CHAPTER X

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Until the Russian revolution not many educated Indians had known much about socialism. But immediately after the Russian revolution many articles on it appeared in various Indian newspapers and periodicals such as The Kesari, The Modern Review and The Bombay Chronicle. Lajpat Rai also studied the Marxist literature only after the October (1917) Revolution and watched its impact carefully on world politics. He considered the Revolution from the outset as a major historical event of worldwide significance.

Lajpat Rai recognised Bolshevism as a powerful and growing force in Europe. Without bothering much about the theories of Capitalist economy, Lajpat Rai was drawn instinctively to the labour leaders of England and Europe and exchange of ideas with eminent socialists influenced deeply his views on social and economic matters and aroused his interest in labour and trade union
movements. By the beginning of 1919, he had come to accept socialistic ideas though he did not subscribe to the Marxist creed. To him the question of Indian freedom was not confined to removal of foreign dominance, but was also one of establishing 'real democracy.' Though no doctrinaire socialist, Lajpat Rai criticised various features of the capitalist system. To him, "the present social structure..."
was wrong and unjust and perhaps even more barbaric than it had been in primitive time. He did not want the mere substitution of the rule of property and privilege in place of the foreign Imperialists and Capitalists. He looked for the dawn of an era of equal opportunity and justice for all. Speaking about the solicitude of the authors of the Montford Report for the Indian ryots, he observed in a Marxist vein:

"We would whole-heartedly support any scheme which would open a way to a just and righteous distribution of wealth and land in India, and which would ensure the ryot and the workingman his rightful place in the body politic."

His Critique of Capitalism and His Ideas on Socio-economic Democracy.

In 1919, Lajpat Rai declared that many Indian nationalists were afraid of attacking the privileges of the territorial aristocrats and the industrial magnates and were willing to maintain an economic system in which


4. Ibid., p. 314.

a small minority of the people possessed a greater part of the national wealth. He advocated such a system of democracy as required the government to be responsible, not so much for protecting existing economic interests, as for reducing the widely prevailing inequalities in opportunities and means for material improvement. He stressed the need of open and bold criticism of capitalists and imperialists not only in British India but also under free India. He did not want to substitute brown masters for white masters. It was not enough to fight against the domination of foreign rulers, it was necessary to fight against the privileges which the Indian capitalists and landlords enjoyed. Lajpat Rai asserted that India needed leaders like Keir Hardie and Lansbury who would not accept privileges of the 'men of property' and who would fight for the establishment of a real democracy in order to provide equal opportunity for all.6

Lajpat Rai was not hopeful that the ryots would be rehabilitated by the politically minded classes of India when they would come into power. But still he supported unhesitatingly the demand for self-government of the politically minded classes, because he considered that to

be the only way for bringing about political consciousness among the ryots and workingmen. He wrote:

"Absolutism must first give way and transfer its power to the political minded classes, then will come the turn of the masses to demand their rights." 7

He believed that the struggle for genuine democracy would commence only after the departure of the foreign exploiter. Until such times he advocated unity among the masses and the classes to win freedom from foreign domination. Lajpat Rai criticized the Montford scheme of reforms as he thought it added to the power of the capitalists and landlords. To quote Lajpat Rai:

"The ugly feature of the scheme is in the possibility of its giving too much power to the profiteering class, be they the landlords of Bengal and Oudh, or the millionaires of Bombay." 8

In the same vein he asked:

"What are we aiming at? Do we want to copy and emulate Europe even in its mistakes and blunders?" 9

He thought it unwise to reproduce in India the "Worm-eaten, decomposing, vicious, immoral, capitalist system of Europe." 10

9. Ibid., p. 203.
He however pointed out:

"What we need is not the power to implant in full force and in full vigour the expiring European system, but power to keep out its development on vicious lines with opportunities of gradually and slowly undoing the evil that has already been done." 11

Lajpat Rai claimed that Marx's diagnosis of the ills of capitalist society had turned out to be so true "that there was now practical unanimity among western thinkers about the evils of the capitalist system." 12

Despite his borrowing liberally from the Marxist jargon, Lajpat Rai did not uphold a doctrinaire approach to socialism and he did not agree with Karl Marx that 'a country should go through the capitalistic mill, before the proletariat comes to its own.' 13 He did not favour the introduction in India of the European system with all its disastrous consequences.

He advocated co-operation between capital and labour, which, he thought, was the only way "to get rid of existing

demoralisation." To Lajpat Rai the goal of Indian Nationalism, was liberty, equality and opportunity for all. To achieve this he did not insist on the necessity of class war or that of class antagonism. Elaborating this point Lajpat Rai wrote that:

"...we do not want to cloister up classes......we want to avoid if possible, the evils of class struggle. We will pass through the mill if we must, but like to try to avoid it."16

Lajpat Rai wanted fraternity and a spirit of comrade between Indian labourers and European proletariat. As the first president of the All India Trade Union Congress in 1920, he urged the delegates to attend the International Labour Organisation formed by the labouring classes of Europe and Russia.17 He wanted the workers of Asia to be organised and also internationally affiliated. Inaugurating the All India Trade Union Congress Lajpat Rai declared that Imperialism and militarism were twin children of capitalism, they were one in three and three in one.18 He

16. Ibid., p. 204.
17. Verma, V.P., Modern Indian Political Thought (Agra, 1971), pp. 222-23.
desired that Indian labour and capital should meet on an
equal footing and co-operate for the development of national
industries. Thus his objective was to achieve a classless
society without a class war. This was to be accomplished
through a process of evolution rather than by a violent
change. In his "Message to Punjabees" on August 15, 1919,
he remarked:

"We are neither fit nor ripe for a militant
revolutionary struggle. We want a revolution
but not force or violence......organize the
middle class, the peasants and the workers."19

In his letter to Gandhi, Lajpat Rai wrote:

"We have to work with them (peasants and
labourers) in a spirit of co-operation and not
to work for them in a spirit of patronage."20

Lajpat Rai's idea of socialism was rooted in
liberal traditions and grew out of the political realities
of the Indian situation. He was a pragmatist both in his
ideas and methods and was suspicious of every dogma. His
ideas on socialism were not very consistent. He was the
creed of a 'humanitarian socialist' and not a scientific

20. Ibid., p. 69. See Lajpat Rai, "The Greatest Need of
the Country," Young India, November 13, 1919.
socialist in the Marxian tradition. The idea of international solidarity of labour which Lajpat Rai propounded in 1920 was, however, later rejected by him. For in 1927, he remarked that the interests of the British proletariat who exploited India, were not the same as those of the Indian Labourer. Lajpat Rai, therefore, doubted if the Marxist appeal 'that the workers of the world unite,' could ever be translated into reality, because the interests of the British labourer clashed with the interests of the Indian labourers. "To talk of the solidarity of the labour movement all the world over to the Indian workers is simply bunkum........What the Indian workers need is not dogma," wrote Lajpat Rai. Among Indian leaders, Lajpat Rai was the first to emphasise the need to arouse the political consciousness of the urban workers:

"The wage earning classes in this country gradually realise that their destiny and bread is in their own hands and not in the hands of those handful of people."  

21. The People (Lahore), September 23, 1928.  
22. Ibid. Also Shose, Sankar, op.cit., p. 7.  
23. Rome Prog. Political 7590, July 1907.
Lajpat Rai regretted how any one could continue to support imperialistic preferences and be a socialist at the same time. Militarism and capitalism were in the last resort, the two pillars on which the imperial preference like every other thing imperial was built. They were exactly the pillars which socialism is out to destroy.

In the rise of Bolshevism in Russia, Lajpat Rai recognised a threat to democracy and called for vigorous and timely measures to increase the political liberties and to improve the economic conditions of the masses. He argued that in a democratic country such as Britain and the U.S.A., class conflict might be ended peacefully and constitutionally by the adoption of some form of state socialism. He foresaw the overthrow of the capitalist order and proclaimed:

"Nobody knows what Bolshevism represents. The socialists themselves are divided over it. The liberals and radicals are freely recognising that it has brought into the affairs of men a new spirit which is going to stay and substantially influence the future of the world."24

He asserted that only the satisfaction of legitimate, political and economic rights of the supressed sections could provide the antidote to communism. He emphasised that only radical changes in the existing order will stem this tide. "The struggle will take sometime but that it will

end in favour of the new spirit, no one doubts," said Lajpat Rai.

Talking of the liberty and rights for the subjects nations, Lajpat Rai exclaimed: "May India should not be ruled despotically and that Democracy should be peacefully introduced and developed here." He emphasised that the only way to meet Bolshevism was to concede rights to the different peoples. Otherwise the discontented and exploited countries of the world would be the best breeding centres for it.

He forewarned that:

"India must come into her own soon, else not even the Himalayas can effectively bar the entry of Bolshevism in India. A contented self-governing India may be proof against it, discontented, dissatisfied oppressed India perhaps the most fertile field."

In 1926, Lajpat Rai attended the International Labour Conference at Geneva as the representative of the Indian working class. In the Central Legislative Assembly he made an effort to organise a labour group to espouse the cause


27. Ibid., pp. 206-7.

Lajpat Rai made a significant contribution towards the promotion and development of the organized labour movement in India. He helped in evolving a trade union philosophy and in crystallising the basic issues affecting the triangular relationship of labour, capital and Government in the British-dominated India.

Lajpat Rai had a comprehensive view of labour problems. Lajpat Rai observed that so long as there was cheap labour in India, and India was helpless to keep out foreign capital and to prevent the latter from using Indian labour to the detriment of the European workers, the cause of the European proletariat was neither safe nor secure.

Lajpat Rai was in favour of Indian workers joining hands and heads not only to strengthen their own interests

29. Dewan Chaman Lall and M.N. Joshi were known as keen trade unionists, and Devki Nandan Sinha (from Bihar) too showed some interest in the idea. But three or four were considered too few and so far lack of response the move did not bear fruit. *The Hindustan Review*, (Allahabad), Vol. XLVIII (1924-25), p.246.

but also to forge a link with the working class brotherhood. He felt that capitalism was organised on a worldwide basis and was backed by financial and political strength and was equipped with weapons stronger than those of labour. He visualized:

(a) a strong national labour organization, free from provincial and local rivalries, 33

(b) co-operation amongst Indian and Asian and African workers, 34

(c) a well-knit international workers' organisation for coordination and joint action at international level. 35

Lajpat Rai did not subscribe to the viewpoint that the interests of Indian industries must in every case override the human needs of workers. He rightfully deplored that in all discussions about the demands and rights of labour in India, labour was still treated as a commodity to be sold and purchased in open market and the interests of industry were held supreme. 36

32. Ibid., p. 61.
33. Ibid., p. 59
34. Ibid., p. 58
35. Ibid., p. 62
36. Ibid., p. 61
What should be the criteria for economic decision-making in the realm of labour-management relations? Often the question asked is, "Will the industry bear it?" The proper question, according to Lajpat Rai, should be, "How can the industry be made to bear it consistently with the minimum human requirements of the worker and his family?"^37

He pointed out, if labour must remain half-starved, ill-clothed, badly housed and destitute of education, it would have no interest in the development of Indian industries and all appeals to him in the name of patriotism would fail. The Indian capitalists, in their own interest and in the national interest, must meet labour half-way and must arrive at an understanding with it on the basis of sharing the profits in a reasonable and just proportion.^39

Lajpat Rai was fully aware of the fact that despite identical interests of labour all the world over, the power of labour in each country was limited by local and national circumstances. Labour in Europe was in a position to dictate through political action. It was absurd for the labourers to depend for their rights and the amelioration of their condition, on political action of persons, who owed

37. Ibid., p. 61
38. Ibid., p. 61
39. Ibid., p. 61
their legislative power and position, to the votes, of 'men of property.' In order to protect their class interests, the workers must have a vote, which they must cast in favour of men of their own class or to one pledged to their interests. The worker in Europe was a political unit. Besides the political action, European labour had found the weapon of direct action. The position was aptly reflected in the U.K., where the trade unions dominated the political system of the country, through Labour Party. The U.S.A. worker bargained with the political parties for the exercise of his right to vote. The Russian worker, on the other hand, aimed at the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Lajpat Rai realised that Indian labour had not even gone through the preliminaries and so he was interested in organising the labour power in the country. Once the labour was organised, he was sure that Indian labour movement would carve out its own lines of action (even form a Labour Party as in the U.K.), depending upon the exigencies of the situation.

In this process, Lajpat Rai wished labour in India, Europe, Asia and elsewhere to solve problems, each in its own way obtaining such support and help from others' thought

40. Ibid., p. 63.
and experiences, as was readily adaptable in the light of particular circumstances and conditions of life and its ideals. 'Labour can, in this way, join hands in building a new world, without anyone imposing his will on the other and without anyone dominating and exploiting the other.'

Lajpat Rai's approach towards international labour co-operation was democratic.

Lajpat Rai had a rational and pragmatic approach towards industrial relations. He posed certain questions to both the protagonists and the opponents of class war. Could class war be avoided? If so, how? Was class war the last word on the subject? Were philosophers everywhere not engaged in a serious attempt at finding out peaceful solutions to these problems? He further asked: "Should both capital and labour in India not take timely steps to prevent the development of the present differences into a class war?"

Lajpat Rai discussed at length the relationship between trade unions and politics. Should labour organisations be used for political purposes? He expected better educated, more experienced and better trained people to place their faculties at the disposal of the

41. **The Tribune, (Lahore), November 4, 1923.**
Indian labour to help and guide them in their organisational tasks. Since labour organisations were as much interested in the movement for political independence as any other class, their participation in the national struggle was but natural. But to Lajpat Rai, the interests of workers should be supreme in the minds of trade union leaders besides their personal and political interests.