar situation, no leadership with sound political sense would have done otherwise. History is replete with examples of similar negotiated settlements prior to independence --in Mozambique, in Guinea-Bissau, in Vietnam, to name just a few. Even the Chinese Communist Party under Mao carried on negotiations with the Americans for a whole year from 1945 to 1946. It seems that the Rubicon of negotiations is a river which is often crossed in the final stages of an anti-imperialist movement's march to independence.

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87. According to the Viceroy, the danger of a mass movement was "more obvious than ever", and that the Government must be on guard. Viceroy to Secretary of State, 5 December 1945. ibid., p. 602. Nehru also warned that if the Cabinet Mission failed, "political earthquake of devastating intensity would sweep the entire country". Amrita Bazar Patrika, 5 March 1946.
Gandhi, in three statements that he published in the Harijan on 3 March 1946 indicated the perils of the path that had been taken recently by the people:

It is a matter of great relief that the ratings have listened to Sardar Patel's advice to surrender. They have not surrendered their honour. So far as I can see, in resorting to mutiny they were ill advised. If it was for grievance, fancied or real, they should have waited for the guidance and intervention of political leaders of their choice. If they mutinied for the freedom of India, they were doubly wrong. They could not do so without a call from a prepared revolutionary party. They were thoughtless and ignorant, if they believed that by their might they would deliver India from foreign domination.... Lokmanya Tilak has taught us that Home Rule or Swaraj is our birthright. That swaraj is not to be obtained by what is going on now in Bombay, Calcutta and Karachi....

They who incited the mutineers did not know what they were doing. The latter were bound to submit ultimately.... Aruna would 'rather unite Hindus and Muslims at the barricade that on the constitutional front'. Even in terms of violence, this is a misleading proposition. If the union at the barricade is honest, there must be union also at the constitutional front. Fighters do not always live at the barricade. They are too wise to commit suicide. The barricade life has always to be followed by the constitutional. That front is not taboo for ever.

Gandhi went on to outline the path that should be followed by the nation:

Emphatically it betrays want of foresight to disbelieve British declarations and precipitate a quarrel in anticipation. Is the official deputation coming to deceive a great nation? It is neither manly nor womanly

to think so. What would be lost by waiting? Let the official deputation prove for the last time that British declarations are unreliable. The nation will gain by trusting. The deceiver loses when there is correct response from the deceived.

The rulers have declared their intention to 'quit' in favour of Indian rule.

But the nation too has to play the game. If it does, the barricade must be left aside, at least for the time being.