India-Czechoslovakia Contacts Before 1968

Czechoslovakia, a small state in East Europe is situated far away from India. It has been very aptly observed:

More than five thousands miles lie between this great Indian peninsula and Czechoslovakia, the country of Central Europe ... not less than nine states with nine languages and cultures have to be crossed if a Czechoslovak wanted to shake hands with an Indian.¹

Despite this barrier of space, relation between India and Czechoslovakia had grown since ancient times. India was mainly known to the Czechoslovak people through the writings of some Czechoslovaks who had visited India and written out their impressions. The first Czech who visited India at the beginning of the 14th Century was Odoricus Boemus de Prodenone (1286-1331). His work "Iter in Indian" had been for a considerable period of time one of the most authoritative descriptions of India.² Since the 14th Century, many Czechoslovaks visited India, which was reciprocated in later times.

Both India and Czechoslovakia suffered under the yoke of foreign rule. Czechoslovakia had become free long before India attained her status as a free country. In Czechoslovakia

¹ Jan Baros (Editor), India and Czechoslovakia, (Published by Jan Baros on behalf of the Publicity Department, Calcutt, 1943) 62.

² Miloslav Krasa, "Traditional Contact Between India and Czechoslovakia", in Miloslav Krasa, (Editor) India and Czechoslovakia In The Cause of Peace And Prosperity (Indo-Czech Association, New Delhi, 1965) 25.
the Austro-Hungarian domination came to an end on 28 October 1918, whereas India attained her freedom in 1947. But, curiously and sadly enough, Czechoslovakia lost her freedom again in 1939 when Germany declared Czechoslovakia her protectorate. By the Munich Agreement (September 1938) which was imposed on Czechoslovakia by Germany, Czechoslovakia had to cede a part of her territory, Sudetenland to Germany; that was not all. Germany forcibly occupied Czechoslovakia on 15 March 1939. During this grave crisis, when the people of Czechoslovakia were experiencing the tyranny of a great dictator, India expressed her heart-felt sympathy towards this victim of European power politics. In August 1938, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who later became Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of independent India visited Prague, capital of Czechoslovakia, and was apprised of the political developments of that country. When Germany began to infringe the territorial integrity and political independence of Czechoslovakia, Pandit Nehru sent a telegram to the President of Czechoslovakia. Though Pandit Nehru at that time was not the representative of free people of independent India and the message which he sent to the Czech President was his personal message but he was reflecting truly the feeling of the Indian people when he stated in the telegram:

In this hour of grave danger permit me to express the deep sympathy and admiration of the people of India for the people of Czechoslovakia. We really believe that
Czechoslovakia will triumph victorious as a fortress of democracy.³

The Working Committee of the Indian National Congress⁴ also expressed its sympathy to the Czechoslovak people. In a resolution of October 1938 the Working Committee stated:

... Being themselves engaged in a war, though non-violent but none the less grim and exciting, against the greatest Imperialist Power, on the earth, India can not but be deeply interested in the protection of Czechoslovakian freedom.⁵

These expressions of sympathy on the part of India were not merely routine affairs. They arose genuinely from a feeling that Czechoslovakia, like India had been suffering in the hands of foreign masters.

After the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, Czechoslovak nationals took shelter in different countries. Some Czechoslovak nationals who came to India, formed a Czechoslovak

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³ Miloslav Krasa, Jawaharlal Nehru - his first visit to Czechoslovakia in Miloslav Krasa (Editor) India and Czechoslovakia in the cause of peace and prosperity (Indo-Czech Association, New Delhi, 1967) 23.

⁴ Indian National Congress was an Indian Political Party. Its first session took place at Bombay in 1885. Mr. W.C. Bonerjee was its first President. See Hindustan Year Book and Who's Who, 1977 (M.C. Sarkar and Sons Private Ltd., Calcutta, 1977) 57.


See also All India Congress Committee, Indian National Congress, February 1938 to January 1939 (Swaraj Press, Allahabad, 1939) 59.
Society of Calcutta, Bombay, Lahore and Secendrabad with an avowed aim of defending and supporting the Provisional Czechoslovak Government which was established in London in 1940 by those Czechoslovak nationals who had taken shelter in London after the Munich Agreement. Those nationals included Dr. Edward Benes, the former President of the Czechoslovak Government before the German occupation. In 1945, however, Czechoslovakia became free from German occupation.

When India made her appearance in the international arena as an independent nation, she found two ideologically hostile super powers, namely USA and USSR holding sway over international politics. Most of the states of the world had joined either of these two blocs. Cold war between these two hostile camps had already started. Most of the Communist states had joined the Soviet bloc and the capitalist states had joined the American bloc. Under such circumstances, independent India had decided not to join either of the two blocs, because she did not want to be involved in any international conflict at this state. She wanted peace, both on the national and on the international level, the reason being, she intended to protect

6 Cenek Valenta, "The Calcutta Czechoslovaks", Jan Baros (Editor) India and Czechoslovakia (Published by Jan Baros on behalf of Publicity Department, Calcutta, 1943) 115.

her newly acquired freedom, to fight against poverty, racial discrimination and such social evils. Hence India adopted a policy of non-involvement in any international conflict. The same policy was followed by India regarding East European affairs which became the bone of contention between the military blocs after the Second World War.

Czechoslovakia again became the focal point of attention in February, 1948, when the Communists, through political manipulation came to power in Czechoslovakia. It was alleged that the Communists came to power in Czechoslovakia with the Soviet help and that the country had totally gone to the firm grip of the Soviet Union. Mr. Jan Papanek, the then Czechoslovak permanent representative in the U.N.O., declared that the communist victory in Czechoslovakia may be traced directly to the support of the officials and officers of the Soviet Union led by Mr. Zorin, the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union who was in Prague throughout the crisis of 1948.8

The Czechoslovakian situation in 1948 and the subsequent developments in that country attracted India's attention. The matter was discussed in the dominion Parliament of India. But the Government of India did not issue any statement on the matter. The reason behind the Government of India's silence on the issue was most probably the fact that just after independence India, busy with her domestic affair, did not like to

8 The Times (London) 14 March, 1948.
get herself involved in any international conflict. India might have thought that Czechoslovak situation was a part of the game of world politics in which two important powers were involved. One of the most important and influential members of the dominion Parliament, Mr. H.V. Kamath, said that at that time India had to fight against poverty, racial discrimination and the like and that she had no time to participate in any international dispute and like activities. He added that nobody wanted war but India must keep "her powder dry". Few days after the communists' capture of power, Jan Masaryk, Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia was one day found dead. His death occasioned a flurry of controversial opinions. Some held that he was murdered while many believed that he had committed suicide. Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of independent India while delivering his speech in the Constituent Assembly (Legislative) on 15 March, 1948, referred to the tragic death of Jan Masaryk. He said that he was personally acquainted with Jan Masaryk and so Mr. Masaryk's death was a personal loss to him. He took the liberty of sending to the Ambassador of the Republic of Czechoslovakia in India sympathy and condolences of the Government and people of India. One point should be mentioned here. When in 1938

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Germany trampled the territorial integrity and political independence of Czechoslovakia; the Indian leaders strongly protested against the German action. But when in 1948, the democratic system of Czechoslovakia was removed with the direct connivance of the Soviet Union, the reactions of the independent India and its Prime Minister seemed to be too mild. There were several explanations given by observers for the difference in Indian reactions.11

During the early years of her independence India found little time to give serious attention to the problem of her relations with East European countries because of her severe domestic problems like communal riots, partition of the country and its consequences and the like. India probably also thought that as most of the East European countries were under the Soviet influence, closer Indo-Soviet relationship would automatically improve India's relation with the East European countries. Though India established formal diplomatic relations with most of the East European countries long after her independence,12 official Indo-Czechoslovakian diplomatic

11 Explanation given by Mr. H.V.Kamath, an important member of the dominion Parliament of India, Amrita Bazar Patrika (Calcutta) 9 March 1949.

India achieved freedom when cold war was already inaugurated. Amidst such an atmosphere India wanted to solve her socio-economic problems with international assistance and not being involved in the cold war. See also Raghubir Chakraborty, Studies in Political Science (The World Press Private Ltd., Calcutta, 1965) 266.

12 Diplomatic relation was established with Albania in March 1956, with Bulgaria in March 1955; with Rumania in December 1954; See M.L.Sondhi, Non-App萧asement: A new direction for Indian foreign policy (Abhinav Publication, New Delhi, 1972) 98, 100.
relations began immediately after India's independence. But India's Embassy in Czechoslovakia was opened one year after India's independence. In October 1948 India established Embassy in Czechoslovakia. At Alcorn Hotel, in Czechoslovakia, a temporary mission of India was set up in October 1948 and Mr. N. Raghavan went there in November 1948 as Indian Ambassador. 13

But this early official intercourse between these two countries did not immediately raise the level of their friendship as India viewed that the relationship with Czechoslovakia in particular and East European countries in general was closely interwined with her relations with the Soviet Union. Perhaps one of the reasons why India established formal diplomatic relations with other East European countries long after her independence was that she had no clear idea about the nature and dimension of Soviet influence over these countries. Before 1954 Indo-Soviet relations, for various reasons, was not good. 14 One of the reasons might be that the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had misimpression about India.

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13 R. Goburdhun, *A real and sincere friendship in 25 years of Czechoslovak Indian diplomatic relations (Embassy of Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in India)* 39. Mr. R. Goburdhun was Ambassador of India in Czechoslovakia from June 1950 - October 1952.


India's national leader, Mahatma Gandhi, was regarded as an agent and tool of British imperialism. But Indo-Soviet relations took a turn for the better in course of time. In August 1953, Soviet Premier, Mr. G.M. Malenkov, who succeeded Stalin, praised India's role in the Korean crisis and expressed his fervent hope to extend Soviet Union's friendly cooperation with India. Mr. K.P.S. Menon, India's third Ambassador to the Soviet Union, said that it was the first occasion on which so friendly a reference to India or to any non-communist state had been made by so important a personage in the Soviet Union. Mr. Malenkov's remark about India was greeted with applause in the Supreme Soviet. From the early days of 1954 Indo-Soviet relations began to improve perceptively and this was reflected in India's gradual establishment of diplomatic ties with other East European countries under the Soviet bloc. As for example, diplomatic relation was established with Albania in March 1956, with Bulgaria in March 1955, with Romania in December 1954. Even after the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet bloc-states in East Europe, India attached little or no importance to those nations as individual countries. Mr. K.P.S. Menon, who was the then Indian Ambassador in the Soviet Union, was concurrently accredited to Poland and Hungary. One single man was made the

diplomatic head in three countries. This often created the impression that India was relatively indifferent to national objective of these nations and was more interested in global diplomacy. One great drawback of Indian foreign policy at this stage was that India gathered information about East Europe through Soviet Union rather than through her own agents. Mr. N.L. Sondhi, a notable Indian politician and a Jana Sangh member of the Parliament in the 4th Lok Sabha, said that Indian diplomacy had been shackled with an unusual degree of over-emphasis on the effectiveness of Soviet politico-military domination of East European countries and had omitted to lay down guidelines for meaningful dialogue with East European intellectual and elite groups. The attitude India took up towards the Soviet Union and its allies in East Europe gave rise to inevitable impression that India was less active in improving its relations with the Soviet bloc states. The same policy was followed by India in her relations with Czechoslovakia. Between 1948, the starting point of diplomatic relations, and the year 1955, there was little economic, cultural or political contact between the two countries. Slowly as Indo-Soviet relations improved, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, went on a state visit to the Soviet Union in 1955. He also visited some other East European states including Czechoslovakia. Since the visit of Mr. Nehru, many

16 N.L. Sondhi, Non Appeasement : A New Direction For Indian Foreign Policy, (Abhinav Publication, New Delhi, 1972) 98, 100.
other notable Indians had visited Czechoslovakia and Czechoslovak individuals also paid back the courtesy. On January 3, 1958, Mr. Viliam Siroky, Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia, visited India. In a joint communique (which was issued in New Delhi on January 6, 1958) signed by the Prime Ministers of India and Czechoslovakia, both the countries reiterated their adherence to the five principles of co-existence. They also agreed that formation of military pacts and blocs was one of the important causes of international tension. They reached agreement on many other world problems. Both the Prime Ministers were happy to note the increasing degree of cooperation between their states. On May 9, 1961, Mr. Busnaiik, Vice-Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia, arrived in New Delhi. On March 2, 1965, Czech Prime Minister, Mr. Josef Lenart, arrived in New Delhi on a state visit. In course of the bilateral talks, both the states arrived at an agreement on a number of international issues. Both the states subsequently expressed their sincerest desire for a speedy liquidation of colonialism. The two Prime Ministers also agreed on the urgent need to reach a consensus of opinion on general and complete disarmament.

18 Ibid.
19 Vidya Sagar, India in World affairs: Chronology of events 1947-72 (Swastik Prakashan, New Delhi, 1973) 91.
20 Foreign Affairs Record, March 1965, Vol.11, No.3, 45.
21 Ibid.
India, visited some East European countries including Czechoslovakia. On October 7, 1965, a joint communiqué was issued in Prague at the end of President Dr. Radhakrishnan's state visit to Czechoslovakia. On November 19, 1966, Mr. Antonin Novotny, President of Czechoslovakia, arrived in New Delhi on a 7-day state visit. Since 1957 numerous economic, trade and cultural agreements were signed between the two countries. Both the countries also cooperated in different fields like economic, scientific, atomic energy and air.

As a consequence of these state visits and increasing political, economic, cultural and trade contacts between the two countries, Indo-Czechoslovak relations became closer and during the mid-sixties, a feeling developed in India that Czechoslovakia and other East European countries could conduct their foreign policies independent of the Soviet Union and that the latter would allow those countries to choose their

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.


See also Milan Krasa, Looking towards India, (Orbis, Prague. 1964) 145-146.

24 For chronology of various types of relations see Vidya Sagar, India in World Affairs: Chronology of events 1947-72 (Swastik Prakashan, New Delhi, 1979) 63-168.
own ways within a limited framework. But this feeling was dashed to the ground in August 1968 when the Czechoslovak crisis began.