Chapter 1

Life and Times of A. R. Desai: A Journey towards Marxist Scholarship

Akshaykumar Ramanlal Desai is known as one of the foremost and eminent sociologists of India. He was a pioneer in applying the Marxist method in the study of Indian polity and society. However, his concern did not stop at theoretical analysis only, but extended to include expressions of solidarity and support to groups and people struggling against injustice. According to Indra Munshi and Denzil Saldhana (1994: 3069-70), Desai addressed meetings, attended workshops, participated in demonstrations till the last days of his life “with energy, enthusiasm and courage.” Parita Mukta and DavidHardiman (Mukta and Hardiman 1995:274) paid tribute to Prof. Desai—he “was that rare person, a Gujarati Marxist, in a state that is not only hostile to Marxism, but which attempts to crush any legitimate dissent as ‘unpatriotic’.” His passing away in the year 1994, November 12 was a tremendous loss for not only the Indian academia, but for the thousands of toiling masses, for whom Desai had always been one of the strongest voices and inspiration. Thus, one can say after Munshi and Saldhana that, “…while we mourn his passing, it is a time also to celebrate a life which was so creative and purposeful” (ibid, 3069).

Desai was born on April 16, 1915 at Nadiad in Central Gujarat. From his family tradition he belonged to the Nagar Brahmin caste which consisted mostly of professionals and intellectuals. His father Ramanlal Vasantal Desai was a leading official in the princely state of Baroda in the 1920s and the 1930s. He was deeply sympathetic to the Gandhian nationalist movement, for which Gujarat had been one of the strongholds, and this was reflected through his novels written in the vernacular. A Gandhian in vision, he wrote novels with a strong idealism and had been a committed nationalist and a Fabian socialist (Patel 2007:421-423). He did not leave the civil service to
join the nationalist movement but various socio-political issues of the period find expression in his novels. According to Sisir Kumar Das (2006: 286), though "most of his novels are technically imperfect yet he has been a novelist reflecting the urges of the time." In this context the observations of Mansukhmal Jhaveri (1978:168) are worthy of consideration. He says, "Ramanlal has largely written social novels...Ramanlal provides a background of the major political and cultural currents prevailing in Gujarat of the Gandhian era." For instance, the critique of colonialism, the positive role of nationalism, the exploitation suffered by peasants due to excessive rents, the possibility of a Gandhian revolution, the importance of citizens relating to the making of a new India were ideas that occur again and again in his novels. Quite naturally, hailing from a family which was highly political and critical of social oppression, A. R. Desai from early age imbued political consciousness. Through his father he internalised the idea of exhorting his students, associates and the common people to relate to the world around them and understand it with the objective of changing it. This was the first set of influence which had a very profound impact upon Desai. Thus, as Prof. Udai Mehta recollects (in an interview taken on June 7, 2009 at his residence in Andheri, Mumbai) Desai had been exposed to a number of "literary and musical giants" since his early childhood through his father. All these shaped his ideological and cultural orientations. Another set of influence upon Desai came from his involvement with radical groups within the student movement at the time of his undergraduate days in Baroda, which at that period was a base for radical intellectuals as well as the activists of the growing Communist Party. He gravitated towards a kisan movement which had started in Gujarat in the 1930s. Due to his political activities he was rusticated from his college in Baroda. He then proceeded to Surat and ultimately to Bombay. During his student days in Bombay, which was a nerve-centre of communism in the 1930s, he was exposed to Marxism and subsequently joined the Communist
Party of India in 1934. However, disagreements over the doctrinaire positions taken by the communists forced him to leave the party within five years. More specifically, Ghanashyam Shah notes, (Gorman 1986: 93) Desai opposed the Communist Party of India “for supporting the war efforts of the British government and resigned in protest” in 1939. In Bombay he met C.G.Shah, a renowned communist, “who has been described as ‘one of the most well read intellectuals of the city’” (Patel 2007: 423). Patel continues that Shah had also been critical of the strategy advocated by the Comintern and Stalin and had formed a study group of young students with the objective of discussing alternative versions of Marxism. There Desai was first introduced to Trotskyite positions. According to Ghanashyam Shah (Gorman 1986: 93), it was during this period that Desai had been influenced by the writings of Trotsky, especially *The History of the Russian Revolution* and *The Revolution Betrayed*. He subsequently joined the Fourth International. At this time he was also part of the Bolshevik-Leninist Party (BLP), organised by a group of Trotskyites from Sri Lanka, which included a number of Indians. According to Prof. Udai Mehta (interview taken on June 7, 2009 at his residence in Andheri, Mumbai) Desai had, since his childhood, been surrounded by stalwarts from different fields, renowned colleagues and questing and curious students—he had drawn sustenance from all these sources which, coupled with his own hard work, had made him the person he was. He graduated from the University of Bombay, secured a law degree and got his Ph.D in Sociology from the same university in 1946. He was part of a generation of intellectuals who came to maturity in the midst of nationalist, peasant and worker’s movements on the one hand, and development and spread of communism on the other. In his academic career he joined Siddharth College in Bombay in 1946 as a lecturer in Sociology. In 1951 he became a faculty-member in the Department of Sociology, University of Bombay and retired as Professor and Head of the Department in 1975. He in his youth
had turned to Marxism in his quest for a more just and humane society and
had closely studied the works of Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Maurice Dobb and
had been specially influenced by Trotsky. He was critical of the policies
adopted by the C.P.I., especially during the period of the Second World War
which were later publicised through a number of his works. In 1953 he
became a member of the Revolutionary Socialist Party and contributed
regularly to the party journal. However, later on as the perspective of Desai
no longer converged with that of the party, he resigned in 1981.
Subsequently, though he continued with his political work, both in the fields
of academics and organisation, he never took the membership of any other
political party. However, he continued to work with the Communist League
and the Inquilabi Sangathan of India, both sections of the Fourth
International in India, till his death. Throughout his life he was involved with
a number of academic associations, projects and programmes. He was a
founder-member of the Indian Sociological Society and was its President
from 1978 to 1980. He was an Associate-Director, UNESCO Project on
“Group Tensions in India” held in 1951 under the direction of Gardner
Murphy. He was also the Hon. Director, UNESCO Project on “Literacy and
Productivity of Industrial Workers in Bombay”. In addition, in 1980 he was
Hon. General Editor, *Source Book of Labour Movement in India during British
Period*, sponsored by Indian Council of Historical Research and later
published by Popular Prakashan. In the same year in February Desai was
deputed to Canada by the U.G.C. under the Shastri Indo-Canadian
Foundation.

Desai was a participant in the First World Congress in Rural Sociology
held in France in 1964 and was invited to give talks in several European
countries. He visited Soviet Union in 1971 for three months as a Senior
Fellow under Cultural Exchange Programme. He was given I.C.S.S.R. Senior
Fellowship from 1973 to 1975. In December 1975 he participated in a

Desai is the author of a number of books, pertaining to sociological analysis of Indian polity, economy and society. He won scholarly acclaim for his doctoral thesis entitled Social Background of Indian Nationalism under the able guidance of Prof. G.S.Ghurye, “a doyen of Indian sociology” himself (Punalekar1997: 78). This work had been published for the first time in 1948 and has run into countless editions. He had two earlier publications, namely, Indian Feudal States and National Liberation Struggle and Gandhi’s Truth and Non-Violence X-Rayed: An Open Letter to Mahatma Gandhi, both published by Desai himself in 1938 and 1939, respectively. The companion volume to his doctoral dissertation, entitled Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism was first published in 1960. His works are spread over a number of most reputed journals and the publications under the C.G. Shah Memorial Trust. To take Marxist sociological literature to the people through the vernacular medium he started a Gujarati publication named Samaj Vigyan Mala which provides “an in-depth, informative and critical format on a diverse range of social and political issues confronting Indian society and its downtrodden segments” (ibid, 91). As his wife, Prof. Neeraben Desai recounted (in an interview taken on June 3, 2009 at her residence in Mumbai), Desai had regularly contributed a weekly column in a Gujarati newspaper named Pravasi between 1985 and 1991, discussing current topics and spreading Marxist theory and practice among the urban intellectual population. He has written and edited countless volumes on a wide variety of subjects like the agrarian society, various aspects of state formation in India and its character, class structure of the Indian society and its reflection upon the activities of the ruling elite,
plights of the toiling masses including violation of their human as well as
democratic rights. To educate and inform the masses regarding the real face
of the ruling classes and unmask the latter’s political designs and misdeeds,
he has toiled endlessly throughout his life and for this purpose edited a
Gujarati journal named *Padhar*, meaning ‘challenge’, as well. He has also
focused upon the divisive tendencies present in Indian society which has
continuously obstructed and hampered the process of nation-building in this
country. Even after his retirement he was actively involved in the fields of
research, education and social activism.

Prof. Desai’s students like Manorama Savur, Indra Munshi, etc.,
(1995:7-21) remember him as “a great source of inspiration.” He offered
perspectives on many of India’s burning problems like underdevelopment,
poverty, exploitation, character of state, etc. His method of teaching included
raising issues, posing questions, providing points of view and he always
encouraged his students to think and to choose. His “passionate concern”
(ibid, 11) was to understand the society in order to change it was evident to
all. He received highest accolade a teacher can get because according to his
students (ibid.) “One cannot help recalling how privileged one felt to be his
Ph.D student, when students thronged to meet him in conferences.” Recalls
Munshi and Saldhana (1994: 3070) that both “...academics and activists
found in him a friend ready to help in innumerable ways.” Sharit K. Bhowmik
(1994: 3002), another post-graduate student of Prof. Desai, recalls that Prof.
Desai never displayed any intellectual arrogance, nor did he maintain any
social distance with his students and referred to them as his friends. For
Desai political affiliation was not very important because as “one academic-
activist friend observed, it did not matter to Desai to which shade of the Left
one belonged. He was always ready to communicate. He transcended these
differences. In fact, he was ready to listen without even being patronizing”
(ibid). In fact as Bhowmik records (ibid), students were free to argue with
him and he never imposed either his will or his political-ideological orientations upon them. Veena Mazumdar, as part of a UGC Committee on Area Studies on a visit to Bombay University, found (Mazumdar 1994: 3023) Desai as belonging to “that rare breed, because knowledge for him was never a commodity, but something to be shared.” Throughout his entire career he had handled, organised and made available enormous facts, data and information and was always relentlessly optimistic in the pursuit of a better social order. Desai was, in his own words an “incurable optimist” (Savur and Munshi 1995: 21).

Another trait of Prof. Desai, says Punalekar (ibid, 89), was that he had been a “restless visionary and fighter with an insight to locate destabilising macro, socio-economic and political forces and unmask their agenda.” This urge compelled him to unravel the impact and implications of global policy trends and tendencies upon the toiling masses of the Third World, including India. This no doubt “oftentimes alienated him from the Establishment and its entrenched lobbies” but “helped him secure a place of pride and affectionate recognition among the Left radical intellectuals and scores of social/political activists from all parts of India” (ibid).

Unfortunately, there has been little or no major research based on the works of Desai. After more than a decade and a half after his death a study of his contributions to the development of Marxist sociology in India is necessary. As S.P. Punalekar notes (ibid, 78), Desai “was an inquisitive and committed scholar from his early days.” Throughout his life so wide, varied and exciting was the range of his interests, that it would be a near-impossible task to capture it in its entirety. However, it is necessary to pay “tribute to the memory of such a fearless and invincible fighter in the domain of ideas and political praxis. It is high time that we emulate his meta-sociological concerns and commitment” (ibid, 91). My thesis is a humble attempt to re-read Desai’s interpretation of Indian socio-political reality stretching from its pre-
colonial past to the post-colonial stage up to the closing decades of the last century.

During his college days, he participated in student and political movements in Baroda, Surat and Bombay and maintained close links with the Communist Party of India, the Kisan Sabha and the left-wing trade unions of the railways, textile industry, state transport etc. Desai was very active in tutoring the workers regarding the basic notions of political economy of growth and underdevelopment, especially in the context of the developing world including India. He had a big contribution in the radicalisation of the workers so that they are better able to decipher the meanings of labour power and participation, labour struggle and militancy, state-control and ways to counter the hegemony of the ruling class. As has been noted, “Behind his disarming smile and talkativeness rested an endless incandescent entry, always out to share and convince others about the need to understand and change the conditions of the wretched of this earth” (ibid).

Desai’s unique and seminal contribution to the growth of sociological analysis had been the employment of the methodology of Historical Materialism to understand the Indian socio-political reality over a huge canvas stretching over three centuries. This methodology gave birth to a distinct sociological tradition known as the Dialectical Approach to the study of Indian society and Desai had been one of its earliest exponents along with Dhurjati Prasad Mukherjee. To understand the appeal of this approach to Desai one has to go back to the period of his youth, comprehend the prevailing socio-political-ideological currents and assess their influence upon the young, formative intellectual.

At the time of Desai’s birth the First World War was raging all over Europe and this war can be said to be a culmination of inter-imperialist competition and rivalries for a re-division of territories and markets. Quite naturally, intensification of socio-politico-economic contradictions was one of
the fall-outs of the War. Thus, since early twentieth century mass discontent found expression through nationalist movements over a large part of the globe, India included. During the formative years of Desai, i.e. in the 1920s and 1930s we find heightened nationalist movements mainly under Congress leadership in India. The anti-imperialist struggles and movements generated governmental repression which led to even more intensified movements. Side by side the foundation of the world’s first socialist state was laid with the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. This was hailed with great enthusiasm in India. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* from Calcutta characterised the revolution as the “Russian Volcano” (C.P.I.(M) 2005: 29). Other newspapers like *Dainik Basumati* from Calcutta, Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s *Kesari* from Maharashtra, *Akali* from Lahore, *Aaj* from Benaras, etc., took a similar stance (ibid, 29-30). Nationalist leaders and intellectuals like Bipin Chandra Pal, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Premchand, Lala Lajpat Rai, etc., also saw Bolshevism as “a new power—the power of the people, determined to rescue their legitimate rights...the only course by which the common people can gain their ends” (ibid). According to Tridib Chaudhuri (Bhattacharya1982: 6), years of study, ideological and political discussions inside the prisons by the national revolutionaries led them to a realisation about the limitations of the earlier methods of struggle and political stands. This inevitably resulted in a transformation of their outlook and attitude in the direction of mass action and class struggle based on Marxism-Leninism and communism.

All these naturally started creating a favourable environment for the spread of communist ideas and ultimately establishment of a Communist Party in India in 1925. However, it should be kept in mind that leftist thought and movement in India emerged out of the matrix of the freedom struggle in view of the fact that it was another offshoot of the same imperial system that had caused the birth of the nationalist movement. Before the establishment of such a party in India there were revolutionary groups working from
abroad which also had a contribution in the spread of communism in India. The most influential communist leader working from abroad was M.N. Roy who was intimately connected to the Third Communist International or the Comintern. Other groups included the commonly known Berlin Group led by Virendranath Chattopadhyay, Maulana Barakatullah, Bhupendranath Datta, Pandurang Khankhoje etc., The Indian Revolutionary Association represented by Abdur Rabb Barq and M.P.B.T. Acharya, Gadar Party activists, revolutionaries of the Khilafat movement and the Hijrat movement who went abroad during and after the First World War. These groups had conflicting viewpoints regarding certain key issues pertaining to India and their debates, disagreements and discords shaped the birth and spread of communism in India.

For instance, the national liberation movement in India, its character and future was a contentious issue between the Indian revolutionaries abroad and the contemporary Bolshevik leaders. Lenin in a number of articles like ‘Inflammable Material in World Politics’ (Proletary, August 5,1908), ‘The historical Destiny of the Doctrine of Karl Marx’ (Pravda, March 1913) (C.P.I.(M).2005:18-19), “regarded the nationalist movements in Asia as a sign of the awakening of the proletariat across the world and of the emerging international proletarian revolution.” Lenin, however, was of the opinion that due to the political situation in colonial and semi-colonial countries, the nationalist movements would be basically bourgeois-democratic type taking help of the indigenous capitalists against the imperialists on the one hand, and the feudal-tribal-patriarchal authorities, on the other. Lenin further added that, instead of severing ties with the bourgeois elements, the communists should encourage revolutionary mass action through a Communist Party of the proletarians which would induce “the real revolutionary forces to action that would overthrow not only foreign imperialism but also forestall the growth of local capitalism” (ibid, 44). In a
Comintern document entitled ‘Directives on the Nationality and the Colonial Question’, signed by Lenin (Dattagupta 2006: 69), emphasized the need for a peasantry’s movement, that class which constituted the overwhelming mass of the population in the backward countries. The document emphasized the need for “a close link between the West European proletariat and the revolutionary peasant movement in the East” (ibid). However, it cautioned that while the Comintern and the Communists had “to build up a temporary alliance with the bourgeoisie in the colonial and backward countries, it must not merge with the latter and must retain unconditionally its independent, proletarian character” (ibid, 70). Bela Kun, member from Hungary in the First Congress of the Peoples of the East held in Baku in September 1920 reiterated (ibid) that in Eastern countries triumph of the people’s revolution will lead to dictatorship of the poor peasantry as the proletariat in these countries was neither too developed nor numerous or conscious enough to give leadership in a revolution. Similar positions were adopted by the IRA and the Berlin group. According to Prof. Dattagupta (ibid, 38–39; 2007:150–151), the former’s position was to come to terms with the reality of the Indian situation which meant recognising the importance of nationalism, religion, casté, community, etc. The IRA also took into account the influence of Gandhi on the poor and illiterate masses of India on the one hand, and the force and impact of nationalism, on the other while formulating the strategy of Indian revolution. The Berlin group was also in favour of taking a relatively more positive view of nationalism while framing the strategy of an anti-imperialist struggle. It was skeptical of a proletarian revolution in India and thus, made a strong plea for joint revolutionary action and coordination of the communist and non-communist elements both in India and abroad. The idea of an anti-imperialist united front had been a strategy of the Comintern since the time of Lenin. However, it suffered a quick burial after
the Sixth Congress of Comintern in 1928 when all nationalist forces had been branded as henchmen of imperialist power.

M.N. Roy, however, held a quite different view. For him the rapidly growing proletariat in India would be the principal revolutionary class with the mass of landless peasantry as the chief ally assuming that sufficient industrialisation has already occurred. For Roy, proletarian revolution under the leadership of a communist party of India was imminent and bourgeois nationalism was already a spent force. He also thought that in a colonial country like India where the indigenous bourgeoisie was weak and the proletariat was ascending, the bourgeois-democratic stage in the revolution may be unnecessary. Furthermore, Roy contended that “the socialist revolution in the colonies was an indispensable precondition for the abolition of capitalism in the metropolitan countries” (C.P.I.(M).2005: 43). On this point similar views were forthcoming from Mustafa Subhi of Turkey, Pak Chin-sun of Korea and none other than Trotsky who had drafted the Manifesto of the inaugural First Congress of the Communist International in 1919. According to Trotsky “...The liberation of the colonies is possible only together with the liberation of the working class in the imperialist centres. The workers and peasants not only of Annam, Algeria, and Bengal, but also of Persia and Armenia, will gain the possibility of an independent existence only when the workers of Britain and France have toppled Lloyd George and Clemenceau and taken state power into their own hands...” (Dattagupta 2006: 51). For Pak Chin-sun of Korea the impossibility of a proletarian victory “without the collaboration of the ‘colonial’ peoples is so evident that further proof is superfluous” (ibid, 68). Mustafa Subhi of Turkey also believed that the destiny of the revolution in Europe was dependent on the fate of the revolutionary movements in the East. “That”, meaning proletarian victory in the West “can be achieved only by arousing a revolutionary movement in these countries, by an uprising of the Eastern peoples against Anglo-French
imperialism” (ibid, 52-53). Bukharin in an article ‘The Communist International and the Colonies’ (Pravda, March 6, 1919), highlighted (ibid, 53) the importance of revolutionary movements in the colonies for the metropolitan countries. In his words (ibid), “The rebellion of the colonies hastens the collapse of imperialism.” To him, the movements in the colonies may not have been socialist always but had “joined the broad stream of the great liberation struggle that is shaking up the entire immense structure of world capitalism” (ibid). Desai quite obviously had been influenced by this line of thinking because he wrote in 1982 (1982: 49) that “as long as the working class of the main capitalist countries has not actually overthrown bourgeois class rule at home, the danger of counter-revolutionary wars remains.”

Another trend of communist thought in the 1920s and 1930s was a strong anti-Gandhi stance vis-à-vis a pro-Nehru attitude. The anti-Gandhi perception, according to Prof. Dattagupta (2006: 42) had been initiated by M.N. Roy in the early 1920s and then it percolated in the Comintern. This became evident with access to the private papers of Rajni Palme-Dutt and Ben Bradley of CPGB from the archives of the Party. In fact, it was through the writings of Palme-Dutt, the classic illustration of which was India Today—the bible that trained generations of Marxists in India—that the Anti-Gandhi stance was transmitted within the Comintern and conveyed to the Communist Party of India. This largely explains the C.P.I.’s traditional portrayal of Gandhi as a social reactionary and a representative of tradition and obscurantism while Nehru was considered as a champion of western modernity and sympathizer of leftist ideology. Though the Sixth Congress of Comintern (1928) as well as the Tenth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern in July 1929 in a ‘Draft Resolution’ on India (ibid, 141) branded Nehru along with Gandhi and Subhas Bose as agents of British imperialism, it was Palme-Dutt’s faith in Nehru that influenced the following generations of Marxists. In Desai also we find the same trend as illustrated by
his work *Gandhi’s Truth and Non-Violence X-Rayed: An Open Letter to Mahatma Gandhi*, published in 1939. In this work we find scathing attacks against Gandhi, Vallabbhbhai Patel and other Congress leaders but virtually no mention of Jawaharlal Nehru. In his later works Desai had criticised the bourgeois-dominated Congress policies but had refrained from singling out any individual.

Another trend of communist thought to influence development of communism in India was the communist perception of the character of the indigenous bourgeoisie. It was M.N.Roy who actually identified the dual character of the bourgeoisie in his ‘Draft Theses on the Colonial Question’ prepared on the occasion of the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921 (June 22–July 12) (Dattagupta 2006: 80; C.P.I.(M) 2005: 54). According to Roy, the national bourgeoisie, in countries with a politico-economic situation like India stands at the forefront of an anti-imperialist, national-democratic movement. So far as it is an opponent of the imperial-colonial ruler fighting for the right of exploiting n:-tive resources and native labour, it is a revolutionary force. However, with the ouster of the coloniser, the bourgeoisie becomes a reactionary force because then it will turn against the masses—the proletariat and the labouring classes—and take whatever measures necessary to obstruct and hinder the forward march of the revolution. S.A. Dange wrote (C.P.I.(M)2005: 61) in the first editorial of *The Socialist* (August 5, 1922)—probably the first Marxist journal published in India—that “The cause of our misery lies in two things: the foreign domination and the indigenous vulture, the class that preys upon the wealth of the nation and the bread of the toilers.” Desai also subscribes to this view as he had witnessed the reactionary role of the bourgeoisie in India after independence in the country’s developmental process. As will be shown later, Desai also echoes Roy’s contention that the weak native bourgeoisie finds it “more profitable to sell itself out to its imperialist peer in return for such
change in the political administration of the country as will provide it with wider scope and opportunity for developing as a class" (Dattagupta 2006: 81).

Hence, the rapidly growing proletariat in association with the peasantry, the urban petty-bourgeois, the pauperised intelligentsia, the downtrodden wage earners—in short, all the scattered forces of the nationalist movement—had to be brought together for the restoration of the national liberation movement on a revolutionary basis which the big bourgeoisie had renounced. To Desai also, the national liberation movement did not come to an end with political independence in 1947 but will continue until the exploited, downtrodden masses experience total emancipation and liberation in all fields. The one hundred and fifty years of British rule had resulted in a huge drain of wealth from India. The common people were deprived of the means of their livelihood and were on the verge of starvation. If freedom from foreign domination was to have any meaning it was essential that the economic revolution is brought to its fulfilment.

In the 1930s an important trend in Communist thinking was a reversal of one of its earlier policy which was a perception that the world economic crises of 1929–30 has sounded the death knell for capitalism. In the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928 the official understanding was that world capitalism was heading for a crash and this would be the ideal juncture for proletarian revolutions across the globe. However, by mid-1930s the position had reversed and it was propagated that it had been a “mistake to believe that the world crises of capitalism was the last crises of the bourgeoisie which would necessarily close with the victory of the proletarian revolution and from which the bourgeoisie would not be able to recover” (ibid, 175).

From late 1930s to early 1940s the biggest controversy within the Communist circles was the nature of the Second World War and the role of the Communists in this war. Initially the War was described as an “Imperialist War” between two predatory capitalist powers by the Comintern and no
distinction was made between bourgeois-democratic imperialist power and fascist imperialist power. The Comintern "exploded the myth built up by British and French imperialists that they had been fighting a war against Fascism and Nazism in order to save democracy, and asked the workers of all countries to oppose the war resolutely" (Chandra 2001: 256). In this background, to take advantage of the situation calls were given to launch and intensify anti-British struggles throughout India. Not only so, all those elements which remained passive in the anti-British upsurge, foremost being Gandhi and his followers in the Congress and the Congress Socialist Party, whose attitude was based on Gandhi's famous statement made on June 1, 1940, "We do not seek our independence out of Britain's ruin" (Johari 1981: 21), were severely criticised. The C.P.I. gave a call to transform the Imperialist War into a Civil War by a "revolutionary utilization of the war crisis for the achievement of national freedom", which it considered 'the central task before the national forces in the new period'" (Chandra 2001:257). But with German attack upon Soviet Union, the Comintern line of argument changed to brand the War as a "People's War" where the aggressor was fascism. The Communist understanding of imperialism changed to make a distinction between bourgeois-democracy and fascism, as the Soviet Union formed alliance with Western liberal democracies against the fascist challenge. This line of argument necessitated support to British war-efforts, which after all, was India's primary enemy. The C.P.I. had initially been in favour of keeping up anti-British agitations while rendering full support to the Soviet Union as it was of the opinion that "only independent India would be able to render really effective aid to the Soviet Union" (ibid, 259). However, the new ideological line was communicated to the C.P.I. by the Comintern through the CPGB to change its policy "of opposition to the Raj and switch over to the position of support to the war efforts." (Dattagupta 2007:158). As Prof. Dattagupta records (ibid), this created a serious
confusion within the Party which ultimately accommodated the stance through a document known as “Deoli Jail document” authored by B.T. Ranadive and S.A. Dange who were then prisoners in the Deoli jail. By the end of 1941 on December 15 the C.P.I. came to the conclusion that proletarian internationalism demanded “unconditional support” to the Allied war-efforts, since only by such support the cause of the defence of the Soviet Union could be upheld, which, at that point of time, was the most important duty of the proletariat and the Communists. In 1943 in a letter dated January 26 (Dattagupta 2006: 213), addressed to a party sympathizer, the C.P.I. leadership clarified the position and declared that the “People’s War” was also the war of the Indian people as fascism was the common enemy— hence, opposing the British war-efforts would be counter-productive. Hence, it can be said that in this way the logic of the fighting by the Indian soldiers under Britain against fascism was legitimised, quite ignoring the fact that Britain, at that particular historical juncture, was the prime enemy of the Indian people.

Desai followed the understanding of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern of 1935 that a distinction existed between two types of imperialist states. As he notes in Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism (2000:2) “…one coalition of the belligerent imperialist states was composed of anti-democratic fascist imperialist states and the other formed of democratic imperialist states.” For Desai the cause of belligerence between the two groups was the need for more markets and therefore, more colonies for further industrial expansion—“...a war between ‘Have-nots’ and ‘Haves’…” (ibid, 4).

It is quite evident that Desai had been greatly influenced by the course of the nationalist movement under the aegis of the Indian National Congress on the one hand, and the birth and spread of communism in India since the 1920s, on the other. For him the Congress movement signified principally an
effort "to transform all anti-imperialist discontent in the country in the form of a mass movement such as would be prevented from assuming revolutionary forms and still exert pressure on Britain to make substantial concessions or even transfer power to the Indian bourgeoisie" (ibid, 27). The destruction and deprivation created by the War was actually advantageous to the bourgeoisie which "reaped fabulous profits" (ibid, 27–28) and this was one of the reasons for a smooth transfer of power from British imperialists to the Indian bourgeoisie. Desai did not condone the role of the C.P.I. either, because in the initial phase of the War, when the Soviet Union had not been involved, the Party had pursued the policy of developing and leading anti-imperialist mass struggles. But with Soviet involvement in the War, the C.P.I. "turned a volte-face, glorified the War as a “People's War” and opposed all struggles for independence from the British rule." Actually due to the triumph of Stalinism in USSR, especially after 1934, the Comintern had been infected by a "sterile dogmatism" (Dattagupta 2007:159) which robbed the members of the C.P.I. of all independent powers of thinking. Hence, its direct or indirect help to British war-efforts amounted to nothing short of betrayal to Desai who probably supported the self-critical stand of the C.P.I. as being 'right-reformist' deviation as presented by B.T.Ranadive at the Second Congress of the Party held in Calcutta from February 28 to March 6, 1948 (Chandra 2001: 275).

The discussion would remain incomplete without elaboration of another trend of events occurring within Indian communism. Side by side with the 'official' communism of CPSU-dominated Comintern and faithful following by the C.P.I., there emerged another parallel second trend among Indian revolutionaries adhering to Marxism-Leninism. As Tridib Chaudhuri notes (Bhattacharya 1982: 7), these revolutionaries had serious misgivings and reservations "about the patently reformist deviations of the new Comintern and CPSU line from the revolutionary internationalist line of
classical Marxism-Leninism, since the adoption in 1935 of the strategy of collaboration with bourgeois democratic parties in the name of building up ‘United Popular Fronts’ for resistance against fascism.” This trend sought to project and follow an alternative revolutionary Marxist-Leninist path in India which would be more conducive to the objective historical situation here pertaining to anti-imperialist mass movements including the movements of the toiling people. This parallel trend was represented by the Marxist Indian revolutionaries of the Anushilan group which grew into an independent Marxist-Leninist Party outside the organisational discipline and purview of both the Comintern and the C.P.I. This group of revolutionaries provided a distinctly separate interpretation of Marxist-Leninist strategy for India and an alternative programme and platform of action based on Marxist theory and praxis. This alternative trend ultimately culminated in the formation of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) on March 19, 1940. For the RSP, aiding the Soviet Union was definitely on the agenda, but not at the cost of the national mass movement in the country. They very clearly rejected the Stalin-dominated Comintern policy of “Safety of Soviet Union even at the cost of revolution in other countries” (Pal 2008: 29). They argued that side by side of helping Soviet defence against fascism, it was equally, if not more, important to intensify the anti-imperialist struggle in India. Supporting British war-efforts would no doubt help Soviet Union but that help would be essentially temporary and it would not only destroy the Indian anti-imperialist movement but would also be counterproductive for the Soviet state in the long run. For the RSP, destruction of the Indian movement would be gravely injurious to the cause of the international communist movement. This was so because if one did not take advantage of the war situation to deal a blow to imperialism—then in the post-war era these same imperialist powers would strive to destroy socialism and the Soviet Union. This position was similar to the one held by Subhas Chandra Bose, for whom also, intensification of
nationalist struggle had to coincide with hostilities among the warring powers. His contention was that a death-blow should be dealt to British imperialism at a time when it was seriously engaged in Europe. Bose was also of the opinion that once the War was over, it would be difficult to secure Indian independence. Thus, aiding British war-efforts in the name of helping Soviet Union would ultimately go against the interests of the workers’ state. Hence, the RSP came into being as a party of ‘non-conformist marxism’ as contrasted to the C.P.I.—the party of ‘conformist’ Marxism as it represented the ‘official’ communist line endorsed by the CPSU and the Comintern. A.R. Desai had been attracted to this trend of Marxist thinking and became a member of the Fourth International. He had joined the RSP in 1955 to continue as one of its foremost members and ideologues for the next three and a half decades.

Desai’s Methodology

Desai had tried to comprehend the entire process of India’s development in terms of both continuity as well as contradictions. In his intellectual conception Politics is not divorced from History and History from Economics and Economics from Philosophy or Anthropology. He laments (1984:4) that “Sociology teaching and research are being undertaken in isolation from indology and history” which is neither correct nor proper to acquire and increase knowledge. As Punalekar records (1997: 88), Desai had helped to dismantle the artificial and knowledge-unfriendly barriers among the social sciences and their practitioners, “...and thus forced a sociology student/scholar to look beyond his discipline for a better appreciation and understanding of the Indian as well as the global social reality.” In fact, he had participated in academic programmes of other social sciences like History, Political Science, Economics, Anthropology, etc., including examining M.Phil or Ph.D dissertations in these disciplines. He had tried to attain a comprehensive system of knowledge and added the experiences of
people's real struggles to that body of knowledge and came to his own conclusions.

As has already been mentioned, Desai had applied the methodology of Historical Materialism to the study of Indian polity and society. In the words of sociologist Abhijit Mitra (Mukhopadhyay 1979: 256), Marxist methodology is necessary because "the Indian communities are slowly transforming themselves into the Indian society, and the forces governing the process of such transformation are primarily economic." As Dhurjati Prasad Mukherjee (1950) said, the forces driving transformations in India "are want, poverty, which is material, economic. They are the compulsives." However, says Desai (1984: 8), the practitioners and advocates of a sociological understanding of Indian polity and society have, in the main, "always adopted an attitude wherein the potential of the Marxist approach to an understanding of Indian reality has been either underrated or summarily dismissed prima facie, by castigating it as dogmatic, value-biased and, therefore, lacking objectivity and value-neutrality." The need of the hour, according to Desai (ibid), is to evolve an approach which will be adequate to discover the special structural features of Indian society, the direction and central tendency of transformation that society is undergoing and the full implications of that transformation. Desai has obviously found the answer in the methodology of Historical Materialism. In his own words (ibid, 9), "...the paradigm evolved by Marx, if adopted consciously, even as a heuristic device, would provide this alternative approach for conducting fruitful and relevant researches on the Indian society. Studies adopting this approach, including my own, have, I believe shown that the Marxist paradigm is the most relevant in comprehending properly the transformation that is taking place in the Indian society and its various sub-systems"; it has "titanic potentiality" (Desai 1981: X) for this purpose. Desai writes (ibid, IX-X) in the Preface to the fifth edition of Social Background of Indian Nationalism that "The delineation of the
transformation of Indian society on the basis of application of this method in its major outline is being recognised as fairly authentic and superior to any other delineation based on other approaches. Desai has been committed and consistent in the application of the Historical Materialist method of analysis, which, to him, has been found to be very valuable for understanding and predicting the trends of development in India and very useful to those who are striving to organise movements to end capitalism and usher in a social order based on socialism.

Through theoretical and empirical scrutiny of Marx’s ideas, Desai, in his doctoral dissertation “brought into bold relief the interplay of social and political forces in manipulating and controlling the mass organizations and delinking them from the revolutionary path” (Punalekar 1997: 79). His quest quite obviously was not “adapted to the needs of the ruling class” but “prompted by anguished search for objective truth” (Desai 2000: VI). He viewed the entire gamut of Indian socio-political-economic-cultural reality from the perspective of the Marxian concept of history starting from the exposition of the real processes of production, the social relations of production amounting to property or class relations, class struggle, state hegemony and the role of the state in the entire process—the nature of society, determined by specific mode or modes of production that we have in India today; the class character of the Indian State which determines its relation with various segments of the population; and the nature of the path of development being followed with all its implications.

Desai, however, cautions against regarding the Marxist method as a form of economic determinism. In his opinion (1984:12) Marx, even in his preliminary formulations had not tried to reduce everything to economic terms; on the contrary, he had endeavoured to point out the crucial importance of the basic activity of producing the means of subsistence, which is absolutely essential for survival and persistence of mankind. The material
basis of society lies in the forces of production and the relations of production. The interaction between the two gives rise to a superstructure of politics, law, governance, jurisprudence, ideology, etc. Thus, Marxian political economy clearly implies that the political superstructure is not suspended in a vacuum; on the contrary, it is solidly rooted in the material base of society. Neither is the superstructure of politics a mere reflection of the material base of society. As C.P. Bhambri observes (1994:153), "The essence of Marxist theory is that politics is a social activity which has a dynamic linkage with material social forces..."—superstructure and material base has a relationship of dynamic interaction with each other. Hence, Marxist political economy rejects the concept of a state divorced or delinked from the material base of society; neither does it accept the idea of passive relationship between the material base and superstructure of a society. The nature and role of a superstructure corresponds to a specific stage in the development of the material base—generally changes in the base are subsequently reflected in the superstructure while the latter can also initiate changes on its own. Thus, for Marx what had been important was uncovering the relationship between this basic activity and other activities, between 'economic' activity and other 'non-economic' activities. This interrelationship, says Desai after Paul Sweezy (1984:13), is the "examination of the contradiction between the forces of production and relations of production."

The Marxist approach, says Desai (ibid.), studies various issues within their specific social context, not autonomously or in isolation from a specific society. In other words, the Marxist approach demands the study of a specific society within its precise historical time-frame and background as a historically changing system. "It views a specific society as emerging, developing, subsequently declining and ultimately either emerging into a qualitatively new, higher type of society or disintegrating" (ibid)—the
productive powers of mankind will forever carry it forward to a new higher level. Not only so, Marxism also incorporates the dialectics of evolutionary as well as revolutionary changes and the occurrence of breaks in the historical continuity in the transition from one socio-economic formation to another.

Desai employs this Marxist approach to the study of not only the Indian State or its path of development or the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. He also applies this approach to understand the peculiar or unique Indian institutions like the caste, religious or linguistic systems and groups, tribal communities with their specific socio-cultural traditions and the role and nature of the transformation of all these in the larger context of the society which is being evolved. Marxist approach can accommodate all these within the matrix of underlying overall property relations without a crude reducing of every phenomenon to economic causes. This approach focuses on the capitalist character of the Indian State, as understood from the postulates of its developmental path, and deepens its analysis on this axis. "Production relations is the axis round which society is woven," writes Desai (Punalekar 1997: 85) and thus, class conflict is to be considered "as the central and most focal conflict in society." He argued with vigour, says Punalekar (ibid, 86), that "...This approach accepts the fundamentals of the Marxist philosophical and sociological postulates, strategy of social studies and analysis of societies." Not only so, he believed (ibid.) wholeheartedly that the "...Marxist approach is capable of providing an adequate theory of development for the Third World"—he remained a firm believer in this methodology and never concealed his admiration for the same.

A.R. Desai, writes Munshi and Saldhana (1994: 3070), was equally at home with academics and grass-roots level-activists, with intellectuals and workers, in seminars and processions, with the young and the old. "This was because," they say (ibid) "in his own person he had been able to integrate
academic work with activism. With indomitable energy he pursued his goal as a duty to his people and society." According to Rajesh Gupta of the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), it was Desai who had provided a bridge between academic institutions and the larger community. "He was one of those rare individuals who managed to combine his scholarly pursuits with his concern for social justice" (Gupta 1994: 3002). One can say after Mukta and Hardiman (1995: 275) that, "A.R. will be remembered for his sustained challenge to the power of the dominant classes in contemporary India, and for his enduring and passionate defence of marginalised groups...Politically, his role in sustaining and nurturing an optimistic and visionary culture, and refusing to succumb to a social pessimism, is immeasurable."